

Ageing and dying “at home” in the Southwest of England

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Introduction

Current end-of-life care policy claims the majority of people in the UK wishes to die ‘at home’ without critically examining what is meant by ‘home’.

My thesis explores the meaning of ‘home’ in the lives of older people (aged 85-98) living alone in the Southwest of England. As the majority of older people are living alone in their own dwellings this poses real questions as to the extent to which older people feel ‘at home’ in these places and how they anticipate their future within these dwellings.

Older people have a lifetime of experiences and therefore may have multiple and perhaps contradictory understandings of what is ‘home’, and what is not. However in policy ‘home’ is used as a static concept mostly referring to older people’s current dwellings.



Methods

This project uses an ethnographic approach and a range of qualitative methods to explore the meaning of ‘home’ with older people.

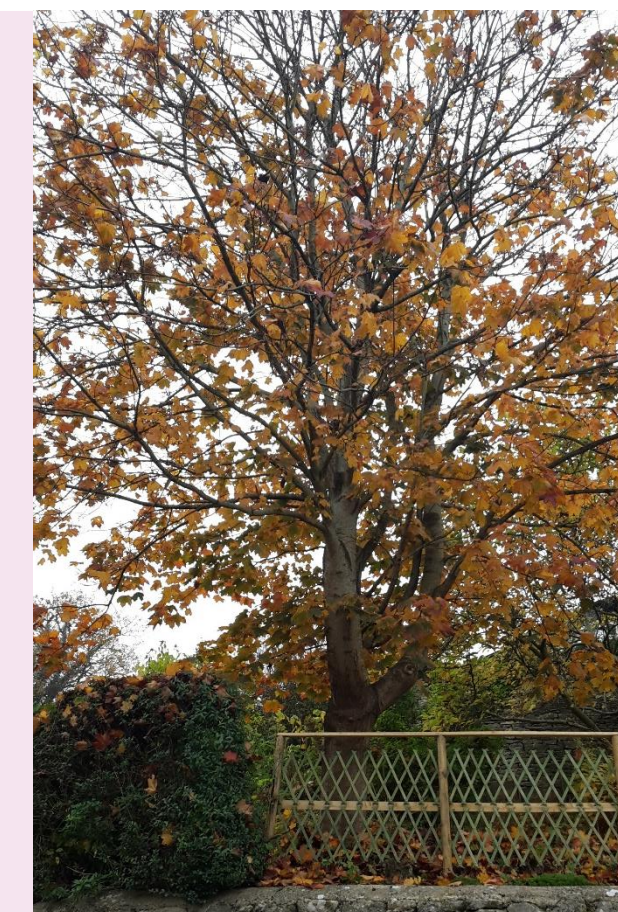
I visited 8 older people over a 9-month period. During this time I explored both issues concerning ageing, death and dying as well as the mundane, everyday life aspect of growing older in your own dwelling.



Most of people’s lives goes on behind closed doors and it is not until one enters this sphere and spends considerable time there that one gets an appreciation of a person’s everyday life.

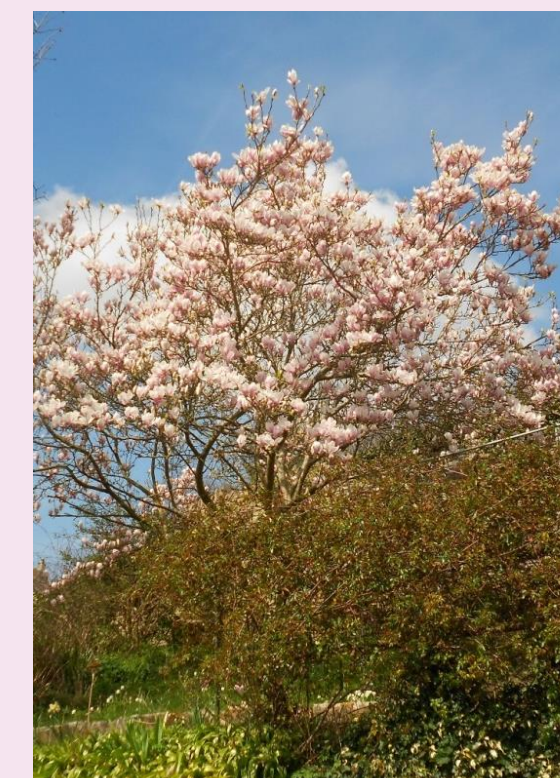
Participants’ living environments and possessions are a great methodological tool to prompt conversations.

Temporality



The research shows the temporal nature of ‘home’

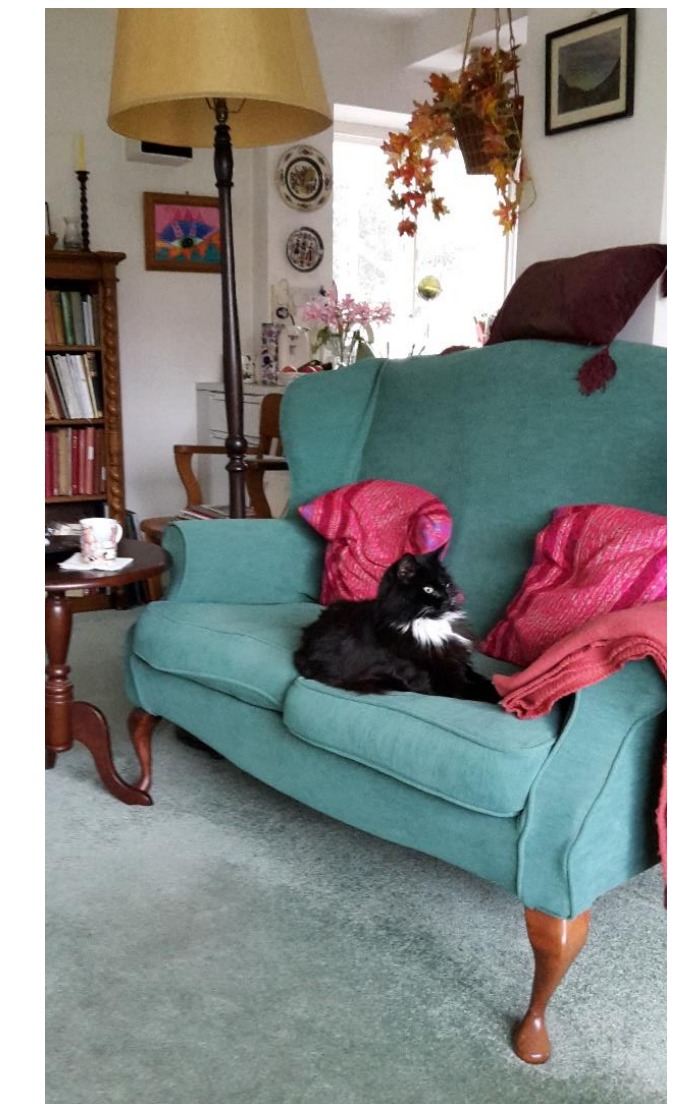
The changing of seasons offered great insight into issues concerning safety and mobility around the house. For one participant the garden was essential. During the last visit she showed me the safety railings that she had installed at slippery spots in her garden as she was ‘getting older’ and had experienced several falls.



Social Relationships

All participants were living alone and had a range of social networks.

Some experienced loneliness and isolation. In some cases pets offered great company.



Conclusion

The study shows the complexity of older peoples’ perceptions of ‘home’, as it can refer both to the house and garden, the surroundings and the neighbourhood as well as the social network to which they belong.

This sense of belonging in the world can be challenging for older people as there is the growing reality that they will not live forever. The research shows the temporal nature of these issues as perceptions change over time.

Older peoples’ perspectives on ageing and dying in their own dwellings are typically not incorporated into policy yet are essential in creating adequate practice and policies.