

# Locked up in lockdown

## Confining categorisations

Ruth Slater



*This is an ethnographic snapshot account of life in a pandemic in an independent retirement village. By this account of older living, I show some of the ways in which the discourse of vulnerability labels and marginalises older people. The account highlights some of the creativity and kindness which emerged at the start of the pandemic, and how older people self-organise, organise and are organised.*

*This is an account of later life from a perspective that is not dominated by failing physical and mental health. It expresses my thoughts and experiences of living with COVID-19 among a particular category of society – the old and vulnerable.*

### Keywords

COVID-19; organisation of older people; pandemic; reflection; ethnography

### Context

Four years ago, when I was in my late 50s, my husband and I downsized with resigned but optimistic anticipation of getting older to a purpose-built retirement village with swimming pool, spa, restaurant and beautiful grounds. We did this so that our son would not have to struggle with our wellbeing and, crucially, we were still young enough to enjoy the facilities and get involved. We love it!

Early in 2019, I encountered the unexpected and unlooked-for serious illness in my household. I was also painfully aware of the advancing loss of a parent. I lived eighty miles from my place of work in academia, but with an understanding employer, this had not been an issue until the serious flooding of November 2019. By that time, I was completely burned-out and, like most people encountering life-changing events, it was time for me to take stock of my circumstances.

I left my higher education institution in December 2019 and, with several intellectual and academic projects in hand, I was looking forward to pursuing interests that had been side-lined in favour of pursuing the completion of a book accomplished in December 2019 (Slater 2019). I am no longer waged and in a conventional organisational setting. I am, however, subject to organisation and organising of a different order.

I am interested in the organisation of people and things, and it occurred to me that the organisation of older people has been singularly overlooked as an object of study. How they are organised by the state, by others and by themselves. Ironically, the pandemic crisis has provided me with time to observe how this is happening, in this particular context – a village for independent senior living. What does this coronavirus experience say about organising older people, an increasing proportion of the population? There's rich material here.

### **Questioning assumptions about older people, the vulnerable**

There are institutionalised assumptions made about our more senior citizens: that they sit waiting for carers and family to turn up; that they watch daytime TV; that they are digitally illiterate and are compromised with their health. Indeed, there are neighbours in the village who do have these challenges. Mary Evans writes in *The Sociological Review* (Evans 2020) that the term used for people like my fellow villagers and neighbours is “vulnerable”. It is a term used by the government and by those who would lead us. The term, however, is a label which creates a social and homogeneous group.

A sociological label like this carries, as Evans (2020) says, “heavy baggage” in that it grants the power to authorities to develop generic policies towards an entire group based on where they live (care homes, or in this case, independent senior living villages) or chronological age. The heavy baggage of this categorisation is “underlying health issues”. Therefore, the vulnerability of a social group is recognisable but incalculable, as not even policymakers can have any idea of where the individual or group vulnerability has come from.

Evans also observes “that poverty shortens life” and that the prevention and cure of such underlying health issues are beyond the reach of most over-70s. She is right, though perhaps less so in this particular establishment. Whilst Evans states that “the old is not, we have to remember, these well-dressed people in Saga advertisements”, I have to tell her, that *they are*, at least here, in this village for independent living. Nevertheless, although my neighbours are different and diverse, they are, I argue, categorised as a homogenous group - the vulnerable.

Poverty does indeed shorten lives, but so does living. Unless someone has found an elixir for perpetual youth and immortality, the human body has from birth the seeds of its own destruction; it declines and fails. It is a paradox that as a person ages there is potential for intellectual growth, creativity and altruism, and all the while their faculties are declining. However, society has forgotten that it is not their fault that they were born when they were. I saw a Tweet early in the crisis that expressed outrage that older people (“my parents’ generation”, the Tweeter said) appeared unable to socially distance, yet the big intolerant omission is that this group of people have hearing loss.

## A shock to my new system – COVID-19

The arrival of the coronavirus pathogen has shaken to its essence the confidence and trust in authority and human-devised systems. These were already fragile, especially since 2007 and the global financial crisis (Amann *et al.*, 2011). So, I for one, had been wondering “by what means has this pandemic threat been allowed to take hold?” How has an animal pathogen crossed the species barrier now? I do not want to discuss the human greed, complacency and global systems which have provided the conditions under which this pathogen has arisen – others are far better placed to do so, and they should be heard. (I have been particularly impressed with the contribution Robert Wallace made in a Transnational Institute webinar (Transnational Institute 2020) and his 2016 book (Wallace, 2016)).

We are all experiencing a global event and we are all experiencing it separately, differently and perhaps uniquely. Both here in the UK and globally the effects of the pandemic are uneven. In my case, I am fortunate to be experiencing the pandemic differently from the single mum, on furlough, with school-age children whom she is having to home-school, living in a town where the nearest open space has been shut as part of lockdown measures. I am mindful of the need to remember the uniqueness of experience, but I do want to share my thoughts and experience of living in pandemic times in my independent senior living village of older citizens.

### Elastic time

I began 2020 with time stretching with an elasticity I have never dreamed of. My elastic time was punctuated with scheduled and desired activities - I was self-organising. Then came the bolt from the blue – COVID-19.

My scheduled activities were quickly extinguished and my diary emptied, to be replaced by my COVID-19 schedule, which I overlaid on my usual online diary, in the expectation of things returning to normal. Days punctuated weeks. The days were short and full of activity and opportunities for acquiring new skills which, although different from those which I had originally envisaged, were exciting. The weeks, however, seem interminable with the prospect of time stretching out even further, with the added menace of it pinging back, terminally and quickly.

These notions are pertinent for me, as the majority of the people in the village are over 70, and whilst neighbours are agile and spry, others are living with the physical and mental diseases and infirmities of later life. Being one of the youngest in the village, I felt an immediate sense of responsibility and care for them, and also for my husband who, because of our experiences in 2019, fell into the ‘vulnerable’ category. This realisation was a wake-up call, and not one I felt ready for. I had to be responsible for him, the local community and myself.

## Manifestations of thoughtfulness and creativity

This piece was conceived in collaboration and discussion with my colleagues from the UK Chapter of the Humanistic Management Network. We had met over Zoom at the start of the crisis and discussed our experiences. We all noted how different things were, how kindness and creativity were abundant, and we envisaged our writing to reflect this.

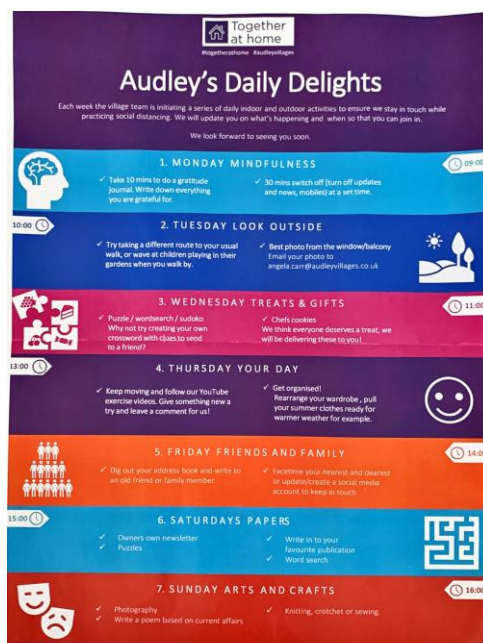
The crisis has prompted a surge of creativity, and musicians, performing groups, galleries and museums put their offerings of performances and virtual tours online. There are opportunities to join in with virtual choirs and instrumental groups. I lead (as in, I play the piano accompaniment) for a small group of vocally challenged but keen singers from the village. It was my birthday early in the crisis – around Easter – and I was delighted to be the recipient of a serenade of “Happy Birthday” by the singers from below the balcony. That was thoughtful. They all (those that could get there in time) stood below on the grass, at about one and a half metres away from one another, with their voices and a Happy Birthday sign. Such thoughtfulness and I did appreciate it.

The joy of collaborating with them on Sunday afternoons has been taken away, as we no longer get access to the restaurant where the elderly baby grand piano is. Inspired by my experience with virtual choirs, we have just begun virtual sing-alongs so that the singers can still sing from their own homes.

The management company of the senior independent living village has been assiduous in protecting the community. At the beginning of the lockdown, the management company at the head office began a series of written communications of increasing urgency concerning topics such as self-protection (washing hands, not going out) and progressing to encouraging the use of online or telephone shopping, and then encouraging socially distant walks around the village.

Locally, we received regular updates about what was happening in the village and how the staff could help. Every Saturday *Audley's Daily Delights*, a flyer, came through the letterbox. Here are some of its contents:

- Each week, the village team is initiating a series of daily indoor and outdoor activities to ensure we stay in touch while practising social distancing. We will update you on what's happening and when, so that you can join in.
- Monday Mindfulness – Create your own positive affirmation. A short quote to remind yourself of something positive
- Tuesday Look Outside – Meet and greet – smile and wave from your balcony for 10 minutes



An example of the village's weekly flyer

- Wednesday Treats and Gifts – Time to feel good! Why not try an at home facial or manicure or wear your best outfit so you feel fantastic?
- Thursday Your Day – Commit yourself to doing the ‘Cuppa workout’ for the whole day. Every time you boil the kettle, that’s your cue.
- Friday Friends and Family – Share a positive thought with everyone you speak to today
- Saturday’s Papers - Owners (sic) newsletter
- Sunday Arts and Crafts – Dance on your own doorstep.

Later still, the management company insisted that visitors to the village report at Reception to sign in and have a temperature check. Previously, the postman or delivery couriers would deliver directly to our homes: now all post goes to Reception and is brought around by the staff or the gardeners who operate in skeleton shifts.

### Organising the elderly by technological innovations

As the lockdown continued and the situation became a way of life, the village management company made available an app for smart devices on which appear updates about COVID-19. The village population have access to YouTube videos from the company’s health professionals entitled “armchair aerobics”, “introduction to Pilates”. There are photography competitions, quizzes, online bridge (yes, more than four of this population play bridge regularly), podcasts, and Gold radio and access to Coronavirus national and international news. The village-specific parts of the app have a chat wall, and the range of photography offerings has been a joy.

The village management has opened a “Pantry”, stocking an ever-growing list of essentials. We are not expected to go there, but to place an order by telephone, and the staff deliver it. On Mothering Sunday, those known to be mothers received a plant and chocolate (unfortunately marginalising those of the village who are spinsters or childless).



Screenshot of the village's App



## Personal Pandemic routines

Before the crisis, we regularly saw friends and neighbours enjoying the now-closed facilities. Once the crisis began and as our facilities shut, people began to ring neighbours to see how they were, as we had not seen them for a while. This was part of the owner-generated keeping in touch efforts. Needless to say, I developed my list of preferred telephone correspondents (people who wouldn't moan, be emotionally draining, or too needy).

The weather was mercifully kind and so people did move about the grounds for their prescribed exercise. My husband and I were early walkers around the grounds, and so by mid-morning, we were enjoying coffee on our balcony. Everyone who came around for their constitutional stopped and spoke. There were lovely days when it was difficult to get a minute's peace out on the balcony.

The ivy grows down the sides of the balcony so that I can hide from chatty walkers as they take their exercise. I recognise that I have developed a trait of being antisocial and that everyone wants to stop and talk. I don't.



The view from our balcony. Photo: Ruth Slater

I regularly saw and photographed pictures of married, social couples and singletons taking 'socially distant' walks around the grounds. Most of my neighbours walk without mobility aids and one or two do not and there is often a caravan of people with various degrees of mobility in various conveyances, with or without helpers walking around the grounds. Occasionally, they stop to chat to one another beginning at the two-metre distance which rapidly became un-socially distant as the hearing aids failed, necessitating an undesired closeness, replicating the picture voiced in Tweet I referred to earlier.

The pandemic drifted on with daily updates from central government about infection, mortality, personal protective equipment, and suddenly, highlighting the overlooked problem of the vulnerable, older people. This late focus was occasioned by the dawning realisation that the care sector had been overlooked as a hub of deficit – infection, mortality and personal protective equipment. Did this mean us too?

There was a step-change in attitude. Where once there had been a good-humoured acceptance, there was now a sense of shrinking boundaries, nosiness about who was socially distancing and with whom. Matters were becoming serious; weariness set in amongst the village, and in myself. The heavy baggage of vulnerability was beginning to become real, and I felt a deep frustration.

I noticed that it was not long before the social media hour allocated in my specially devised COVID19 calendar contracted to the bare minimum in favour of practising my Italian, practising my singing, organising my writing and reading about the origin of novel pathogens which cross the species barrier as a result of hyper-globalisation where people matter less than the urge to make money.

### The worm turns

My neighbours were getting tired of restrictive organisation, and I have often thought about the extremely elderly (and there are some here) who have not seen family or external friends since March, and who, by the very fact of their advanced years and declining health, may not see another Christmas or Spring. It is deeply saddening.

As the period wore on into May, lockdown restrictions were easing generally. But not here in the village. Activities and groupings we used to enjoy until the first week of May, suddenly became forbidden in the village. In the missive from the management company head office, 12 May 2020, in *Coronavirus Update Number 22*, they disappeared overnight. *Update 22* was a summary of the Prime Minister's announcement and it affected us in this way. We could "meet one other person from a different household outdoors". We could not "gather in a group of more than two" and "gatherings of more than 2 people from different households are prohibited by law". A placid population appeared to turn into, if not spies and informers, snitches (not a pleasant behaviour in this group of people). The pleasure of meeting another couple in a garden or patio had gone, as those owners who thought they had been acting responsibly realised quickly that they had been on the wrong side of the law. *Update 22* 'ticked us off' as a class:

*"In some villages, there have been impromptu groups gathering and people entering other owners' houses, both activities are currently illegal".*

*Update 22* also announced that the management company would be putting in measures to facilitate the use of the lovely terrace area and the croquet lawn. That **would** be a treat! Socially distant chairs suddenly appeared, rather stiffly. The distance between the chairs is measured and they are not to be moved! Two people can play a socially distanced (some chance!) game of croquet for fifty minutes, this so that the staff can clean the hoops and balls (bring your mallet!)

### Locked up and locked down

A long time before the pandemic began, the newsletter editor and his wife had wanted to work on an oral history of villagers' memories of work. Progress had been slow, as many people were unwilling to contribute, as they had been wary of the prospect of being interviewed. Suddenly, the newsletter (appearing about three times a week, and prompting me to declare as I retrieved it from behind the door, "Not another one!"), began to include reflections of life, childhood and work. The newsletters appeared with a sequence of stories from former nurses, complete with black and white photographs of smiling young women at the start of their careers in frilly matron's caps, not a single item of PPE to be seen. It began to seem rather worthy: I still had nothing to contribute at all – nothing worthy, nothing interesting. It made me feel worthless and bad-tempered.



Socially distant chairs around the terrace, and the croquet lawn. Photo: Ruth Slater

One day, I received an email that the Chatsworth Estate car parks were to re-open. The email contained a link to pre-book tickets. Since by then there was nothing to stop people driving out for exercise, I thought I'd share it and sent it to the newsletter editor. This was his reply:

*Many thanks for your message and this may well be something that many people want to take up. However, I am not going to include it as (the management company) are keen to minimise trips to and from (the village).*



The editor then said that, as the local staff had been “magnificent in printing and delivering the newsletter”, he did not want to put the staff in a difficult position.

Not only did I feel locked up, but I also felt put down! Within the space of ten weeks, I found myself organised and bound in the elastic time that had in January 2020 seemed endless and exciting.

## Reflections: pandemic and the organisation of older people

### The crisis as a harbinger of a better society?

As early as March, in an article in *the Conversation*, before lockdown in the UK, Foster (2020) highlighted with prescience the unequal and severe effects of the approaching pandemic:

*“It will cause death, worry, inconvenience and great physical and economic suffering. Lives and livelihoods will be destroyed. The burden will fall disproportionately on the old, the weak and the poor”.*

All these things have happened - especially the marginalisation of certain societal groups. The ethic of care and the treatment of a human as an individual with worth and value have been side-lined. Instead, concerns for this older group are manifest in policies of separation and exclusion. Separation and exclusion are likely to minimise the effect of infection, but in the organisational, organising and organised sphere, unfortunately, they have consequences which cause group members to become less mobile, more withdrawn, and which contribute to diminished mental wellbeing.

However, Foster also highlighted eight potential benefits arising from this pandemic, such as the potential for more altruism and localism, the realisation that the conception of the human as an “island” based on “the atomistic billiard-ball model of the person” is unsustainable. Foster is pointing towards change. There has always been a case for societal change, but this pandemic crisis should prompt new thinking about that change, and about how things could change for the better. A crisis and its threat should alter behaviour: we may now need to be physically distant, but our propensity for solidarity and co-operation remains undiminished.

I commented earlier that this project began with a recognition of the positive human experiences which the onset of the crisis appeared to indicate. I hope I have conveyed some of these at play here in this retirement village. However, as the crisis proceeded and as I came to terms with the rigour and potential excitement of time stretching, I began to ignore what was going on in virus-hit hotspots beyond our gates. I even lost interest (and faith) in the pronouncements from Downing Street and the dubious statistical comparisons.

### We are not all the same

Even as the lockdown was easing, I found myself *locked-up in lockdown*. I found myself reflecting upon the categorisation of my neighbours, who despite their individual experience, knowledge, skills and vibrancy become classified as *vulnerable* and treated as a homogenous group. They are prisoners of their good fortune, good economic management and their ability to fund an exceptional retirement environment.

The point here is that the management company could not see the effect of this classification, because of their preoccupation with corporate reputation. My neighbours have been classified as vulnerable and their humanity is overwritten and organised within a velvet-lined box. This is nothing when compared to the *vulnerable* in unseen, unremarked places, where people struggle with the basic aspects of existence before, during and after a global pandemic. It is pointless to keep issuing mantras such as “we are all in the same boat” and “wash your hands”. Some people do not even have a boat and certainly do not have access to water to drink, let alone keep their hands clean.

There is a truism that we shall all be changed at the end of this pandemic, and it is wise to take the opportunity for honest reflection. I learn that I can be very singular; I can work alone; I don't always need the company of others. This does not mean to say that I am ignorant of the needs of others: it's just that I forget that my neighbours might not be like me, and might need more support and human contact. I am irritated by trivia, half-truths and the over-categorisation of my neighbours as one homogenous group.

My earliest and hearty endeavours with spring cleaning have returned to the perfunctory. I am always happy to see people; I'm always happy to speak to people. I am less good at initiating that contact by phone. This period has made me more singular, more self-contained, more politically aware. I don't always like the person I am, but I am learning to be content with it. Oh, and I am quite good with virtual conferencing!

And despite the barely veiled irritations, I am fortunate to be here, but I am mindful of the fissures and the uneven terrain in our society which this pandemic has opened.

## Acknowledgements

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## About the author

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