

Guest editorial

Anne Killett and Fiona Poland

Agency and connectedness for building resilience

The lessons we learn again are that to lack agency is to find ourselves in an especially dangerous position in a pandemic. Public statements worldwide have tended to highlight the extra vulnerabilities rather than the agency of older people in managing direct and indirect effects of these events. The papers in this issue, informed by highly diverse actual experiences of the pandemic, have identified the need for collective support for older people to be sustained and inclusive. While the pandemic has disrupted many research relationships and processes, nonetheless, a range of studies and stories are helping raise awareness of these experiences.

Where older people are members of displaced groups, their experience can highlight the challenges of intersectionality. Ekoh and colleagues render visible the “special and vulnerable population” of older persons displaced in Nigeria. Building on their experience of researching with internally displaced people, they interviewed 12 displaced people in person, taking infection control precautions to protect the participants and researchers. We learn that it is not COVID-19 itself that was having an impact on their daily lives at that time, but rather the economic impact. People worried about not having enough to eat but were also in fear of contracting the Coronavirus as they had little confidence that they would receive treatment. Even in the face of such existential threats, some were missing the fellowship of religious gatherings and meeting friends and family. The authors argue that the pandemic has revealed the sporadic and sometimes inappropriate nature of the support offered to this group of people as their circumstances and relationships change.

The single-person case study presented by Davies-Abbot et al. explores the perspective of a person living with dementia during COVID-19. They point to the campaign launched in response to the restrictions on visiting people in care homes during the pandemic. We hear that “Patti” accepted the reduction in her agency that came with pandemic restrictions, but this was not an easy, smooth process. She considered means available to her to promote her autonomy, settling on keeping informed about the pandemic through the news and observing how other residents and people visiting the home behave. The loss of close contact and shared experiences are keenly felt. We gain a precious and detailed insight into the efforts one person made to maintain their autonomy while also acting on feelings of responsibility for others. As the authors tell us, there are important implications for involvement in meaningful decision-making where ever possible.

With Dutton’s paper (reporting a national evaluation), we take the focus out more widely again as we learn about a study of the responses of the UK retirement villages and extra care housing to the COVID-19 pandemic. While these revealed experiences in common with other sectors, such as difficulty obtaining personal protective equipment and in maintaining the necessary number of staff, providers expressed a sense of being particularly overlooked. The late provision of guidance specific to housing with care and the lack of access to testing for residents and staff added to the complexity and challenges of a newly demanding situation. The sector faced increased costs yet also reduced income and remained concerned about financial pressures in the future, which have not been mitigated. Alongside such pressures, however, many operators showed how they continued to be actively mindful

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of residents' well-being by supporting social contact and activity. They offered evidence that residents reported feeling safe and supported through the pandemic despite the challenges.

Looking beyond the pandemic, Burke explores the themes of intergenerational fairness and enforced reduction of mixing between the generations to find lessons and opportunities being identified to "build back better". Could the community spirit that blossomed in the pandemic be part of a transformation for a less divided society? Burke warns against homogenised views of older people having more financial security but more ill health and deaths than younger people and goes on to examine some of the challenges older and younger people actually share in relation to the pandemic, such as with mental ill-health and loneliness, in which they may collaboratively work on addressing. He sets these in the context of the other major risks faced by society, including tightening public finances, climate change and demographic change, to focus more widely on the intergenerational tasks and opportunities ahead.

As in the opening article by Ekoh, we are reminded that encountering such challenges can drive and deepen inequality. But the disruptions of the pandemic experience can also to be a catalyst for change, perhaps to better appreciate and also to innovate shared agency and human connections across generations in families, communities and beyond as we try to "build back better" in collaboration with older people.

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