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The emergence of the creative ager – On subject cultures of late-life creativity

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: In the last fifteen years, research on aging has seen a new interest in creativity in later life. While late-life creativity has often been described as a method to unpack the potential of older adults in the face of demographic change, this newfound interest is arguably linked to the commodification of late-life creativity itself in terms of innovation and productivity. These new modes of creativity might then also establish new ways to age. Has the homo aestheticus spread into old age?

Method: To explore this question, this paper first lays out a praxeology of late-life creativity. In this framework, creativity as well as age is understood as a social practice through which the artwork as well as the (older) artist is continuously produced. Second, this paper draws upon data from thirteen semi-structured interviews with older adults regularly involved in creative practices in their everyday lives. Using the documentary method, data shows how older adults describe the creative practice and what meanings they attach to growing older within these practices.

Results and discussion: Analyzing subject cultures that emerge from creativity in later life shows how creative practice calls for a specific self-image that is centered around productivity, the preservation of field positions despite growing older and active as well as anti-aging. Studying late-life creativity through a praxeological lens allows for critically evaluating current modes of creativity and the normative positions that are inherent in these practices.

Introduction

While late-life creativity was a well-established gerontological research topic during the 1980s and early 1990s (see, e.g. Goff, 1993; Alpaugh, Parham, Cole, & Birren, 1982; Dohr & Forbess, 1986), a newfound interest in the creative engagement of older adults has arisen during the last fifteen years. In their review, Bernard and Rickett (2016) show that of all articles on theater of older adults evaluated in the study (ranging from 1979 to 2014), one third of the relevant documents were published after 2010. Beyond a broader cultural turn in gerontology (Twigg & Martin, 2015), this was mainly due to a rising interest in the effects creative engagement might hold for older adults in their everyday lives. Hence, the field has seen a vast amount of studies on different forms of creative engagement in recent years such as arts (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2017; Fraser et al., 2015), theater-making (Bernard & Rickett, 2016), music and dance (Krekula, Arvidson, Heikkinen, Henriksson, & Olsson, 2017; Wakeling & Clark, 2015) or writing (Gutheil & Heyman, 2016; Murray et al., 2014; Sabeti, 2014) and their beneficial effects on quality of life (Fraser et al., 2015), health (Castora-

Binkley, Noelker, Prohaska, & Satariano, 2010), social inclusion (Gutheil and Heyman, 2016) or self-confidence (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2017). Overall, a great amount of literature suggests that creative activity can contribute to successful aging (Fisher & Specht, 2000; Price & Tinker, 2014) and has shown that creativity can be beneficial to well-being in later life (Noice & Noice, 2013). Hence, late-life creativity was increasingly studied as an aspect of late everyday-life, which was not exclusively available to older artists, but to a majority of the older population.

This newfound empirical interest in creativity in later life was also accompanied by advancing theoretical development in the field. As Jan Baars argues in his “Aging and the Art of Living” (2012), creativity in later life can be conceptualized in the context of individuality. As youth-oriented societies today confront older adults with generalizations and the denial of their individuality, creativity might be one method to unfold this potential of older adults. O’Neill (2011) argues in a similar pattern. For him, late-life creativity can provide a lifeline to understand what older adults have to offer in the face of demographic change. Creativity, in this sense, is a concept that relates to self-

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expression of older adults. While literature acknowledges the difficulties older adults face towards their self-expression in modern societies (Baars, 2012), creativity is conceptualized as a counterpart to these challenges. Creativity holds the potential to reveal individuality in all stages of the life course.

Within the context of this theoretical framework, most studies have focused on creativity as a human competence: Creativity is understood as part of the most inner self; a resource that needs to be discovered, supported and – in some cases - pushed to become public. More critically, scholars have also argued, however, that creativity has been commodified in recent years to fit neoliberal agendas of productivity and self-realization (Florida, 2004). As Reckwitz (2017) argues, studies on creativity have been historically rooted within a paradigm of self-realization that unfolds around two elements: the development of a creative individual that is then creative not only in the practice of art production, but in every aspect of everyday life. This paradigm of self-realization in studies on creativity therefore comprises: “First, the unfurling of some inner core of individual potential pushing against outside resistance and second, an aesthetic transformation of everyday perception” (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 41).

The narrative of self-realization that surrounds creativity studies has not only transformed what is understood as creative but also – and more importantly – what can be understood as a self-realized self: Through this narrative of the creative and self-realized individual, Reckwitz (2017) argues, the self appears as a “structured ensemble of resources, which can be exploited (...) to produce (...)” (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 152). Creativity, in that sense, is understood as a transformative power from which self-realized and – notably – productive subjects are constantly created in late modernity.

In late modernity, Reckwitz (2017) claims, we witness the emergence of the creative subject – establishing both the demand and the desire to be constantly creative, innovative and bring something new into the world. “Late modern society”, he argues, “has been fundamentally transformed by the expectation and desire to be creative.” (Reckwitz, 2017, vii). Therefore, “creativity is not simply a superficial semantic phenomenon, but, rather, a crucial organizing principle of Western societies” (Reckwitz, 2017, p.2). The newfound emphasis on creativity in late modernity, these scholars argue, can be contextualized in a general emphasis on productivity and innovation in society – urging individuals to constantly showcase their productivity in every aspect of their daily life.

This narrative of the creative and the productive self might, then, have also spread into old age. Numerous studies have shown how old age today is commodified in terms of productivity, consumption and anti-aging (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, 2002), however, a consideration of late-life creativity in this context is currently lacking.

Against this backdrop of a commodification of creativity, this paper explores how the image of the homo aestheticus' has spread into old age. Critically evaluating the notions of self-realization and productivity inherent in practices of creativity calls for a theoretical framework that enables the understanding of ways to interpret, know and make sense of the world not as part of individuals' most inner selves, but as part of a shared social practice. This can be achieved through a practice-theoretical framework that understands practice as a “routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 250). Through this framework, the fully-realized productive creative age is not shown as a casual bystander or a precondition of creative practices. Rather, creativity in later life arguably form certain types of practice through which the image of the creative, self-realized age self is constantly created.

Theories: a praxeology of late-life creativity

What does it mean to develop a practice-theoretical perspective on creativity? First, this framework is established on the assumption that

creativity is a social practice (Fox, 2015). Within these creative practices, the artwork as well as the (older) artist and the social conditions of the creative activity are continuously produced. These assemblages of artistic creativity (Fox, 2015) might then be age coded (Krekula, 2009) as they may allow for specific modes of self-description and subjectivity for older artists.

Understanding creativity as a social practice means understanding creativity as “spatio-temporal nexuses of doings and sayings” (Schatzki, 2014, p. 18) instead of a human capacity. In that sense, creativity is not something that humans are or possess, but something that is continuously done. This idea has been applied both to creativity (Reckwitz, 2012, 2016) and art (Schatzki, 2014). In both cases, the practice-theoretical framework shifts away from the question that benefits, effects or restraints to creativity exist, but rather asks the question of how creativity is produced.

Taking this approach seriously, therefore, means to conceptually move away from the active and agentic creative individual – hence, it means to decentralize the subject. This means understanding creativity not as a human capacity or resource, but as a social phenomenon that is done through human, non-human and discursive actors. Schatzki (2014) has framed these packages of actors and practices as “art bundles” (Schatzki, 2014, p.17): The practices of music, for example, do not just consist of playing the instrument – they also involve seeing and reacting to a (present or imagined) audience, managing the instrument and sounds. It could also involve a guitar, the room in which the performance takes place or microphones.

Fox (2015) takes this thought further: Moving away from art bundles as a set of practices, he defines creativity as emergent from assemblages, which can consist of humans as well as non-humans and much more. The practice of painting, he argues, is not just done through the artist alone: The colors and pencils, the room in which the painting takes place, the idea of what it means to paint (and motivations for doing it) are all equally involved in creating the practice of painting. Creativity is then a relational category: “Creativity should be considered not as a human capacity, but as emergent from assemblages of relations between the human and the non-human (things, ideas, social formations)” (Fox, 2015, p.523).

What does productivity mean against the proposed practice-theoretical backdrop? What (and who) is produced through creative practices by what (and whom)? As Fox (2015) has argued, it is not just the painting that is the result of a creative practice in an assemblage, it is also the painter him- or herself that is created through the relation of actors involved in the practice: “Both the creative product and the creator are consequently outcomes of the creativity assemblage: the artist is as much produced as is the painting or any other product” (Fox, 2015, p. 525).

In this sense, the creative older adult might be a product of the creative practice he or she is involved in: We learn to describe ourselves as creative (and as older) through taking pictures, making music or painting. In a practice-theoretical framework, creative subjects are therefore produced through creative practices. To understand the subject as a product of social practices then allows for analyzing certain forms of identity as a cultural practice – it means to ask in which ways practices lead to certain images and narratives of the self. Practices in this approach are then part of subject cultures (Subjektulturen (Reckwitz, 2016, p.77)): an ensemble of practices and discourses in which a certain form of the subject is created and reproduced. The form of the subject (Subjektform (Reckwitz, 2016, p. 76)) is then the specific cultural way in which the subject is expected to behave, act or talk about him or herself. Human agents with their individual characteristics, attitudes and wishes are produced according to the practices they are involved in: “They understand the world and themselves and use know-how and motivational knowledge according to the particular practice” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 256).

To empirically analyze creative practices in later life, this means to move away from analyzing reasons or motivations for creative

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