Aagje Swinnen

Healing Words: Critical Inquiry of Poetry Interventions in Dementia Care

The personhood movement in dementia research has established the theoretical foundation for implementing artistic approaches in care practices. The underlying assumption is that professionals from the visual and the performance arts are well equipped to see the person behind the condition and to focus on possibilities for meaningful relationships in the here and now. My lecture focuses on poetry interventions as one example of creative approaches that increasingly are employed in dementia care and receive recognition as good practices. The use of poetry might seem counterintuitive given that people with dementia lose their language abilities and poetry is regarded to be the most complex literary form. I will argue that to expand on existing research on poetry interventions from a health and science perspective, a humanities approach will help illuminate how poetry works to improve the wellbeing of people with dementia. Drawing on participant observations of poetry interventions by Gary Glazner (Alzheimer's Poetry Project, USA) and Sandra Stark (Zona's Kiosk Amsterdam, NL), poetry interventions will be framed as a specific form of oral poetry in which people with dementia are positioned as co-creators of embodied texts and directly benefit from the power of the spoken word.

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