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# Stroke and self-identity among older people: A biographical approach

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# Background

- Increase in older people living with chronic conditions.
- Stroke is the leading cause of disability in England.
- Few studies explore the meaning of chronic illness for older people.
- Little research on identity in old age more generally.



# Aim

To explore the experience and meaning of stroke in relation to the self-identity of older people based on a biographical-narrative approach.



# Research questions

- To what extent is stroke experienced and interpreted as a 'biographical disruption' (Bury, 1982) by older people?
- In what ways does stroke disrupt or allow continuity of identity for older people?
- How do older people present themselves to others in personal and public contexts following a stroke?



# Method

- Qualitative biographical-narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2004).
- Begins with open question to elicit the story of their stroke.
- Respondents give structure to their own narrative.
- Shows how the stroke fits into their biography.



# Sample

Recruited from South London Stroke Register.

Eligibility criteria:

- aged 75 and over
- living in private households (ie. not institutionalised)
- AMT score of 7 or above
- able to communicate in English
- without severe speech impairment
- stroke occurred within the last 12-36 months



# Interview data

- Aim to complete 30 interviews in total
  - Theoretical sampling approach
  - 13 interviews completed to date
  - Currently being analysed
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- 8 males, 5 females
  - 9 White British, 2 Black Caribbean, 1 from former Yugoslavia.
  - All lived in inner city areas
  - Mainly from working class backgrounds



# Analysis

- Biographical case reconstruction analysis (Rosenthal, 2004).
- Contextualises events in terms of wider life histories and circumstances.
- Levels of analysis:
  1. Past life events (Life history)
  2. Respondent's presentation of the narrated personal life story (Life story)



# Emerging preliminary themes:

## Previous employment and presentation of self (Goffman, 1959)

*I was (working) there for **twenty six years**...I started off sweeping the floor and then from there I **worked my way** up to a charge hand... Silk screen printing... I was in charge of nine, nine girls, I think, two guys.*

(‘William’, White British, married, aged 78)

*I joined there as an engineer going round putting phones in people’s houses and that, you know, and to offices, pubs, clubs. **I enjoyed it. Good job.** You’d get tips.*

(‘Harry’, White British, single, aged 77)

*They were **lovely people to work for**. It was lovely because **I get on with everybody**. When I used to clean their homes, it wasn’t their home I was looking after, it was mine.*

(‘Mary’, White British, aged 75)



# Presentation of self and previous employment

*Since I was 14, I've never been on the dole, I've never consciously been out, I've **never been out of work**...When I had Sally I stopped when she was born and when she was a few months old my mother babysat for me and I went back to work. I think you've got to have some **purpose and pride**.*

(‘Mary’, White British, aged 75)



# Retirement as biographical disruption (Bury, 1982)

*I retired when I was 60, which took me two years to get over the **shock**. I'd made up my mind I was staying in work till I was 65 but I worked for (a large telecommunications company) and they were quite adamant that you went at 60.... I was completely **shattered** (when I had to retire). I mean I'm what 75 now but inwardly I'm 27.*

(‘Mary’, White British, widowed, aged 75)

*My wife didn't want me to get a job (after I retired) but I said yes I will. I phoned the office, I started there because I was **bored and short of money**, it's as simple as that.*

(‘Bob’, White British, widowed, aged 87)



# Stroke as biographical disruption due to enforced retirement

***I do miss (work)...*** If I hadn't had my stroke I'd still be doing my (paid) housework probably.

('Mary', White British, aged 75)

*It was a **good firm while it lasted**, well I was there 22 years... they kept me on, let me stay there as I was 87 before I had the stroke. Well it wasn't practical for me to stay there after I'd had a stroke.... But **I do miss that** because it made a break by meeting people first thing in the morning you see. Something to do and something to say...I thought it was going on **forever** to tell you the truth and suddenly it hits you.*

('Bob', White British, aged 87)



# Stroke as biographical reinforcement (Carricaburu and Pierret, 1995)

*On the day, I think I was discharged, (the nurse) said, ‘I’d like you to become a member of the Stroke Governors Unit as a **patient representative.**’ She said, ‘I know you can use a computer, you appear to be fairly literate, and **you’re not frightened to stick up for yourself and other people,** and I really would welcome that.’ So I did.....I was invited (to speak to) the Health Minister, and **that was great** to sit and have a one to one with him...I was able to tell him what had happened to me...when he left he thanked me and asked me how I’d got involved with this. And I said, ‘Well **old trade union habits die hard.**’*

(‘Tim’, White British, married aged 75 )



# Employment and stroke

## Employment as preventing stroke

*They pensioned me off....I tried to get another job actually. I went to the labour exchange and I wanted a £50 a week job, and, 'You can't have it,' they said, 'You can't have it.' ...And if I'd had, I'd have been kept busy and I might not have had the stroke.*

(‘Harry’, White British, single, aged 77)

## Employment as causing stroke

*Whether whatever caused the stroke will cause another one...It may be that because I was still working at 87 I should have packed up before then and, but then I become bored so what do you do.*

(‘Bob’, White British, aged 87)



# Next stage

- Continue to conduct biographical narrative interviews
- Theoretical sampling approach
- Carry out analysis simultaneously
- Explore other themes to emerge eg. social support