

BSG Bursary Reports 2016

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I arrived curious about the venue for this year's BSG conference, my third, having never been further north in the U.K. than Edinburgh. The stunning campus with its gentle gradients, lakes with swans and moor hens, its forest and mountain backdrop and the play of light and clouds across them made for an unforgettable setting for this one. That said, the programme including its social aspects was so full that I felt I was playing truant on the few occasions that I took off to do any exploring.

The ERA conference which preceded the conference proper, and where I was presenting this year, helped focus the mind and provided the opportunity to rehearse the main presentation for the conference (albeit with about half the time allowed). An innovation this year was to request that audience members complete feedback forms, which Valerie D'Astous afterwards distributed to each of us who presented. For me this was helpful and I appreciated the constructive comments received. In the event, I enjoyed presenting at the main conference and found the discussion afterwards of my presentation along with that of others to be very interesting. Many thanks to colleagues – those who presented with me and who attended - for their engagement in these discussions.

Brexit was on my mind, of course, coming to the U.K. for the first time since the referendum so I was glad that it was a topic addressed right at the outset in the first keynote address of the conference proper and in its lively exchanges afterwards. The main conference programme involved, as usual, trade-offs between sessions that I thought were essential for me to attend and others I would have liked to attend had there not been clashes. I did not try and run between symposia to try and catch certain sub-sessions as I did last year and instead once I opted stayed put and had to miss others.

Amongst the presentations of most interest to me were those by Amanda Grenier on 'precarious or active ageing' and by Sheila Peace on vision-friendly communities (both relevant to my research interests in the experience of ageing with disability). Other sessions on health and social care were useful in helping me to understand how social care is structured in the U.K. at present – and I'm also grateful to colleagues who attempted to explain this to me between sessions and over dinner!

Again, this year certain sessions surprised such as the one on Quality of Life, particularly the outline by Peter Derkx on the meaning of life (or the meaning *in* life) and left me with some thoughts to ponder that shed a new light on issues that I am interested in.

Colleagues met again and new ones encountered for the first time made the whole experience warm and stimulating and also, fortunately, hilarious in spots.

Finally, I managed a half-hour walk around the campus before taking the (very much appreciated) shuttle to the airport and was rewarded with, amongst other things, a most extraordinary field of wild orchids. Well done Stirling University for having the good sense not to turn all their green areas into bland lawns.

Well done and many thanks to the organisers.

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I am a final year PhD student in Queen's University, Belfast, where I am currently exploring the substance use of older women who have experienced violent relationships. I became a member of the BSG, and the Emerging Researchers in Ageing (ERA), just over two years ago. In 2015 I was at the ERA event, but was unable to stay for the full BSG conference, so this year I was looking forward to attending both. My supervisor, Gemma Carney, who has been a member of the BSG for some time, had been encouraging me to go, talking about how welcoming and supportive the conference was. I submitted a paper as part of a symposium she was organising and also applied for one of the bursaries that were advertised. The paper was accepted, I was lucky enough to be offered the bursary, and so I was good to go.

I arrived at the beautiful Stirling campus on Tuesday afternoon and just had time to drop my bag in my room before heading off to the first ERA session. This consisted of a short talk by Sheila Peace, and then a presentation by Shannon Freeman. Sheila was able to put us all at ease by explaining how she still found it difficult at times walking into a room of strangers and having to strike up a conversation. Shannon continued with this theme, firstly by emphasizing just how important networking is, and then by getting us to work on our 'elevator pitches' with each other. Although this was a bit awkward at the start, by the end of the afternoon we were all much more comfortable at introducing ourselves and were definitely more skilled in giving a concise snapshot of who we were and what we were researching.

The second ERA session was held the following morning, and this gave us the opportunity to hear presentations by several ERA members. These were really interesting, and covered a very broad range of topics, from food practices of older people living at home, to a comparative study of income mobility of older people in England and South Korea.

After this, it was into the BSG conference, and a very full three days. It was difficult at times to decide which session to go to – more often than not there were two or three on at the same time that I would have liked to attend. I presented my own work on the Wednesday afternoon as part of a symposium on feminist research. It was difficult not to feel a bit intimidated as the other members of the symposium, Gemma Carney, Naomi Woodspring and Sukey Parnell were all established and well respected in their various fields. However, although all our presentations were very different they worked well together, and prompted a really interesting discussion to conclude the session.

On Thursday, a third and final session was held for ERA members, Lunch with the Leaders. Here, distinguished gerontologists Debbie Price, Jill Manthorpe, Paul Higgs, and Christina Victor spoke about their experiences and gave advice. Again, this was a very useful session, and helpful for those of us who are just starting out. Also on Thursday, I was filmed, along with my supervisor, talking about our symposium on feminist research. This was for the BSG Ageing Bites series, and I look forward (I think!) to seeing the final version. Again, like Shannon and the elevator pitches, the thought of doing this made me uncomfortable, but not only is it a way to get some of the work conducted by BSG members seen on a broader platform, it is also a great opportunity to get feedback from a wider academic audience.

All in all I thoroughly enjoyed the conference. During my time as a PhD student I have attended many such events, but to me this one stands out. As gerontology covers such a broad field I had the opportunity to engage with people from many different backgrounds, and I found it really interesting talking to people from a whole range of disciplines ranging from social policy, my own area, through ethnic minorities and LGBT, to housing, vision friendly communities, sexual health...to name but a few. The conference offered a good balance of academic presentations where the more formal connections were made, and social events, which provided space for conversations to be continued in a more relaxed atmosphere. To conclude, I must admit that my Supervisor was right, the BSG conference was every bit as welcoming and supportive as she had said. Roll on Swansea 2017!!

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This year's conference was a very friendly affair in the University of Stirling's beautiful campus, with its loch, castle and wild rabbits. The main foyer, in which refreshments were served, offered an excellent selection of informative exhibition stands, including a very popular and interactive one on the Mobility, Mood and Place research project about built environments that are co-created with input from both architects and older people who will be using them.

At the start of the conference, Professor David Bell roused delegates by changing the advertised subject of his opening plenary to Brexit which provoked strong reactions but ended on a positive note about future research needs.

As usual, there was a broad selection of themed parallel sessions covering a variety of topics. Of special interest to me, and highly relevant to my own research, were those about prevention and early intervention from which I gained both valuable feedback and contacts. Also fascinating were sessions sharing the experiences of researchers carrying out home care and shadowing other home care workers, and the findings of a literature review about home care workers supporting people with dementia at end of life. Several sessions were dedicated to younger older people, including one on the extent to which social class disguises intra-cohort differences in baby boomers. Of course, so much choice leads to difficulty in deciding which sessions to attend I would have loved to listen to some of the other speakers.

Professor Heidi Hamilton, of Georgetown University, Washington gave a delightful plenary about using art and objects to construct situations in which meaningful conversations with and between people with dementia could be had. Her expertise in socio-linguistics brought an additional dimension to how group art appreciation can be implemented with people with dementia to reinforce their observational and language skills. Bringing in input from this particular discipline enriched the conference's, introducing a new perspective.

Having the opportunity to give an oral presentation was invaluable in further developing my presentation skills, confidence and identity as an emerging researcher. As the first external

presentation about my own doctoral research, I found the audience's comments supportive and encouraging.

While the long walks between rooms and buildings on the extensive campus ensured that our daily step count didn't drop too low, it also led to fewer opportunities for accidental networking over tea and biscuits which I felt took something away from the experience. However, I still found myself bumping into one or two long-term and highly respected academics I had met at previous BSG Annual Conferences who have shown an interest in my development/progress and future career. This, along with Professor Hamilton's plenary and being given the opportunity to give an oral presentation, was one of the highlights of the conference.

Preceding the conference was the BSG-Emerging Researchers in Ageing event which was very well-attended. As usual, the programme was excellent. A former PhD student, at the University of British Columbia in Canada, discussed the importance of networking, outlining how and where her own extensive networks had started. A post-viva student shared how a university departmental peer support writing group, to which I also belong, had been extremely supportive in many ways not least for writing skills, giving constructive feedback and self-confidence. In two parallel sessions, in short individual presentations attendees spoke about their own research or plans. I see this event as a 'must-attend' event for doctoral students which adds much to the experience of attending the BSG Annual Conference.