



Nature as a 'Lifeline': The Power of Photography when Exploring the Experiences of Older Adults living with Memory Loss and Memory Concerns

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Nature as a 'Lifeline': The Power of Photography when Exploring the Experiences of Older Adults living with Memory Loss and Memory Concerns

For Peer Review

Abstract

The visual is an underutilised modality through which to investigate experiences of memory loss in older people. We describe a visual ethnography with older adults experiencing subjective or objective memory loss, receiving a cognitive wellbeing group intervention designed to prevent cognitive decline and dementia (“Blinded for Review” programme). We aimed to explore lived experiences of people with memory concerns, how participants engaged with this photography and co-design project, and how collaboration with an artist/photographer enhanced this process. Nineteen participants shared photographs reflecting what they valued in their daily lives, their experiences of memory concerns, and the intervention. Fourteen participated in qualitative photo-elicitation interviews, and thirteen collaborated with a professional artist/photographer to co-create an exhibition, in individual meetings and workshops, during which a researcher took ethnographic field notes. Eight participants were re-interviewed after the exhibition launch.

We contextualise images produced by participants in relation to discourses around the visual and ageing and highlight their relationship with themes developed through thematic analysis that interconnects photographic, observational and interview data. We present themes around the use of photographs to: (1) celebrate connections to nature as a lifeline; (2) anchor lives within the context of relationships with family; (3) reflect on self and identity, enduring through ageing, memory concerns, pandemic, and ageing stereotypes. We explore visual research as a powerful tool for eliciting meaningful accounts from older adults experiencing cognitive change and to connect the arts and social sciences within ageing studies.

Participatory Photography; Collaborative; Mild Cognitive Impairment; Subjective Cognitive Decline.

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3 Cultural gerontology is characterised by explorations of social identity, subjective
4 experiences, and cultural depictions of ageing, ageism, and embodiment (Andersson, 2002;
5 Twigg and Martin, 2015a, 2015b), for which visual methods are powerful and under-used
6 tools. Older bodies are often seen as “a disruption to the visual field” in youth-oriented
7 societies (Hepworth, 2000). Visual research methods resist this (Hogan and Warren, 2012;
8 Martin, 2015), with images as “a site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly
9 particular” (Armstrong, 1996, p. 28, cited in Rose, 2001, p. 10). Images of ageing are not
10 merely illustrative but have a “visual autonomy and specific mediality” (Kampmann, 2015, p.
11 279).

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15 Cultural Gerontology highlighted not only the arrival of the humanities into ageing studies
16 but increased interconnections between the social sciences and arts; artists and social
17 scientists collaboratively bringing novel perspectives and methodologies (Twigg and Martin
18 2015a, 2015b). Discussions around the conjunction between photography and ageing from
19 an arts and humanities perspective have often focused on images of older people and the
20 physicality of ageing. These images and discussions are important to counteract the relative
21 invisibility of older people in popular culture (Cristofovici, 2009), to explore the ‘double-
22 standard’ of gendered attitudes to physical ageing (Pilcher and Martin, 2000; Sontag, 1972;
23 Woodward, 1999) and to examine polarising tendencies in representation in images of older
24 people; ‘decline’ versus ‘positive aging’ (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995) or ‘melancholic’
25 versus ‘carnavalesque’ (Parnell Johnson, 2018; Richards et al, 2012, drawing on Parnell
26 Johnson).

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31 Cristofovici asks how photographers depict the ‘inner realities’ of ageing (2005, pp.20-21).
32 The relationship between ageing and photography is not confined only to images of older
33 people (Cristofovici, 2021). In this study the images were taken mostly by older people, and
34 mostly not of them, depicting their inner realities through their selection of photographs to
35 best represent their lives. This contrasts with projects where older people are mostly
36 subjects of the image, taken by photographers who may be considerably younger than them
37 (Richards et al., 2012).

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39 The research method of participatory photography responds to criticisms of ‘inequity of
40 power, the politics of representation and the objectification of the other’ (Clover, 2006, p.
41 275-6). It empowers participants to represent their realities (Clover, 2006; Reyes et al. 2022,
42 p. 4) and explore self and subjectivity (Pink, Hogan and Bird, 2011). Images, and participants’
43 responses to them, are not simply more data but different data; tools to elicit insights and
44 meanings (Harper, 2002, p. 99), which allow “different and more textured understandings of
45 ageing identities” (Martin, 2015, p. 100).

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48 Participant-generated images have been used in previous studies with older people,
49 including people with Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) (Renn et al, 2021). Brotherhood et al
50 (2017)’s *Created Out of Mind* residency co-designed multiple performances and exhibitions
51 with participants with dementia. Although other participatory photography projects with
52 older people have incorporated workshops and exhibitions (eg. Hogan and Warren, 2012;
53 Martin, 2015; Reyes et al., 2022), our project is, we believe, the first to report on a sustained
54 engagement in which an artist/photographer, social science researchers, and participants
55 with memory concerns, worked together in different modalities (interview, zoom sessions,
56 workshop, exhibition co-creation). The timing of this work in relation to the Covid-19
57 pandemic provides an interesting context.

We aimed to explore how participants engaged with a photography and co-design project to convey their lived experiences of memory loss and dementia prevention, and how this creative and reflective process was enhanced by collaboration between social scientists, participants with lived experience and an artist/photographer who specialises in the representation of ageing. Our analysis of the data generated through this was shaped by the engagement of participants and the types of images they shared with us.

Methods

Recruitment

We recruited participants aged 60 and over with Subjective Cognitive Decline (SCD) or Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) from the “Blinded for Review” (RCT), which evaluated a dementia prevention programme involving weekly small groups, interactive video-call sessions and phone calls with facilitators (“Blinded for Review”; “Blinded for Review”). We purposively recruited intervention arm participants, for cultural and ethnic diversity. Participants were invited to take part in either, or both, photo-elicitation interviews and collaboration with a professional artist/photographer to co-design an exhibition. No incentives were offered for participation.

Data collection methods

“Blinded for Review” (social science researcher) conducted photo-elicitation interviews March-September 2022. “Blinded for Review” (artist/photographer) and “Blinded for Review” [social science researcher] facilitated exhibition co-design, in individual and group sessions, April-August 2022. After the exhibition “Blinded for Review” [social science researcher] conducted further interviews.

Photo-elicitation Interviews

Following established methods of using participant generated photographs in photo-elicitation interviews (Balomenou & Garrod, 2016), “Blinded for Review” [social science researcher] invited participants to take a series of photographs (around fifteen over 1-2 weeks) that felt relevant to their memory concerns and participation in the wellbeing programme. Photographs could include objects, activities, images of people, views, or more abstract images. We intended this guidance to be orientating but not overly directive, to empower participants to generate their own meanings and representational style of photograph. Some participants shared more or less than fifteen photos (the highest number was 50), and some included photos that had been taken previously, including some images of them taken by others. Images were mostly taken with camera phones or occasionally an ipad, and some with participants’ own cameras.

“Blinded for Review” [social science researcher] conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, mostly in their homes, two by video-call. She invited participants to share and

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3 discuss photographs taken, and a topic guide shaped discussions of their experiences of
4 memory concerns, broader lives and identities. This included asking participants about their
5 involvement in “Blinded for Review” and if they had spoken to friends and family about
6 having concerns about their memory. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.
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9 The use of interview prompts following discussion of photos follows methods used by
10 Klingorová and Gökarıksel (2019).
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14 ***Collaborating with an artist/photographer and co-creating an exhibition***

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16 Participants in this part of the project met with “Blinded for Review” [artist/photographer]
17 and “Blinded for Review” [social science researcher] individually once or twice, depending
18 on what felt useful and possible for them. Timings varied but were usually for around 30-60
19 minutes. Participants provided photographs before sessions, including those explored in
20 photo-elicitation interviews, and additional photographs that spoke to “things that are
21 important to me”.
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24 “Blinded for Review” [artist/photographer] led these video-call sessions discussing images,
25 experiences and stories participants wished to convey to audiences, and exhibition work
26 (photographic arrangements) they wanted to develop; “Blinded for Review” [social science
27 researcher] took observational fieldnotes. “Blinded for Review” [artist/photographer] used
28 appropriate software to display and explore images and advised on lighting and other
29 technical considerations. This online visual method was developed by “Blinded for Review”
30 [artist/photographer] in her work with students during the COVID lockdown. The kinetic
31 visual element was critical, enabling her to move images around in dialogue with
32 participants, making new groupings/arrangements/sequences that prompted different
33 connections. Most participants used their phones or own cameras and two borrowed
34 cameras from the project.
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39 Next, we held four half-day workshops (three in person, one video-call group) for four or
40 five participants each. Developed photographs and printed arrangements from initial video-
41 calls were given to participants at the beginning of the face-to-face workshops. Photographs
42 were sent to virtual workshop participants after the session. Participants responded to each
43 other’s photos, wrote sticky notes on their own to describe meanings, arranged
44 photographs, and wrote accompanying text. “Blinded for Review” [social science
45 researcher] and “Blinded for Review” [artist/photographer] continued to support
46 participants to develop their work after the workshops through email and video-call, and in
47 some instances for “Blinded for Review” [social science researcher] to further explore their
48 thoughts, feelings, and reflections on the images. Participants had a designated space on
49 the exhibition display boards and were invited to display photos and text. SJP collaborated
50 with participants on how to present work creatively, suggested other types of display for
51 some sets of photos, and laid out the designs using appropriate software, to be printed onto
52 large boards.
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57 Next, we organised two co-production meetings to plan the exhibition and accompanying
58 film and catalogue, with four and five participants each, and study team members (PPI and
59 academic). “Blinded for Review” [artist/photographer] presented images and initial
60 overarching exhibition themes that “Blinded for Review” [social science researcher] and

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3 “Blinded for Review” [artist/photographer] had developed, which the group discussed. The
4 second meeting included a visit to the exhibition site.
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8 **Ethics**

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10 “Blinded for Review” Research Ethics Committee (Reference: “Blinded for Review”)
11 approved the “Blinded for Review” study in March 2020, and all participants re-signed
12 consent forms after an amendment dated 16.12.2021 to include this study. Participants
13 signed consent forms covering potential uses of donated photographs; with further image-
14 specific consent forms for photographs including identifiable images, by all people
15 potentially identifiable. All participants chose to be named in the exhibition beside
16 exhibition pieces, and on a catalogue insert. To protect identities, we have altered some
17 minor details of case studies while maintaining the integrity of narratives (Saunders et al.,
18 2015).
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24 **Data analysis**

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26 Textual data (transcribed interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes and display exhibition texts)
27 were analysed alongside photographs and other visual exhibition works. We drew on
28 Gleeson’s method of polytextual thematic analysis with photographs (2020) and Braun and
29 Clarke’s reflexive thematic analysis (2019), in finding patterns across and between data.
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32 We asked interview participants to take photos that relate to memory concerns and the
33 “Blinded for Review” intervention, extending this during the collaborative process to include
34 “things that are important to me”. While some images shared with us directly engaged with
35 the first two themes, participants primarily shared images, and collaborated to produce
36 artwork, that reflected what was important to them, their everyday lives, and identities.
37 Analysis was guided by looking at of how participants used images to express and reflect on
38 their lives, within and across sets of photos, in their accounts and in developing pieces for
39 the exhibition. “Blinded for Review” [social science researcher] and “Blinded for Review”
40 [artist/photographer] discussed ideas for themes that appeared to be emerging during the
41 collaborative process, and with other members of the study team. We present overarching
42 conceptual themes, and developed case studies that illustrate how these themes were
43 woven through the participants’ engagement.
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49 **Results**

50 **Sample description**

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52 Table 1 (Appendix) describes characteristics of the nineteen participants and how their
53 contributions supported theme development.
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57 **Analytic themes**

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3 We identified three themes. *'Nature as a lifeline'* explores how tangible connections to the
4 material anchor and reassure. As illustrated in the case studies, familiar places brought
5 comfort and trees were recurrent emblems of continuity and stability. In a second theme,
6 *'Family'*, participants portrayed how mutual love and support, past and present, is
7 important to their sense of self and place. Photographs reflected family relationships,
8 including people lost.
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11 *'Self and Identity'* is defined by reflections on self and identity, enduring through ageing,
12 memory concerns, pandemic, and ageing stereotypes. This was illustrated in self-reflexive
13 artworks, using memories, experiences, life and family history to ground and make sense of
14 identity over time.
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19 Case studies

20 Authors discussed and agreed selection of four case studies to showcase themes, how our
21 methods and breadth of visual and textual material contributed to their development, and
22 interconnections between them; and to illustrate diversity of experiences.
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24 We will draw on the humanities to enhance our understanding of experiences of ageing and
25 the visual, making connections to Sara Ahmed's writing on the power of objects, physical
26 and otherwise, to orient the self; an aspect of participants' lives that photography makes
27 visible (2006).
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31 ***Jill (illustrating themes 1, 2 and 3).*** This case illustrates the power of photographs to pull us
32 into the materiality of a participant's world. Jill, who is in her late 70s, lives alone. She
33 shared over thirty photographs in a photo-elicitation interview, which spoke to the
34 intertwining of biography and identity (Frank, 2010), and brought more to her discussions
35 with "Blinded for Review" [artist/photographer].
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38 Her exhibition piece was autobiographical; photographs from her childhood to the present,
39 including images of close family members, mixing sad with happier times. It charted how
40 relationships (Theme 2) and life experiences shaped her personal identity, and how this and
41 her enjoyment of life endured despite memory concerns (Theme 3).
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44 People, places, objects, and photos of art are combined in Jill's artwork, including photos of
45 herself across the life course (including photos of old photos). This expresses a sense of her
46 "sequential self states", and an intertwined continuity and discontinuity that is important
47 for photography of ageing to engage with (Cristofovici, 2009). The entire artwork, made of
48 many photographs, is an "image of ageing" encompassing multiple selves across time.
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51 Jill's artwork celebrated nature and valued the solidity of the material world (Theme 1),
52 connecting it with her pagan beliefs; represented by a photograph of flowers in her garden
53 that are her "saviours". Her photos included places in her hometown, where she had
54 returned late in her adult life, which evoked important memories and emotion. A post-box
55 reminded her of a relative joking they would post her into it as a child (Supplementary
56 Figure 1); a local brewery sign evoked memories of familiar childhood smells, and a
57 photograph of a creek of the unfulfilled wish to leave footprints: permanence of nature
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3 relative to impermanence of man (Supplementary Figure 2). She intends her ashes to be
4 scattered there, to “finish where I started”.

6 These images and reflections speak to an “embodied” sense of place and how memories
7 attach to everyday activities (Pink, Hogan and Bird, 2012, p. 16); and to Sara Ahmed’s work
8 on how familiar places and objects can reorientate at times of disorientation, like “a second
9 skin that unfolds in the folds of your body” (2006, p. 9).

11 Jill’s images reflect resilience (Theme 3). She reflected on physical ageing in an image of her
12 hand. Just as Rosy Martin (2002) writes of the “flash of recognition” at seeing her mother or
13 father when she looks in the mirror, Jill felt that it was her mother’s hand she was seeing in
14 front of her, as though past generations are embodied in ageing selves.

17 She likened herself to the poppies in one of her photos, which stand tall after other plants
18 had wilted, popping back up after life events pushed her down. She stated in a text for the
19 exhibition that the possibility of memory loss is her next “challenge”:

21 My life has consisted of fantastic highs but many, many lows from which I have
22 fought back from with a vengeance in the past, this may be more of a challenge, but
23 I am sure as hell going to try as there is so much more I want to do.

28 A photograph of her shadow during pandemic lockdown represented how she became “a
29 shadow of my previous self”. She recalled how her voice changed with less use, and
30 isolation had affected her memory. She is “throwing” herself into activities now and
31 described her exhibition work as an exhortation for people to fight against what might be
32 “round the corner”, reflecting the “event horizon” of the fourth age (Gilleard and Higgs
33 2010).

36 Her exhibition piece reflected a playful, “theatrical” personality. Photos were printed onto a
37 magnetised board, with her sticky notes as vinyl pieces so that the audience could move
38 them and some images resisted or played with age-related stereotypes, such a photograph
39 of her dancing. She embraced this idea, which reflected a resilient identity based on deep
40 connections to the material world, within shifting scenes in life. Opposing stereotypes can
41 be inadvertently reproduced in research seeking alternative images of ageing (Parnell
42 Johnson, 2018; Richards et al., 2012). Jill’s exhibition piece provides a more complex,
43 layered and balanced image of ageing. The photograph of her shadow and a book on
44 improving memory conveyed authentic vulnerability, contextualised in images of humour
45 and active embracement of life.

49 Her artwork, entitled “Uncertainty”, was brave and moving and attracted a lot of interest;
50 Jill “really enjoyed” explaining it to people. She reflected after the exhibition how her
51 “higgledy-piggledy” arrangement reflected the course of her life, looking back. She felt that
52 the project was cathartic and it seemed to enable what Habermas and Köber termed
53 “autobiographical reasoning”, described as “a process of thinking or speaking that links
54 distant elements of one’s life to each other and to the self in an attempt to relate the
55 present self to personal past and future” (p. 666), and which is suggested to support a
56 “sense of self-continuity” across time.

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3 **Beatrice (Themes 1 and 3).** Beatrice's work celebrated the natural world (Theme 1), and the
4 development of new rituals that enhance older age (Briller and Sankar, 2011). She used
5 images to express resistance to ageing stereotypes and saw in the project the capacity to
6 revitalise and offer new hope, a source of resilience in itself (Theme 3). Beatrice is in her
7 early 90s and a retired secretary, she completed an art degree in her 70s and continues to
8 paint and display work. She was interested to learn techniques from "Blinded for Review"
9 [artist/photographer] and donated over 200 photographs.

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13 The first images that Beatrice shared included two of herself: one in sunglasses and another
14 with a badly bruised face from falling a few weeks after her 90th birthday. In her plans to use
15 this powerful image of vulnerability for a painted self-portrait she illustrated creativity in
16 adversity, confronting her experience of vulnerability with resilience through art. She later
17 sent us this image within a cubist-style self-portrait (Supplementary Figure 3). While Jill
18 presented separate images in conjunction on a backdrop, here Beatrice brings together two
19 selves in a compound split image of ageing. It is a composite diptych photomontage image,
20 two faces split centrally and joined as one. One half represents her identity as a painter, the
21 other a vulnerability (at least partly) subverted. It seems to indicate agency in the face of
22 adversity, interrupting readings of creative decline and stasis, in images of older women
23 particularly. She reflected that "it sometimes seems that "one" is flaunting to overcome the
24 reluctance to show oneself? It could be that as one gets older defiance sets in and you need
25 to prove (also to yourself) that you are still around and alive!"; her own "challenge" to the
26 invisibility of older women (Martin, 2002).

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32 Beatrice lives alone and during the pandemic lockdown she was frightened of going out.
33 Walking in the local park early one day when it was quiet, she photographed a ginkgo biloba
34 tree. She has photographed it many times since, from different angles and in different
35 seasons (Supplementary Figure 4), and experimented with photographing its leaves. She
36 refers to it as "my ginkgo" and also connects it to when she began taking ginkgo biloba
37 tablets due to concerns around memory. It has represented hope and ontological security
38 (Giddens, 1991) in a time of disorientation. She found a sense of continuity and resilience in
39 it, saying "It seemed to inspire me you know, sort of keep going and seeing it, you know, as
40 long as you see the tree you're going to be all right", and:

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45 its roots there and, you know, as I said, if it's bare or green, you know, when it loses
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47 its leaves, it's still there and I feel happy about it, it varies. It's OK, things are going to
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49 be OK, fine. Life is good, it keeps me going I think that tree

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53 Beatrice sent us many photographs of the tree over the course of the project and we
54 emailed feedback and encouragement. Visiting it was a ritual or "refrain" through which a
55 person's sense of "going on being" is "held" (Walkerdine, 2013, drawing on Guattari) and
56 speaks to the enhancing power of nature (Orr et al., 2016). She described it as a "lifeline", a
57 word we used in our title and that Ahmed uses to describe an object, or sense of possibility,
58 that can decrease disorientation, something that can be grabbed hold of, physically or
59 figuratively, to help someone back on "course" or into feelings of safety (2006). Beatrice

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3 described an embodied affinity with the physical form of the tree, “They’re rather like an old
4 body, an ageing body and you think it looks OK, you know, you love it but really it’s
5 changed”. “Blinded for Review” [artist/photographer] created a book of her photographs for
6 the exhibition, including multiple images of the tree, the bruised face photos and the split
7 portrait.
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10 Beatrice displayed a photograph of the apple tree in her garden in the exhibition, taken with
11 a new skill of using a short depth of field that blurs the background, to express her thoughts
12 about the mind and memory (Supplementary Figure 5). She wrote a note for the exhibition
13 titled “The Power of Photography”. Here is an excerpt:
14

15 Early one Sunday walk, I noticed a Ginkgo Biloba tree in my local park. Taking a
16 photo of it to send to my daughter proved I had been out for the necessary walk.
17 This unique ‘living fossil’ has become an important lifeline for me. Every time I
18 photograph “my ginkgo” I see something different about it! The camera’s ‘blurring
19 eye’ made my brain think again – how to? With so many photos taken, I found it
20 difficult to eliminate as each one was a moment taken in my life. Every photo was
21 meaningful.
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25 My synapses fired – I made some collages. How to arrange some of the leaves and
26 photograph them? Haiku writing kicked in, another way of expressing joy!
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30 A family history of Alzheimer’s, and memory concerns, motivated Beatrice to take part in
31 “Blinded for Review”. It was clear how much she valued the photography project. She
32 described actively exploring connections between current and past images through her
33 visual imaginary, writing “My brain is ignited and I remember the energetic days of Uni
34 again”; and “I no longer feel afraid”. This speaks directly to Ahmed’s work describing how
35 people turn away from fearful objects and towards positive possibilities. Bringing Beatrice’s
36 words together with Ahmed’s theory highlights the disorientating effect of fear, with the
37 project as a reorientating object of hope that created a new sense of possibility (2006), via
38 the visual imaginary, reflections, and supportive and collaborative relationships.
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41 The image of her hand touching the ginkgo tree (Supplementary Figure 4) shows continued
42 engagement with the material world beyond the confines of home, and an embodied
43 affinity with nature and this tree in particular, in which she sees a reflection of her own
44 (ageing) body. In the technically accomplished image of apple blossom (Supplementary
45 Figure 5), and words that accompanied it, we see a new identity as a photographer
46 emerging, actively engaged with the world and with a continued capacity for self-
47 development that can be seen in its visual and aesthetic effect. She described it as showing
48 “a mind which is blurred by the memories of one’s life” but with the buds opening “like
49 synapses”, leading to “the joy of the rosy apple to be tasted later in life”.
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54 Beatrice was proud to exhibit her work and ordered multiple copies of her print and book
55 for family/friends. Her work shows the transformative potential for this kind of collaborative
56 project, as she embraced ongoing creation of her own subjectivity (Pink, Hogan and Bird,
57 2011), which the project allowed us to both evoke and capture.
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3 **Natasha (Themes 1 and 3).** Natasha is in her early 80s and lives with her husband. Originally
4 from Hungary, she enjoys art galleries and belongs to a photography club. Natasha has
5 word-finding difficulties and mobility problems following a stroke. Ahmed (2006) describes
6 how objects, thoughts and ideas, can succeed or fail at “extending” us into the world. For
7 Natasha words could not always be relied upon for this type of extension.
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10 Natasha shared photographs from her large existing collection. She approached these
11 thematically and used symbolism, often giving them titles and abstract meanings. In early
12 sessions she and “Blinded for Review” [artist/photographer] discussed images that spoke to
13 bodily and health constraints, ageing, memories, feelings of being blocked and curtailed,
14 and dichotomies of choice. A tree in winter represented death. She also expressed a love of
15 colour, structure and light as positive elements in images.
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18 Her final piece, “*Reflections and Imaginations*” (Supplementary Figure 6), includes visual
19 metaphors of the ageing process. The nebulous tree in the centre, entitled “My Mind”,
20 reflects current challenges; a pair of old shoes called “Tired and Thrown away” symbolise
21 her ageing identity; and a fence symbolises obstacles, visually barring the way for both
22 photographer and viewer. A photo of a place she has visited in the past is called “Will Never
23 See It Again”, and a view from below a huge spider sculpture against a darkening sky,
24 suggesting overwhelm, is called “Fears”, (all in Figure 6). She also photographed a Louise
25 Bourgeois sculpture called “The Mute”, reflecting feeling “lost for words”. and shared
26 images of Bourgeois’ “Spider” sculpture, commenting on the fragile legs, symbolising her
27 fear of falling and breaking bones. These speak directly to the ageing body without depicting
28 it.
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32 Her symbolic use of scenes and objects to represent ageing and physical constraints renders
33 her physical form invisible, and externalise her affective experiences. These images speak to
34 Natasha’s negative experiences of ageing while the artistry brings a form of comfort. It also
35 shows how photographers can depict internal responses to ageing, finding novel ways to
36 express “the inner screen of aging” (Cristofovici, 2009, p. 18).
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39 Her accompanying text (“thoughts about getting older”) described the constraints of ageing
40 and thought of death. She described how colours and symbols have become a great
41 consolation to her in later years:
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43 For several years I have been interested in photography, films and arts in general. In
44 my years now they are like a raft that keeps me afloat and happy to deal with
45 shapes, forms, colours. What they mean, and their symbolism are with me and make
46 my life bearable.
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52 Art mixes with science or even theology and all that begins to mean more to
53 me now, than in my youth. Ideas and messages are appearing in images,
54 there are so many meanings to everything if given a chance.
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3 The arts seem to act as her anchor in a world that feels more restricted.
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5 Natasha used a powerful image in her post-exhibition interview to communicate her
6 experience of pain: a postcard of an Anthony Gormley sculpture of a suspended figure
7 stabbed with nails, which showed how she feels when walking, "because everything aches
8 when I am walking". This is reminiscent of Deborah Padfield's work on the therapeutic value
9 of expressing inarticulate pain via photographic images (2021).
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12 Her photographs and reflections speak to the importance of understanding how older
13 people experience suffering and pain and what modulates or mediates this experience;
14 representing or communicating the experience of suffering through language is an area that
15 presents a particular challenge within gerontology (Medeiros and Black, 2015)
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19 **John (Theme 2).** John is in his late 60s and lives with his wife Helen and adult daughter. John
20 spoke of the reciprocity and depth of love in his relationship with Helen, who accompanied
21 him to the workshop. John took many images of Helen during the project but deleted them
22 as none represented his internal image, a palimpsest softened and shaped by years of
23 memories (Parnell Johnson 2018). John decided, after discussion with "Blinded for Review"
24 [artist/photographer], to withhold Helen's portrait from view by turning it over and
25 presenting the back of the image captioned with his loving feelings towards her. In
26 suggesting this SJP drew on visual strategies that she developed in earlier work around
27 withholding images of older women, based around Barthes' withholding of his mother's
28 image in Camera Lucida (Parnell Johnson, 2018).
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33 Unfortunately, John left the project early due to illness but said that he had "really enjoyed"
34 the memories that it brought up. With his support, "Blinded for Review"
35 [artist/photographer] created a piece based around photos of his children and
36 grandchildren and the reversed photo of his wife, using his images and plans. He wrote text
37 to display alongside, beginning:
38
39

40 My family has always been the most important thing to me.
41

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43 My children and grandchildren are so very important to me; I remember where and
44 when I first met my wife, I remember all my children being born and the first loving
45 words I said to them all.
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51 It described familial love, including love from parents and between siblings when he was a
52 child, as a point of continuity throughout life, and spoke to creative ways of evoking
53 multiple "sequential self states" over time (Cristofovici, 2009). Photographs of John's notes
54 on love and family formed a backdrop to the photos within the artwork, and accompanying
55 text acted as an "elaboration" of the work (Kress and Leuwen, 2006, drawing on Barthes).
56
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58 Generations, in particular grandparenthood, was an important theme in a photography
59 exhibition looking at "New Images of Age(ing)" (Staudinger, 2011), often through images of
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3 grandparents alone or with grandchildren or great-grandchildren. Here the relationships
4 between generations, and John's identities as husband, father, grandfather, child and
5 sibling, were evoked by bringing together multiple photographs and pieces of text into one
6 artwork with a further accompanying text. It referenced multiple familial relationships past
7 and present, with John himself implicit, an absent presence behind the camera, in a work
8 that the audience found very moving.
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11 12 13 **The exhibition**

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15 Exhibition artwork spoke to questions of biography, identity, generation, the importance of
16 relationships, nature and place, and the ageing process itself. Participants captured their
17 own lived experiences and reflections, where ageing was not necessarily foregrounded but
18 was implicit. It was important to honour the artworks by staging the exhibition imaginatively
19 and professionally. Artworks were accompanied by text that deepened the audience's
20 understanding of their meaning and by participants' reflections on the "Blinded for Review"
21 intervention. Attendees spoke of the insight the rich and diverse pieces gave them into
22 participants' lives.
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27 The exhibition, titled "Reimagination: The reframing of Memory", was initially displayed for
28 one day at the Wellcome Collection in London (8.9.22), attended by around 200 people
29 (Supplementary Figure 7). Photographs from seventeen participants were displayed,
30 including a piece designed by "Blinded for Review" [artist/photographer] using images from
31 four interview participants who had not taken part in the workshops (Table 1). "Blinded for
32 Review" [artist/photographer] worked with participants to develop original display formats.
33 A piece relating to time was arranged in a circle with a central 3-dimensional clock
34 mechanism pointing to individual images (James). A piece celebrating family, community,
35 nature and place was displayed on a map, with pins and string plotting the participant's
36 habitual routes (Robert). Two participants displayed photo books near their artwork,
37 exploring themes that included nature and embodiment (Beatrice and Christina). "Blinded
38 for Review" [artist/photographer] created a praxinoscope (circular spinning device) for a
39 participant who had taken many photographs of the same building at different times of day
40 (Matthew). One participant lent the exhibition a memory book that his family had made for
41 his late father, which was displayed on a podium. Ten exhibitors attended the launch with
42 family and friends. We produced one short film while creating the exhibition and one of
43 "Blinded for Review" [artist/photographer] giving a tour of it. The exhibition was also
44 displayed in the Houses of Parliament for a week, then Holy Sepulchre London church
45 (February-April 2023), after which we offered the artwork to participants to keep.
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53 The therapeutic potential in relation to memory concerns, of working with a professional
54 artist/photographer in this way, is reflected by Beatrice, who told us how the project helped
55 her to move past her fear of memory loss. Another participant described how it helped her
56 resolve to persevere with challenges, suggesting an increased confidence. She has used it to
57 discuss her memory issues with friends, showing them images from the exhibition.
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Discussion

We have presented themes developed through participant engagement with the project, in which photographs were seen to celebrate connections to nature as a lifeline; anchor lives within the context of relationships with family; and reflect on self and identity, enduring through ageing, memory concerns, pandemic, and ageing stereotypes.

We described how creative collaborative photography can help in accessing interior worlds, thoughts and feelings, and be an important, positive experience for participants, with potential to create the space to “embrace creative, reflexive, complicated “selves,”” as described by Winton (2016, p. 428).

Working with the artist/photographer individually and in small groups produced images and artworks that gave new insights into ways of representing and exploring ageing, from the subjective perspective of older people. This contrasts with projects where representation is directed by a professional photographer and the rich diversity of participants’ experiences can be overlooked (Richards et al. 2012). In liaison with the artist/photographer, participants transformed data from social science into art that enabled audiences to question and challenge their own ideas and stereotypes around ageing, memory and everyday life. This suggests the importance of participatory photography, across gerontology, not only in creating discursive data but in the power of the images themselves. Using visual methods in this sustained collaboration allowed insights into participants’ worlds that may be invisible to other methods.

The photographs and other data discussed here speak to important areas within social gerontology as well as age studies, including ageism (Goldman and Higgs, 2021), the embracing of third age identities and fear of the fourth age (Gilleard et al., 2005; Gilleard and Higgs, 2010), the body, embodiment and embodied practices (Gilleard and Higgs, 2013; Twigg and Martin, 2015a, 2015b; Martin and Twigg, 2018), resistance to stigma and invisibility (Hogan and Warren, 2012; Martin, 2002; Martin, 2015), and the importance of place and ageing in place (Pani-Harreman, 2021). We have illustrated the breadth of data that can be generated by participatory photography and in particular the kind of imagery that can be produced, speaking to the heart of cultural gerontology and to the aim of “refreshing the gerontological imaginary” (Twigg & Martin, 2015a, p. 357).

Completing this project and reflecting on the artwork and reflections produced from it, we wonder what more could be done with this method, and how it might be extended to allow more time and opportunities to explore the creative potential of using photographs in conversation with an artist/photographer and other participants; further reflections on ageing identities may emerge from this process.

Limitations

There was inevitably an element of self-selection in those who took part. We separated recruitment for the interviews and the exhibition to try to broaden participation.

Unfamiliarity with technology can be a potential obstacle in using these methods with older people (Mysyuk and Huisman 2020); use of email, zoom, a camera or other device, and ability to send images over email were essential. Some participants asked friends and family

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3 to assist with sending photographs and we helped to download or email images during
4 workshops, if required.
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6 The majority of participants were White British and most of those from minority ethnic
7 groups were White Europeans from outside the UK. This reflected the make-up of the
8 sample from which we recruited (the “Blinded for Review” intervention). There were two
9 further interviews with participants from other minority ethnic groups but as they did not
10 share photographs we did not include them in this analysis. It is likely that participants had
11 greater cultural capital than those who declined to participate and this helped to shape their
12 engagement. Most did not have an arts background, though Beatrice and Natasha did have
13 some previous involvement in arts creation.
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19 **Conclusion**

20 This article has reflected on the use of participatory photography with participants with
21 memory concerns engaged in a dementia-prevention study. It has traced the process
22 through photo-elicitation interviews, collaborations in zoom sessions, workshops, co-
23 production meetings and a co-created exhibition. It has shown the creative possibilities that
24 this can engender and capture, the potential to generate rich data that enhances the study
25 of ageing, and the positive effects that can be experienced by participants. Moreover, it
26 demonstrates the rich cross-fertilisation that engagements between the arts and humanities
27 and gerontological research can have in extending our understanding of the lived
28 experience of later life in its myriad forms.
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34 **Acknowledgements**

35 Data is not available to other researchers for replication purposes due to ethical reasons,
36 such as the potential identification of participants. We are also not making analytic
37 materials available as we intend to continue with analysis for the purpose of further
38 publications.
39

40 This research was not preregistered with an independent institutional agency.
41

42 “Blinded for Review”
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47 **Funding**

48 “Blinded for Review”
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53 **Conflict of Interest**

54 We have no conflict of interest to declare.
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Tables/Figures

Table of Participant Involvement in the study

Key to Themes:

1. 'Nature as a lifeline'
2. 'Family'
3. 'Self and Identity'

Participant	Age, gender ethnicity, living situation	Study involvement							Themes (see key above)
		Photo-elicitation interview	Pre-workshop individual session	Workshop	Post-workshop individual session	Exhibition coproduction meeting	Exhibition display	Post-exhibition interview	
1. Jill	75-84, female, White British, lives alone.	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	1.2.3.
2. Natasha	75-84, female, White European, lives with husband.	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	1.3.
3. John ^a	65-74, male, White British, lives with wife and adult son.	1	1	1	0	0	1*	1	2.

4. Christina	75-84, female, White European, lives alone.	1	2	1	2	1	2	0	1.3.
5. Hugh	65-74, male, White British, lives with wife.	1	1	2	0	2	1	1	2.3.
6. Helena	75-84, female, White European, lives alone.	1	2	2	0	0	1	0	1.
7. Jessica	75-84, female, White British, lives alone.	1	2	2	2	0	1	1	1.2.3.
8. James	75-84, male, White British, lives with wife.	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1.3.
9. Beatrice	85+, female, White	0	2	1	2	0	2	1	1.3.

For Peer Review

	British, lives alone.								
10. Sarah	75-84, female, White British.	0	1	2	1	0	1	0	1.2.3.
11. Robert	75-84, male, White British, lives alone.	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1.2.
12. Matthew	65-74, male, White British, lives with wife.	0	2	1	0	1	2	1	1.
13. Gareth	65-74, male, White British, lives with wife	0	2	1	0	1	2	0	1.2.
14. Christopher	75-84, male, White British, lives with wife.	1	0	0	0	0	Some of this participant's interview photographs were exhibited as part of a 14 th piece	0	1.2.

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								designed by the artist. It features photographs from four interview participants who did not take part in the workshops.	
15. Patricia	75-84, female, White British, lives with husband.	1	0	0	0	0	0	As above.	0 1.2.
16. Lynne	60-64, female, White British, lives with partner.	1	0	0	0	0	0	As above.	0 1.2.
17. Gaynor	65-74, female, White British, lives with partner.	1	0	0	0	0	0	As above.	0 1.2.
18. Jane	75-84, female, White British,	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0 Jane shared three photographs of doors in

	lives alone.								her house that caused her confusion, in relation to concerns about memory.
19. Afzaa	Unknown, female, Black African, lives with husband.	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2.
TOTAL		14						8	

^aJohn's work was displayed in an arrangement made by the artist as he could not complete the project due to ill-health (see case study).

FIGURE 1

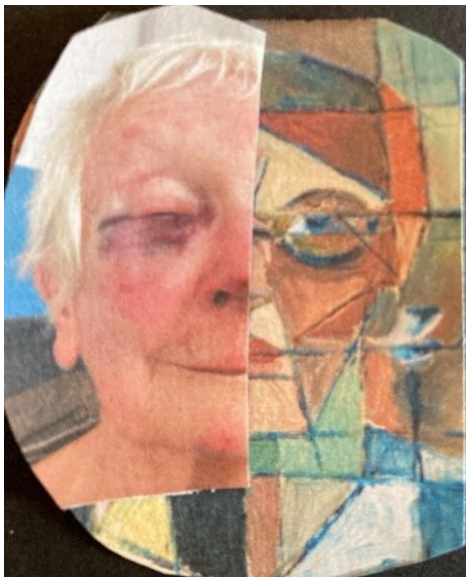


FIGURE 2



For Peer Review

Figure 3



For Peer Review

Figure 4.



Peer Review

FIGURE 5.



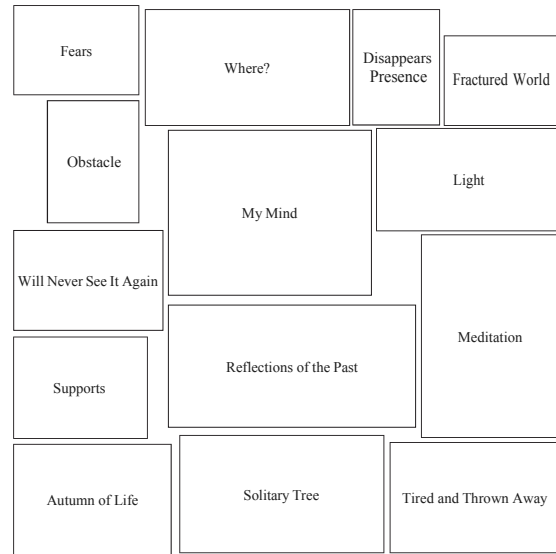
For Peer Review

FIGURE 6.



Sex	Age	Year	Residence
Male	65	2010	US
Male	65	2010	US
Male	65	2010	US
Male	65	2010	US

Individual Photograph Titles:



Peer Review

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FIGURE 7.



For Peer Review