

The Spiritual Care of Older People: The Report of a Group Research Study

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*This article focuses on methods and outcomes of a piece of participatory research with the intention of combining an educational experience with the production of useful research. This group approach to research may serve chaplaincy well as the combination of perspectives and skills is greater than the parts. This article shows that reflection and discussion can produce "new horizons." Authors use the Gadamerian stages of the hermeneutic cycle as headings for the presentation of the data and also identify the findings before showing the workings. This deviates from the standard presentation of research but allows the research story and the workings to be exposed more helpfully. Conclusions show that adaptation both internally and externally are required in old age and a major task for chaplaincy is to help in the adaptive process through focussing on the underlying meaning to a life's experience. Reprinted with permission from the *Scottish Journal of Healthcare Chaplaincy*. Original spellings and form for source citations have been maintained.*

THIS PAPER REPORTS A STUDY undertaken as part of an educational programme aimed at developing research method skills in health care chaplaincy. This particular project considered the idea of "gerontological chaplaincy."

The intention of the educational programme was to offer participants an interactive, customised and flexible experience of doing research. This would enhance their understanding of research methods and develop practical research skills. The intention also was to devise a method of collecting and analysing data about the spiritual care of older people in health care settings, which is appropriate to health care chaplaincy and its core beliefs and principles. This meant that a method needed to be found whereby theological reflection and social science analysis could work together.

This was achieved by working as a collaborative group made up of chaplains, spiritual caregivers and spiritual care researchers. The substance of the fieldwork was to gather naturally occurring case study material of spiritual care work with older people.

We recorded and analysed these case studies as a research group. We identified key themes and generalisable issues using qualitative research techniques of analysis and theological reflection, drawing on the various skills of the group. This paper reports the findings of this study and comments on the process of doing collaborative research.

Background: Gerontological chaplaincy

The assumption underlying this research topic was that older people have particular spiritual needs which are distinct from those of others, particularly in times of ill health and death and dying. These needs have been underresearched and underacknowledged in health care chaplaincy practice. As individuals, we are often not receptive to our own ageing, tending to see ageing as something that others do. As a society, we struggle to value ageing, seeing youth as more interesting and enlivening. Health care chaplains are not immune from these cultural sentiments, which influence their practice.

Working out the research question

The research team were either working as full- or part-time health care chaplains or spiritual care researchers. In addition, there were three course leaders. The total group of nine collectively had backgrounds in medicine, psychology, learning disability, theology, nursing, sociology, business, accounting, education and engineering. The intention was to reflectively work through the research process in order to identify new ways of working with older people based on empirical evidence. We were trying to combine theological reflection on a situation with empirical observation and analysis. This process combined the ideas of Gadamer (1975) and the hermeneutical circle and the expression of the action research cycle found in Swinton and Mowat (2006). In both cases, the importance of reflection, change and use of research knowledge is highlighted. The work of Gerkin (1989) also influenced our thinking in particular in considering the reflective task and the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

The group was asked to prepare themselves for the discussion by reading a variety of articles given to them in the precourse materials. (Reid 2009, Wolfe 2007, Mowat 2008, Mowat 2007, Sadler and Biggs 2006) Our first two days spent together were dedicated to working out the research question and the method. In terms of the Gadamerian reflective cycle, these two days moved from "preunderstanding" to the experience of "being brought up short." There were a variety of presentations to stimulate discussion, which included the nature of knowledge, how can we know what we know, the idea of ageing, successful ageing and the link between ageing and the spiritual journey. Each member of the group was asked to write up a known case, somebody who had spiritual needs and for whom they had spiritually cared, and to use the research technique of thick description. The anthropological task of thick description requires a detailed unpacking of the situation so that the nuances and subtleties of the interactions may be understood more fully. (Geertz 1973) Using Gherkin's ideas we also encouraged the team to incorporate their own reflections and selves into the description and analysis.

Our discussions brought us to the conclusion that it might be difficult, and possibly undesirable, to differentiate older people's spiritual needs from that of anybody else. The idea that ageing has a particular spiritual imperative and indeed that ageing gives us an opportunity to develop spiritually was critically discussed. The result was that a new perspective was found. Instead of accepting uncritically that there were specific characteristics of spiritual care for older people and that the task was to identify them, a new question was posed: Are there specific characteristics of spiritual care for older people: should older people be seen as having different needs to others?

Method

During our group discussions, we refined the method taking into account the practicalities of research being conducted by people with other, full-time jobs. The end result was as follows:

1. Each participant reviewed one book and summarised for the others.
2. Each participant wrote two thick descriptions based on their real life practice. They drew these descriptions from their own experience of working with an older person, often during bereavement or illness.
3. Each participant analysed two of the descriptions, one of their own and one of someone else's.
4. Two participants carried out consensus group discussions with groups of older people linked to churches.
5. Each participant produced a written piece reflecting on an aspect of the research data.

Literature review

At the beginning of a piece of research, it is important to establish what has gone before. Typically, an exhaustive review of the literature will lead naturally into the research question. In reality, people do not have time or the resources to do this kind of work and the available materials now online vastly overwhelm capacity to take in the knowledge.

We asked the participants to read one book reflectively in depth and to write up an account of it as it related to the research question. Each of these books was written by established authors in the field. Some of them were edited books. (Woodward 2008; Killinger 2005; White 2006; Mackinlay, ed., 2008; Mackinlay, ed., 2001; Jewell, ed., 2004)

Our group discussions of this literature showed that preunderstandings had shifted and that participants were experiencing the “being brought up short” referred to by Gadamer (in Osmer 2008). None started with a particular knowledge about ageing. All found issues, ideas and knowledge in these books that made them start to view the world of ageing slightly differently. Building on these insights, we started to formulate a way of analyzing the data by creating themes that came from the literature that linked with the themes that came out of the data.

This literature “voice” revealed four themes as shown in the following table.

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Definitions of ageing | Ageing is a spiritual journey, helps you become more true to yourself, is normal, something we all do, involves existential angst. | |
| The relationship between ageing, spirituality and religious faith | Spirituality waxes and wanes with age. Spiritual maturation is possible in old age. We have a crisis in faith as we age. Christian faith may be a matrix/resource for ageing (Woodward). The Church denies age. Is about the relationship with the ultimate. | |
| The requirements of ageing and spirituality | A search for meaning and purpose. Seeing things differently, e.g., only see the stars when it's dark. A challenge to existing beliefs. | |
| Methods of supplying spiritual support | Talking and listening. Nonanxious presence. Friendship. Time. Memory. Journaling. Faith community as holder of memories. Reminiscence. Anticipation of loss – ritual. Life review. | Prayer. Staff discussion. Friendship. Use of language. Strategies for communication. Playfulness. Compassion and cheer. Sense of belonging. Welcome. Relationships. |

The group noted several key analytical points, which formed the basis of the review of the data.

- What is seen as strength in early life may become a weakness in later life.
- The process of ageing requires a process of spiritual support.
- For the current generation of those over seventy, spousal relationships are specifically important and central and arguably different in nature to the next generation spousal relationships.
- Finding meaning is the crucial basis from which the carer and those being cared for can emerge and spiritual care cannot be fulfilled unless that basis is found or recognised.

Armed with these insights and reflections we moved on to the data. The richness of the data is never done justice to in the write up because there are always too much data to include.

The data “voice” – dialogical interplay

This stage in the cycle allows the texts to reveal themselves to us. The data voice came from the thick descriptions, the consensus group work, the analysis of these data by individuals and the group discussions. This reflects the view that data are inevitably interpretive. We have tried to show the “workings” of that interpretation. The job of the reader is to consider the interpretation presented here in the light of her/his own preunderstandings in order to continue the hermeneutic process.

These were prepared during the fieldwork period and each participant had access to all the data for the two-day analysis period. One of the research team led the analysis process, which involved deriving themes and substantiating them through the data. This was not a typical analysis process in so far as it was collapsed into two days rather than spread out over a period of time with spaces for reflection. This had the benefit of focussing the discussion, but the disadvantages of not allowing ideas to emerge and ferment.

Summary of the findings

Through group discussion, reflection and thematic analysis, we derived a method of spiritual care for older people, which is expressed in the Diagram 1 – A method of spiritual care for older people. (See [Attachment A](#).) This was the “fusion of horizons,” which we achieved following our “dialogical interplay.” The diagram shows that adaptation was central to ageing as well as possible. This is consistent with the work on “successful” ageing. (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) Adaptation and adaptive capacity depended to some extent on the nature of the ageing journey. The findings showed that in all cases ageing was a journey to be taken seriously and which had a number of common characteristics. There were two kinds of adaptation required. An adaptive attitude referred to the internal work and processes of the individual and the adaptive resources referred to the way in which the outer world was responded to—the external relationships. The task of the spiritual carer, expressed as good practice, is therefore to support the adaptive capacity in both spheres. The major way to do this was by engaging in the search for meaning and adopting the practices listed under methods of supplying spiritual support shown in the literature review summary table above.

The data analysis “journey” – dialogical interplay

This framework came at the end of a long and sometimes quite challenging process of trying to make sense of the data. The intention had not necessarily been to come up with a model of good spiritual care but to answer the question about specific spiritual care for older people. The development of the themes expressed in Diagram 2 – The data analysis journey and their configuration as a framework for good spiritual care practice came out of the discussions about the data within the group who were themselves applying prior knowledge and theory to the data. (See [Attachment A](#).)

The ageing journey

It quickly became obvious that older people in the case studies were “journeying” and that this journey involved a number of common experiences. [Attachment B](#) shows examples of the material from the case studies that support the categories. This table demonstrates the process of moving from the data, to clusters, themes and category and then to the framework described above.

The ageing journey for these cases was helped by adaptive capacity. There seemed to be two components to adaptation that were derived from our data set.

Adaptive attitudes

Adaptive attitudes seemed to revolve around concepts which are familiar in discourse around spirituality and successful ageing. Specifically, these included thankfulness

... dear wife was taken from their home and never survived to reach hospital and so was spared needless suffering. He was simply so glad she had passed away quickly and painlessly. (01)

as well as acceptance, peace of mind, maintaining routine/ritual and finding a continued role in life.

He was at ease ... and spoke with characteristic ease and grace with a real sense of gladness about his wife's peaceful painless passing and never referring to what the future held for him. ... there was no apprehension or anxiety about his own fate; instead he readily planned his weekly shopping trip when he drove himself to the supermarket. (01)

The internal work of adaptive attitudes was influenced by a number of themes: faith, personal characteristics, finding new purposes, looking forward, retaining/rehearsing memories and addressing the question of meaning. (See [Attachment C](#).)

External relationships

The other component part of adaptation was in terms of resources. We described these as external relationships. In our sample, these seemed to be the way in which the case study individuals engaged with and related to their families, nature, spousal relationships, community support and involvement in the church. All these factors seemed important in helping individuals adapt to the ageing process and to give a framework for approaching their spiritual care. (See [Attachment D](#).)

The good practice for the spiritual care of these individuals seemed to be to stimulate an adaptive attitude through addressing the internal and external components of the life. This means encouraging and discussing an adaptive attitude and stimulating and supporting adaptive resources.

Conclusions

This experimental study has developed a framework for spiritual care of older people. It draws on empirical data derived from case studies, two focus groups and a multidisciplinary group of researchers, who generated themes through reflection and discussion using the techniques of the reflective cycle. It suggests that those who are serious about supporting older people in their spiritual journeys will focus on both the internal and external resources available to them and encourage an adaptive approach to the ageing process. This is very much in tune with the idea of adaptation, compensation and optimisation which Baltes and Baltes generated. Adaptation is in itself a spiritual task and needs help.

Limitations

This was an experimental study, which attempted to use a collaborative approach to a topic and to combine the social science qualitative method with a directly reflective cycle. The data are secondhand in the sense that they come from the researchers' memories of interactions and situations and thus are highly interpretive. However, if we believe that all data are interpretation, then we have tried to identify and to show our "workings" in order that readers may judge for themselves the value of the emerging framework.

Implications – application to the real world

Application to the real world is the final part of the Gadamerian cycle. It is here that we consider the new insights that this work has given us.

Firstly, we will consider the insights about chaplains' capacity to engage in action research. This project was hard work for everyone and had to be fitted in to busy lives elsewhere. However the time to reflect and think served the chaplains well. The model of collaborative research, in which researchers from different perspectives engage with each other, is very appealing and workable. This strengthens the work and allows its theological aspects to maintain their place alongside the social science drive towards themes and generalisations.

Secondly, we consider that the spiritual work required is at the end of life when bereavement, loss and decline are commonplace. Health care chaplains, whether in the community or in hospital, inevitably encounter such topics with patients, many of whom are elderly. We think that this framework for spiritual care provides a real and helpful structure by which to support older people and to offer practical, spiritual and emotional comfort. It offers a vehicle by which meaning in old age may be sought and found.

In the end, our spiritual journey is just that, ours. However we may walk alongside each other as companions for some of the way. We may gently ask the questions, both practical and philosophical, that need to be asked so that adaptive capacity can be maximised and spiritual lives enhanced and enriched. 🕯

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Attachment A

Diagram 1: A method of spiritual care for older people

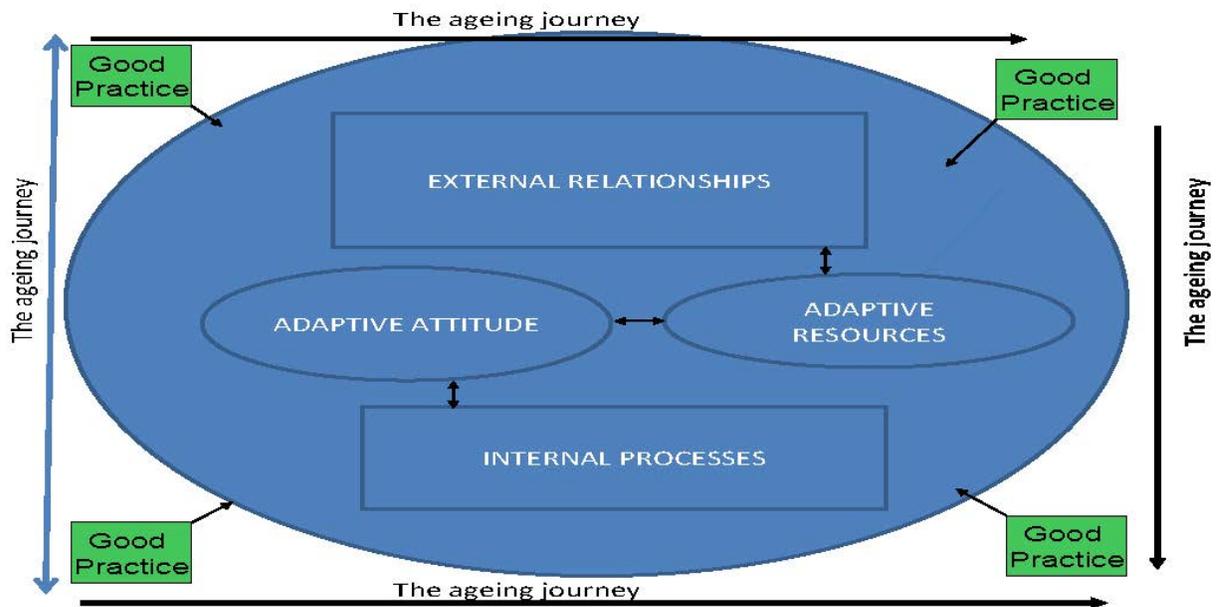
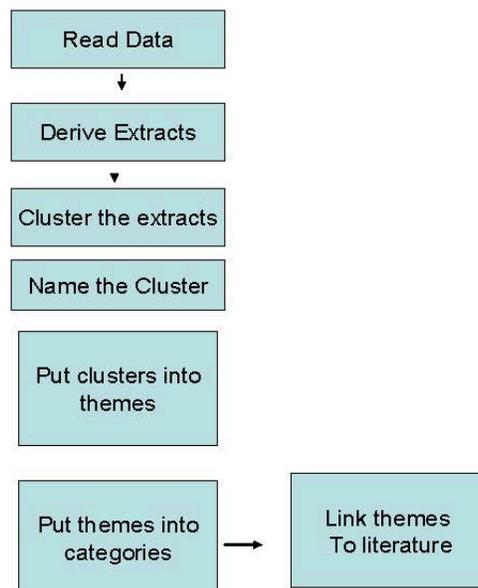


Diagram 2: The data analysis journey



Attachment B: Examples of material from the case studies which support the categories in the ageing journey

| Raw data extracts Detailed refs available in data files | Clusters Agreed by group | Themes Named after discussing clusters | Category Appears on framework |
|--|--|--|---|
| I think about God and how good he has been to me. I ... I liked being in the church doing things for the church. You know that I was an elder and in the guild. I miss the people whom I used to be friendly with at church. ... is X still there? (021) | Shrinking horizons Missing church community Restrictions to daily living | Narrowing and shrinking of horizons | The ageing journey |
| M has always been a keen gardener, but as she became less able to tend flower beds, J has progressively planted more of the garden as lawn. (062) | Gradual adjustment to loss Wobbly balance between independence and dependence | Loss | The ageing journey |
| After much deliberation, she suggested that she would like to go into a residential care home rather than be looked after by one of the family. (031) | Accepting that carers become the cared for Effect on the carers | Acceptance | The ageing journey |

Attachment C: Adaptive attitudes

| Raw data extracts Detailed refs available in data files | Clusters | Themes | Category |
|--|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <p>Mr. and Mrs. X chose to retire here from a gregarious life style elsewhere and their own social skills ensured that they were accepted within their own locality as well as the church. ... they had a substantial network of friends and this gave them support and encouragement. (011)</p> | <p>Practiced social and emotional mobility</p> <p>Primary identification of self as family member</p> <p>Core consistency of self aided by routine</p> <p>Oblivious to the idea of ageing</p> | <p>Personal characteristics</p> | <p>Internal processes</p> |
| <p>On recovering (from a stroke) ... something had changed. P was wanting to pray and be part of a group, which he had never done before. ... we wondered if he would like to go to church, and someone said, "He doesn't get up any other day before 11." (051)</p> | <p>Questions about life after death</p> <p>Strong faith</p> <p>Constant relationship with God</p> <p>Prayer brings peace</p> <p>Faith as progress, means of getting nearer to God</p> <p>Affirmation of spirituality</p> | <p>Faith as a support in life</p> | |
| <p>The group reflected on the cumulative emotional effect of all his losses, compounded by a sense of grievance arising from medical mishap ... the feeling of accumulated and accentuated loss fed into an absence of hope; the collective feeling of "what's the point." (04103)</p> | <p>Existential anger</p> <p>Questioning God and faith</p> | <p>Meaning/finding purpose</p> | |
| <p>Some new activities and relationships became available to S ... providing a much needed structure to the week. ... he continued regularly attending the church he had gone to as a child and also linked up with a befriender. (052)</p> | <p>Making active, positive choices in facing challenges</p> <p>Making new connections</p> <p>Making decisions</p> | <p>Looking forward</p> | |
| <p>He did not mindlessly recall and recite past happenings featuring his late wife but would include her whenever it was appropriate, just as if she were out shopping and not present to contribute to the discussion. (011)</p> | <p>Memories as part of resilience</p> <p>Memories of church and family</p> | <p>Memories</p> | |

Attachment D: External relationships

| Raw data extracts Detailed refs available in data files | Clusters | Themes | Category |
|--|---|-----------------------|------------------------|
| <p>The family (who lived a good distance away) would phone them regularly and visit when able. That worked out at about a monthly visit during the winter, more often in the summer. (062)</p> <p>She maintained her interest in family events, and when her grandson was married, she felt she did not have the confidence to be taken to the wedding, so the wedding came to her. In between the reception and the evening party, the bride and groom accompanied by a variety of bridesmaids went out to visit her. (031)</p> | Family blockage Geography Intergenerational relationships Meaningful and contributory loving family relationships Connections | Families | External relationships |
| <p>With her dementia, L has an inner self-awareness through memories of long ago, whereas her husband is more aware of the present. L displays a greater sense of contentment and serenity than her husband. (062)</p> | Burdensome loneliness Duration of relationship Mutual dependency Endurance Love | Spousal relationships | |
| <p>He has good neighbours, who bring his daily paper and use this an opportunity to see that he is up and about. (061)</p> | Belonging to a neighbourhood Friends Connections to place and across generations | Community support | |
| <p>She still enjoys going to church but now relies on neighbours to take her there and back if her husband is too stiff to walk. ... she is always welcoming to people who visit her. (062)</p> | Connection to active church, engagement with the church community, a sense of belonging. It implied a network of support and a sense of continuing purpose. (Some of the case study subjects actively sought to maintain church involvement.) | Church involvement | |