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Title: Politicisation in later life: experience and motivations of older people participating in a protest for the first time.

Short title: Participating in a protest for the first time in later life

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Abstract: With the ageing of populations around the world, political activity of older people is increasingly becoming relevant to political science. However, little is known about the possibility of and rationale for politicisation in later life, especially among those who have never before been politically active. This article uses in-depth qualitative interviews with older participants in a successful protest against the closure of a charity-run day centre to investigate how and when such politicisation might occur. We find that in response to perceived extreme threat, and provided with high levels of support, frail older people with low levels of early politicisation actively participated in a protest that ultimately prevented closure of their day centre. Furthermore, older people are not a weak population, but were able to use their frailty as political tools for shaming decision-makers. The study reveals that despite low political activity throughout life, politicisation can be triggered for the first time in later life. Four key aspects are highlighted: in spite of poor health, which acts as a barrier, perceived threat seems an essential driver to politicisation. Catalysts, whether they are supporters or carers, act as an essential determinant to politicisation in this group. Finally, older people are capable of adapting their claim-making performances, including shaming strategies, to achieve the best outcomes, thus illustrating their potential power.

Keywords: demonstration, politicisation, protest, gerontology, disengagement.

Word count: 7014

Introduction

Research into the implications of ageing societies has given insufficient attention to the determinants of later life changes in political behaviour. With the ageing of European populations, political activity of older people is increasingly becoming relevant to political science. Goerres (2009) termed it 'the greying of our democracies", encapsulating fears such as voting power imbalances, increased conservatism and anti-youth tendencies. Little is known about the possibility of and the rationale for politicisation in later life. Percheron (1993) defines politicisation as the process whereby individuals adopt sets of knowledge, skills and behaviours which are transmitted by politicising institutions such as the family, the school, and the media, among others.

Due to general decreasing physical and mental capability and progressive loss of social role, older people may become progressively disempowered (Goerres, 2009). It is therefore anticipated that the political engagement of disempowered people is unlikely. This paper argues that people in later life can politicise despite an individual history of low political commitment. It investigates the politicisation of people in later life via the participation in a protest. This article describes that, in response to perceived threats, older people who were never politically involved beyond voting, can actively be part of a protest. In-depth evidence from nine older interviewees, all first time protesters, confirms that politicisation can result from a combination of perceived threat, physiological capability and earlier politicisation but importantly may or even must also be facilitated by external supporters. This research suggests that earlier politicisation is not a necessary feature of later political actions. Furthermore, it supports the view that older people are not the weak population that one could imagine as they are able to use their frailty as political tools for shaming decision-makers.

Political activity: life course and claim-making performances

Theories of disengagement and continuation

Political activities of older people are generally conceptualised under two main processes: disengagement and continuation. Under disengagement theory, research has shown that people tend progressively to withdraw from the political activities that require the most energy and resources as they age (Cumming & Henry, 1961; Glenn, 1969), with ill health perceived as a reason to refrain from participating in physically demanding political activities such as protesting (Goerres, 2009). Other than voting, political activities such as being a party member, marching or debating progressively erode from usual activities as people age (Jennings & Markus, 1988); and older people use selective withdrawal to keep doing what matters the most to them (Glenn & Grimes, 1968).

Continuation is an alternative sociological concept also used to understand and explain observed behaviours of older people in the political sphere. Acknowledging the fundamental role of individual determinants of political activity, research has shown that, as people age, they tend to keep doing what they have always done throughout their life (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991; Atchley, 1971, 1989; Krosnick & Alwin, 1989; Tirrito, 2003). According to continuation theory, individuals who have been active members of the political sphere tend to remain active. People who participate in marches at older ages tend to display a lifelong

history of protest participation. Voting is also among the strongest and most long-lasting of political activities in older people, where little disengagement is found (Goerres, 2009; Jennings & Markus, 1988).

Protests and claim-making performances

Political science describes various forms of political participation, ranging from simple layman discussions to active and determined commitments to political roles within society. These activities – or claim-making performances (Tilly, 2006) – extend from being socially acceptable and common, such as voting or debating, to repressible violent political expression modes, such as damaging property (Norris, Walgrave, Aelst, & Url, 2005; Tilly, 2006). This study focuses on protests as one particular political action tool among diverse types of claim-making performances that are used by politically active groups. In Western societies, peaceful demonstrations are mostly regarded as a rightful mean of political expression (Neveu, 2011) but are nevertheless physically and emotionally demanding due to physical constraints and time requirements. Populations attending protests are mainly young and healthy, which suggests a possible association between physical capacity and political engagement (Norris et al., 2005). For these reasons, analyses of politicisation of older people through their first participation in a political demonstration constitutes a powerful example of the possibility of politicisation in later life.

Politicisation: a process of the youth

The lack of research around politicisation of older people may be related to the perception that politicisation is a sociological process, which take place earlier in the life course. The main politicising institutions referred to by Percheron et al. (1993) in their definition of the politicisation process – mainly family and school – suppose that it occurs essentially during upbringing, therefore youth, leaving less for later life politicisation, hence the assumption that politicisation is a process of younger people, and that adulthood and later life are associated with continuation or disengagement on the basis of early political activity patterns. The possibility of politicisation in older age is not envisaged by continuation and disengagement theories which are perceived as universal.

Political activism & politicisation of older people and other disempowered populations

Political activism in older people and usage of adapted claim-making performances

In spite of the literature on politicisation of older people being scarce, some research has been conducted around forms of activism of older people. A number of movements have been observed and investigated. The Grey Panthers in the USA gained public fame for demanding the end of mandatory retirement and expanded to Germany and the UK (Walker, 2010). The Raging Grannies in the USA and Canada notably called for social justice for older women (Narushima, 2004). The Argentinean *Jubilados* were older people gathering for years in front of the Buenos Aires National Congress to raise awareness on social issues that older people faced (DuBois, 2013). These experiences are examples of political activism rather than politicisation in older age, but the strategies deployed to be heard via the use of appropriate

claim-making performances in a group regarded as disempowered are nevertheless relevant to this study.

Politicisation of disempowered groups is characterised by the use of a specific and adapted claim-making performances. All groups, regardless of their ranking on the scale of social power, use distinctive claim-making performances perceived as the most efficacious to reach a particular goal (Snow, Soule and Kriesi, 2004). Shaming strategies are typically used by disempowered groups in order to shock the public and therefore gain recognition and leverage by for example publishing videos on social media showing harsh truths hidden behind closed doors such as videos of abuses in slaughter houses. At larger scale, such techniques are used by human rights and environment activists denouncing nature threatening behaviours of industries (Jacquet, 2015; Bloomfield, 2015). Shaming is also a tool known to have been used for political ends by disempowered groups at a smaller scale. For example, Shakespeare (1993, p.256) described an event during which people in wheelchairs blocked Oxford Street in London. They succeeded by driving the police to a moral dilemma over forcibly removing them in front of the media and witnesses.

Politicisation of older people: a response to threat

While a number of studies have looked at the politicisation of young people to explain differences in political views and political activities at older ages (Crittenden, 1962; Percheron et al., 1993; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980), much less attention has been given to political behavioural changes in other ages, especially in later life. Political action has been theorised as the product of opportunities for action (specifically, the opportunity to make demands) and threats, with threat conceptualised as ‘the probability that existing benefits will be taken away or new harms inflicted if challenging groups fail to act collectively’ (Goldstone and Tilly 2001; Almeida, 2003). Since Goldstone and Tilly (2001) argued that the role played by threat in motivating political action had previously been underestimated, threats have been demonstrated to have been important factors in the mobilisation and tactics of a wide range of political actions across time and space (e.g. Almeida 2003, 2015; Prieto 2016). However this research considers threats in the context of large-scale political action, and generally theorises threats as a crucial catalyst for protest movements by groups that were already organised but possibly not, or not sufficiently, mobilised. The significance of threats has not been considered on a micro-scale to previously apolitical and uninvolved groups, who had not felt threatened before and were not in any sense organised, nor civically engaged. Few studies have considered the concept of threat in the context of political participation by older people; two studies nevertheless report information relative to the determinants of politicisation of older people (Campbell, 2003 and Goerres, 2009).

Campbell (2003) studied the rationale for politicisation of older US citizens for the defence of Social Security and Medicare. Using a multivariate quantitative analysis, she emphasized that perceived threat – in this case the decrease of government benefits – was a significant factor related to politicisation at an older age, and a reason for a modification of the ‘normal’ political course of individuals. Campbell recognises that ‘specific mechanism by which individuals are mobilized by threat cannot be addressed with these data’ (Campbell, 2003, p.41) – a qualitative approach is required.

Goerres (2009) investigated the political participation of older people in Europe through a group of older people having participated in a demonstration. Threat – in this case defined as the risk of losing existing benefits – was identified as an essential reason to mobilise. Furthermore, the author emphasizes the role of support from external individuals – experienced and highly politicised individuals – to enable political mobilisation, therefore acting as political catalysts. Despite some participants being first-time protesters, the analysis did not investigate the motivation leading those who politicised. Politicisation of older people is therefore far from being fully understood, particularly with regard to the factors that enable politicisation, however perceived threat and external enablers have been identified as important.

Politicisation of other disempowered populations: the role of threat and external support

Although politicisation in later life has seldom been investigated, politicisation of other disempowered populations contributes to the understanding of processes underlying politicisation of older people. In a review of unexpected politicisation, Collovald and Mathieu (1999, 2009) compared demonstrations by sex workers, precarious workers and other 'weak' groups. These were characterised by their 'rarity of militant competence, weakness of collective framework, prejudice attached to their collective identity, which is considered inferior or even stigmatised' (Collovald & Mathieu, 2009, p.120; Mathieu, 1999). In the case of protests by sex workers in Lyon, France, authors gave an account of both the political inexperience as well as the stigma that the group suffered. While perceived threat was outlined as a crucial motivator for politicisation, the authors also found that the support from experienced assistants – political catalysts – was essential to trigger the social movement. Cited in Shakespeare (1993), Klein's (1984) analysis revealed that politicisation in disabled people is the result of society-induced threat: 'Personal problems become political demands only when the inability to survive, or to attain a decent life, is seen as a consequence of social institutions or social inequality rather than of personal failure, and the system is blamed.' In this same analysis of political organisation of disabled people, Shakespeare (1993) cites DeJong (1983) who explains that politicisation of disabled people is the ultimate step after having failed to be heard through other ways. 'When traditional legal channels have been exhausted, disabled persons have learned to employ other techniques of social protest such as demonstrations and sit-ins' (DeJong, 1983, p.12). This links with a particular characteristic of politicisation of disempowered groups, that is, the use of adapted and specific claim-making performances. Although the literature investigating the politicisation of disempowered people helps bridge the gaps of the literature specific to older people, it is necessary to verify these findings within the specific context of people in later life.

Aims and methods

The context for this study was a year of heightened unrest and political action in the UK in opposition to austerity-budgets. In May 2010, a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Alliance imposed substantial cuts designed to deal with the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The budget was followed by students and education workers protests against tuition increases. In March 2011 Trade Unions led the largest anti-government protest since the demonstrations against the second Iraq War, followed by a strike in June 2011 (Brown et al, 2013). The protest discussed in this article was one of a multitude of small scale events in response to

specific circumstances. The protest, specific to the closure of a charity-run day centre, took place an afternoon of January 2011 and included a small crowd. Following its success, some of the participants went on to participate in larger protests.

This article investigates politicisation of people in later life and its determinants. To this end, it examines a single case of several first-time participants in the abovementioned protest. These first-time participants belong to a larger sample, interviewed as part of a research looking more broadly at the participation of older people in political demonstrations, regardless of the history of their political activity (Guillemot, 2011). This original dataset also included individuals displaying characteristics of stronger early life political participation. For the purpose of this article, individuals were eligible if they were participating in a political protest for the first time in their life and if their history of political participation was limited to, at most, voting.

The nine respondents included in this analysis participated together in one protest in January 2011. In this case, all respondents were visitors to a charity-run day centre providing lunch and social activities. This centre was supported by public subsidies. Consequence of the budget cuts, many community day centres were due to close in a matter of months. At the time of the study, one community centre had already closed down in the Borough and the centre to which the respondents belonged was to be shortly terminated. In January 2011, all the visitors to the centre participated in a protest in front of the council hall, which lasted several hours. The demonstration was directly aimed at the closure of that one community centre. Ultimately, the centre was awarded a 12-month budget extension and was still running early 2017, more than six years after these events took place.

Older participants in demonstrations were identified with the help of a British charity, who served as a gatekeeper for the recruitment of participants (Heath, Charles, Row, & Wiles, 2007). In this subsample, written informed consent was gained from each participant before data collection (Bowling, 2002). Nine in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted between 15 June and 7 July 2011. Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Interviewee names used in this article are fictitious to preserve anonymity. Interviews were conducted according to a discussion guide (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2010), which used four categories of information relating to the interviewee's personal history of political commitment, motivators to the participation in the demonstration, understanding of political issues, and personal demographic characteristics.

Coding and analysis were undertaken using the qualitative analysis software NVivo®, according to thematic analysis and codes. Codes emerged initially from the discussion guide and were further elaborated iteratively during the coding process. Interview transcripts were coded according to seven codes, namely history of political commitment, perception of older age, health and demonstrations, personal consequences of the cuts, description of the mobilisation, the role of the staff in the demonstration, aspects of disengagement. Each code was reviewed to identify patterns of discourse, which served as a basis for analytical axes.

Findings

Respondents' characteristics and biographical information

Respondents' demographic characteristics are detailed in Table 1. All respondents were female aged 66 to 92 years (median age 86) at the time of the interviews. The visitors to the day centre displayed a broad diversity of physical and mental capacities. The day centre was not adapted to receive dependent individuals. Though respondents were often frail and needed physical and mental support, they all lived by themselves and had a certain degree of autonomy. Some used wheelchairs, others needed walking assistance devices.

Table 1 Participants' pseudonyms and age

Pseudonyms	Age
Molly	88
Lauren	83
Agnes	92
Regina	77
Emily	87
Mary	66
Francesca	88
Janet	86
Laura	84

Although respondents had not participated in protests before, they displayed a very committed relationship to voting. All respondents were regular voters and perceived this activity as important. Participating in demonstrations however was not part of their political upbringing or earlier identity. The unexpectedness of their participation was also perceived by the demonstrators themselves. Regina's experience was representative of the feeling.

> *Regina: No, [I] never [demonstrated] in my life. I never thought I could be interviewed [on TV], on cameras, […] on Twitter, that's what it's called, I was on Twitter and that. I never thought I'd do anything like that!*

Several other participants explained their history of political commitment through participation in institutionalised behaviours such as voting, as Agnes explained.

> *Interviewer: So you haven't demonstrated before?*
>
> *Agnes: No, no, no.*
>
> *Interviewer: Have you had any kind of political activity?*
>
> *Agnes: No, no, I have enough to do on my own, leave the political stuff! No.*

Interviewer: You don't vote?

Agnes: Oh yes I vote! Of course I vote! You have to vote!

Interviewer: Have you ever been a political party member?

Agnes: No, never, I've only demonstrated for here. That's all!

Both Agnes and Regina, like the other protesters from the day centre were not used to taking part in active politics. Molly described her political role according to social classes.

Molly: I've always voted Labour. Because I'm working class. It's the wrong thing to say, but I'm working class so I voted Labour. That's all.

Interviewer: Always?

Molly: No, no, no, I did vote once Conservative, because my husband always voted Conservative. But he was a cinema manager, so I suppose he had different... He was a bit up more than me. So he always voted Conservative and I just voted Labour. That's all. But all my family voted Labour. The nine of us: my mum and dad, eleven of us, we all our life voted Labour.

The above discourse examples from these three participants are evidence of a low early politicisation, associated with consistent voting patterns and low levels of active participation in more demanding political events including demonstrations. Despite these socio-political characteristics, all of them decided to take part in the demonstrations of 2011. The following section describes the protesters' motivations to participate in the protest.

Motivations to participate in the protest: counteracting the threat of the closure

The apparent reason for people participating was the impending closure of the centre. Although it may not have appeared as a fundamental event to an external observer, the description of the consequences associated with the closure by the centre's visitors took the matter to a different and more dramatic level.

Molly: Why I did it is because I've always found [council name] very good, very good to the elderly people and, hm, suddenly there's this thing, that they've got to cut things and I thought, why should they? I've worked all my life! Why should they? So, anything that I could help to stop it, I try to do, like going outside the town hall, and raising my voice and shoutin' out[...] Because I think this [the day centre] is a lifesaver for me, for all these people here. It can't close, it can't close. We'd all sit at home and fade away. As I said, I'm not doing it yet, I'm not gonna fade away yet.

Agnes explained her feeling about old age and how the closure of the centre would impact its visitors.

Agnes: Old age, you got to feel sorry for them. Because most of them, if they close this place, lot of these of people wouldn't get out of bed. They'd be in bed, they wouldn't cook. Now, with me, I have a dinner [here, dinner means midday lunch] down here, I go home and cook in the evening. These people, they only have one dinner here, 'til the next day for them to have another dinner. So what would they do? If this closes, they would rot, I told the eight people in the Council.

Lauren: That's probably what they want us to do.

These two interviews highlight the grave nature of the threat perceived by Agnes, Lauren and Molly. This interview, where Lauren intervened as she was nearby, details Agnes's point of view on the closure of the centre: a death sentence for many of the visitors. It represented a major threat to her as she explained when asked what would happen if the centre closed. An interesting aspect of Agnes's' discourse, however, is the way she referred to older people using the third person, as if she was not part of them. Incidentally, Agnes was the oldest visitor, confined to a wheelchair.

Similarly to Agnes, Lauren explained her view on the consequences of the closure of the centre.

Lauren: No! [whispers] Please God, no, don't let them shut the place. I know I'd be helped by my daughter-in-law, but she's got her life to live. That is not right. Not right, is it? It's their own life. That's the way I look at it anyway. But I mean, I would willingly go, but I wouldn't push myself. It's just not right. I'm not complaining, I'm quite happy. If I can come here, [employee] is very nice, the people are very nice. We're all different. I'm very happy and I had a good dinner today. For a very reasonable price. I wouldn't go anywhere else. I'm very happy. If this place shut, well... Really I don't have anywhere else to go. Shame [laughter]. [...] That's going to sound dramatic but to me that would feel like the end of my life. I don't know where else to go.

The centre represented much more to its visitors than just an ordinary location for occasional socialisation. Most of its visitors spent every day at the centre and were fed there. For many, it was like their home was being threatened; the centre appeared as the one thing they looked forward to each morning. This brings a different perspective to the mobilisation of the group: a fight for what was perceived as a right to live. First-time protesters were nevertheless aware of the limitations associated with their physical capacity and were able to perceive these weaknesses as strengths, as the next section describes.

Consciousness of physical limitations and adaptation of claim-making performances

Participants in the demonstrations were aware of their limited physical capacity. Interviewees explained how their physical frailties, on the contrary, led to the use of previously acquired skills and a selection of adapted claim-making performances, which was more efficient for them; including the use of shaming to gain attention and leverage.

Interviewees described how their physical capabilities slowed them down. Regina recounted the planning of the demonstration and how her health was affected.

> *Regina: We made flyers, we made banners and everything else here. I paid for it later. One day we sat in nearly all day doing things and because of the arthritis, when I got home that night I paid for it, my hands and joints were killing me. But we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves when we were making them.*

Interviewees were also aware that their physical capabilities were different from crowds usually participating in protests, which can sometimes represent a threat to political institutions. Lauren told of her willingness to fight with a certain irony and wit, showing that her capacity to display strength – and here awareness of it – and physical power were limited.

> *Lauren: I am, of course I am [ready to fight]. I would. Wherever I have to go and join the crowd, I would. Oh yeah. I stood outside the town hall. Oh yes. As long as [I am] reminded. Definitely, I would fight for it. Oh yeah. Not that the fist would help, but I would have a go.*

By ironically explaining that the 'fist would not help', she acknowledged her physical weakness. The goal was evidently not to display physical force. She describes the contrast between her capabilities and the anticipated threatening appearance of protests. Also, Lauren explained that she suffered from memory loss. When questioned about her motivation, she described both her awareness of her condition but also her determination to fight nevertheless. Later in this interview, when asked about her motivation to demonstrate, she looked suddenly puzzled, then said that she could not remember why they were protesting and casually asked to be reminded the reason why they needed to mobilise; a reminder that the researcher provided. Aware of this situation, carers and other visitors to the centre always made sure to be around Lauren at all times.

Francesca casually presented her willingness to protest despite her physical limitations:

> *Francesca: I think I would do anything possible, within my means. I love it here.*

Despite their individual and specific physical and cognitive capacities and disabilities, each of the participants detailed their perception of the mobilisation and the different forms it could take. The appropriation of the claim-making performances was interestingly presented.

> *Molly: [...] I didn't care anyway. Well there was only a few of us outside [council hall] but I did get lots of people. I stopped them and made them sign the petition, you know. I used to do acting, so I'm not backwards with coming forwards, you know what I mean, so... That's it. I was outside the town hall, and if they ask me to do it tomorrow, I'll do it tomorrow.*

Molly's outgoing behaviour to get people to sign the petition showed the use of previously acquired skills for the purpose of this new mission. Regina described her feeling regarding her political behaviour.

Regina: It doesn't make me feel any different. I can't believe that I've done it! [laughter]. I can't believe that I've done it. […] Hm, we've only got another year. And if we have to do it next year, to keep it open, I'll do it again. You've got to fight. It's no good sitting back and saying 'oh why has this happened. You know, why don't people do this.' You got to get yourself involved if you believe in something. You can't expect other people to do it all the time.

While a demonstration typically gains success by boasting a large number of people gathered, this small demonstration focused rather on shaming the council as gathering a crowd was unrealistic. Although a demonstration is in many ways a conventional tool within usual claim-making performances, when used by older, frail people, it can be perceived as a deflection of the use and signification of a protest. In fact, several interviewees referred to some aspects of *shaming* decision-makers for pushing older and frail people to protest in the streets on a cold January day and for destroying a key shelter without which visitors feel have nothing. In this perspective, the goal of the demonstration was less to threaten power than to send a message to politicians and utilize a moral strength that their old age provided them. Agnes explained this argument with particular wit.

Agnes: [manager's name] told us when he got us all together. And we had the councillors, from the council, around here. And we all spoke our mind to them and I said to them, I said, if you close this, I said, this is a red light area, we've got nowhere to go. I said, only prostitutes, pimps and drugies. That's all that's around here. I told them to their face, didn't I?

Agnes was considered by the visitors and the centre's staff as the leader of the movement as she was the oldest but also because she had been interviewed several times by the local media as a result of the protest and her discourse was now well rehearsed.

Francesca put into words the shaming approach, when replying to the question of whether she would protest again in opposition to the centre closing.

Francesca: I would, yea. 'Cause they took me down in a wheelchair and I'm quite happy with that. And I think it's to see a few people in wheelchairs, it does help. Yea. 'What do you want to go down there for? It wouldn't do any good'! I say, how do you know? If you don't go and don't try, you won't know. You've got to give it a try! Yea. […]If it's for the benefit of the centre, yes. I never say no to things like that, if it's for the good.

Although all respondents participated in the protest by the Town Hall, most did not participate in another much larger protest, which took place in central London in March 2011 against cuts more generally. Respondents explained their choice in light of their physical limitations, as Mary's discourse illustrated.

Mary: There was a big one, but I didn't go to that, because sometimes, these demonstrations, I know you got to fight for things, sometimes there is fighting and all of that, there is a lot of funny people out there, but I didn't go to that, you're with me? There was a demonstration, a while back, I didn't attend to that. […] because

> *sometimes there is a lot of hateful people and they can do something and sometimes they involve horses, you know, so that one I didn't go. But to the town hall outside I went.*

While this study investigates the motivators to politicisation, Mary points out one reason why older people refrain from participating in protests, which is fear of threatening behaviours, regardless of the actual existence of the behaviour or the threat that they bring. Janet and Laura contributed to this view that they could not be part of a larger event, when asked if they participated in the large-scale protest.

> *Laura: No we didn't [go to the large demonstration].*
>
> *Janet: They started off from here, didn't they? And they marched through, didn't they? For hours.*
>
> *Laura: It was a long time, a long way.*
>
> *Janet: You couldn't really cope with it.*
>
> *Laura: Some in wheelchairs, they took some wheelchairs as well.*
>
> *Janet: But they had some people to push them didn't they? I mean, I couldn't have walked that far. Hours and hours.*

The physical difficulty and the risks associated with protesting show a distinctive constraint applying to these visitors to the day centre. To an extent, it seems nearly impossible that they could have achieved even the participation under investigation here by themselves, hence the question to which we turn next: the role of their environment in their participation.

Catalysts of the protest: empowerment by the staff

There are indications that the day centre's visitors received strong support from the centre's staff. The charity social workers acted as political educators contributing to a later politicisation and also as physical assistants. For this reason, the centre's staff can be regarded as a catalyst: an agent enabling and precipitating a reaction. Regina's description of the decision-making process for marching attested of the role of the charity.

> *Regina: I didn't really make a decision. Just we talked here and that... And we talked this and we talked that and we just went and suggest we were gonna do it. There was no hesitation about, no we're gonna do it. We just all said yes, we're gonna do it! There was no... No real thinking about it. [...] Over here we decided we weren't gonna sit back and then...*
>
> *Interviewer: Who spoke about it?*
>
> *Regina: [manager's name] and [social worker's name], they talked to people here and they were telling about it and asked if we'd... I think it was [another social*

worker]... And we said we weren't gonna let it happen. And the day... We heard the day we were going somewhere and we decided we weren't gonna let it ruin our day and when we come back here, the following day, we sat back and it was all sorted that we'd do what we would do.

Although Regina presented the decision of participating as an obvious choice initiated among the visitors themselves, she then explained that it came from the staff. Naturally, the staff were the first to be informed of the imminent closure and were expected to communicate the information to the visitors. However, when she explained that 'it was all sorted that [they]'d do what [they] would do' it became clear that the staff positively encouraged the people to protest.

Interestingly, the nuance between the centre's visitors and the centre's staff became blurred when a close look at the vocabulary was given. The way 'we' was used in this extract to refer to both the staff and the visitors emphasised that little difference between both groups existed, in this domain at least.

The role of the charity workers as physical assistants was described by Agnes when she recalled the day of the demonstration.

Agnes: [I went] in a wheelchair, I was ill, with bronchitis... It was so good. We've got the best manager in the world with [manager's name], who you've just seen, he's our manager, he's wonderful. He got hot water bottles on me, blankets, eight o'clock at night, we was [sic] around that town hall, demonstrating and I was ill.

The protest outside the Town Hall took place in January in deepest winter, in the evening. An aspect of senescence is the degeneration of the body's thermoregulation. Older people get colder more easily and tend not to feel the cold. Protesting in the cold is tiring and can be seen as hazardous for older people if someone is not looking after them. The manager's role was fundamental in Agnes' ability to protest. By warming her up with hot water bottles and with blankets, he *enabled* her political action.

One can question whether this political action would have taken place without the central role of the staff. Although the aim of this study was not to question the motivations of the staff to participate in the demonstration, it became clear that the jobs of the centre's social workers were also put at risk by the closure of the centre. This demonstration was the result of the combined motivations of the staff and the visitors rather than the visitors only. The discourse by Regina brought this aspect into perspective.

Regina: We live life from day to day. But we're not going to sit back and let the council take away the bit of enjoyment we've got *here. On top of which these people that help run these places are marvellous people. They go over the 100% to look after whoever is in need. Why should they lose their jobs as well? 'Cause it's not just the club that's being closed down, it's people who are going to lose their jobs as well. And this is one other reason we all fight, for what we believe in.*

The goal of the staff may be to protect their jobs but is also the result of strong defiance towards a social policy perceived as destructive and life-threatening. The charity staff acted as extensions of the visitors and provided them with the necessary support for them to develop their capability to act as rightful citizens.

Discussion

This study confirms pre-established determinants to politicisation of older. As described in Campbell (2003) and Goerres (2009) and confirmed with other peripheral studies (Shakespeare, 1993), perceived threat – described by respondents as indirect death due the closure of a day centre providing meals and social interaction – is a key determinant to the politicisation of older people, even when in poor health. Despite emphasized as a barrier to politicisation, this study shows that poor health is a potential barrier but insufficient to prevent politicisation if individuals are appropriately supported.

This study establishes two other determinants, which have been demonstrated in other disempowered populations and therefore fills a gap in the literature. The adaptation of claim-making performances to increase political impact as emphasized by Shakespeare (1993) is evidenced in this study through the intention of shaming authorities. Finally, the importance of catalysts highlighted by Collovald and Mathieu (1999, 2009) and to a lesser extent Goerres (2009) is demonstrated in this study by the crucial role played by the staff.

This study shows that in response to threat and provided with support, older people with low levels of politicisation can participate in a protest. It confirmed earlier findings that political mobilisations are generally a function of perceived threat, physiological capability, earlier politicisation but also external support. Furthermore, this study contributes to the view that older people are not the weak population subgroup that one could imagine: older people can use their frailty as shaming tools to communicate their claims.

Nine respondents were included in this analysis. While this sample appears small, it is not unusual considering the specificity of the study population. In a qualitative study analysing the experience of older people protesting in England in 2004/5, Goerres (2009) interviewed 22 individuals, 14 of whom were protesting for the first time and only four of whom had never been politically active before. Because such late politicisation is rare, larger samples could only be identified with great difficulty.

Because it is a case study looking at a very specific group of people in the very specific context of the closure of a day care centre, the case may not be representative of older people in Britain generally. However, a case study rarely aims to gather representative people, but rather aims to understand generalities from the perspective of unusual situations. The significant role of the charity in the politicisation of the respondents is undeniable. It nevertheless sheds light on political behaviours in later life in a unique manner.

While this case study shows the possibility of politicisation in later life and its determinants, it does not of itself contradict nor falsify theories of continuation and disengagement. This paper shows that there are exceptions to these rules and proves that specific circumstances can lead to unusual outcomes.

Conclusion

The main contributions of this study are that politicisation, despite low political activity throughout life can be triggered for the first time in later life. Four key aspects are highlighted: in spite of poor health, which acts as a barrier, though surmountable, perceived threat seems an essential driver to politicisation. Catalysts, whether they are supporters or carers, act as an essential determinant to politicisation. Finally, older people are capable of adapting their claim-making performances, including shaming strategies, to achieve the best outcomes, thus illustrating their potential power

Evidence from this study both supports and challenges theories of political engagement in later life, namely that of continuation and disengagement. It shows that these theories do not fully describe the political activity older people and that politicisation in later life is possible. These findings are valuable and innovative contributions to theories of social unrest genesis. A closer look at specific 'hard to politicise' population subgroups may inform us of profound social processes in the construction of social movements. Was this case an epiphenomenon, or, on the contrary, do these mobilisations occur in other contexts? These preliminary results call for a broader assessment of the capability of older people to politicise, to gain control over specifically designed claim-making performances, especially in the current context of reforming social policies in Western countries.

Ethical approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. King's College London Ethics Committee reviewed and approved the methodological and ethical approach used in this research.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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