

Like a thief in the night

A qualitative study of experiences and narratives
related to bodily ageing and physical activity

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ABSTRACT

This research deals with experiences and narratives related to bodily changes in late life with a main focus on two problems.

The first regards the connection between bodily changes and experiences of growing old. The second regards the meaning of physical activity in relation to elderly people's experiences of self-identity, body and ageing.

The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and lifestory interviews with seven "frail" and eight "spry" elderly between 68 and 95 years of age.

The participants describe physical activity as a therapeutic strategy carried out as a means to keep bodily ageing at a distance. Physical activity hereby forms a contrast to the stereotype of ageing and decay.

Specific gender related themes in the stories were uncovered showing that the men predominantly focus on controlling the body through discipline whereas the women display divergent strategies towards bodily changes ranging from accepting bodily changes to different forms of self-regimentation and control.

The male participants of the "spry" olds develop minute daily training programmes which correlates with a general focus on control. None of the female participants develop such strategies of activity.

The stories support a distinction of three narrative types. Eleven participants display *the status quo narrative*. They accept the present bodily conditions and hope that these conditions can be upheld in the future. One of the participants expresses the hope of re-establishing former bodily capabilities and is hereby representing *the restitution narrative*. But his hope of restitution runs short and his story ends up as a narrative of decline characterised by a general dissatisfaction with the body and a lack of possible improvements in the future. Three participants reflect *the decline narrative*.

The research shows that experiences of ageing are related to bodily changes and decline, but these bodily processes are managed and ascribed meaning in many diverse ways. The stories reflect a complex relationship where the elderly negotiates meaning through different self-stories and the involvement of the factual body in social contexts.

Most participants defy being labelled "old", but acknowledge the bodily changes throughout life. Thus they acknowledge the processes of ageing, but reject the stigmatisation linked to the general conception of "old age". The general rejection of being defined "old" and the attempt to keep ageing at distance mirror a culture that has been unable to provide complex images, ideas and stories of ageing.

Negotiating between subjective experience and cultural stereotypes the elderly propose new stories that challenge the general and simplified notion of ageing as decline.