Fiestas, Saints and Spirituality: Collective Rituals as Community Eldercare in Andalusia

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore how spirituality and collective rituals influence eldercare in a small town in Andalusia, Spain. I describe how older people's interactions with the town's Virgin Mary statues generate personhood, situating the Virgin saints as spiritually protective kinship care-givers. As ubiquitous religious symbols, the saints can be recognised by some people with dementia, providing reassuring familiarity. Older people nearing end-of-life seem to draw comfort from these saints, who become mediators between everyday and spiritual worlds. During fiestas, the statues are carried as part of celebratory processions, stimulating intergenerational solidarity and spiritual protection, and strengthening residents' sense of belonging, which can be especially valuable to older people at risk of isolation. In care institutions, activities encourage older people to participate in fiestas, reaffirming their community membership. For people with dementia, the multisensorial nature of fiestas can be therapeutic by inciting embodied long-term memories, whilst their seasonality can be reorientating. This paper brings insights from the anthropology of religion into dialogue with the anthropology of ageing by arguing that religious rituals have the capacity to generate a spiritually and collectively therapeutic role in eldercare; this then reveals the need to approach eldercare as 'community-centred.' It further demonstrates the capability of ethnography to reveal the diverse ways that collective cultural practices can influence eldercare.

Keywords: *Eldercare; Dementia; Collective Ritual; Spirituality; Community-centred Care*

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Introduction

Spain boasts one of the highest life expectancies in Europe but also rising dementia rates (OECD 2021). European countries are increasingly turning to long-term care institutions to look after people with dementia (Verbeek *et al.* 2015). Despite this trend, the majority of people with dementia diagnoses in Spain live at home with family (Ruiz-Adame and Jiménez 2017). Eldercare in Spain, even of those with neurodegenerative diseases like dementia, has traditionally been considered a family responsibility, reflecting Mediterranean kinship values and, until recently, there has been a reluctance to use formal care services (Lillo-Crespo and Riquelme 2018).

Andalusia, an autonomous community with a history of socioeconomic marginalisation from Spain's central state (Cazorla Sánchez 2010; Pratt 2003), is well-known for its strong family values and close-knit kinship networks, which provide core care provision to dependent older adults (Ruiz-Adame and Jiménez 2017; Tobío and Cordón 2013). I thus approached Andalusia as a critical site to explore global debates around elder- and dementia care experience. Straddled across the craggy slopes of a mountain range in Andalusia lies *Pueblo*, the small town where I spent 14 months conducting ethnographic fieldwork for my Ph.D. research during 2018-2019. I use *Pueblo*, translating into English as "town/village," as a pseudonym to protect residents' anonymity. During fieldwork, I regularly participated as a volunteer at *Pueblo*'s day centre and care home, and assisted local families caring for older relatives at home to gather rich ethnographic data around eldercare. I use the word *abuelos*, translating into English as "grandparents," to signify older people, as this was the local term used to refer to older people.

Pueblo's inhabitants were split into an upper neighbourhood, protruding across the top of a sharp mountain slope, and the lower, more affluent neighbourhood, which held the town's main commercial centre, and was nestled at the bottom of the gradient. Each neighbourhood had its own chapel, in which resided a distinctive statue representation of a Virgin Mary saint. The lower neighbourhood had *La Virgen del Pilar* (The Virgin of the Pilar), and the upper neighbourhood housed *La Virgen de la Humildad* (The Virgin of Humility).[1]

Early on in fieldwork, I noticed the frequency with which *abuelos*, at both care institutions, would discuss the statues in everyday conversation. One adjustment I struggled with initially was talking earnestly with *abuelos* about these statues. Although I now describe myself as agnostic, my awkwardness in these conversations may have stemmed from my fervently atheist upbringing. I found it difficult talking with *abuelos* about these statues, which they seemed to hold in such profound reverence. What surprised me was how *abuelos* spoke about the statues as real people. One conversation at *Pueblo*'s care home went as follows:

"Chloe! Did you see the procession last night?" Isabel asked me excitedly.

"Yes, I watched the whole thing. I was…impressed!" I replied, unsure of how to better describe my feelings about it.

"Wasn't the Virgin so beautiful?"

"Oh, she was incredible!" Esperanza chimed in. "Absolutely stunning! I couldn't take my eyes off her."

"Yes, she moved with such grace! So elegant!" Carmen added, nodding enthusiastically.

Abuelos used the pronouns 'she' and 'her' to describe the statues. As time passed, and I observed the multitude of ways people spoke about and interacted with these statues, I realised that, to many people, particularly older generations, these were more than statues. Through devotional interactions – like speaking with, touching and kissing the statues – the statues generated interdependent personhood. The personhood of Catholic statues has been explored by anthropologists investigating religion (see Mitchell 2010; Whitehead 2018). In this paper, I bring this work into an anthropology of ageing by analysing how the statues' personhood provided *abuelos* with spiritual protection.

These deeply venerated local Virgin Mary saint statues are celebrated with annual *fiestas* (celebrations). During fiestas, people assemble at the particular statues' resident chapel, recite prayers and sing devotional songs. *Pueblo* is decorated with colourful bunting and banners praising the distinctive Virgin saint being celebrated. Celebrations include huge processions where the statues are placed on ornamental floats and paraded through the streets to the cheers of *"¡Viva La Virgen!"* ("Long live the Virgin!"), *"¡Guapa!"* ("Pretty!"), and jubilant music from the town band (see photograph 1). Residents attend a *feria* (fair) from midday until the early hours of morning, with funfair rides for children and booths containing stages equipped with dancefloors, where flamenco performances take place (see photograph 2).

This ethnography explores the dynamic ways that spirituality and collective celebration can serve as meaningful forms of community eldercare. I begin by discussing how personhood is generated in *Pueblo*'s Virgin Mary statues through people's interactions, bringing the statues to life. Many *abuelos* drew profound comfort from their devotional interactions, which seemed to create reciprocal relationships with the saints, making them become spiritual protectors who mediate between everyday and spiritual worlds.

Next, I explore how these saints are celebrated through annual fiestas. I employ anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly's (2010, 2014) conceptualisation of 'moral laboratories' of care, explaining how care-givers navigate complex ethical choices to generate hope, combined with Mette Nordahl Svendsen *et al.*'s (2018) concept of 'magical moments,' whereby people with dementia connect with their surroundings. These theorisations help me analyse how care-givers in *Pueblo* deliberately incorporated fiesta rituals into eldercare to reap therapeutic benefits.

I then use the Durkheimian [1912] (2007) concept of 'collective effervescence' to explore how *Pueblo*'s fiestas strengthened *abuelos'* sense of belonging to the town. The seasonal, repetitive nature of fiestas orientated *abuelos* with dementia to the present, whilst linking them to their community's shared past. My analysis brings insights previously explored by anthropologists investigating religion into dialogue

with anthropologists investigating ageing by arguing that community religious rituals have the capacity to generate a spiritually and collectively therapeutic role in eldercare. This demonstrates the importance of approaching elder and dementia care as not only 'person-centred' but also as 'community-centred.'

Photograph 1: Residents carry a Virgin Mary statue in a fiesta procession (N.B. faces blurred to protect anonymity). Photograph taken by author. May, 2019.

Photograph 2: Residents celebrate at the feria during fiestas. Photograph taken by author. August, 2019.

The Personhood of Statues

As fieldwork progressed, I began to learn how *Pueblo*'s residents, particularly older generations, attached profound meaning to the Virgin statues. To many, they were more than statues; they were real embodiments of the Virgin saints. Through engaging in devotional interactions with the statues—i.e., by speaking with them, saying prayers to them, touching and kissing them—the statues were attributed with personhood. I gradually became more confident talking about the statues, referring to them using feminine pronouns, and even interacting with them directly.

In the weeks leading to the fiesta for *La Virgen de la Humildad*, excitement filled the air in *Pueblo*, particularly in the upper neighbourhood where I lived, which held the resident chapel of this statue. Colourful bunting and banners were strung up and fluttered across the streets, proclaiming *"¡Viva La Virgen de la Humildad!"* ("Long live the Virgin of Humility!"). On the first day of the fiesta, a ceremony was held in the chapel. People had been talking to me enthusiastically about this upcoming event. I had been instructed to wear my best, and I spent significant time getting ready to meet this important member of *Pueblo*'s community. The town band were playing in front of the chapel, and there was a lively atmosphere as people queued outside. I ran into Mercedes, an 84-year-old woman who attended the day centre:

> "Have you got in mind something you'd like to ask her?" Mercedes enquired.

> "Urrm… No, not really. I don't really know what to tell her," I muttered sheepishly.

> "You can say anything you like! She's very understanding. Tell her what you're worried about, and she'll help you…Don't worry!" Mercedes reassured me, seeing the bemused expression on my face. "She's kind! There's no need to feel nervous!...It's a real honour to be so close to her. This is the only time of the year we can do this."

Inside the chapel, as I drew closer to the front of the queue, I looked up at the statue. I was surprised by her smallness. People stood several metres back, giving the person at the front a more private, intimate moment with the Virgin. When it was their turn to approach her, people would bow, sign the cross, and speak to the Virgin in quiet whispers. After a few minutes of intimate exchanges, they would go right up to the statue and kiss her hand, then wipe it with a tissue. To my dismay, I realised I did not have a tissue on me! I frantically asked the people in front of me, but I was unable to get hold of one before my turn. When my moment came, I asked the Virgin (in Spanish) to look out for me during fieldwork, kissed her hand and apologised for not having a tissue, then awkwardly used my cardigan sleeve to wipe her hand clean. I walked away, feeling silly but also relieved and optimistic.

The personhood of these saints seemed to be generated through people's social, embodied interactions with the statues that represented them. Through devotional interactions, the statues came to exist as real embodiments of the saints. Previous anthropological work has found personhood to be co-created through devotees' interactions with Catholic statues. Jon Mitchell observed during his ethnographic work in Malta how people's interactions towards Catholic statues meant they were perceived as "persons rather than things" (Mitchell 2015, 25). In Amy Whitehead's (2013) ethnography of practices towards a Virgin Mary shrine in Andalusia, devotees referred to the shrine's statue using feminine pronouns, and these interactions seemed to generate relational personhood. Similarly, *Pueblo*'s Virgin Mary statues thus came into being. Even my interactions as an agnostic outsider led me to treat the statues as more than just statues. For many of *Pueblo*'s residents, the saints were important parts of their lives; living beings with whom they shared meaningful relationships.

Virgin Saints as Kinship Care-givers

Not only did interactions with the statues generate personhood, but the interdependent relationships people also maintained with the Virgin saints seemed to fulfill a caring, kinship role. *Abuelos*' bedrooms in *Pueblo*'s care home were covered in objects celebrating the saints: magazine cuttings; handmade decorations; ornaments and trinkets (see photographs 3-5). This contradicts assumptions of care homes as impersonal, showing how *abuelos* personalised and spiritualised such environments.

Photograph 3: A care home bedroom decorated with photos of the Virgin Mary. Photograph taken by author. September, 2019.

Photograph 4: A homemade decoration of the Virgin Mary on the wall in a care home bedroom. Photograph taken by author. September, 2019.

Photograph 5: Stickers of Virgin Mary statues on the wall of a care home bedroom. Photograph taken by author. September, 2019.

Residents regularly spoke to these objects to communicate with the saints. Isabel, an 87-year-old resident, explained her night-time ritual with her miniature replica of *Pueblo*'s *La Virgin del Pilar* statue:

> I'm lucky. I'm never lonely because I have my Pilar here beside me [gestures towards statue on bedside table]. I tell her everything. I tell her about my day, and she always

> listens to me. Before I sleep, I kiss her and wish her goodnight. Then she watches over me as I sleep…I was having lots of problems sleeping, especially when I first moved here, I couldn't get used to the change. And because of Antonia [her ex-roommate who has advanced dementia]. She was not well in the head. She was always getting up in the night and shouting, and sometimes she would even shake me awake. It was terrible. But I spoke to my Pilar about it, and she handled it. Eventually Antonia was moved to another room. I'm so thankful for that because, since she's gone, I've been sleeping much better…If I ever wake in the night, I look over at [Pilar] and seeing her there helps me get back to sleep.

In this example, Isabel understood the transfer of her roommate to another bedroom as the Virgin's doing; she had shared a problem with the Virgin, who had resolved it. Tanya Luhrmann's (2012) ethnography, exploring evangelical Christian worship in the US, highlighted how, through prayer, worshippers shared the personal minutiae of their daily lives to develop intimate, personal relationships with God. This resonates with Isabel's experience of praying to the Virgin, as through the sharing of her everyday thoughts, worries and wishes, she generated an intimate, interdependent, reciprocal relationship with the saint. The Virgin Mary, as mother of God, is considered the quintessential mother of Catholic theology. Linda Hall's (2004) book, investigating Virgin Mary devotion in Spain and the Americas throughout history, described how the Virgin is regarded as a feminine vision of peace and unconditional love. People in *Pueblo* seemed to identify with this maternal, perpetually caring attribute. Moreover, Whitehead's work, exploring devotional practices towards an Andalusian Virgin Mary shrine, explained the shrine as adopting a 'kinship role' by protecting devotees (Whitehead 2018, 225). In *Pueblo*, the warmth and care that the Virgin offered seemed to provide maternal protection.

For *abuelos*, the kinship they experienced with the saints appeared especially meaningful because, as elder family members, they had lost parental kin. A maternal relationship, achieved through interactions with representations of the Virgins, proved especially comforting as it seemed to restore kinships lost in life. Isabel recalled how her devotion to the Virgin had helped her manage grieving for her mother. She described how she now considers that she has "two mothers watching over me", referring to her biological mother who had passed away, and the Virgin saint. The saints thus provide not only interdependent care, whereby devotional interactions are reciprocally repaid through comfort and protection, but also a maternal relationship.

The Virgins' capacity to nurture appeared especially important for people with dementia. For those in earlier stages who were aware of diagnosis, this protection could be a source of profound comfort. This was seen in my conversation with 82-year-old Mari Carmen, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease a year earlier:

> I know my memory is bad, and I know it will only get worse as time goes on. But I try not to worry. I try not to worry because I know even if I cannot remember, Pilar [the Virgin saint] is watching over me, and if I do not remember, she will remember for me.

Mari Carmen trusted that if her cognitive capabilities failed, they would be filled in by the Virgin. Her words suggest that she understands her memories, which form part of her personhood, as interdependent with the Virgin. By compensating for the memory deficiency that could make Mari Carmen vulnerable, the Virgin looked after her the way a mother cares for a child. Social interactions of devotion towards the saints can thus become a profound source of interdependent kin-like spiritual care.

As representations of deeply ubiquitous religious symbols, the Virgin statues were still recognised by some *abuelos* with advanced dementia who were experiencing greater memory loss. For example, 89-year-old Rosita, who regularly attended the day centre, had been diagnosed with vascular dementia 15 years earlier. By the time I met Rosita, she was displaying advanced dementia symptoms: she was wandering, appeared disorientated, could not recognise people she knew and seemed to hallucinate. When I tried engaging Rosita in conversation, she would sometimes respond by smiling or talking. Although what she said often seemed incoherent, there were moments of lucidity.

Rosita also had an increasing tendency to get agitated, and she would sometimes shout or even hit others. One technique staff discovered was walking her to a large, framed photo of *La Virgen del Pilar* statue that hung on the lounge wall. Staff would gesture to Rosita to look at the image. Rosita would look up at the Virgin and, on processing the image, she would often snap out of her agitation, sign the cross with her hand and mutter a prayer. Sometimes this technique worked brilliantly; other times it did not, and Rosita continued to exhibit aggression. One staff member, who described herself as nonreligious, suggested it was because the Virgin Mary was such a recognisable image that it was relatable even to people with advanced dementia who might struggle to recognise other things.

Virgin-saint representations also aided *abuelos* with dementia through the repetitive, multisensorial nature of devotional rituals. Ana was care-giver to her mother, 92-year-old Paquita, who was bedbound with advanced vascular dementia. Ana described generating hope from moments when her mother became more lucid. She explained how, during the fiesta's opening ceremony, she would put the local radio station on in the bedroom Paquita occupied, and they would listen to devotional songs made to *La Virgen de La Humildad*. As I mentioned earlier, this Virgin statue resides in the upper neighbourhood, where Paquita had lived her entire life. Ana described how, during the ceremony's broadcast, Paquita would sit up and her features became more alert. She would smile and move her lips to these songs she had memorised since childhood. Ana understood this as her mother connecting with the saint to whom she had been devoted throughout her lifetime. Ana deliberately decorated Paquita's bedroom with photos of the Virgin to help her maintain this connection. Such practices were Ana's attempts to manufacture the conditions that triggered seemingly more lucid, connected moments in her mother.

Through their ethnography of a Danish dementia-care unit, Svendsen *et al.* described how carers deliberately attempted to stimulate moments when "the person with dementia responded, albeit slightly, with a nod, a movement, or a verbal sound, expressing some kind of comfort or fulfilment in life," describing these as "magical moments" (Svendsen *et al.* 2018, 28). I use this theorisation in combination with Mattingly's (2010, 2014) concept of 'moral laboratories' of care. Mattingly's research with families of children with serious chronic medical conditions explored how, when making complex decisions regarding care, care-givers become experimenters in creating conditions that generate hope. Similarly, I argue that care-givers to people with dementia strive to create 'moral laboratories' of care that result in those for whom they care experiencing 'magical moments.' In Ana's case, she experimented using multisensory sources—religious images, prayers, and hymns—to create the necessary experimental conditions for Paquita to experience a 'magical moment' whereby she spiritually connected with the saint.

The repetitive, structured nature of rituals, such as prayer, also appeared to ground people with dementia into the present. Many *abuelos* in *Pueblo* said prayers, explaining these as an important part of their devotion. They said prayers to themselves or to religious trinkets, images, or icons before going to sleep or when in moments of distress. Mari Carmen, who was in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, recalled how worried she had been when she first started experiencing memory loss. She described

finding comfort in saying a prayer to *La Virgen del Pilar* each night. Performing this nightly prayer seemed to provide consistency, rhythm and routine that calmed her.

Ritualised devotional practices towards the Virgin saints could be especially comforting for people approaching end-of-life. Although people of varying ages engaged in devotional practices towards the saints, it was more pronounced in older generations. This may have been partly because this generation grew up during a time when religious worship was more active across Spanish society. However, it could also be due to life stage, as these were people approaching death and perhaps seeking spiritual mentorship. Mari Carmen described her comfort that the saint was there at this point in her life, "Before I go to sleep, I say a prayer to Pilar [the Virgin saint], I ask her that if tonight is the night that I am ready [for death]. But I ask that she guides me and be by my side through my journey."

In his ethnographic work in Malta, Mitchell (2010) explained how Catholic saints are not entirely supernatural entities from mythology, as they can be verified as actual historical figures with lives that can be empirically confirmed. Saints are thus part human, which may enhance the relatability of the saints' statues to their worshippers. As Hall analysed, the Virgin Mary is "not God but the Mother of God. She is fully human" (Hall 2004, 7), which may make her more relatable. This relatability may be further enhanced by the localised versions of the Virgin statues that exist in *Pueblo*, which seem to position these saints as ideal candidates to act as divine mediators, guiding people from life to death.

Fiestas as Social Solidarity

The first annual procession with a Virgin statue was met with a particular atmosphere of excitement and expectation as it occurred straight after the *Fiesta de Las Cruces* (Festival of the Crosses), another of the many fiestas that decorated *Pueblo*'s calendar, which involved people adorning large crucifixes with flowers. *Pueblo* was thus already in the full-swing of fiesta by the time *La Virgen de la Humildad* left her chapel to parade the streets for the procession in her honour. Below, I describe my experience witnessing the start of this procession:

As I headed through the streets towards the chapel, I could hear the thumping of drums and hooting of the brass band drawing closer. Children holding brightly coloured balloons ran past excitedly, heading towards the crowd. I joined the excited hubbub gathered in the plaza outside the chapel. Men dressed in traditional-style suits with wide-brimmed hats stood alongside women in colourful polka-dot flamenco dresses, chatting excitedly, whilst chewing on sunflower seeds, scattering the ground with their discarded shells. The uniformed town band were playing outside the chapel and the atmosphere was jubilant. My neighbour, closer to the front of the crowd, caught my attention and waved me over. "You're here just in time." She pulled me into the crowd, smiling, "She's about to come out!"

Minutes later, the chapel doors were flung open, and the procession streamed out. People dressed as priests—some carrying large crucifixes or candles, others waving pots on chains filled with strong-scented frankincense—marched alongside an array of costumed people: women in ornate dresses with veils, children dressed as shepherds with tea towels over their heads, all marching in line.

Moments later, the crowd let out a huge cheer and the unmistakable, towering figure of La Virgen de La Humildad emerged from the church doorway, wearing a huge golden ringed headpiece and a lavish, gold-embellished dress with a long trail flowing behind her. She stood on an ornately decorated float, supported over great wooden beams resting on the shoulders of men in white shirts, marching in unison. The band upped the volume and blasted out a celebratory tune, whilst members of the crowd shouted "¡Viva la Virgen de la Humildad!" "¡Guapa!" and "¡Morenita!"[2] to rapturous applause. Spectators standing on balconies overlooking the plaza threw colourful

petals that spun and floated over the crowd. People were smiling, clapping, cheering, and shouting at the Virgin statue, stretching out their arms to get closer to her.

The excitement of the fiestas was not only spiritual, but a collective, social experience that seemed to produce community solidarity. Many younger residents described themselves as nonreligious, with some even using the term 'anti-religious' because of Catholicism's role during Franco's dictatorship. At that time, Andalusia had suffered oppressive laws and mass slaughter under Franco's regime. His dictatorship was supported by the Catholic Church and resulted in over one in ten Andalusians being killed (Pratt 2003, 48). Younger generations frequently explained their turn away from Catholicism as related to this dark period of national history. Yet, even many of *Pueblo*'s most fervently 'anti-religious' residents still described enjoying the fiestas as they understood them as a celebration of their community.

Émile Durkheim famously investigated collective worship rituals and analysed these religious practices as capturing something beyond the individual, i.e., rituals can be collective, *social* processes through which people connect as a group. He emphasised how group religious rituals are fundamental in establishing 'collective life' (Durkheim [1912] 2007, 276). With inspiration from Durkheim, I argue that residents' participation in *Pueblo*'s fiestas linked them to the spiritual and everyday worlds of their social community. For *abuelos* needing care, this solidarity across generations seemed to offer profound comfort. Durkheim described collective participation in religious ritual as generating "a sort of electricity," which he called "collective effervescence" (Durkheim [1912] 2007, 247). I extend this analysis into eldercare, arguing that this experience is particularly meaningful to older people who, due to physical and/or cognitive decline, may be experiencing social isolation. As I observed, through their participation in fiesta rituals, *abuelos* seemed to enter into a state of collective effervescence. As anthropologist Janelle Taylor warned in her reflections on caring for her mother with dementia, "It is only as members of communities that any of us can hope to transcend forgetfulness and death" (Taylor 2008, 333). The collective act of engaging in the fiesta ritual thus seemed to become a therapeutic way for *abuelos* in *Pueblo*, many of whom were at risk of social isolation, to connect with a social solidarity in their wider community.

Fiestas as 'Community-centred Care'

A great deal of care research has emphasised the need to approach elder- and dementia care as 'person-centred.' The social psychologist, Tom Kitwood, revolutionised approaches to dementia care with his (1997) work advocating for 'person-centred care.' This approach critiqued biomedical conceptualisations of dementia as dehumanising. Rather, 'person-centred care' advocates for people's unique sense of personhood, thus restoring the *individual* behind the diagnosis. Kitwood's work helped rehumanise dementia care, and person-centred care has been widely adopted into healthcare professionals' practices worldwide.

However, when viewed anthropologically, 'person-centred care' can become problematic as a contextual product that stipulates specific cultural meanings around a highly individualised understanding of personhood, particularly when emphasising the value of independence. Anthropologist Annette Leibing (2017) critiqued how researchers investigating dementia care highlighted enduring personhood, reifying nostalgic imaginings of people pre-dementia. Such emphasis on a static, individual self seems to parallel the 'successful aging' movement in the US and elsewhere, which has been critiqued by, among others, anthropologist Sarah Lamb (2014). As Lamb described, individuals are expected to work hard to stay healthy by engaging in disciplined exercise, healthy eating and lifestyles, to maintain independence in older age and avoid dependence on others.

Further evidence of this approach can be found in ethnologist Amy Clotworthy's (2020) work exploring health policies for older people in Denmark. Clotworthy describes how health policies frame older people as a high risk to the state due to their potential for declining health, and thus manages them as a burden. Some politicians and health professionals attempt to counter-balance this by promoting an overtly positive narrative around healthy ageing to encourage older people to engage in self-help interventions to preserve their health. This paradigm pushes an unrealistic promotion of a highly individualised, static form of personhood that seeks an unattainable eternal independence in older age. This seems to deny the inevitability of ageing, decline and the need to depend on others for care.

Investigating the therapeutic effects of *abuelos'* collective participation in religious rituals suggests that elder- and dementia care need not only be approached through a 'person-centred' framework that assumes an individualised understanding of personhood that values independence. Instead, personhood can be understood as relational, recognising that older dependent people, despite lacking independence, remain people who are deeply affected by their social relationships. Such an approach reflects the theoretical work of political scientist Joan Tronto. In exploring what she called an "ethics of care," Tronto (1994) claims that, as human beings, we need to both give and receive care. She explains how "care helps us to rethink humans as interdependent beings" (Tronto 1994, 21). In recognising this interdependency, and taking a more relational form of personhood, it becomes necessary to approach elder and dementia care as not only person-centred and attuned to individual differences, but also as deeply affected by collective social processes and interactions that occur within specific cultural contexts.

This approach also builds on theoretical work investigating relational autonomy. In their work about medical ethics, Carlos Gómez-Vírseda, Yves de Maeseneer and Chris Gastmans (2020) explored relational autonomy in end-of-life care. They advocated against paternalistic and deindividualising approaches to autonomy, and instead promoted recognition of the complex ways that human autonomy is shaped by social relations and the cultural contexts humans are embedded within. Similarly, I propose a need to shift understandings of elder and dementia care from person-centred approaches towards understandings that recognise care as profoundly 'community-centred.'

Durkheim explained how a totem object "is the centre of all regards…the permanent element of social life" (Durkheim [1912] 2007, 278-9). The Virgin Mary in *Pueblo* appeared to become a totem-like mediator, generating social cohesion across generations, and between natural and supernatural worlds. Anthropologist and historian William Christian's (1972) ethnography of a devout region of northern Spain explored people's experiences of religiosity and devotional practices. Specifically, Christian investigated the function of Catholic shrines and saints, and explained the Virgin Mary as a 'totem object' who becomes a community's link between real and spiritual, and to ancestors who celebrated her before and future generations who will celebrate her after. During fiestas in *Pueblo*, the Virgin Mary statue is carried on an ornate float and marched through the town as part of a huge procession. Her float is swung from side-to-side which makes her move and appear to come to life. Spectators call, shout, and hold their arms out towards her. This celebration of people's devotion stimulates collective effervescence, which generates shared protection and care across the community that is especially felt by *abuelos*; this suggests the value of 'community-centred' care.

During processions, the Virgin's personhood comes into closer proximity to people's everyday reality, enabling deeper emotional engagement with the Virgin and an enhanced sense of her spiritual protection. The statue, resting on a float, in being swung by those who carry her, appears active and animated, which emphasises her vitality and personhood. As Mitchell described of the Maltese *festa*, the processions that animate the Saint Paul statue make him "an agent," enabling people to experience

closer social engagement (Mitchell 2004, 68). As I observed, *Pueblo*'s residents positioned themselves close to the procession and held out their arms towards the statue to experience this proximity. The processions carrying the Virgin Mary statues also made special stops at *Pueblo*'s day centre and care home. The saint's physical proximity to the town's care institutions gives *abuelos* an enhanced spiritual protection and again demonstrates how eldercare in this town is profoundly community-centred. The Virgin Mary statue, carried as part of these processions, is thus brought into an intimacy of moving within the everyday world of her people's community.

Fiestas as a Sense of Belonging

As I observed, feelings of solidarity experienced during fiestas seemed to link with a sense of belonging to *Pueblo*'s community. *Pueblo* is naturally distinguished by the mountain it occupies and its Virgin statues are associated with its landscape, forming part of its municipal identity. In his ethnography, Christian described how Spanish saints occupying shrines can possess their own "territory of grace," which was "an area over which its benevolent power seems especially manifest" (Christian 1972, 44). Ritual practices during *Pueblo*'s fiestas appeared to link the saints to *Pueblo* as their 'territory of grace'. For example, in the chapels housing the statues are objects that connect to *Pueblo*'s unique local identity. There are vases filled with dried branches from *Pueblo*'s olive groves and, during the fiestas, small glasses of *Pueblo*'s locally-produced alcoholic drink are placed by the statues. Photographs used in *Pueblo*'s annual calendar display its landscape alongside images of the Virgin statues, suggesting the saints watch over *Pueblo* as their 'territory of grace' (see photograph 6).

For *abuelos*, I observed how they seem to feel local spiritual protection from the Virgin saints more keenly and intimately when approaching the end of their lives. As I described earlier, bedroom walls in the care home are covered in images of these saints and *Pueblo*'s landscape. The 'territory of grace' and spiritual protection offered by the saints, which is experienced through devotion towards the statues, appears to generate a sense of community belonging that could protect them from some of the health and social challenges they may face as they move into older age.

Photograph 6: Poster of Virgin Mary statue in front of Pueblo's landscape, on the bedroom wall of a care home. Photograph taken by author. September, 2019.

For *abuelos* who attended *Pueblo*'s day centre or lived in its care home, a sense of belonging was especially important as it could reduce the social displacement they may have felt through their new lives in the care institutions. Medical anthropologist Erica Borgstrom (2017) examined social death, particularly in relation to illness and dying. Social death, she explained, describes "the ways in which someone is treated as if they were dead or non-existent" (Borgstrom 2017, 5). Such treatment can have significant consequences for the care a person receives. Taylor (2008), who cared for her mother with dementia, highlighted how once someone with dementia moves into a care institution, they often experience a social death whereby friends and even close relatives effectively abandon them. In contrast, the fiestas in *Pueblo* seemed to reaffirm a social sense of belonging to the community despite this move into the care institution. Care institutions harnessed the fiestas' capacity to generate belonging by engaging *abuelos* in activities that were integral to the fiestas – this may have prevented feelings of social abandonment for which these elderly residents were at risk. In the weeks leading up to the *Fiesta de Las Cruces*, *abuelos* attending the day centre made craft flowers to decorate a large crucifix that was displayed outside. Whilst I was there, we painted pinecones collected from *Pueblo*'s forests. In previous years, they used dried pasta, plastic spoons and egg boxes (see photographs 7-12). During the fiesta, a party was held at the day centre, and the decorated crucifix was displayed alongside other local markers of identity. For example, walls were decorated with specific trinkets and items, such as flamenco fans and instruments that were used to make the locally-produced alcoholic drink (see photograph 13). *Abuelos* recounted with pride how they had previously won *Pueblo*'s competition for the most beautifully decorated crucifix.

Photograph 7: Craft flowers made from pasta. Photograph taken by author. April, 2019.

Photograph 8: Craft flowers made from plastic spoons. Photograph taken by author. April, 2019.

Photograph 9: Craft flowers made from egg boxes. Photograph taken by author. April, 2019.

Photograph 10: Craft flowers from pine cones laid out for painting at the day centre. Photograph taken by author. February, 2019.

Photograph 11: Craft flowers made from pine cones in 2019. Photograph taken by author. April, 2019.

Photograph 12: Staff member preparing day centre's cross for Fiesta de las Cruces. Photograph taken by author. April, 2019.

Photograph 13: The day centre's decorated cross on display with local artifacts during Fiesta de las Cruces. Photograph taken by author. May, 2019.

During the fiesta of *La Virgen del Pilar*, the care home was invited to its own intimate visitation with the statue. Staff accompanied residents to this visitation, where they could kiss the statue and speak with her directly. This enabled an intimacy with the saint that seemed to strengthen the protection *abuelos* felt from her, as well as their sense of belonging to the community. During these fiestas, a procession paraded down the street where the care home was located and paused in front to sing devotional songs. As I observed, residents who were mobile enough sat outside the building awaiting the procession's arrival, whilst others clustered around windows to watch. The street in front of the day centre was too narrow for the procession to enter, so it paused at the top of the street; the float carrying the statue was turned to look towards the day centre and give her blessing. Mitchell (2010) noted how, as statues are paraded around the streets during the Maltese processions, the power of saints seemed to flow directly from the statues, spreading powerful spiritual protection throughout the community. As I observed, the stops the procession made to acknowledge the care home and day centre highlight how the saint's healing powers are considered particularly important to the lives of *abuelos*. Through their integral participation in *Pueblo*'s fiestas, *abuelos* who may experience displacement from their new lives in care institutions are thus reaffirmed as important community-members. Thus, their sense of belonging may be reinforced through these collective rituals.

A sense of belonging is not localised to just *Pueblo* but also further to the town's neighbourhoods. *La Virgen de La Humildad* rests in the upper neighbourhood chapel, and *La Virgen del Pilar* in the lower neighbourhood chapel. As I observed, several houses in both neighbourhoods had icons of their distinct neighbourhood Virgin saint set into their walls (see photograph 14). My neighbours in the upper neighbourhood emphasised that, although they celebrated *La Virgen del Pilar* because they were from the upper part of town, they were most devoted to *La Virgen de La Humildad*. "Because she's our neighbor," my neighbour explained. "It is she who we know will watch over us up here." As I mentioned, the upper neighbourhood was less affluent than the lower neighbourhood, and there was some animosity amongst my neighbours towards the lower neighbourhood. They recounted how the council had privileged the restoration of the lower neighbourhood's plaza as it generated more money from tourism, and they felt that the upper neighbourhood was neglected. It appeared then that people

felt a closer alliance, devotion, and sense of belonging to their neighbourhood statues because these objects were closely tied to their home and everyday life.

Photograph 14: Icon of Virgin saint set into a house in Pueblo. Photograph taken by author. May, 2019.

One example of this sense of neighbourhood alliance was 86-year-old Louisa, who had moved from her life-long home in the upper neighbourhood into *Pueblo*'s care home in the lower neighbourhood. Her bedroom walls in the care home were covered in photos of the upper neighbourhood's *La Virgen de la Humildad*. She had cut-outs from local magazines and photos tucked behind the fall-alarm on the wall above her bed (see photograph 15). She showed me around her bedroom enthusiastically:

> "And here is *La Virgen de La Humilidad* from last year's processions. Beautiful!" she said, beaming, pointing out one of the magazine cut-outs stuck on the wall.

> "You see, I am from the upper neighbourhood," she said to me, lowering her tone of voice, "And I know my dear Virgin, my *Morenita*, felt betrayed that I had come down here."

> A look of remorse came over her, "But what could I do? I couldn't keep living there. I couldn't manage that big house alone anymore, and all that shopping up the hill from the supermarket. It was too much… But I felt terrible at first. Of course, I love Pilar [*La Virgen del Pilar*], but it's not the same."

The guilt that Louisa expressed about moving from the upper to the lower neighbourhood—and her displays of loyalty towards the upper neighbourhood's Virgin saint—suggest how the saints may contribute to feelings of localised neighbourhood identity and belonging.

Photograph 15: Photos of Virgin Mary statue tucked behind a fall-alarm in Louisa's bedroom in the care home. Photograph taken by author. September, 2019.

Older people living in the care home, many of whom had never previously left home or only done so after marriage, seemed to feel a strong identity with their neighbourhood. When a resident died, the upper or lower chapel's bells would chime depending on which neighbourhood they were from, and many *abuelos* could distinguish between these chimes. During my fieldwork, a man who had been living in the care home passed away, and the chapel in the upper neighbourhood chimed for him. Despite having spent his last years in the care home in the lower neighbourhood, his identity was inherently connected to the upper neighbourhood where he had lived most of his life. The Virgin statues thus appeared to generate a sense of belonging to *Pueblo* and the specific neighbourhood people were from.

For many *abuelos*, the sense of closeness to community could have been restricted by their physical inability to access *Pueblo*'s streets and public spaces. However, local media networks compensated for this. Despite only having 10,000 inhabitants, like other Andalusian towns, *Pueblo* has its own radio and television networks, which show unedited live coverage of *Pueblo*'s fiestas. When I visited *abuelos* at their homes, I noticed how commonly these local channels were played. I became friends with Diego, the camera operator for the local TV station. Chatting with him over a beer one night, he stressed the importance of the local channels to *abuelos*: "I remember one year I was in the upper plaza filming the *feria* and an *abuelita* [little old lady] came up and kissed me and said, 'Thank you so much for recording the *feria*, because I had a hip operation last year and I couldn't leave my house, but seeing it all on TV made me feel like I was there.' It made me so happy," Diego recounted, looking wistful.

Diego also explained how, as a media network for a small municipality, it is possible to adapt content and broadcast times to fit with viewers' needs, most of whom are older people:

> We can be very flexible. Say, if an *abuelo* rings me up to ask what time we're showing a procession, I'll say, 'What time would you like us to show it?' and she might say, 'Well, 3pm would be great' so I'll say, 'No problem!' and we'll run it then. These older generations are our main audience.

Despite the town's relatively small population, having its own media networks gives it scope for

flexibility, which facilitates greater accessibility. By broadcasting live coverage of the fiestas and being flexible to local people's needs, *abuelos* who can no longer attend the fiestas in-person are able to tune in to the sense of belonging of their community.

Fiestas as Inciting Embodied Memories

Investigating the role fiestas play for *abuelos* with dementia, I noticed how fiestas appeared to influence memories. The fiestas and all they include—the ceremonies, processions, lights, incense, decorations, singing, dancing, and costumes—seem to invoke a deeply multisensorial experience. Michael Bull and Jon Mitchell's (2015) work investigated the potential of combining cognitive/neuroanthropology with performance studies and the anthropology of the senses in order to reach new understandings of religious transmission. Rather than focusing on mental representations in religious transmission, they advocated for the need to investigate people's embodied experience of ritual, approaching the body as "the sensing body" (Bull and Mitchell 2015, 4). This is helpful in analysing *Pueblo*'s fiestas in relation to the bodily, sensorial experiences of those participating. As I observed, such ritual practices affected those *abuelos* who, due to cognitive impairment or dementia, were not able to communicate through conventional verbal modes. I found that the multisensorial experience of fiestas may generate long-lasting, deeply imprinted memories, which could remain accessible to people with memory problems.

The annual repetition of these fiestas since childhood also meant that people described certain sensorial triggers, such as the smell of frankincense (a strongly-scented incense that was burnt from ornamental holders during the processions) as triggering nostalgic memories of past fiestas. Processions play on the multisensory body; the music, the strong smell of frankincense, and the striking image of the Virgin statue make the procession a persuasive and sensorially stimulating event that may imprint long-lasting memories. I describe this in more detail through my observations of Tano, a 91-year-old man with dementia who lived near me in *Pueblo*:

As I left my house and walked down the street this morning, I'd seen the usual sight of Tano wandering up to his garage, situated at the end of our street. I'd seen him often marching up to his garage, opening the door, entering for a few moments, then leaving and locking the garage door behind him. He then tended to wander back down the street but stop and turn back halfway down. He would then return to the garage and check it was locked; sometimes, he would open it again and check inside, before closing and locking the door. He would start heading back down the street, then turn around and repeat the whole process. His wife would get frustrated with him when he said he was going to the garage. "You've already checked it twice this morning" she'd say, but she could not stop him heading out multiple times throughout the day, sometimes for hours at a time…

It was Tano's repetitive ritualised behaviour that I witnessed again on the day of the procession. But this time, his behaviour was fitting to his surroundings. The procession was due to pass through our street, so I'd decided to watch it from my house. Crowds were gathered, running up the street awaiting the processions' arrival. It began its march down from the top of the street…At the lower end of the street, I saw Tano turning up the street, garage keys in hand. I knew where he was likely to be heading. But on seeing the crowds, he stopped in his tracks. As the procession marched down the street, I saw him stand to the side amongst the crowd. As the procession drew closer, he doffed his hat and shouted, "Viva la Virgen!" He then clapped along with the music, remaining amongst the crowd.

The multisensory, embodied experience of the ritual appeared to cause Tano to enter into what Svendsen *et al.* called a "magical moment" through which he momentarily became embedded within the surrounding procession to connect with others around him (Svendsen *et al.* 2018, 28). Experiencing early-stage dementia, Tano struggled to form newer short-term memories but could recall long-term

memories—in this example, he stopped to participate in the ritual of the procession. This suggests that Tano was experiencing a deeply embodied long-term memory that had formed through his bodily participation in these rituals annually throughout his lifetime. The repetitive multisensorial nature of *Pueblo*'s fiesta rituals may thus be therapeutic for *abuelos* with dementia as these rituals can trigger the recall of long-term meaningful memories that enable *abuelos* to understand and join in with the collective celebration.

On another occasion, as I stood outside the care home with the residents to observe the arrival of one of the saint statues, I similarly observed one of these 'magical moments' in Auxi, an *abuela* in her mid-90s with advanced dementia. Auxi was usually not able to verbally communicate and would generally seem unaware of her surroundings. If people tried to interact with her, she was often unresponsive. Yet, when she stood with the crowd outside the care home to watch the procession, she joined in the applause as the statue arrived. Malcolm Goldsmith, a rector and sociological writer interested in the influence of spirituality on dementia care, investigated how people with dementia responded to religious ritual. He explained how people with dementia participating in religious rituals often engage effectively, as they "just *know* what they have to do" (Goldsmith 2002, 145). As I observed, the collective ritual appeared to trigger a deeply embodied memory in Auxi, inciting a 'magical moment' whereby she connected to this shared celebratory moment with those around her.

During *Pueblo*'s fiestas, memory also seems to connect people to their shared historical and spiritual past. This can be particularly meaningful for *abuelos*, who are approaching the end of their lives, as it can provide a reminder of participating in these rituals with their relatives who have since passed away. For example, people described to me how processions triggered nostalgic memories of watching them with family years ago. This forms a connection to the spiritual world of their ancestors alongside the religious saints.

Processions also celebrated a shared Catholic history. During *Pueblo*'s *Semana Santa* (Holy Week/Easter) processions, Catholic stories are re-enacted. *Abuelos* spoke with genuine sorrow about the procession recreating the betrayal of Christ, and with jubilation about the procession performing his resurrection. This can play a reminiscence role for *abuelos* to generate a sense of belonging in a shared religious history. Mitchell, describing Catholic Maltese processions, explained how through the annual re-enactment of past events, a "concertina-ing of time" is created by "bringing events and persons from the distant historical past back into the present" so that spiritual entities are felt as a "continuous presence" (Mitchell 2009, 61). As I observed, this 'concertina-ing' of time occurred through *Pueblo's* fiestas, which were repeated annually in line with specific seasons. This could help orientate people with dementia to the present, whilst providing a reminiscence of the past. It could have an especially powerful effect on *abuelos* at the end-of-life by highlighting the temporal and connected nature of time, nostalgically connecting them to past relatives, the community's shared history, and the spiritual world for which, as believers, they awaited.

For many *abuelos* with dementia, however, the fiestas had become inaccessible or even disorientating. Claudia looked after her 88-year-old mother, Adela, who had Alzheimer's disease. Claudia described how her mother had lost interest in the processions and disengaged from prayers to the Virgin statue, which she had performed avidly throughout her lifetime. Claudia recalled taking Adela to a visitation with the statue but described how Adela had shown disinterest towards the statue. Claudia believed this was evidence that Adela had declined and changed—so much that she was no longer the person Claudia had known her to be before the onset of Alzheimer's disease. The fiestas had thus assumed a sad tone for Claudia, as memories of previously enjoying the fiestas with her mother now gave her a profound sense of loss.

I also witnessed in one *abuelo* that the fiestas could be disorientating. José was an 85-year-old retired shepherd and olive farmer in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, who I had met at *Pueblo*'s day centre. I would often pass him in the large plaza in the upper neighbourhood as he was sitting on the benches chatting to other men or playing *pentanca* (boules), a gentle sport that involves rolling small balls along the ground and is often played by older people in *Pueblo*. José had recounted to me many times how he had keenly participated in the fiestas throughout his lifetime. However, one afternoon during a fiesta, the *feria* (fair) was occupying the plaza where José would normally socialise, causing it to overflow with a hectic mix of people, stalls and loud music. I ran into José, who was looking completely lost and barely seemed to recognise me, saying he had forgotten how to get home. I was able to get him to a neighbour who accompanied him home. It seemed that the chaotic change of everyday circumstances caused by the fiestas had disrupted José's usual routine of socialising with friends in the plaza, which then caused him to become disorientated. This shows how the fiestas' disruption to everyday life also had the capacity to disorientate people with dementia, who may rely on routines to compensate for memory deficits. Although I only observed such effects occurring in José during my fieldwork, some people with dementia can become easily disorientated; thus, it seems likely that others could also experience the fiestas as disorientating; this requires further investigation. But José's reaction indicates how the meanings attached to these fiestas are deeply dependent on each individual's unique contextual experience. Although I generally noticed *abuelos* reacting positively to *Pueblo*'s fiestas and have focused on their therapeutic capabilities, fiestas could also be experienced as inaccessible or disorientating, and it is therefore important to recognise that such therapeutic effects are not universally experienced.

Conclusion

With a point of departure in my ethnography from rural Spain, in this article, I have delved into the spiritual and collective realms of eldercare. By exploring older people's interactions with an Andalusian town's Virgin Mary saint statues and residents' participation in collective fiesta rituals, I have revealed that such social-cultural practices form a meaningful part of community eldercare. I explored older people's interactions with the statues, describing how the statues possess personhood and provide spiritual protection. Some people with dementia continue to recognise the statues; thus, as powerful, ubiquitous religious symbols, they can provide stability despite the confusion that dementia can bring. Spiritual protection from the saints may be especially important to older people approaching end-of-life and preparing for their own transition to the spiritual world.

With inspiration from Durkheim, I analysed how *Pueblo*'s rituals generate "collective effervescence" that incites social cohesion and intergenerational solidarity. I also explored how the Virgin saints act as mediators across generations, and between everyday and spiritual worlds. Such an interpretation of these collective rituals leads me to advocate for a shift towards understandings of elder- and dementia care as deeply 'community-centred.' As I have described, the fiestas form a uniquely local celebration, drawing on municipal symbols of identity to generate belonging. This is particularly important to *abuelos* in care institutions, who may be experiencing feelings of displacement.

During the fiestas, the multisensorial collective action may also trigger "magical moments" (Svendsen *et al*. 2018, 28) in some people with dementia. Specifically, people with dementia who still can access long-term memories may, through multisensorial elements of the rituals, enter a therapeutic spiritual state whereby they connect with those around them in the here and now. Meanwhile, the seasonal, repetitive nature of fiesta rituals may bring a shared spiritual history into the present. This is particularly important for older people who have lost loved ones and are reminded of the connectedness of past to

present and spiritual to everyday. However, I also highlighted how, whilst the fiestas can be comforting to some people with dementia, they can be distressing to others. The meaning of certain rituals is thus subjective across individual contexts.

By investigating how meaning is generated around an Andalusian town's saint statues and fiestas, I have illuminated how community religious rituals have the capacity to generate a spiritually and collectively therapeutic role in eldercare. This brings scholarship from the anthropology of religion into dialogue with the anthropology of ageing to demonstrate the importance of approaching eldercare as not just 'person-centred' but also as profoundly 'community-centred.' The benefits of this shift in approach are being recognised by anthropologists investigating dementia and eldercare as well as by healthcare practitioners working with older people and people with dementia; these professionals are seeking ways to incorporate community rituals into care practices.

Exploring the benefits of participation in collective rituals for older people is especially relevant now, as people worldwide continue to negotiate new forms of physically-distant care during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was poignantly demonstrated in *Pueblo*'s response to an outbreak of the virus at its care home in April 2020, which resulted in multiple hospitalisations and deaths. *Pueblo*'s local council arranged for *La Virgen del Pilar* statue to be carried to the care home in a special socially-distanced ceremony in order to emphasise the Virgin saint's presence and spiritual protection over the care home during this difficult period. In times of crisis, engagement in such familiar, locally-specific rituals may generate solidarity, both spiritually by the saint and socially by the wider community. This reinforces the importance of investigating how collective rituals can influence eldercare, and supports a shift towards care that is fundamentally 'community-centred.'

In this article, I have also demonstrated how ethnography can provide a critical tool for exploring how localised cultural practices can be harnessed to create communities where older people and people with dementia feel valued and able to participate in civic life. More broadly, this suggests the benefits of taking an ethnographic approach to investigating ageing, dementia, and care that moves beyond healthcare sites to reveal the diverse ways that collective cultural practices can form an essential part of eldercare.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Saint names used are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

2. Morenita translates into English as 'little tanned woman' and is an affectionate nickname for the Virgin that expresses an adoration of her tanned skin.

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