'This is Your Life You Have to Live with the Memories': Older Migrant Women's Reflections on Living with the Past

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'This is Your Life You Have to Live with the Memories': Older Migrant Women's Reflections on Living with the Past

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Abstract: Memories collected across the life-course often inform our sense of who we are and what is important to us, as we grow older. This article draws on the findings of two qualitative life-history research projects that set out to explore older UK migrant women's quality of life across the life course. It has two main aims. One aim is to contribute to existing theorizations of social memory. Another aim is to show the extent to which migrant women's memories of life-altering events influence their satisfaction with life as they grow older. The article concludes by arguing for an approach to the study of ageing that is sensitive to the impact of memories on our experiences of growing older.

Keywords: Ageing, Fulfilment, Life-course, Life-satisfaction, Migrant, Social Memory

Introduction

THE CONSTRUCTION AND renewal of collective and individual identities is intimately connected to our memories of the past (Misztal, 2003). Memories of past lives and homeland's remind us of who we are and what is important to us. They are also a storage place for emotions such as anger, hurt, disappointment, loss, nostalgia and happiness. Some of these may linger as past, present and future 'coexist, interpenetrate and mutually implicate each other' (Adam, 2004: 69). Thus, our stories of the past may seep into and become part of our present, influencing our sense of identity and life-satisfaction. A number of psychological studies have examined the effects of traumatic memories on individuals at different life stages (e.g. Schrauf and Rubin, 2001; Berntsen and Rubin, 2002). Most of these have theorised memory as an individualised cognitive process. Such an approach is problematic because it ignores the extent to which the social landscape shapes how and what we remember (Zerubavel, 1996). In this respect, psychological perspectives on memory are often socially and culturally oblivious. Subsequently, they tell us little about the impact of socially traumatic life events on life satisfaction and fulfilment in later life. This is not to suggest psychological theories of memory are not important, but rather to argue that our individual recollections of the past are always embedded within a particular socio-political context (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick and Robbins, 1998; Misztal, 2003). Accordingly, this article takes issue with theorizations of memory that ignore the social circumstances that influence *what*, *how*, and *why*, we remember.

This article focuses on the memories of older (age 60+) migrant women living in the UK. It draws on findings from[1] two qualitative life-history research project's exploring older

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COMMON GROUND

women's quality of life across the life course. Life-history research with migrant groups has highlighted the significance of memories as a source of identity and a means by which people maintain their subjective ties to people, place and time (Brah, 1996; Campbell, 2008). It has also demonstrated the extent to which personal, public, social, cultural and political experiences shape both our sense of who we are and 'our ability to make sense of our present circumstances' (Misztal, 2003: 1).

The aims of this article are two-fold. First, it seeks to build on existing conceptualisations of social memory, and second, to explore the link between older migrant women's memories of important events and their current life-satisfaction and fulfilment. It draws on empirical accounts to illustrate how the process by which we acquire and retrieve memories is influenced by social context and the extent to which recollections of the past continue to influence the present. The discussion is organised into three main sections. The first section provides a critical review of theoretical approaches to social memory and considers the extent to which past experiences, such as migration and death, influence life-satisfaction and well-being in later life. The second section outlines the methodological approach of the research projects. The third section draws on empirical accounts of older migrant women's memories of life changing events. It seeks to examine how these memories affect the women's sense of fulfilment, priorities and coping strategies as they grow older. In the concluding section, the extent to which traumatic memories collected across the life course impact on life-satisfaction and fulfilment in old age is considered.

Social Memory and Life Changing Events

An assertion of this article is that memories of the past influence contentment and life-satisfaction, as we grow older. Further, the memories we have accumulated with the passing of time take on different meaning as we view them from the vantage point of old age. Research on memory and ageing has tended to focus upon, for example, the experience of bereavement (Hockey, Penhale, and Sibley, 2001), the problems of memory loss (Schofield, Murphy, Herrman, Bloch, and Singh, 2000), and coping with traumatic memories of war (Burnell, Coleman, and Hunt, 2009). With the exception of Hockey et al., (2001), research in this area tends to draw heavily on individualised psychological approaches. One effect of this is that the impact of social and collective memories on experiences of growing older is often excluded by definition. This is problematic because the life course experiences an individual remembers are shaped by the wider socio-economic and political context of that time. In this respect a sociological perspective on memory and ageing has much to offer. Yet it is only recently that sociological approaches to memory have begun to emerge as a distinct area of study. Social aspects of memory were only briefly alluded to in the work of classical sociological theorists such as Durkheim ([1915] 1951). For example, Durkheim mentions memory in passing when describing the importance of traditional rituals as a means of transferring social memory. However, such passing references to memory have not contributed to a distinct theory.

Building on these earlier references to social memory, Halbwachs ([1926] 1950: 82) theorised a sociological perspective on memory. Rejecting a psychological approach to memory

he argues in the act of remembering we maintain contact with those who are significant to us. Thus our personal memories are constructed via the collective memories of others, which are in turn, 'constantly transformed along with the group itself' (Halbwachs, 1950: 82). This is evident in the way that we use memories of a particular period to maintain our links to the loved ones we have lost due to, for example, bereavement or migration. As Halbwachs puts it:

> To forget a period of ones life is to lose contact with those who then surrounded us (1950: 30).

Thus, memory is always socially constituted as individual memories are formed only as a consequence of 'the intersection of collective influences' (Halbwachs, 1950: 44). This suggests it is not possible to separate individual and collective memory as, 'each memory is a viewpoint on the collective memory' (Halbwachs, 1950: 48). Importantly, this viewpoint alters as the individuals' social position and relationships with others changes. Nevertheless, one of the problems with this approach is its failure to theorise the agency of individuals to draw on their understanding of an event in order to amend the collective memory. This means that those versions of a story or event that differ from the collective may be excluded, even though people do not always share similar memories of the same event (Fentress and Wickham, 1992).

More recently, Zerubavel (1997: 82) has proposed an approach that focuses on the social aspects of the 'mental act of remembering'. He argues social environment strongly influences how we remember the past and what we choose to forget. Thus our memories are influenced by both past and current, political, and social context and the circumstances these create. Additionally he notes 'mnemonic others', such as family members and friends, help us to either remember or expunge the past. In this sense,

> our social environment certainly plays a major role in helping us to determine what is "memorable" and what we can (or even should) forget (Zerubavel, 1997: 84).

This suggests that mnemonic socialization and tradition influence what we recall and how it is remembered (Zerubavel, 1997). Further, a collective memory formed through personal recollections of a particular event or place is always more than 'the sum total of the personal recollections of its various individual members' (Zerubavel, 1997: 96). Subsequently, we remember not as individuals but as members of the 'thought communities' to which we feel a sense of attachment or belonging (Zerubavel, 1997: 9).

Migrants are members of 'thought communities' that are made up of people who have experienced the upheaval of migration and living in a place that does not feel like 'home'. Such 'communities' are important because they are places where memories can be shared and through this ties to a remembered homeland maintained (Brah, 1996; Wray, 2003; Degnen, 2005). As Gilroy notes memories of social relationships, sights, and sounds are often a more important indicator of ethnic identity than a persons' actual place of residence (1991, 2000). The political landscape of the time also shapes how and what we remember (Radstone, 2010). For those older migrants who were forced or coerced into leaving their place of birth talking about memories of this period is often a painful process (Blakemore and Boneham, 1994; Maynard et al., 2008). For example older Polish migrants, who settled in the UK

during the 1930s and 1940s, have lingering memories of the violence they witnessed when they were forced to flee their homelands during the Second World War. Drawing on the work of Alexander et al., (2004), Eyerman (2004: 160) argues when members of a group experience social trauma, such as war, their memories are marked forever and the resulting 'cultural trauma' may lead to 'a loss of identity and meaning'.

Memories of other traumatic events such as death, bereavement, and racial discrimination have also been shown to impact on quality of life and social circumstances in old age (Karlsen and Nazroo, 2002; Maynard et al., 2008) Importantly, at a time when death and mourning are becoming increasingly sequestrated from public space (Mellor, 1993) and periods of mourning shorter (Aries, 1983), memories are a way of maintaining a connection with those we have lost. The act of remembering may evoke the powerful emotions and feelings felt during the event (Misztal, 2003; vom Bruck, 2005). One effect of this is the re-living of these emotions and their incorporation into the self which, in turn, influences our existing feelings of self-worth and identity (Nussbaum, 2001; De Michele, 2009). Subsequently, such memories have the potential to influence our sense of well-being and life-satisfaction in later life (Wray, 2004; Maynard, Afshar, Franks and Wray, 2008).

Importantly, even though traumatic events may have occurred in the distant past the emotional and practical consequences do not always diminish with time (Blakemore and Boneham, 1994). In her research on the *sadah*, a hereditary elite group in Yemen, vom Bruck examines how remembrance translates into social practice. Her research suggests culture and social location are important influences on what and how we remember the past. As she points out,

> (...) cultural understandings and social location shape the ways in which subjects remember and then actively reconstruct memories in the process of making sense of their lives and of formulating responses to adversity (2005: 14).

Memories also influence our relationships with others and whom we turn to for support. The act of sharing, sometimes painful, memories may help us to come to terms with the past because it provides an opportunity to 'transfer some of its burden to others, who help us to bear it' (Halbwachs, 1950: 97).

From the above discussion it is evident that memories are continually and retrospectively (re)constructed and (re)interpreted in the context of our current relationships and life circumstances (Mead, 1932; Misztal, 2003). Our memories are attached to places, people, and events, and remembering 'involves a uniting of past and present selves and emotions, which allows for an ongoing re-examination and reinterpretation of one's self and experiences' (De Michele, 2009: 104). Memories are also shaped by our understanding of *who we were* and *who we are* (Campbell, 2008). Thus, it is through our reflexive engagement with the past that we make sense of our current position and circumstances (Warnock, 1987). Further, our recollections are simultaneously located within past and present socio-cultural terrains; they emerge from the past but are understood from a standpoint that is situated in the present (Misztal, 2003).

Methodology

This article is based on the experiences of a sub-sample of seven participants from two qualitative research projects. The first research project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and formed part of its *Growing Older* initiative. The second research project was a pilot study funded by the University of Huddersfield. The author of this article was a researcher on both projects. Both research projects sought to explore older (50–80 years) women's perspectives on quality of life. Research participants were recruited from urban and suburban areas in the North of England and the majority had worked in paid employment in factories, mills and shops. The sub-sample of participants represented in this article self-defined and categorised their ethnic background and identity as: Indian, Pakistani, British Muslim and British-Polish.

A life-history interview approach was used in order to capture both pre and post migration experiences and gain an insight into how the participants' memories of earlier life-course events changed, as they grew older. As Back (2007: 10) reminds us 'the order of things is not a product of nature, but rather of history'. Thus, the participants were encouraged to take a story-telling approach (Edwards, Alexander, and Temple, 2006). The researcher met with the interpreter prior to the interviews to explain and discuss the aims and objectives of the research, and to consider the suitability of the interview themes and draft questions. The themes explored in the interviews included experiences of; pre and post migration, education, work (paid and unpaid), kin relationships, friendship networks, relationships outside of the home and in the immediate community, religion, ageing, and health. One of the most important findings was the lingering effect of memories of particular events on current life-satisfaction and outlook. The majority of participants spoke in detail about the past and related some of this to their present circumstances.

Both research projects aimed to capture the often disordered way that people live their lives, the 'messiness' of emotions and feelings and the muddled and fractured nature of their recollections of the past (Smart, 2009). Another methodological aim was to examine how the biographies of the participants, the researcher, and the interpreter interacted to influence the research process.

In relation to data analysis, 'literal', 'interpretive' and 'reflexive' readings were undertaken of each of the interview transcripts (Mason, 2001). The first 'literal' readings produced a list of themes and codes. For example, migration experiences, employment, bereavement, transport, and friendship networks etc. Subsequent readings facilitated the development of a deeper understanding of the meanings attached to the participant's comments. Field notes and observations were used to contextualise the participant's experiences and views. This facilitated the development of analytical codes and themes that went beyond 'technical categorization and description of the data', and located the data within explanatory theoretical frameworks (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996: 154).

The interviews took place in community centre's and the participants' homes, whichever was preferred by the participant. With permission from the participants interviews were recorded to audio disk. Interview recordings were translated from Punjabi to English by the interpreter, this provided detailed transcripts. Ethical issues arising from the two research projects included those relating to consent, anonymity, confidentiality and privacy. Prior to recruitment, information about the projects was provided to the participants using an interpreter where appropriate. This included details of the research aims and topic, the contact

details of the researcher, the time, place and duration of the interviews, dissemination of the research findings, and the right to withdraw information or participation at any time without explanation. Potential participants were given a week to decide whether or not to participate and provide signed consent (British Sociological Association, 2011).

Older Migrant Women's Reflections on Memories of Life-altering Events

Memories of events that the participants viewed as life-altering continued to influence their present lives. These included; pre and post migration events, the death of family members, and war time experiences. Interestingly, when recounting their past the research participants often related them to their current circumstances. Thus, memories of particular events tended to be used by the participants to make sense of their present life issues and priorities. This was evident when the participants were asked about factors that had affected them before they had migrated to England. In response, Rehana and Jannah recalled their memories of the partitioning of India and Pakistan and connected this to the gender inequalities they had encountered throughout their lives. Rehana noted how the upheaval caused by partitioning, and her brother's restrictions on her attending school, destroyed her ambition to become 'a doctor or a teacher'.

> I had lots of things in my mind but I was uneducated. I wasn't literate in Urdu either. I went to school for just four years before India and Pakistan were made. Then we came to Pakistan and everything was destroyed here as well, just like in India. Then I grew a little older and my brothers stopped me from going to school. I was my brother's only sister very much loved and cherished but they didn't allow me to go to school. I had so many dreams. (...) My heart used to wish if only I had become a doctor or a teacher (Rehana, age 65+, Muslim Pakistani).

Rehana's dreams of gaining an education and a fulfilling career were shaped by the political, geographical, and socio-cultural upheaval that accompanied the partitioning of India, and the consequent gender discrimination she experienced due to her brothers preventing her from attending school. Rehana felt the gender discrimination she had faced in her youth had had life-long disempowering effects. For instance, it had a negative effect on her employment opportunities and her subsequent income and made her feel she had not reached her full potential (Wray, 2009). She went on to describe how she had spent most of her life 'working, working, working', for 'sixteen years in factory work sewing and then for twenty-six years in a rented shop'. This left her with a lingering sense of injustice, anger, and disappointment. Rehana drew on her memories of childhood to explain the extent to which a lack of access to education had impacted on her life. She spoke powerfully about her life long disappointment of not fulfilling her wishes to 'become a doctor or even a teacher'.

Similarly, Jannah also recalled her memories of the social upheaval resulting from the partitioning of India and her fathers' cultural restrictions on her behaviour, in order to explain her lack of education and employment opportunities:

> I'm going (to school) a few years...only a couple of years. During that time Pakistan and India is separated. I came from Pakistan I was three and a half years old at the time of the separation. In those days the local people were kidnapping the girls especially if

they had a little jewellery or something like that and taking them away, even killing them, all of the time this was happening. Those days my father did not like to send me (to school) (...) And later he sent me for about two years...that's it. I wanted to...study because my brothers are educated one is a doctor and one is a top lawyer. But at the time...because I'm a girl my father thinks...the girl is more respected if she is married (...) I was only sixteen when I had the first child and I was married and um always the parents in those days have to... the girl was a burden. This has made it difficult for me... all of my life (Jannah, age 60+, Pakistani British Muslim).

Jannah draws on her memories of this event to try and make sense of her lack of formal education and her inability to fulfil her dream of becoming a teacher. Her experiences demonstrate how coming to terms with the past may involve re-visiting and re-adjusting memories in order to understand why particular events occurred (Warnock, 1987; Misztal, 2003). Jannah's recollections are embedded in the cultural beliefs of that time, such as her father's belief that a girl should be uneducated and marry young. However her comments suggest her memories are also viewed from a standpoint that is located within the present (Mead, 1932; Misztal, 2003). Jannah's current view is that both girls and boys should be encouraged equally with regard to their education, as she commented:

Did you want your daughters and sons to have a good education? (Interviewer)
Yes, I encouraged them equally (Jannah)

This highlights how reflection on the past may influence our sense of self and the views we hold which, in turn, has the potential to influence our current behaviour (Misztal, 2003). Jannah's decision to equally encourage her daughters and sons is shaped by her memories of childhood and a strong sense of injustice that remains with her.

Other participants had had their access to schooling halted as a consequence of war. Agata, a Polish refugee who had arrived in England after the Second World War, spoke movingly about her experiences of being sent to a German forced labour camp and as a consequence leaving her school in Poland at the age of 13. This experience continued to influence her throughout her life in different ways. For example, it made her determined that her own children would have access to a 'proper education'. This is evident in the following interview extract where Agata begins her story by talking about her daughters' education and then goes on to recall her own memories of school, and how she felt about missing out on her education.

When my daughter started school – after a while I wasn't pleased with her teaching and learning. Then I decided to send her to private school. So I said, "I will work even harder to earn the money and my child shall have a proper education", you see because I hadn't. You see I was 13 when war broke out and then it finished. That was it for me... there was no more school. There was one war then another war broke out and then I was taken to Germany and that was it. I had no more education and I said "No-my child will have education". Because...my husband is well educated. You don't feel what you have but you miss what you haven't. And that is one thing I miss all the time all my life that was one thing I missed...my education (Agata, age 79, British Polish).

Agata's story highlights the interconnections between past and present and the extent to which previous life changing events may influence our current actions and priorities (Warnock, 1987; Campbell, 2008). Although Agata missed out on her own schooling she gained a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment from making sure her daughters had a good education. Memories of her war-time experiences also shaped other life priorities. For example, she drew on her memories of being sent to the front line to dig trenches for the soldiers during the war to explain her attitude toward work and religious faith. As she noted:

> You see every evening, every morning during the day when I used to be in the field in Germany working very, very hard and the planes were zooming above your head. You didn't know whether any moment you could lose your arm or your....it didn't bother me if I would lose my head I was just afraid that I would be wounded. What I did was I used to work and pray. And I am still doing that. These are important to me (Agata).

War-time experiences of being afraid, not having anything warm to wear, the constant cold, and lack of food, had influenced Agata's priorities throughout her life. Alongside education her priorities were as follows:

> So every time for me it is warmth and I always have food in the house. I make sure there is warmth and I have enough clothes to wear I make sure of that as well (Agata).

Memories of family deaths also had a lasting impact on the lives of some of the research participants. For example, Nimrit and Jannah had both experienced the death of a child and their memories of this continued to affect their health and quality of life (Riches and Dawson, 1997). Nimrit's daughter had died twenty-seven years ago at the age of seventeen after an operation for a heart problem. Her sadness as she spoke about her memories of this was tangible.

> Then first when she was operated it was okay, second time she didn't pull out, in 1983 she passed during operation. She was in a coma. After the operation she was alright... then she went into a coma. Then after three, four days, she died. Then I was very regret, why we have (to) operate second time, but we don't know you know...as God wishes (Nimrit, age 65+, Indian Sikh).

When Nimrit recalled this difficult time she spoke quietly and slowly and her feelings of sadness and regret were clearly evident (Lupton, 1998). She went on to say that she would never forget her daughter because she lived on through her memories. As she put it:

> But you can't help...you know a mother may have got eight children but you can't forget that child (Nimrit).

Jannah also spoke of her continuing sadness at her sons' death sixteen years previously. Her son had died in traumatic circumstances that had been investigated by the police but the case remained unresolved.

> Sometimes, sometimes everyone is sad but after my son...is sad. My son is passed away.
> Is sixteen year but I'm still so much...missing him all the time. (...) I feel its yesterday.
> I don't know why...it's all the time fresh in my memory, all the time he is with me.

The death of Jannah's son remains 'fresh' in her memory and she feels he is with her 'all the time'. Her memories of her sons' death are connected to and inseparable from those held by her family. Consequently, they are collectively constituted through the recollections of her family members, as 'mnemonic others', of the events that occurred at the time (Zerubavel, 1997). This re-living of the circumstances of the death makes it difficult for Jannah and her family to come to terms with their bereavement as the emotions they felt at the time are constantly re-lived as they share their memories (De Michelle, 2009). For example, Jannah's younger sons' memories of this time continued to make it difficulty for him to come to terms with his brothers' death.

> He's unwell (younger son). After my other son passed away...uh my life is very, very hard. He (younger son) can't control himself he's banging on the door and breaking the door...and not going to the hospital when he should...and shouting at the police and everyone is coming and...the police arrested him and took him to the court and the judge sent him to the hospital. He's not taking the medicine and his mood changes very quickly. It is hard after my son died...very, very hard. He (younger son) can't live with the memories (Jannah).

Jannah's account illustrates the reality of living with traumatic memories and the extent to which they may impact on both mental and physical well-being. Additionally, it highlights how memories of her son's death inter-relate with those of her family (Halbwachs, 1950; Zerubavel, 1997; Campbell, 2008). The experiences of Jannah draw attention to the collectively constituted nature of past hurts and traumas and how they may continue to encroach on our present and future happiness (Misztal, 2003).

Throughout the interview, Jannah linked her current depression to her memories of leaving her homeland and the death of her son. She spoke about how she missed Pakistan and her family from the moment she arrived in England to the present time:

> Then I came after him (her husband) and at first I feel very sad and...I left the family over there. Parents and brother, I've got no sister only me. And all the time I am missing them. It was dark...but I came in June 1967. Yes but I'm still missing Pakistan...very much. That's it, that's my life. Yeah I'm always thinking about...when I left home my mother my father are very, very close to me. I remember...my father crying so much he didn't want to send me here (Jannah).

Jannah associated her memories of these events with her feeling that there was nothing good about getting older and spoke about trying to live with her memories.

> Yeah sometimes I'm so tired and I don't feel always feel ok in my mind (...) (Jannah)
> What would make you happy now? (Interviewer)
> Life is happy and sad (...) but the things that are coming...you have to accept...this is your life. This is your life you have to live with the memories. Getting older means always living with the memories (Jannah).

Amneet had also suffered a number of family deaths, which she said had left her feeling mentally despondent and physically ill. Here she recounts her memories of these bereavements and associates this period in her life with the beginning of health problems:

> (...) one of my son's was seventeen years old when he died. He had a brain tumour. But for two years err... he survived. Everything was okay and after two years he got sick. When he was thirteen he became sick and started vomiting and needed an operation (...) and then he was good and going to school. Then when he was fifteen...again it started. In his spine, spine...then God knows. Don't know...nobody knows and he died. At the same time as this, one of my brother's died in the Air India crash. Yeah Air India...there were sixty-four people in the aeroplane and everybody died. And I can't do it then I can't go on...and I am mentally ill, for two years I was sick. One son died, my mother died after this...then my father two years after he died also. Then...my brother died, my mother died, I had lots of blood pressure, high blood pressure, then lots of cholesterol started. Cholesterol, thyroid, so plenty of things started at this time (Amneet, age 60, Indian Sikh).

Amneet went on to say that she was 'ill and disappointed' with her lifeand that her physical and mental health had suffered as a consequence of the bereavements. She told the story of how 'day by day' she had attempted to recover.

> Day by day with gym, aerobics classes, in the last five years or so my health problems have gone because I use the health club. My health is now good. I have good food, aerobics classes, I mean gym, (...) so...these days my doctor says err you have a 'little sugar', my eyes are checked...no there's nothing wrong. So then I have good health. So sometimes I'm saying 'health is the wealth'. This helps me to keep going. My memories of the deaths are less with time...but they will never leave me (Amneet).

Attending the health club enabled Amneet to improve her physical and mental health and provided her with opportunities to socialise with others. She went on to say that keeping busy and socialising meant she did 'not think about the past' as much, and this helped her to live with her memories of the bereavements. Amneet's life was filled with other social activities such as charity work for her local Sikh temple, walking, visiting her grandchildren, and swimming. She often mentioned the importance of maintaining her health as a means of ensuring she would be able to 'get out' and visit family and friends both in England and India (Maynard et al., 2008; Wray, 2003). Nevertheless on three occasions during the interview Amneet guided the conversation back to memories of the deaths. For example, when asked about what made her happy Amneet unexpectedly associated this with her memories of the bereavements:

> But money's not enough sometimes...and though my health is good... I still have to... when my son died my brother died my mother died...I still remember. This made me know what was important in life. It made me realise again...health is the most important thing. Also being with others getting out and not worrying.

Here Amneet's memories influence her values and priorities and how she makes sense of her life in the present, they help her to conclude that health is more important than money

(De Michele, 2009). Her comment about 'being with others' also suggests socialising with others may increase resilience to the painful emotions that often accompany memories of traumatic events.

Similarly to Agata as a young girl Katya, a 72-year-old Polish migrant, had been taken to a forced labour camp in Germany. Through talking to each other about their, often painful, individual and collective memories of the Second World War they were able to share the *burden* of their experiences (Halbwachs, 1950). Agata and Katya belonged to what Zerubavel (1997: 9) refers to as a 'thought community' where their personal recollections are drawn upon to form a collective memory of Polish migrant identity and war-time experiences. This is evident in Katya's feeling that some of her current health problems were directly linked to what happened to her at the forced labour camp, where she had been treated in a similar way to Agata.

> I have first this asthma and lately I have arthritis. I have a bad back always because I was in Germany during the war and working (in forced labour) and it stays forever (Katya).

Other participants also attributed some of their current mental and physical health issues to previous 'cultural traumas' (Eyerman, 2004: 160). Some felt that remembering these episodes re-awakened the emotions they had experienced during that time (Nussbaum, 2001). As Emilia a Polish migrant aged over 60 who had been taken to Germany for forced labour at the age of 15, reflects:

> If I tell my story to somebody I feel different. I may feel like a cry but I don't. But at night sat on my own...and I try to write...then you want everything put in and you have to think back to that time. It makes me cry but it doesn't help when I cry because I have to stop and go away and have a cup of coffee and then start again. (...) Until now we got harden up and you don't have to cry every bit. But there are some bits I remember in my life when I write down...when I have to cry and I cried a lot (Emilia).

Emilia narrates this story from both an individual and collective group perspective. When she say's 'we got harden up' she is referring to other Polish migrants to the UK who had shared their experiences of the Second World War with her. Her story also shows the extent to which social crisis may have long lasting effects that do not dissipate with age. Indeed for Emilia the emotional impact of her memories appear to have intensified with age.

In summary, the accounts discussed in this section reveal the extent to which memories of life-altering events affected the participant's present and future hopes and expectations. They also suggest that there is a need to develop an approach to understanding ageing that is sensitive to the importance of memories as an influence on well-being in later life.

Conclusion

Drawing on older migrant women's accounts, this article has explored the links between older migrant women's memories of life-changing events and their current life-satisfaction and happiness. Remembering the past may be experienced as both empowering and disempowering; it may (re)create feelings of regret, happiness, anger, and injustice (Nussbaum,

2001). It may also be used to help us to come to terms with and explain the trajectory our life has taken. Certainly for some of the participant's childhood memories of war and gender discrimination were drawn upon to explain their lack of education, limited opportunities in paid work, and current feelings of regret and injustice. Memories of war-time experiences also influenced their priorities and what contributed to feelings of contentment. In this sense, as Radstone puts it, 'where memory is concerned, the personal is political' (2010: 33). For some of the participants, memories of the bereavement of family members made it difficult for them to get on with their lives. For example, this was particularly the case for Jannah whose son had died in unexplained circumstances. Her experiences illustrate the extent to which past hurts and traumas may continue to encroach on present and future happiness.

From the discussion it is clear that memories of traumatic events have strongly influenced the research participants' satisfaction with their lives, which in turn, affected their current outlook and priorities. Yet, the impact of such memories on later life is often overlooked in social gerontology and sociology. The experiences of the women in this article suggest there is a need to address this neglect. This could be achieved through further research exploring the cumulative impact of memories on happiness and life satisfaction in old age. A lack of sensitivity to the effects of memories of traumatic events may further exacerbate existing feelings of loneliness and isolation for older migrant women. As such, the implications of the sometimes damaging effects of memories on older migrant women's well-being, needs to be prioritised for further research and by those working to improve older people's quality of life.

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Dr. Sharon Wray is a Reader in Sociology at the University of Huddersfield. Her research has focused on ageing, ethnic and cultural diversity, migration and health. She is particularly interested in how life course events, such as migration, ethnicity, and social class, influence later life. With colleagues she has undertaken an ESRC funded study examining older migrant women's experiences of growing older. She recently completed a project on the quality of life and health of older Pakistani and Indian migrant women. She has extensive experience of undertaking qualitative research, working with interpreters, and researching across ethnic and cultural diversity. She has been widely published in the areas of ageing, ethnic diversity and quality of life.

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