



Unmaking old age: Political and cognitive formats of active ageing



Aske Juul Lassen ^{a,*}, Tiago Moreira ^b

^a Department of Ethnology, Saxo-Institute, University of Copenhagen, Karen Blixensvej 4, 2300 Kbh. S, Denmark

^b School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University, 32 Old Elvet, Durham DH1 3HN, UK

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ABSTRACT

Active ageing is a policy tool that dominates the way the ageing society has been constituted during the last decades. The authors argue that active ageing is an attempt at unmaking the concept of old age, by engaging in the plasticity of ageing in various ways. Through a document study of the different epistemes, models and forms used in the constitution of active ageing policies, the authors show how active ageing is not one coordinated set of policy instruments, but comes in different formats. In the WHO, active ageing configures individual lifestyle in order to expand the plasticity of ageing, based on epidemiological and public health conventions. In the EU, active ageing reforms the retirement behaviour of populations in order to integrate the plasticity of ageing into the institutions, based on social gerontological and demographic conventions. These conventional arrangements are cognitive and political in the way they aim at unmaking both the structures and the expectations that has made old age and format a new ideal of the 'good late life'. The paper examines the role of knowledge in policy and questions whether the formats of active ageing should be made to co-exist, or whether the diversity and comprehensiveness enable a local adaptation and translation of active ageing policies.

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Introduction

There is no consensual definition of active ageing, but it usually refers to individual or collective strategies for optimising economic, social and cultural participation throughout the life course (Kalache and Kickbusch, 1997; Walker, 2009; WHO, 2002). Active ageing overlaps with other qualifications of the ageing process – e.g. successful ageing, healthy ageing, and productive ageing – but it is unique within gerontology for being primarily a policy concept. Indeed, when reviewing the literature on active ageing, Stenner and colleagues argued that the meaning of active ageing cannot be

'adequately grasped without understanding that it is designed to change our views, perspectives, understandings, stereotypes and prejudices about ageing in order to reconstruct the practical societal reality of the ageing process in an 'ageing society'' (Stenner, McFarquhar, and Bowling, 2011:468).

Since the turn of the 1980s one of the concerns of critical gerontology has been to understand the way knowledge about ageing informs policy. One of the central claims of critical gerontology has been that mainstream gerontological research partakes in the economic and political construction of the issues and 'problems' that are associated with old age. In this regard critical gerontologists have argued that the gerontologically informed political institutions legitimise and reproduce historically constituted modes of production (e.g. Estes, 2008; Estes, Swan, and Gerard, 1982), and that the opportunities and capacities of older individuals have been shaped by expert beliefs about ageing processes. This means that bureaucratic standards (Kohli, 1986), policy instruments

Abbreviations: EC, European Commission; EU, European Union; UN, United Nations; WHO, World Health Organization.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +45 2292 0212.

E-mail addresses: ajlas@hum.ku.dk (A.J. Lassen), tiago.moreira@durham.ac.uk (T. Moreira).

such as pension systems (Fry, 2006; Walker, 1980) and 'old age' services (Estes, 1979; Townsend, 1981) have formed the design of, and expectations towards, old age. Gerontological knowledge has embedded normative categorisations of the role of 'old people' in institutional arrangements. While this knowledge has created a system that caters for the needs and dispositions of some 'old people' it also legitimises their role in the division of labour: Old people are passive recipients of pensions.

The marginalisation of old people as passive is a subject of criticism in critical gerontology. However, in recent years critical gerontologists have discussed and doubted the constructive potential of their criticism (Moody, 2008; Ray, 2008). While some critical gerontologists argue that critique has constructive potential and can reframe the everyday experiences of older people if it is applied to a practical domain such as care (Dannefer, Stein, Siders, and Patterson, 2008) others express concern that the critical gerontological focus on civic engagement and continued participation in society produce an alternative 'positive' standard of old age that can be just as marginalising for people who fail to live up to this standard (Minkler and Holstein, 2008). As we will argue, critical gerontological knowledge has been constructive in its central role in the formation of active ageing, and this has subsequently been criticised for marginalising the passive older people (e.g. Ranzijn, 2010). Thus, while many gerontologists see themselves as marginalised and with little political influence on the subject they study, we claim that various forms of gerontological knowledge have been central in the formation of active ageing. We focus in particular on how insights from the critical gerontological current of political economy and findings from epidemiology and demography have contributed to what we analyse as an unmaking of old age.

The role of knowledge in the making of old age has been emphasised by scholars who have studied the history of gerontology (Achenbaum, 1995; Green, Greene, and Blundo, 2009; Katz, 1996). Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault (1926–1984) on governmentality, Katz, argued that the dynamics of gerontology could be understood as a coupling between power and knowledge. This approach highlights how a particular understanding of the 'aged body' and of 'old people' as a population group informs how society deals with older people. Thus particular forms of knowledge assume power in the way knowledge guides the conduct of individuals and organisations (1996). In a seminal paper, Katz (2000) used the case of active ageing to show how gerontological knowledge has partaken in the creation of instruments that assess bodily and psychological capacities of older people in order to create 'busy bodies'. In this regard active ageing is a neo-liberal governmental tool.

As has been proposed by Holstein and Minkler (2003) the rearticulation of old age crystallises normative expectations onto complex life course processes, leading to forms of exclusion and blame. As we will show, active ageing draws on particular forms of gerontological knowledge, but there are similarities with the way successful ageing attempts to create a 'positive' old age. However, the forms of knowledge that active ageing and successful ageing draw on, and subsequently their political implications, differ. The positive versions of old age have been extended to the field of sexuality, now taken as a marker of successful ageing (Katz and Marshall, 2003) and to the management of cognitive abilities, whereby it

becomes the responsibility of ageing individuals to assess and control their risk of developing dementia through a healthy lifestyle (Williams, Higgs, and Katz, 2012).

In a study of media representation of active ageing in Canada, Rozanova (2010) argued that the individual is consistently identified as the key agent for a successful ageing process and a functional ageing society (see also Cardona, 2008; Rudman, 2006). The normative expectations crystallised in active ageing become apparent when focusing on how activities usually linked to old age such as napping become stigmatised (Venn and Arber, 2011), or when disadvantaged, relatively inactive groups of elders are marginalised (Ranzijn, 2010). Thus active ageing policies have become the target of criticisms for potentially discriminating the dependent (Boudiny, 2012), for its inability to integrate the notion of decline (Moulaert and Paris, 2013) and for its focus on the young-old (Boudiny and Mortelmans, 2011). However, in our analysis we find that active ageing policies are multiple and do not exclusively target the young-old. Rather, one version of active ageing should be seen as an intervention on the entire ageing process from cradle to grave, while another is an attempt at integrating the longer life into societal institutions and cultural expectations. The focus on active ageing as a life-long intervention or as an integration of a longer life raises an important question: How far into old age can intervention and/or integration work? Is old age really unmade, or merely postponed into what has been termed 'the fourth age', i.e. the part of old age when people begin to be dependent (Laslett, 1987)? As our analysis will show, the two active ageing policies can be claimed to be attempts at unmaking old age because a) lifestyle interventions ideally will hinder the transition from the third to the fourth age, and because b) changing the societal institutions endeavours to radically rearticulate what we mean when we talk about late life.

Although political economy and governmentality approaches have been effective in identifying the close relationship between knowledge, institutions and ageing policies, there are, in our view, two difficulties in applying these approaches to active ageing.

First, as we mentioned above, active ageing policies aim at challenging the normative age categorisations that underpinned 'old age' institutions. This was exactly the focus of critical engagement for both political economy and governmentality scholars. Our analysis shows that the arguments levelled against 'old age' policies by these scholars are a central component of the justification behind contemporary active ageing policies. This is not surprising given that gerontologists have increasingly participated, as advocates or advisers, in the formulation of ageing policies. However, in being both a tool of criticism and of political change, critical gerontology can potentially find itself in a circular process of negative feedback. Can critical gerontology continue to denounce the nefarious assumptions underpinning the institutions that it helped to build? One way out of this process, we suggest, is to aim for an alternative form of critical engagement.

This relates to the second issue fettering the use of critical gerontology approaches in the analysis of active ageing. Where the critique stemming from political economy tend to see new ageing policies as a function of the cycles of capitalism, and the governmental critique tend to portray new ways of disciplining and subjectivising older people as an effect of a neo-liberal power formation, we wish to demonstrate that active ageing is

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