

Are we mining memories or exploiting older people? New research demands a rethink of Applied Theater

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Imagine your grandmother's life story distilled into a performance, applause washing over her as strangers dissect her past. Sounds heart-

warming, doesn't it? Not so fast, warns a new study from the University of Surrey.

The study found that Applied Theater practices, particularly reminiscence [theater](#), could encourage ageism. This happens when we only see older adults as sources of stories from the past and forget to listen to their current thoughts, opinions, and hopes for the future.

Reminiscence theater is a form of interactive drama in which older adults share memories and experiences through dialogue, storytelling, and creative activities.

The study, led by Dr. Georgia Bowers from the Guildford School of Acting, has shown that [unconscious biases](#) and assumptions can lead practitioners to reinforce [negative stereotypes](#) about older adults unknowingly. This can be particularly evident in reminiscence theater, where focusing on extracting memories risks neglecting participants' present experiences and agency.

Dr. Georgia Bowers, Lecturer and Programme Leader of Applied and Contemporary Theater BA (Hons) at the Guildford School of Acting and lead author of the study, said, "It's crucial to acknowledge that ageism exists within even well-intentioned practices like applied theater. While reminiscence theater offers valuable benefits, it can become problematic if we don't prioritize co-creation, shared power, and a focus on participants' present responses to their memories."

The research proposes a new Anti-Ageism Praxis (AAP) framework to address these concerns. AAP emphasizes:

- Co-creation and shared power: Participants actively collaborate in shaping the project and final performative outcomes, ensuring that they are not only used for their recollections.

- Focus on present responses: Exploring how participants feel about their memories in relation to the present moment leads to focusing on the here and now and not solely on what has been.
- Challenging stereotypes: AAP prioritizes showcasing older adults' diverse experiences and perspectives, fostering understanding and dismantling ageist assumptions.

Dr. Bowers continued, "This research opens important conversations about ethical practice in applied theater. The proposed AAP framework offers a valuable guide for practitioners to ensure [older adults](#) are central to the work and their voices are truly heard."

The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Performance Research*.

More information: Georgia Grace Bowers, *Invading Capitalist Ageism in Applied Theatre through Anti-Ageism Praxis*, *Performance Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2023.2272511](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2272511)

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