Journal of Aging Studies 27 (2013) 166–174

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Aging Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaging

The notion of precariousness among older adults living alone in the U.S.

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 17 November 2012
Received in revised form 25 December 2012
Accepted 11 January 2013

Keywords:
Precariousness
Living alone
Individualization
United States

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that older adults living alone in the U.S. face a set of unique challenges, as they are likely to experience a sense of precariousness. The term precariousness points to an intrinsic sense of instability and insecurity stemming from a lack of, or difficulty to, access essential resources. During a two-year ethnography of 47 older solo dwellers, this term captured one of the distinctive traits of the experience of living alone in older age in the U.S. The findings from semi-structured interviews and participant observation highlight the emergence of the notion of precariousness along three levels of analysis. First, on the micro and subjective level of analysis, older solo dwellers may struggle to perform the chores related to their household as they may deal with a failing body, faltering memory, and fixed if not shrinking income. Second, on the meso and institutional level of analysis, older adults living alone need to navigate the complex, scattered, and ever-changing landscape of services and understand their eligibility criteria, accessibility, fees, and conditions. At the same time they may have to deal with family issues. Finally, the macro level examines the pressure on older solo dwellers of a prevalent ideology that prizes independent behaviors and personal responsibility. In conclusion, the notion of precariousness illustrates the unique position of older adults living alone as they face different type of challenges on a micro, meso, and macro dimension. The paper ends with an invitation to create social policies that accommodate the needs of a growing number of older adults living alone.

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Introduction

Precariousness has scarcely appeared in aging studies. In the last two decades, the lack of security evoked by the notion of precariousness has mostly shown in Europe in regards to "precarious workers" without retirement and health plans (Bresson, 2010; Furtos, 2009; Tari & Vanni, 2005). Yet, the use of the notion of precariousness for an in-depth ethnographic analysis of the condition of living alone in older age in urban America led to two significant outcomes. First, it lent an original framework of analysis to embrace the complex experience of older solo dwellers. Second, it highlighted the importance of the micro, meso, and macro analysis in social gerontology. During this two-year project, the idea of precariousness became crucial to explain the experience of living alone in older age for its capacity to encompass elements influencing the thoughts and behaviors of older adults living alone at these three levels of analysis.

The labels "micro", "meso," and "macro" help distinguish these different and yet permeable dimensions. "Micro" points to the personal realm, to the relationship with one's body, sense of self, and other human beings. This level examines the role of personality traits, preferences, financial resources, as well as physical, mental, and emotional health. "Meso" moves the lens towards the relationship between human beings and institutions such as family, schools, nonprofits, corporations, and public programs (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2011). "Macro" points to the less tangible realm of hypothesis related to social problems. At this level, the social scientist

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2013.01.001

can reflect on the relation between field observations and relevant theoretical constructs (Clarke, 2005). For instance scholars drawing from the political economy perspective use the macro level of analysis to reflect on the influence of the allocation of resources within market economies.

Critical gerontologists (Estes, 2008; Estes & Phillipson, 2007; Minkler & Estes, 1999; Phillipson, 2008; Townsend, 1981) first promoted the use of these multiples lenses of analyses within aging studies. Under the paradigm that the personal is political and the political is personal, they claimed that the micro level lends a sharp lens to observe meso and macro dynamics. As C. Wright Mills outlines in the *Sociological Imagination* (1957), the duty of social scientists is to extrapolate the influence of political, economic, and social dynamics in the mundane and minute acts of their subject of investigation. Social scientists uncover the connections between different dimensions of reality and make these threads intelligible to the public. As C. Wright Mills suggests, personal issues might be generated at social, political, and economic level. As virtual translators, social scientists should decipher patterns at multiple level of analysis. This process is facilitated when a concept, in this case precariousness, brings to the surface issues rarely analyzed in concert. This ability to move among planes allows social scientists to embrace a phenomenon from multiple angles, adding depth to their analysis and avoiding the trap of "microfication" — a term created by Hagestad and Dannefer (2001) to critique the tendency of social gerontologists to dwell on the subjective realm.

Precariousness: Theoretical Background

The word precariousness evokes a sense of insecurity stemming from the vanishing of resources from multiple angles. At the heart of precariousness, from an ontological perspective, lies the intrinsic insecurity and unpredictability of the human existence. The Latin root of precariousness is *precarius*, its root being *prex* meaning "prayer" or "entreaty" which suggests that our existence might depend on ineffable dynamics. Existential precariousness points to the ephemeral nature of our lives: each one of us might suddenly die at any moment. Natural disasters – earthquakes, tsunamis, and tornadoes – remind us of the limits of our existence. Terroristic and other man-made disasters – the crumbling of the Twin Towers on September 11th, nuclear plant disasters – further underline the fragility of our lives as Judith Butler reminds us in *Precarious Life* (2004).

In Europe precariousness has evoked the instability that has developed as a result of liberalization policies and the consequent retreat of the welfare state. Activists, journalists and scholars have used the term "precariousness" to highlight the intrinsic instability of a "precarious" job without benefits and with a set termination date (Ananasso & Polodori, 2012; Bresson, 2010; Furtos, 2009). The difference in quality of life of "precarious" workers compared to "fully-employed" workers with benefits even caused bloodshed. In Modena (Italy) in 2002 the Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*), a terroristic group, shot Marco Biagi, an Italian economics professor and main contributor to a law that allowed temporary employment. Still in Italy, a few years later, a group of precarious workers (*lavoratori precari*) created a new saint, "San Precario", the saint protector of workers without a stable employment or *posto fisso* (Bruni & Murgia, 2007; Tari & Vanni, 2005). To educate the public on the unfair conditions of their employment contracts, protesters carried a statue of San Precario in processions in venues operated by *lavoratori precari* such as supermarkets, call-centers and the film festivals. In France, with the intention of conferring a class connotation to their social position, temporary workers baptized themselves as "precariat", a term that links "precariousness" with "proletariat" (Bodnar, 2006). The word "precariat" grounds the status of workers in a political economy that allows the existence of an employment stripped of guarantees and benefits such as health insurance. The protests for a stable employment is a symptom of a political economy no longer equipped to guarantee essential resources – a secure job, retirement income, affordable health coverage – to its citizens.

Still in Europe, in the social sciences, Zigmunt Bauman, Robert Castel, and Ulrich Beck have theorized, alone or collaborating with one another, on a sense of precariousness. Bauman writes: "The ground on which our life prospects are presumed to rest is admittedly shaky" (2007, p. 10) as he announces our immersion in an "age of uncertainty" where the incontrollable rise of flows of private capital and commodities at global level diminishes the power of nation states at local level. This imbalance deprives the state from its original authority and makes it unable to properly redistribute resources and enforce political control.

Castel also underlines the social insecurity caused by the inability of the state to gather enough resources to protect its citizens from the lowering of quality of life caused by illness, poverty, and aging (2003). According to Castel (2000), the encounter of a generalized insecurity stemming from the decreased scope of the welfare state combined with the erosion of traditional social bonds is at the heart of a sense of disaffiliation. People tend to live alone more often than ever, divorce rates are on the rise, fertility rates have sunk. Rather than guaranteeing enough dignity to its citizens, the limited resources of the state are used to disseminate a sense of security through the surveillance and punishment of the disenfranchised and impoverished factions of society. According to Bauman, functions that were previously an exclusive prerogative of the state "become a playground for the notorious capricious and inherently unpredictable market forces and/or are left to the private initiative and care of the individuals" (2007, p. 2). The emphasis on private enterprise shifts "the responsibility for resolving the quandaries generated by vexingly volatile and constantly changing circumstances […] onto the shoulders of individuals who are now expected to be 'free choosers' and to bear in full the consequences of their choices" (Bauman, 2007, p. 4).

As people place themselves at the center of their own "planning" to survive, they also confront the limited support coming from public institutions. For Beck "a sense of impotence" emerges from the retreat of state institutions. "People are suddenly confronting an abyss," (1992, p. 93) — the void left by the retreat of the state creates this abyss. According to him, a sense of precariousness occurs when individuals face this void, as they tend to point to themselves as the sole responsible of their situation, hence discounting the role of the state. Public support is rarely invoked as a solution to individual shortcomings: "problems of the system are lessened politically and transformed into personal failure […]. Social problems are increasingly perceived in terms of psychological dispositions, such as personal inadequacies, guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts and neuroses" (Beck, 1992, p. 89). The individual, rather than

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