

## Strangers in care

using literature to re-theorise care for the oldest old

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*Published in:*  
International Journal of Care and Caring

*DOI:*  
[10.1332/239788221X16099490162894](https://doi.org/10.1332/239788221X16099490162894)

*Publication date:*  
2021

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Dahl, H. M. (2021). Strangers in care: using literature to re-theorise care for the oldest old. *International Journal of Care and Caring*, 5(4), 669-684. <https://doi.org/10.1332/239788221X16099490162894>

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With families and significant others no longer exclusively providing care for the oldest older persons, the care task falls to strangers working in private or public institutions. Care has gone public, insofar as care has become a commodity, sometimes with the state responsible for providing or accrediting/certifying care workers, along with the state-engineered use of volunteering to meet the needs of persons in their 'fourth age', a concept coined to cover our social imaginary of the oldest, most fragile older persons (Gillead and Higgs, 2014). With caregiving now a professional occupation, there is a greater likelihood that the older individual will encounter an unknown and unfamiliar care worker. Several researchers have identified the increasing fragmentation in elderly care (Thelen, 2015; Nandram, 2015; Riskjær, 2019). In Westernised contexts we now have a system of 'regulated fragmentation', in which management of care for the oldest old is deliberately fragmented into ever smaller elements through politically engineered processes such as marketising and professionalising specific types of care for persons in specific kinds of situations (home/institution; disabled/living with dementia, etc.). This system of managing and segmenting care entails an androcentric bias, as it assumes that it does not matter who, what (non-human) or how many caregivers are involved in the care of the vulnerable older individual.<sup>1</sup> In some countries, strangers move into the homes of the older person, living with them on the most intimate terms, whereas in other cases, several strangers enter the private home during the course of the day, in a veritable flow of care workers and professionals. That an older person with dementia may experience their own family and significant others as strangers is different from the strangeness experienced in relationalities with care workers and care professionals.

The stranger shows up in subject identities that need to be understood as part of the dynamics of providing care; the stranger is an integral part of how doing 'good' is organised in the management of care. The caregiving stranger who has replaced the close family member is no longer an anomaly. In caring for the vulnerable older person, the stranger as care worker has become the norm. Despite this, public policies neglect the role of the stranger in 'doing' care. This leads to a lack of understanding of the increasing uncertainty and complexity that accompanies the flow of strangers in the 'regulated fragmentation'. Not only policy, but also care research has largely failed to see the stranger as an essential element in the care provided. The stranger enters

care in various ways that necessitate studying the phenomenon in depth. Sociologically, the stranger is invariably viewed as unfamiliar, threatening and a 'container of fear' (Ahmed, 2017: 24). In the absence of research on stranger and strangeness in care for the oldest old, I decided to make an exploratory study of contemporary literature in order to obtain some preliminary insights on the stranger and strangeness. Literature has dramatised stories that can provide knowledge about general troubles not yet available in research. Hence, I pose the question: *'How might we understand and theorise 'the stranger' in care for vulnerable older persons?'*

In this exploratory research, I have read two sets of texts: 1) novels by recognised authors, and 2) memoirs written by family members about their older partners or parents, both those with and without dementia. The stranger is an analytical concept introduced in my earlier work (Dahl, 2017). The stranger is more than just a synonym for the migrant care worker, as used in Isaksen (2011). The stranger is a theoretical lens that can help us understand key aspects of unfamiliarity and strangeness in the care setting. My understanding of the 'stranger' draws on the work of the German sociologist Georg Simmel and the French-Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva. For Simmel, the stranger refers to an unfamiliar person who combines features of proximity and distance (Simmel, 1908). For Kristeva, who is more psychoanalytically oriented, the stranger is something we carry within ourselves, i.e. the repressed, something we fear, or cannot come to terms with (Kristeva, 1991). In my understanding, the 'stranger' applies to a variety of people, e.g. care workers and care professionals, helpful strangers on the street, family members turning into strangers or even the vulnerable, older adults becoming strangers in contemporary high-speed, neoliberal society. Strangers appear in different personifications and are not a straightforward notion. Hence, I will describe the different ways in which we can understand the stranger by using novels and memoirs as a magnifying glass that allows us to see something hard to get at.

I am inspired by a tradition within sociology that has used fiction to broaden the sociological imagination and attain knowledge otherwise inaccessible (Mills, 1959; Rockwell, 1974; De Vault, 1990; Czarniawska-Jorges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1993; Leavy, 2015). Not being a literary scholar myself, I adopt a reading strategy as an outsider to the literary profession. I apply a feminist discourse analysis inspired by the French historian Michéel Foucault, supplemented with the feminist notion of

intersectionality (Foucault, 1972; Dahl, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991; Skeggs, 1997). The intersectionality approach aims to explore how various dimensions of social life - gender, class, ethnicity, etc. - interact and intersect. Here I apply feminist discourse analysis to literature, i.e. novels, and to the autobiographical accounts written by people living in three different welfare regimes: liberal, conservative and social-democratic. Following the American philosopher Donna Haraway, the knowledge that I present here is 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988) relevant for a westernised context.

The structure of the article is as follows. I begin with a brief 'state of the art' on the concept of the stranger in social science. I then outline a methodological section describing my feminist discourse analysis on the works of literature. This is followed by a description of six distinct subject positions that the stranger occupies in novels and memoirs. Finally, I conclude and list some avenues for further research.

### *Theorising the stranger*

In research on eldercare, the stranger has become a topic of discussion (Andersson, 2007; Isaksen, 2011; Barnes, 2012). Eldercare research uses the stranger in three ways: as a way of understanding the migrant care worker; as an unknown figure in public space; and as a broader, analytical term overlapping with 'strangeness' as such. Applying a care chain perspective, the Norwegian sociologist Lise Widding Isaksen applies the stranger conceptualisation to the migrant; in this case, a Polish domestic care worker who cares for an older, vulnerable Italian woman in the woman's home (Isaksen, 2011). In contrast, Barnes uses the notion of the stranger to describe the coincidental encounter with unknown others outside the home, i.e. in the public sphere. Beyond these approaches, the Swedish sociologist Katarina Andersson (2007) applies the stranger as a wider, analytical concept. Andersson refers to strangers as an analytical concept in two complementary ways: as an encounter between two persons previously unknown to one another, and strangers as something residing within ourselves (Andersson, 2007: 30). In the latter 'stranger-as-repressed-self' understanding, Andersson is inspired by Kristeva (1991)'s Freudian approach to the stranger and strangeness. The encounter with the stranger is simultaneously potentially positive and threatening (Andersson, 2007: 29-30). Unpredictability is part

of this encounter, and it is this uncertainty that creates the anxiety that is invariably associated with encountering any sort of stranger. Hence, while we have now begun to pay attention to the stranger and strangeness syndromes in care research, the broad gamut of strangeness has not yet been sufficiently explored. With Andersson, we get closer to a notion of the stranger as an unknown and unfamiliar person in care for the oldest old.

Let us first elaborate the writings of two well-known thinkers, Georg Simmel and the feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva (1991). Simmel's essay, 'Exkurs über den Fremden' (orig. 1908) focuses on the stranger as an unknown person settling in an existing community. Kristeva, in a book entitled '*Strangers to Ourselves*' (1991), uses a psychological perspective to identify strangeness as something both outside and inside ourselves.

Ontologically, all members of a community relate to each other through nearness and distance (Simmel, 1908/1950/1998). The stranger, however, combines elements of nearness and distance ('Nähe und Entfernung') in a more radical way, for the stranger is always a person who originally does not belong to the community; as such the stranger introduces elements and qualities that are extraneous to the community, elements that can be innovative or threatening. Strangers thus occupy an ambiguous position of being outside and inside simultaneously. They are someone to whom we relate; in contrast to people for whom we are not in any sort of 'non-relation' ('eine Nicht-Beziehung'; Simmel, 1908: 512/1950:407). The stranger can become familiar to us if there are similarities in terms of national, social and occupational characteristics as well as 'these common features extend beyond him or us' (Simmel, 1950: 406). Whereas Simmel considers strangeness as relational between people from a sociological perspective, Kristeva extends the notion of the strangers and strangeness within ourselves. Based upon a Freudian and etymological reading of the use of Greek mythology and contemporary fiction, Kristeva theorises the stranger as both a stranger fleeing family, soil and the nation and as something we carry inside and suppress. Kristeva analyses the problem of the stranger as a migrant ('foreigner') threatening our national identity (Marcano, 2003). But she also analyses the internal, psychological processes of what the foreigner does to us – and how we already carry strangeness within us. We are supposedly fearful of the foreigner who lives within us: 'the hidden face of our identity' (Kristeva, 1991: 1). We are not just one, but two in our

unconsciousness. The foreigner is that disturbing otherness in our unconscious; something whose existence we do not want to know about; something that we fear, and that we project upon the stranger as a person (Kristeva, 1991: 182-92). The foreigner in front of us is threatening because s/he embodies our own strangeness.

Simmel highlights the altered balance between nearness and distance in a sociological investigation of strangeness. Kristeva, in contrast, turns our attention to the psychological forces at work in our relation to the strangeness and the foreigner within ourselves and to the foreigner on whom we project that which we have violently repressed. Kristeva's theorisation of the stranger as migrant is not applied in this article, as it limits my exploratory endeavour. However, Kristeva's Freudian reading of the stranger as related to the unconscious and our deepest fears is both necessary and helpful. Necessary because when the stranger attends to the older person and her/his needs, this might be the only time the older adult meets this person. Helpful because the stranger can elicit emotions of curiosity and fear. However, the stranger might return for further care visits, in which case they could either become a more intimate acquaintance or alternatively an indifferent care professional/worker. However, despite the insights provided by Simmel and Kristeva, neither of them turn their attention to the dynamic processes of strangeness. Meetings with another person can rapidly evolve from a feeling of neutral similarity to a moment of unfamiliarity, strangeness, or tension; or *vice versa*. I will return to this element of strangeness in the empirical section.

I will not apply the two theorisations deductively to the empirical material. In my exploratory research, I consider the extent to which the theorising of Simmel and Kristeva can help us understand the dynamics of care for fragile older persons in times of regulated fragmentation. Let me now turn to the methodology of reading literature as an outsider to the literary profession.

### *Analysing literature using feminist discourse analysis*

Six decades ago, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) suggested using fiction to gain inspiration for research and enlarge the sociological imagination. By reading novels by Balzac, one would gain knowledge about different classes in French history, and the researcher could clarify their research interest and design (Mills,

1959). In Mills' view, fiction could replace research where it was absent or inadequate. The sociologist could gain knowledge about private troubles and relate them to transformations at the macro level:

In the absence of adequate social science, critics and novelists, dramatists and poets have been the major, and often the only, formulators of private troubles and even of public issues. Art does express such feelings and often focuses them – at its best with dramatic sharpness. (Mills, 1959: 18)

Today Mills is not alone. There is an increasing number of researchers that argue for the usefulness of fiction invoking a range of epistemological and ontological positions (Rockwell, 1974; de Vault, 1990; Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux 1993; Bauman, 1997; Leavy, 2012; Krüger-Fürhoff, 2015; 2019). That fiction can have an 'objective quality', linking the personal narrative with general societal tendencies, can be seen in the quotation below:

Novels, like research, are usually inspired by a quest for insight and knowledge. A work of art can be very personal in tone but still have an objective quality... It has an objective relevance for all of us, by making it possible to approach salient problems in a personal, although not private, way. It is perhaps more pertinent to speak about generality vs. particularity than objectivity vs. subjectivity. [Fiction] combines the subjective with the objective, the fate of individuals with that of institutions, the micro event with the macro system. (Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux 1993: 8)

Fiction provides a dramatised story of real life that can be generalised to developments at the macro level. Such a dramatised story touches us deeply while bringing to us knowledge about the world. In this sense, fiction provides: 'an account of a real-world situation that can be referred to in more general terms' (DeVault, 1990: 895).

Inspired by the French historian Michél Foucault's archaeological analysis (1972; 1979) and by the American sociologist Marjorie de Vault, I apply a post-structuralist account to the way novels relate to discursive fields. Novels provide 'imaginary access to the subjective world of those afflicted' (Krüger-Fürhoff, 2015: 105) and are read by particular subjects such as myself. According to de Vault, we gain access to knowledge because the stories are referred to 'in more general terms', which is a signifier for knowledge. As a researcher, I analyse literature itself as part of larger, overarching discourses that constitute the textual traditions within which both the researcher and the artist operate (DeVault, 1990: 889). Many researchers who

advocate the use of fiction share the idea that fiction gives access to areas of reality that are otherwise difficult to access, such as the inner emotional life of persons or families. While fiction is not a mirror of social reality, it nevertheless co-produces reality. There is never a strict division between reality and fiction:

I am fully aware that I have not read anything other than fiction. For all that, I would not want to say that they are outside truth. It seems possible for me to make fiction work within truth, to induce truth-effects within fictional discourse. (Foucault, 1979: 74-75)

Applying Foucault's insights I use dramatised stories as a magnifying glass that directs our attention to elements of reality that may be barely visible or overlooked. Dramatised stories such as novels can produce truth-effects. The American sociologist Patricia Leavy writes about 'accessing hard-to-get-at dimensions of social life' (2012: 254), whereas the German literary scholar Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff, mentions lived realities that are 'shameful, taboo, or collectively suppressed' (2019: 112). The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes about 'exiled truths', where fiction becomes a location of exile where unwanted truths can be found: 'Banished from reality, truths may only hope to find their exiled "second home" in the house of art' (Bauman, 1997: 126). Together, these scholars see literature as a portal into that which cannot be said, or can be talked about only with great difficulties. This resembles what Foucault has termed silence, or silencing (Foucault, 1984; Dahl, 2017). I view fiction as giving voice and access to some of the subjugated knowledges, where significant others, professionals, care workers and volunteers provide care for the oldest of the old in their own homes, sheltered dwellings and nursing homes.

Fiction has many forms: films, TV series, novels, poems, etc. Memoirs are not fiction, but autobiography. However, I selected novels by distinguished writers and memoirs by significant others as my empirical material, and will analyse them together. In the remainder of the article I apply 'literature' as a shorthand for fiction *and* memoirs. Poems required too deep a linguistic and cultural knowledge to be properly analysed by a non-native speaker of English. To analyse films and TV series would have required a different methodological framework than analysing textual materials. I have therefore selected novels, short stories and memoirs of family life as my source of empirical material. Concretely, I approached a number of fellow researchers and librarians in several countries and asked them to identify relevant short stories or novels about old age, vulnerability, dependency and the coming and going of people



to help and care for them.<sup>2</sup> From these colleagues, I obtained a heterogeneous material that includes novels and short stories written by recognised authors and memoirs written by family members. I then selected between three and six books from each of the three types of welfare regimes. My sample is primarily literature from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I wanted to explore the narrating of the contemporary situation of the oldest old in need of care, and its portrayal. I have scoured this literature from three different welfare regimes (using Esping-Andersen's terminology, 1990): liberal (UK/Australia/USA), conservative (Germany/Austria) and social-democratic (Denmark/Iceland). These different welfare regimes draw upon different ideas of the state, market and family, and the role of women (i.e. their unpaid care work).<sup>3</sup> The three regimes – liberal, conservative and social-democratic - differ widely in the extent to which they rely on informal (i.e. family-based) care. Denmark and Iceland, for example, operate with a state-financed eldercare model, whereas Germany and Austria rely mostly on the family and compulsory social insurance-based care. In contrast, Australia, England and the United States rely on community care and markets. In my analysis I explore the figure of the stranger across different welfare state contexts.

There are different sub-genres of literature. Memoirs are often considered to be close to 'real' historical texts, and would normally not be placed in the same category as a novel or short story. However, along the lines of Foucault, I argue that the demarcation line between novels and ostensibly autobiographical accounts is blurred. The memoirs and fiction that I read all seemed to be realistic stories that could have taken place in a particular place and time. How do I know this? Here I invoke my scholarly authority and some personal experience. As a researcher on eldercare, I have obtained extensive knowledge of care works in various settings. Moreover, as an individual living in a Nordic welfare state, I have experiences of being a daughter to very old parents, aged 85 and 86. Hence, it makes little sense to divide the textual materials into different genres. Instead, I have treated them as literature *in toto* and employed a single reading strategy for all the material. I analysed the selected novels and memoirs using discourse analysis inspired by Foucault's archaeological analysis. In this sense, I identify the construction of objects, subjects and rationalities within the discourse (Foucault, 1972). A discourse constitutes a horizon of meaning that enables and limits the possible: what can be said and done, and the legitimate positions to be held (Dahl,

2000; 2011; Norval, 1996). From feminist theory, I apply an intersectional perspective to identify the key intersections between different dimensions such as gender, race and class (Crenshaw, 1991; Skeggs, 1997). It is not possible to analyse gender and gendering without including elements of race and class, as these dimensions intersect and form the way gender is performed. The American scholar Jasbin Puar describes intersectionality as the major feminist contribution to social science (Puar, 2012). In the analysis that follows, I identify the different ways in which the stranger has appeared in literature, regardless of context, attentive to the intersection of race, class and gender in different constellations.

I adopt a reading strategy of an 'outsider': I am 'outside the literary profession but inside the social science profession' (DeVault, 1990: 916). Within feminist research, the notion of an 'outsider within' is used to describe the way women – and feminists – often inhabit a dual position towards main- and mainstream research (Harding, 1986). When I started to read, I realised that I had to inhabit a position of being simultaneously inside and outside the text. I had to find a way to remain inside the text and its horizon of understanding, while simultaneously reading it as an outsider. This task was difficult, as the stories were touching, involving both tears and laughter. I found it emotionally demanding for me, a trained political scientist, to read the texts and analyse them in this dual insider/outsider role. I was not reading these stories as a private person, nor was I reading them as some kind of policy documents. But I was, still 'looking for something' in these texts (to quote Annie Lennox). To read novels and memoirs as an insider to the social science professions meant a different kind of attentiveness. I had to pay attention to how dramatic individual stories were linked to general aspects of contemporary society, what Mills called 'personal troubles' and 'social issues'. I had to pay attention to inequalities, to the circulation of power and affect in relation to class, gender and ethnicity in an intersectional lens. Like Haraway, I tried to stick with the trouble (2016). In my reading strategy, I endeavoured to identify the storyline, to mark out my intersectional position, and to locate the intersectionality of the fictitious characters. I searched for who was carrying out what kind of care.<sup>4</sup> I then identified the strangers and the kind of strangeness that was being performed, the subject positions available, and finally, the rationalities about the oldest old present in the texts. I analysed each text and condensed the texts from each welfare regime into a

single analytical unit. Finally, I put the three welfare regimes analyses together and identified six ways in which the stranger or strangeness was applied in literature.

### *Stranger and strangeness in literature*

There is currently a boom in literature about old age and being old. The depiction of the fourth age spans from accounts of dull, bureaucratically oppressive nursing homes to the elderly as active agents in control of their own lives. There are humorous novels about life in nursing homes (Groen, 2014; Ingelman-Sundberg, 2014), older persons as amateur detectives figuring out unresolved crimes, older adults becoming criminals stealing art works (Healey, 2014; Cannon, 2018; Ingelman-Sundberg, 2014), and touching memoirs written by partners and children of elder people coping with dementia (Geiger, 2019; Rosenberg, 2014; Bredsdorff, 2017; Lindhardt, 2017).

I originally introduced the notion of the 'stranger' to care research in order to develop a more effective analytical toolbox for re-scribing the care of vulnerable old persons. My critique centered on what I believe to be an over-emphasis on relations between known others in enduring relations (care within the family), and on the role of caregivers as migrants or ethnic others. Instead, I decided that it was time for two different knowledges to meet: research on eldercare and subjugated knowledges about the care of the oldest old as depicted in literature. In my reading, I have identified six ways in which the figure of the stranger is understood in the literature, i.e. six subject positions the stranger inhabits across different welfare regimes. The positions and identified dimensions are useful for our understanding of the various ways in which the stranger enters the life of a person in his/her fourth age and then becomes part of their care in a situation of fragmented regulation. The dimensions bring some order into that which we cannot yet understand. It enlarges our thinking by pushing care researchers out of known, cognitive territory. Below, I describe the six positions the stranger inhabits: a) the stranger as an unknown, unwanted other; b) the stranger as an unknown other who becomes known and welcomed; c) the transformation of the older person/the family/significant others from familiars into strangers who are not recognisable; d) the continually changing identities between the well-known and the stranger; e) the helpful, unknown stranger passing by; and f) the older person as a stranger unwanted by society.

Taking the entire corpus of texts, both novels and personal memoirs, the dominant narrative of strangers is that of the stranger as *unknown and unwanted*. Contemporary literature portrays people in their fourth age as 'sticking to the familiar' in terms of staying at home, a well-known place, and only accepting help from people whom they know and trust (Lodge, 2008; Taylor, 1971; Healey, 2014; Lessing, 1984; Rosenberg, 2014; Thorup, 2003). Being afraid and distrustful of strangers is a pervasive theme in the British texts (Healey, 2014; Lodge, 2008; Taylor, 1971; Lessing, 2008). This suspicion of strangers fits well with Kristeva's theorising of the stranger as representing the repressed, even though the strangers described in these works are not migrants, but mostly of similar ethnicity to the older persons. The fear of the oldest old towards the stranger caregiver relates to their fragile, vulnerable condition. In one of the German memoirs, for example, the author describes his father's final years suffering from dementia. The author describes how his father turns people away if they are strangers or if they cause him confusion (Geiger, 2019: 132). Sometimes the fear and distrust of strangers derives from previous, unpleasant experiences with incompetent and/or unfriendly professionals and care workers (Healey, 2014). In some of the novels from the Nordic welfare regimes too, the care workers and professionals are tolerated at best. In the texts, they obtain pejorative nicknames such as 'ordinary nurses', 'prison guards', 'boss lady'<sup>5</sup> (Helgason, 2011) or names such as 'Aunt Wrinkled Cunt'<sup>6</sup> (Nielsen, 2010: 155), all signalling an incompetent and bureaucratic welfare professional preoccupied with rules and regulations. Older people living in a nursing home can also relate to fellow persons as strangers. In one text, an older woman suffering from a heart condition moves into a nursing home, where she feels her fellow residents are strangers to her. She thinks that her fellow residents are probably suffering from dementia. They are 'these dumbstruck, empty-eyed dolls before my eyes'<sup>7</sup> (Helgason, 2011: 269). She feels like a stranger.

In contrast to the dominant narrative of threatening strangers outlined, there are also narratives describing unknown strangers who turn into known, beloved confidantes'. This is the case in Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), which depicts how Jane befriends old, lonely, weakened Maudie. Maudie does not like having strangers in her home, but when she asks Jane to help her with some daily chores, Jane reluctantly agrees. Their relationship evolves, and soon Jane turns into Maudie's friend. Jane and Maudie inhabit different worlds in terms of class and life situations.

The novel depicts the development of their friendship and Jane's increasing involvement in Maudie's care as she becomes older and sick. A relationship that started with Jane meeting Maudie for tea and doing her shopping, ends with Jane doing the cleaning, laundry, communicating with the social services, with Maudie's physician, and bathing her. Like Lessing's Jane, there are other stories where strangers who may be neighbours, welfare professionals or care workers turn into intimate and appreciated others, in effect, becoming significant others for the oldest old (Helgason, 2011; Nielsen, 2010; Rosenberg, 2014). In a Danish story, an older man residing in a nursing home is especially fond of Pia, one of his home health aides. Pia is friendly, listens to him and provides him with cigars and a good shave. The old man appreciates Pia for her attention, humour and care, and appreciates the fact that she does not scold him. He says: 'I'm so happy that she cares for me' (author's own translation, Nielsen, 2010: 136). We see one element of Simmel's theorising here, where unfamiliar others, as they become known, become part of our community.

The third subject position of the stranger occurs when familiar others turn into unknown, and sometimes unwanted others. This happens when family members and significant others, as well as older people themselves *turn into strangers who cannot be recognised*. Ageing parents or spouses can slowly become unrecognisable, a syndrome typically related to the onset of dementia. The family members become strangers to each other: they are either not recognised, or rejected or even confused with others. Spouses or children cannot recognise their family members, who have changed personality and/or behaviour, becoming distant, passive or aggressive. In David Lodge's novel *Deaf Sentence*, the protagonist Desmond goes to visit his father with mild dementia at the hospital. His father is emaciated, wearing an IV tube, angry and arguing with the hospital staff. Desmond cannot recognise his aggressive father, whom he describes as 'an animal in captivity' (Lodge, 2008: 269). Desmond is like the relatives depicted in other novels and memoirs, none of whom are able to recognise their loved ones. Even worse, the relatives now begin to forget how their parents/loved ones were in the years prior to their dementia. Their memories of their beloved parents change: 'The worst thing was that I lose the memory of how things were before'<sup>8</sup> (Rosenberg, 2014: 167). A daughter's memories of her mother's former life fade away as the present difficult situation dominates her life, replacing the fond memories of the past. Writers depict dementia as a sickness, where the very old lose their memory and

cannot recognise others. Their communicative response is delayed, and they produce meaningless sentences or simply repeat themselves endlessly. Communication between spouses stops (Bredsdorff, 2017; Rosenberg, 2014). In one of the books, a memoir by a Danish husband of his Alzheimer's-afflicted wife, the husband stands in front of his wife while she utters: 'When is my husband coming?' (Bredsdorff, 2017: 194). Familiar others, spouses who have lived together for decades, become strangers, a situation that is understandably difficult for their significant others to accept (Lodge, 2008; Lessing, 1984; Healey, 2014). This process of estrangement works in both directions. Neither Simmel nor Kristeva's theorising can capture the processes that take place here.

A fourth subject position identified in the texts is that of changing identities between being a well-known person and a stranger. In this position, the stranger does not occupy a stable position in families with dementia. This can be exemplified in the memoirs of the Austrian Arno Geiger of his father, entitled *Der alte König in seinem Exil* (Geiger, 2019). At times the father recognises his son, but on other occasions he is a stranger. At one moment, the father refuses to be bossed around by a stranger, in this case his son: 'I will no longer allow myself to be commanded by a stranger'<sup>9</sup> (2019: 107). However, being a stranger to one's own father is not portrayed as a permanent condition. Sometimes, Geiger's father recognises him, momentarily returning to his normal, slightly changed, self (Geiger, 2019: 60). The older father living with dementia experiences moments of lucidity, in which he realises that something has changed in him (Geiger, 2019: 116). A change of identities also occurs in the German novel *Magnolienschlaf* (Baronsky, 2015). The protagonist of this novel, a ninety-year-old widow named Wilhelmine, is twice widowed, her first husband having died during the Second World War. Wilhelmine is originally cared for by the wife of her nephew Karin, who ends up delegating most of the care to an East European nurse named Jelisaweta (but who uses the name 'Lisa') in a traditional, regional, 'care chain' resembling that described by the German sociologist Helma Lutz (2011). At first Lisa is an unfamiliar, though welcomed, stranger. This changes dramatically, as Wilhelmine overhears Lisa speaking Russian to her family back home. Wilhelmine's war trauma is activated, and she becomes hostile to Lisa. Wilhelmine begins to see Lisa as a stranger who is not welcome. Lisa, in turn, begins to see Wilhelmine as a difficult patient. The situation accelerates into a hateful relation, with yelling, punishments and

physical objects thrown. A coincidence slowly changes the relationship, however, as Lisa overhears Wilhelmine calling for her dead daughter in a dream. Lisa gently asks about Wilhelmine's daughter, and they begin to develop a deeper relationship. They are no longer strangers to each other. Although there is no happy ending, this story highlights how fast relations can change in a post-war Europe where Lisa and Wilhelmine both suffer the long-term effects of war. In *Deaf sentence* as well, there is a similar change of stranger identities. The son visits his father in hospital and no longer recognises him. Nor does the father recognise his own son. However, when the son helps the staff bathe his father in the bed, the situation changes, and the son is no longer a stranger. During the bath, his father calms down and seems to feel the bodily presence of his son, his hands, his voice, his smell, his presence. The father may be unable to recall his son's name, but he can feel the intimacy of his son (Lodge, 2008). Examples like this indicate the importance of being attentive to embodiment and body work (Twigg, 2000; Hamington, 2004), as the experience of familiarity related to physical, concrete bodies cannot be grasped by Simmel.

A fifth position is that of unknown, helpful strangers passing by in the public space. This is the situation in various novels including *Elizabeth is missing* (Healey, 2014), *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont* (Taylor, 1971), *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (Lessing, 1984) and the Danish memoir *Tøsne og forsythia* (Bredsdorff, 2017). In these stories and a memoir, unknown strangers enter the scene, bringing the lost, older person with dementia back to their home (Healey, 2014), or caring for an older woman who has injured her leg (Taylor, 1971). Sometimes these unknown, helpful strangers become friends, sometimes they remain strangers.

Finally, the older person can become an unwanted stranger to others and to themselves. It is a kind of othering from the dominant neoliberal idea of an autonomous human being. Older people become unwanted strangers who disturb the normal course of life. In one of the novels, an old man with dementia walks around in the neighbourhood outside his nursing home. Having been a farmer, and passing a lawn mower in front of a house, he starts mowing the lawn. The owner is furious and scolds the professional carers who come to retrieve the 'escaped' person with dementia:

You've got to keep them indoors. This is the third time this week... We can't have them running around freely like this. The municipality promised that

locating the nursing home on the street would not irritate the residents. If it happens again, it'll be a case for the police (Thorup, 2003: 65).<sup>10</sup>

In this dystopic novel, normality is the ideal, and there is no sympathy by 'society' for the confused man. The angry homeowner is concerned only about his precious lawn, and rejects any scenario that does not fit with his picture of normality. The older persons become defective human beings, outside of normality, weak, dependent, threatening and, according to him, should be locked up. The older person with dementia can become 'a case for police'. The angry homeowner represents a hegemonic masculinity, and the older person – a former farmer - with dementia is now an unwanted stranger in society. In a British novel too, vulnerable old adults are reduced to barely tolerated strangers (Taylor, 1971). In this novel, the older persons dwell at a cheap hotel in London: The Claremont. These long-term guests can remain as long as they pay their rent and remain independent. The hotel manager wants his older guests to remain invisible, as he sees them as creating a bad atmosphere for other hotel guests. When the older persons are no longer in control of their bodies, they are politely asked to leave the hotel. In both the lawn mower and the hotel examples, the oldest old are portrayed as unwanted strangers. In Kristeva's optic, the older persons are no longer subjects with agency. They have become objects, radically othered. The angry homeowner is fearful of becoming fragile and dependent himself. He is suppressing that force which frightens him. Several authors are critical of contemporary society and its treatment of the vulnerable older person (Lindhardt, 2017; Geiger, 2019). One writer describes the old father with dementia as not comfortable in a society that values independence, readiness for change, speed and innovation (Lindhardt, 2017: 185). The older persons become strangers *in toto*. For some authors, like Geiger, his vulnerable old father needs to be protected from neoliberal, competitive society in a nursing home. Here they do not have to live up to the demands of neoliberal society<sup>11</sup> (Geiger, 2019: 187). They are outsiders to neoliberal society and relieved of the burden of being innovative and productive. All the texts describe the oldest old at the margins of society.

I have outlined six positions the stranger inhabits in these texts. The positions change over time and shift from one moment to another. It is an unstable position. The analysis presented here shows the usefulness of applying Simmel's and Kristeva's approaches. But it also highlights positions that go beyond their theorising.



## *Conclusion*

The regulated fragmentation of care for people in their 'fourth age' in Western industrialised countries makes strangers and strangeness into an everyday occurrence. My analysis of the literature has shown that the stranger appears in six distinct subject positions of carer and cared-for across different Western, welfare state regimes. Strangers are not just migrants. They also inhabit unstable subject positions. Strangers can be unknown others who become familiar, and they can be familiar others who turn into unknown strangers. The older persons themselves can also inhabit a position as strangers in a neoliberal society. We need to better understand the plurality and instability of strangers in order to govern care and to create conditions for 'doing good' in the Westernised context.

While my analysis has revealed the utility of Simmel's and Kristeva's approaches, these approaches also have their limitations in terms of corporeality and the dynamic of familiarity and strangeness. Strangers and strangeness is not just an ontological condition. Some dimensions of strangeness are products of a particular kind of governance: regulated fragmentation. Bringing the 'private troubles' of regulated fragmentation back to a level of 'public issues', in Mills' terms, the care literature shows us a complex, ambiguous picture. The storylines about strangers reveal how regulated fragmentation is linked to specialised institutions for older people with dementia in two ways. There is one story about caring, flexible professionals and another story about bureaucratic, paternalistic, and anti-humane institutions. Simultaneously, the literature also shows troubles related to the division of care between different providers (public and private or between different private providers). Here the care is fragmented into ever smaller units of discontinuous care, thereby increasing the need for precise coordination between the older person's significant others and the provider(s), as well as between different providers in the home. These constant coordination efforts between family members and strangers are the cause of much tension, distress and frustration. Hence, we need a deeper understanding of the plurality, instability and complexity of strangers. This understanding can help us better investigate the more specific links to regulated fragmentation and potential problems generated by this form of governance of eldercare.

One avenue for further research would be to investigate whether theorising on disability (eg. crip theory) could be a useful tool in theorising the figure of the stranger. Crip theorists stress the impossibility of accounting for impairment (similar to vulnerability) that shifts over time, context or even change of impairment (Kafer, 2013: 4). This impossibility, combined with the permanent instability of the stranger and strangeness, needs to be considered in modern care management of the most vulnerable older persons. Crip theory is a promising approach that can help us understand how society is strongly geared towards cure rather than care. Care for vulnerable older people today seeks to turn them into active neoliberal subjects through strategies of 're-ablement' and 'everyday rehabilitation' (Dahl, 2012; 2017). The 'active ageing' discourse holds promises of autonomy, but also compels the older person to remain active and healthy even when they are manifestly unable to meet these standards. The older persons are disciplined to a hitherto unknown extent; they are now morally obligated to care for their own body and mind in a particular way of life (Dahl, 2012). The oldest old are self-responsibilised and pushed to become less in need of care, whether they want to or not (Dahl, 2012; Tronto, 2017). Care in a neoliberal system aims to make older people less strange, 'just like us', to cure or to change them into the kind of people who fit an ideal of the autonomous male subject: an ideal of perfection (Dahl, 2012; Clare, 2017).

Kristeva (1991) depicts strangers who are at the margins of society, while for Ahmed (2017), the stranger is a container of fear. The stranger, however, should be seen in direct contrast to the home. 'Home' is a signifier of familiarity and control. It is also a site and a container of affection given by well-known others. For decades, social policies in the Nordic welfare regimes have encouraged older persons to remain 'at home as long as possible' (Dahl, 2012). And in social policies across Europe, the home and the familiar take centre stage. It is possible to interpret this policy focus on the home as a struggle against 'strangeness', nationally and transnationally. However, as this study has shown, the 'stranger' cannot be avoided. The stranger is both an empirical phenomenon and a theoretical problem. At any time, our loved ones can suddenly turn unfamiliar; they can become strangers to us, and we can become strangers to them. Care researchers and policymakers need to familiarise ourselves with strangeness.

### *Acknowledgements*

Most of this research was carried out during my stay as a fellow at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) 2019-2020. I am grateful to the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (KNAW) for this fellowship. Thanks also to the fellows at NIAS and the two anonymous reviewers of IJCC for their useful, constructive feed-back for an earlier version of this article.

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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<sup>1</sup> We can now see signs of political and scientific attention to the problem of coordination between professionals within and between different institutions (Doessing, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to the following for suggestions for fiction to read: Carol Bacchi (University of Adelaide), Rob Stones (University of Western Sydney), Johannes Eurich (University of Heidelberg), Joan Tronto (University of Minnesota), Ann-Dorte Christensen (Aalborg University), Lisbet Christoffersen (Roskilde University), and the librarians at the Goethe Institut Copenhagen and Roskilde University. I am also especially grateful for suggestions by Kristine Krause (University of Amsterdam) and Evelien Tonkens (University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht) at a seminar at NIAS in 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Although there have been feminist critiques of Esping-Andersen's typology, it can serve as a proxy for elderly care regimes, as there exists no such commonly agreed typology by which elderly care regimes could be classified (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004; Rummery and Fine, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> The post-human as devices or animals did not play any important role in the fiction.

<sup>5</sup> The words used in the original texts were ('*hverdagssygeplejersker*'), 'prison guards' ('*fangevogterne*'), 'boss lady' ('*myndig dame*') (Helgason, 2011)

<sup>6</sup> The word used in the original text was ('*Moster Rimpefisse*') (Nielsen, 2010: 155)

<sup>7</sup> The original text reads 'disse måbende, tomøjede dukker for øjnene af mig' (Helgason, 2011: 269).

<sup>8</sup> The text in German reads 'Das schlimmste ist, ich verliere die Erinnerung wie sie früher war' (Rosenberg, 2014: 167)

<sup>9</sup> The original text in German reads: Ich werde mich nicht länger von einer von mir fremden Person herumkommandieren lassen (2019: 107)

<sup>10</sup> The original quotation reads: I må holde dem inden døre. Det er tredje gang i denne uge... Vi kan ikke have dem rendende frit omkring. Det var et løfte fra kommunen, at det ikke ville blive til gene for beboerne at placere et plejehjem på vejen. Sker det igen, bliver det en politisag (Thorup, 2003, p. 65).

<sup>11</sup> In the German text, the term is Leistungsgesellschaft.