The making of 'the elderly': Constructing the subject of care

Bernhard Weicht *

Social Policy and Intervention Studies, Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The provision and arrangement of care for elderly people is one of the main challenges for the future of European welfare states. In both political and public discourses elderly people feature as the subjects who are associated with particular needs, wishes and desires and for whom care needs to be guaranteed and organised. Underlying the cultural construction of the care regime and culture is an ideal type model of the elderly person. This paper analyses the discursive construction of elderly people in the discourses on care in Austria. An understanding of how elderly people as subjects, their wishes and needs and their position within society are constructed enables us to analyse, question and challenge the current dominant care arrangements and its cultural embeddings. The paper demonstrates the processes of silencing, categorisation and passivation of elderly people and it is argued that the socio-discursive processes lead to a particular image of the elderly person which consequently serves as the basis on which the care regime is built.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

'The purified image of themselves that society offers the aged is that of the white-haired and venerable Sage, rich in experience, planing high above the common state of mankind. (…) The counterpart of the first image is that of the old fool in his dotage, a laughing-stock for children. In any case, either by their virtue or by their degradation they stand outside humanity.' (Beauvoir, 1972, p. 4)

In most European and other highly developed welfare states, ageing societies are cited as one of the main challenges for national social policy arrangements, not the least in the provision of care for elderly people. Similar to other European countries, in Austria the discourse on care for the elderly is closely linked to family ideals (Österle & Hammer, 2004), reflecting the specifics of the welfare culture (Strell & Duncan, 2001). The provision of care for elderly people is thus largely based on informal settings, usually within the care receiver's

family (Österle & Hammer, 2004). Strell and Duncan (2001, p. 153) focus on the strong role of Austria's family policy, both socially and ideologically, describing the Austrian welfare model as a male breadwinner model built on the ideal of the 'proper family', where social rights are connected to either individual employment or family relationships (see Hammer & Österle, 2003). In the context of long-term care, the importance of the family means that 80% of people with care needs in Austria are cared for at home by close relatives, of whom 80% are women; and only between 4 and 5% of people who are 65 or older live in an institutional setting (Österle & Hammer, 2004). More recently, home care arrangements have been increasingly facilitated by the employment of approximately 40,000 migrant carers working and living in the house of the person cared for (Weicht, 2010). Elderly care, based on this family ideal, like other social policy arrangements, includes a particular construction of the subject for which policies and arrangements are designed. In both political and public discourses therefore, elderly people feature as subjects who are associated with particular needs, wishes and desires and for whom care needs to be guaranteed and organised. Thus an understanding of how elderly people as subjects with their wishes, needs, situation and position within society are constructed will contribute to an

* PO Box 80.140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 30 253 8972.
E-mail address: b.weicht@uu.nl.

understanding of current practices and social policy arrangements and can form the basis for critique and intervention.

This article conceptualises construction of the elderly as the subject of care in two steps. These steps, following Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) model of discursive strategies, try to identify how subjects of policies and interventions are constructed in public discourse, and how particular treatments and interventions are justified on the basis of these subject positions. For this endeavour, data, consisting of newspaper articles and focus group discussions, gathered during a study of discourses on care, are analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA). The main aim of this enterprise is to identify the particularities of the subject position around which care in Austria is arranged — the elderly person.

The following section discusses the relevance and importance of a discourse perspective, followed by a description of the specific tools and foci of the method employed. The analysis then starts by situating elderly people in a particular discursive context in Austria, followed by the main data sections. First, the different subject positions available to elderly people are identified and described; and secondly, the needs and desires those subjects are associated with are analysed. The discussion reflects the relationship between construction of the elderly subject and the particular care regime.

The elderly in discourse

Within both social policy and everyday situations, people make sense of the concept of care through particular categories, such as the elderly, carers, dependent or independent. These categories should be understood as not being fixed in their meaning; rather, their sense and connotation are defined and shaped in discursive actions (see Hall, 2000). Perhaps a deconstruction of constructs such as 'the elderly' therefore 'enables us to detach ourselves from the categories and meanings imposed by policy-makers, welfare managers or (some) social researchers' (Williams, 1996, p. 68). It is through discourse, 'undertaken by social actors in a specific setting determined by social rules, norms and conventions' (Wodak, 2008, p. 5), that people construct and make sense of their everyday lives and experiences.

A focus on the discursive construction of later life and the sociolinguistics of ageing is adopted in a growing number of publications (Coupland, 2009; Liang & Luo, 2012) and analysed in advertising (Lee, Carpenter, & Meyers, 2007; Williams, Ylänne, & Wadleigh, 2007), newspapers (Rozanova, 2006, 2010), magazines (Lumme-Sandt, 2011), online discussions (Lin, Hummert, & Harwood, 2004) and research interviews (Breheny & Stephens, 2012; McVittie, McKinlay, & Widdicombe, 2008). Hockey and James (2003) argue that periods of life's course are discursively linked to specific social identities. In an inspiring essay, Jean Améry (1968) describes that ageing is not commonly understood as a continuous process, as an objective description of time passing within a life course perspective; rather, ageing is expressed through associations and symbols which create a dichotomy of the young on one side and the ageing population on the other. Similarly, Plath (2008, pp. 1355–6) points out that the identification of elderly people as being dependent does not follow a natural process of ageing but is somewhat based on a social construction 'maintained by dominant ageist values in society'. Also Wilińska (2010) shows

that a normative 'age order' is established in discourses constructing the older person as the quintessential other. Fealy, McNamara, Treacy, and Lyons (2012) summarise that discourses position older people as a distinct demographic group whose position describes identities outside mainstream society, and closely linked to dependency and otherness. As the elderly are presented as a particular, largely homogenous group, differences in degrees of passivity, dependency or vulnerability are avoided and ignored in discourse (see Weicht, 2011). In Shakespeare's (2000, p. 15) analysis of the dichotomy constructed 'between dependent, vulnerable, innocent, asexual children and competent, powerful, sexual, adult citizens', older people can be seen as being identified with the former. Similar to disabled people (as in Shakespeare's account), they are regularly infantilised, disempowered and degraded in public, social, cultural and political discourse (Hughes, McKie, Hopkins, & Watson, 2005).

The construction of imagined (client) identities then builds the basis for social policy, as Wilińska and Henning (2011) demonstrate, and 'particular 'identity categories' function either as legitimating or disciplinary within discourses of entitlement and disentitlement' (Taylor, 1998, p. 333). Active subject positions are rare in the construction of the elderly and often exclusively focus on people's independence and/or role within the family context (Breheny & Stephens, 2012; Lumme-Sandt, 2011). Wilińska (2010), in her analysis of the Polish context, sketches out three positive roles for elderly people: the grandparent, the rich pensioner and the person who stays active in the labour market. Similarly, Townsend, Godfrey, and Denby (2006) identify in older people's own perceptions of other elderly people the subject positions of heroes/heroines, villains and victims. Other constructed identities relating to successful and/or healthy ageing can reproduce the boundary constructed between active subject and passive elderly care receiver (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011; Liang & Luo, 2012; Rozanova, 2010). Hence, subject positions play an important role in constructing and shaping the portrayal of a distinct group within discourse and act as 'resources' (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) for the definition of what old age and care mean for the elderly. In discursive processes about particular groups in society, subject positions are restricted. However, consequentially, these limited positions guide the discourse about the needs and wishes of elderly people, and so, ultimately, also inform policymaking.

Researching discourse

Critical discourse analysis (CDA; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) is applied to two sets of data: newspaper articles and focus group discussions. For the first step in the analysis of public discourses on care, I used a newspaper sample, based on Reisigl and Wodak's (2001) study (see also Bednarek, 2006). The sample consisted of four national Austrian daily regular newspapers, covering the whole spectrum in terms of political orientation and socioeconomic characteristics of the readership. Using the classical distinction, the *Kronen Zeitung*, which is the most widely read newspaper in the country, would be classified as tabloid newspaper, *Die Presse* and *Der Standard* as broadsheets, though the former adopts a rather centre-right and the latter a liberal-left perspective, and the *Kurier* can be considered a mid-market paper. All newspapers were analysed