



## “Senior coolness”: Living well as an attitude in later life



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 19 July 2013

Received in revised form 6 November 2013

Accepted 6 November 2013

#### Keywords:

Coolness

Multimorbidity

Vulnerability

Finitude

Living well

Attitude

### ABSTRACT

With demographic change becoming an ever more pressing issue in Germany, old age (80+) is currently talked about above all in terms of being a problem. In mainstream discourse on the situation of the oldest old an interpretive framework has emerged that effectively rules out the possibility of people living positively and well in old age. With regard to both individual (personal) and collective (societal) spheres, negative images of old age dominate public debate. This is the starting point for an interdisciplinary research project designed to look at the ways in which people manage to “live well in old age in the face of vulnerability and finitude” – in express contrast to dominant negative perspectives. Based on the results of this project, the present article addresses an attitudinal and behavioral mode which we have coined “senior coolness”. Coolness here is understood as both a socio-cultural resource and an individualized habitus of everyday living. By providing an effective strategy of self-assertion, this ability can, as we show, be just as important for elderly people as for anyone else. “Senior coolness” is discussed, finally, as a phenomenon that testifies to the ways elderly people retain a positive outlook on life – especially in the face of difficult circumstances and powerful socio-cultural pressures.

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### Introduction

Is it possible to live well in old age – and if so, how? Indeed could it be that it is more common than public debates about (multi-)morbidity and the care needs associated with it might suggest? In the context of a cultural studies research group set up as part of the interdisciplinary project “Living well in old age in the face of vulnerability and finitude”,<sup>2</sup> we set out to examine these issues in two ways. First, we analyzed popular discourses about old age found in high circulation German-language print media (newspapers and self-help literature) between 1990 and 2012. Second, we conducted 75 qualitative interviews with people aged between 77 and 101, as well as with relatives of

elderly people, in order to find out what “living well in old age” meant for those interviewed.

We have presented detailed results from our discourse analytical study elsewhere (Grebe, 2012; Grebe, Otto, & Zimmermann, 2013; Otto, 2011, 2013; Otto & Grebe, 2013; Schroeter & Zimmermann, 2012; Zimmermann, 2012a, 2012b). In the present article, therefore, we offer just a brief summary of this aspect of our research, placing our focus much more on the results obtained from the qualitative interviews. In particular, we highlight a phenomenon that we have coined “senior coolness” and that we wish to put forward for debate.

Elderly people's experiences have begun to attract greater attention from academic researchers, often with the express intent of providing a counterpoint to prevailing negative portrayals and debates (Katz, Holland, Peace, Taylor, & Blood, 2011; Poon & Cohen-Mansfield, 2011). Our own view is that more positive perspectives on old age certainly can be grounded in individuals' accounts of their own lifeworld experiences. The crucial issue here, however, is to identify the links between people's personal perspectives (their own accounts) and practices on the one hand and those locally

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<sup>2</sup> The full title of the project is “Living well in old age in the face of vulnerability and finitude – an analysis of images of old age in public discourses and everyday practices” (Kruse, Rentsch, & Zimmermann, 2012). Funding for the project was provided by the Volkswagen Foundation.

specific and collectively relevant settings that constitute (elderly) people's socio-cultural location on the other, given that these contribute towards shaping their specific understanding of themselves and of the world (Biggs & Powell, 2001; Estes, Swan, & Gerard, 1982; Katz, 2000; Richter, 2012; Schroeter & Zimmermann, 2012; Twigg, 2004; Zimmermann, 2012a).

Thus elderly people's everyday activities and their experience of reality in their own lifeworld are also influenced by public debates. In particular, mass media representations of old age need to be taken seriously in terms of the impacts they have on people's everyday practices. Life as an elderly person can evolve into a stressful experience for the simple reason that many influential metaphors (Grebe et al., 2013) and catchwords used in German media discourses – including *Altenlast*, a word used to signify the (financial) burden on society posed by large numbers of old people, *Rentnerberg* (“mountain of retirees”), and *dunkle Demografiewolken* (“dark clouds on the demographic horizon”) – cast doubt on the capacities and capabilities of elderly people and thus offend their dignity (see also Gullette, 2004; Laws, 1995; Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011).

Our study of print media texts and self-help literature<sup>3</sup> – to summarize briefly – has revealed a dramaturgy based on a clear-cut distinction between the third age and the fourth age.<sup>4</sup> The third age (65 to 80) is represented throughout in positive terms as the phase when a person is no longer in paid work and has the opportunity to take up other activities, including those that contribute towards self-realization. This optimistic view is reflected in catchy self-help titles such as the following: *Das Beste kommt noch – Männer im Unruhestand* (The Best is Yet to Come – Men and Unretirement, Hammer, 2010); *111 Gründe, sich auf die Rente zu freuen: Ein Loblied auf das, was nach der Arbeit kommt* (111 Reasons to Look Forward to Retirement: Celebrating Life After Work, Brost, 2011); *Endlich alt! Jetzt mache ich, was ich will!* (Old at last! Now I can do what I want!, Oppermann & Tippelt, 2005).<sup>5</sup>

Representations of the fourth age (80 plus) are in stark contrast to this. Our impression is that, since 1990,

representations found in newspaper articles and self-help literature have increasingly come to serve as a negative foil for an active, productive and successful (process of entering) old age: all the negative and pessimistic stereotypes of old age that circulate in German culture and society are increasingly being projected onto the group of the oldest old. Life for people aged over 80 is frequently described principally as a phase of rapid physical and mental deterioration (Otto, 2011).

This is indicated most clearly – to give a striking example – by the large number of newspaper articles on dementia-related problems (Grebe, 2012). The tone of such reports is reflected in the following (translated) quotation from a major broadsheet: “The progressive loss of all memory functions and cognitive capabilities makes it increasingly impossible for people to cope with everyday life and destroys the very core of their personality.” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 279/2005) It is repeatedly claimed that aging with dementia means losing one's identity and dignity, ending up “no longer being a person” (*Bild Zeitung* 78(14)/2008). This portrayal of an ineluctable process of dehumanization also finds concise metaphoric expression in descriptions such as the following (Grebe et al., 2013): “It is only at the start of their free fall that sufferers still notice their own biography leaving them (and, with it, that which had made their life what it was) along with their identity – in other words, their ‘self’ – slipping away inexorably toward nothingness.” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 220/2006).

The style of reporting observed in relation to dementia-related illnesses in particular also applies in general to individuals who require intensive nursing care: here there is a highly noticeable discourse of deficiency and loss that extends beyond the elderly themselves to include the burdens experienced by relatives and local communities and even society as a whole. A typical description of the situation faced by the elderly person's family is this: “Seventy-five percent of old people in need of nursing care are looked after in the home. By their daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters, or wives. Many of these become depressed, many feel frustrated and burnt out, many become ill themselves as a result of feeling trapped.” (Brigitte Woman, 4/2002).

Care work can be stressful and is usually done by women, this much certainly is true. And yet carers also have positive experiences. They speak, for example, of growing personally as individuals, of experiencing better, more intense relationships and of gaining a richer perspective on life (Netto, Jenny, & Philip, 2009). Yet such issues are rarely reflected in the media context. Instead, negative sensationalized stories that focus on horror scenarios are common fare.

Statistical data on predicted longevity in society provide the basis for an “apocalyptic demography” Robertson, 1990, see also Katz, 1992. Here, slogans such as the following predominate: “Squeezed by the pressure of an elderly population” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8/2011), “Old people exploit the young” (*Bild Zeitung* 60(11)/2008), “Germany is sliding further into the Methusalem trap” (Focus Online, 2012). Alzheimer's and dementia are portrayed as a “national disease”, or *Volkskrankheit* (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 213/1997), and thus as a collective destiny that is fatal not only for the many people affected by it but also for the welfare state and the economy, indeed for the entire global economy: “Alzheimer's disease: A threat to the global economy” (*Kieler Nachrichten* 152/2011).

<sup>3</sup> In terms of printed media, the daily newspapers analyzed were: *Bild* (circulation approx. 3.5 million), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*/*Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (circulation approx. 900,000). Popular magazines and customer magazines analyzed were: *Apotheken Umschau* (a free fortnightly magazine available at pharmacies, circulation approx. 9.8 million), *Senioren Ratgeber* (monthly circulation around 1.7 million), *Neue Post* (weekly circulation roughly 960,000), *Reader's Digest Deutschland* (monthly circulation around 650,000), *Brigitte Woman* (fortnightly circulation approx. 346,000), *Menschen. Das Magazin* (quarterly circulation roughly 60,000). The source for the circulation figures given here is the database of the German organization that monitors the distribution of advertising media (IVW, 2012). The data corpus additionally covers a selection of 22 titles with an especially large circulation from the sphere of advice literature for the elderly. This, for example, includes a book that is extremely popular in Germany, “Grey is colorful: opportunities in old age” (*Grau ist bunt: Was im Alter möglich ist* (Scherf, 2008) by Henning Scherf, former mayor of the City of Bremen).

<sup>4</sup> In differentiating between the third and fourth age we are following the 12. coordinated population prediction of Germany's Federal Office of Statistics (*Statistisches Bundesamt*). This defines people “aged 80 years and older” (*Statistisches Bundesamt*, 2009, p. 16) as the “oldest old” group.

<sup>5</sup> This book titles as well as all the following quotations from media texts/research texts and interview excerpts have been translated, where necessary, from German into English. The original German versions can be made available by the authors upon request.

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