European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, Vol.12, No.3, 2021, pp. 267-280

Age images and learning in late life. Coping with crisis experiences as a potential in long-life societies

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Abstract

This paper discusses the potential that coping with ageing experiences in later life might have for dealing with the current Covid-19-pandemic. The paper is based on the results of a qualitative study on subjective ageing experiences and the respective coping strategies of older people. The study is based on subject-obnderlying social structures. (e.g. BMBF, 2010). A qualitative research design was developed using the method of group discussions. The data gathered in these discussions were evaluated based on the approach of grounded theory. The results of this study are discussed regarding the ways in which the coping strategies of the participants revealed the specific abilities of older people to manage crisis experiences. The findings offer new perspectives on improving current images of ageing.

Keywords: Active ageing, age images, crisis, finiteness, learning in later life

Introduction

Learning and crises can be examined critically in relation to developments in the physical world, such as those we are currently experiencing across the globe. The crisis caused by Covid-19 has proven to be relevant to education on various levels, and it has involved both individual and social learning processes. This crisis has affected a variety of dimensions, such as social institutions and socially institutionalised solidarity with regard to the health care system, the childcare system, and the care system; close social relationships, which normally offer support in individual crisis management, but have to

ISSN 2000-7426

http://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.3342
www.rela.ep.liu.se

be reduced now; and everyday life. During periods of shutdown, we need to change our routines. This situation, which has been politically addressed as primarily a health threat, permeates our individual and social existence.

However, the current situation can also be seen as an age-specific crisis. As human beings, we become aware of the anthropological condition of the finiteness of life and its effects. This can be experienced on an individual level as a crisis to which people must respond with individual learning processes. Older people are particularly affected by the pandemic and the risk of the end of life that it makes more concrete. They therefore need more protection but also need to deal with that age-specific danger. Based on this, a crisis regarding social images of ageing has emerged, which frames the individual's handling of finiteness. During pandemic, there has been the threat of the regression to negative images of ageing in which older people are ascribed a special role that ultimately promotes cultural exclusion (Kulmus, 2019; Kneale, 2012; Schmidt-Hertha, 2019; Walsh et al., 2017; Bursell, 2019). Furthermore, this crisis has revealed the fundamental structures of recognition on which these exclusionary tendencies are based, as well as the ways in which social structures are linked to anthropological conditions of existence, such as the finiteness of human life.

Therefore, this crisis has both required and enabled a change in the way we handle knowledge about our vulnerability, old age, and older people. The present study is based on an earlier empirical study on learning in late life. This previous study was conducted without considering the pandemic context. Nevertheless, its results revealed the general abilities of older people to deal with crisis experiences. It therefore allows for discussing the potential that these abilities offer, *not* to fall back into negative images of old age.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss what we can learn from older people during the present crisis instead of perpetuating images that disenfranchise and devalue them. I begin by presenting two theoretical approaches that framed the empirical study: learning as dealing with crisis experiences; and social images of ageing and the social structures that underlie them. I show that these approaches could be combined to explore the contextuality of learning in older age. I then present the results of the empirical study regarding coping strategies as a form of biographical learning that serves to maintain a good life even in facing individual and social disruptions in old age. Finally, I return to the context of the Covid 19 pandemic and discuss the current regression to outdated images of ageing. I also query the potential of the nonpandemic-related empirical results to be applied in dealing with the current crisis, with specific regard to the experiences of older people and general regard to social attitudes towards ageing.

Towards learning in late life: A qualitative empirical study

A qualitative empirical study was conducted to show how older people dealt with ageing and its relation to learning (Kulmus, 2018). In the study, two theoretical approaches were combined to connect theories of ageing and learning.

Theoretical approach 1: Biographical learning in continuity and crisis situations

The relationship between learning and crises has been addressed by several theorists of learning (Faulstich, 2013; Meyer-Drawe, 2012; Wagner, 1999). In different formulations, this relationship has been conceptualised as an occasion for learning: the relationship between continuum and moment (Faulstich, 2012; Kulmus, 2018); the relationship

between everyday life routines and ruptures in life (Wagner, 1999); the relationship between embodied, habitualised lifestyles and alienation experiences (Meyer-Drawe, 2012); the relationship between expectations and negations of the same (Buck, 1967); and the relationship between intended action and "suffering" the consequences of the action (Dewey, 1938).

These elaborate theories assume that the reasons for learning lie in confrontations with moments of experience, irritation, or the negation of expectations. With regard to biographical learning, the processing of critical life events, such as illness or the loss of a person, have been the subject of research (Nittel & Seltrecht, 2013). From this perspective, learning always presupposes the anticipation of the future, successful development, or growth (Dewey, 1938; Felden, 2018). The anticipation of successful development through learning is risky because the latter can fail, especially in learning late in life. Thus, because of the limitations of human life, the decrease in future prospects cannot be resolved by learning. Therefore, the question of how learning can nevertheless contribute to leading a "good life" has become even more relevant.

Little research has been conducted on learning and finiteness, especially from the perspectives of adult education and lifelong learning. However, a few studies have focused on that relationship of learning and finiteness. For example, Nittel and Seltrecht (2013) examined learning as a way of dealing with life-threatening illnesses. The phrase "learning in the face of death" implies finiteness as a perspective on learning. Nittel and Seltrecht described living with the disease and with the knowledge of its life-threatening nature as a deepened process of identity work that leads to a biographical redefinition. An early gerontological study by Kruse (1990) addressed the question of "borderline experiences". The study revealed that resignation as well as the realisation of possibilities could arise in the relationship between continuity of life and crisis-like moments and the ways in which they are managed. In a recent biographical analysis of the German composer Bach, Kruse (2014) showed that creativity and creation emerged in advanced age under the highest conditions of suffering.

Finally, an early study by Thomae (1989) showed interesting results. This study was focused on the experience of time in old age. The results showed that changes in the life course were continuous but not necessarily crisis-like. Moreover, in the participants' spontaneously expressed thoughts, finiteness did not appear to play a role. However, these findings could certainly be discussed further. In the study, categories such as the "belief in the finality of the situation" were mentioned by the participants, but they were not included by the researchers in the topic of finitude. However, the finding that the shortening of life perspectives was not necessarily experienced as a personal crisis should be taken seriously. Instead, it could be interpreted as a sign of mastery in dealing with the knowledge of finitude. Interestingly, the results also showed that in old age, changes in the perspective on time tended to be caused by social changes, not by the shortening of the lifetime perspective in general.

Contextualised and biographical learning theories have assumed that learning is an individual action framed by social structures (see Faulstich, 2013; Kondrup, 2010). Images of old age and ageing have been based on such frames. From different theoretical perspectives, the concepts of "cultures" (Amrhein, 2008), "narratives" (Himmelsbach, 2009), and "dispositives" (Denninger et al., 2014) of ageing have been used in describing the structures that shape concepts of ageing. In these approaches, "age images" has been used as an umbrella term (Kulmus, 2019; BMBF, 2010). Thus, this term can be understood as denoting the context of human learning in late life.

Theoretical approach 2: Societal age images and social recognition structures: No space for calm or deceleration

The discussion of images of old age has a long tradition in several disciplines, such as philosophy and history (Göckenjan, 2009). The empirical research, however, has been based mainly on psychological approaches to stereotypes of age (Staudinger, 2015). Core questions include whether positive or negative images of old age have causal effects, such as on mental capacity, well-being, objective or subjective states of health, mortality, and participation in adult education (BMFSFJ, 2010; Schmidt-Hertha, Formosa, & Fragoso 2019; Staudinger, 2015; Tippelt, 2009; Wurm & Huxhold, 2010). However, a simple differentiation of positive or negative age images is problematic because this polarity does not reflect reality. Instead, there have been many "grey area findings" (Schmitt & Kruse, 2005). Furthermore, such images have been based on cognitive attitudes or opinions, and it is not clear the extent to which the images or stereotypes guide actions in real-life situations (Lehr et al., 1979).

However, in recent years, the research on age images has broadened, and there has been a stronger focus on the societal structures that construct the invisible background of age images. This shift also concerns the understanding that some assumptions of ageing are scientifically untenable. Negative images are mainly based on what gerontology has referred to as biological age. Ageing involves processes of degradation on biological and cellular levels, which ultimately lead to death, which is threatening to many. Ageing has been described as a reduction in physical and mental abilities. It has long been clear, however, that the so-called adolescence-maximum hypothesis is not tenable and is methodologically problematic. Instead, mental performance and thus learning ability can be maintained in old age (Lehr, 2007). Naturalistic (i.e., deficient) attributions to old age from a purely biological perspective are not necessarily transferred to mental and social processes; therefore, they are not tenable.

In a countermovement, a discourse of active ageing has been identified, which has become dominant in recent years as both a reality and a programme. This discourse is based on empirical knowledge about today's generation of older people, who have a much higher average life expectancy, good health, and a high level of education (Wahl, 2021). Moreover, because they retire relatively early, they still have a long phase of life ahead of them, which they can shape. However, the losses that accompany ageing are often ignored in this discourse, in which the focus is often on activity, especially productivity (Denninger et al., 2014).

This focus reflects the influence of the structure of modern work and performance societies, where recognition and dignity are based on ideas of performance and achievement in mainly work contexts (Denninger et al., 2014; Göckenjan, 2009). Honneth (2008), one of the most important authors in Germany regarding recognition theory, has argued that recognition is closely connected to gainful employment, which means that work, if it is not seen as a private autonomous activity, must be organised and structured in a certain way to be worthy of wages and social recognition. Work has to contribute to the social division of labour by the social exchange of individual performances. However, the labour market can no longer be considered only from the functionalist perspective of increasing economic efficiency. It must also perform the function of social integration (Honneth, 2008). According to Honneth (2008) with reference to Émile Durkheim, an organic solidarity then arises from the division of labour because the members of society know that they are related to each other in their respective contributions to the common prosperity.

This idea includes moral standards that are inherent in modern working societies, which include the following: first, a generalised obligation to contribute to the well-being

of all through one's own work and to develop one's own abilities to increase the general wealth; second, an expected return, that is, the right to economic independence through earning a wage (Honneth, 2008). These standards lead to the assumption that retirement is the end of gainful work, which is closely related to images of age in the discourse. The assumption of declining performance, which is at the core of negative age images, has been presumed to justify exclusion from the labour market, therefore creating a boundary in the life course. By crossing this boundary, older people are propelled into a "new" phase of life, in which they are ascribed the special status of "being old" without new standards and values that recognise their new status (deleted for anonymity).

Therefore, on the individual level, this phase of life is characterised by great freedom. However, it runs the risk of depriving older individuals of the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills. It does not allow for the appearance of constraints or disabilities without the withdrawal of social recognition. After retirement, people are "parked" in their special status as "old people". They are supposed to keep busy and healthy, so they do not burden the social system. However, the existing social structures do not offer them many opportunities for real, relevant social recognition in return (deleted for anonymity).

In this context, biographical learning as a way of dealing with crisis-like individual and social ageing experiences becomes relevant. The theory of biographical learning not only stresses the concept of crisis as a learning opportunity but also emphasises the social contextuality of learning: Biographical learning is considered to offer the possibility of meaningfully shaping one's own biography in the face of finitude, which, however, depends on the existing structural possibilities of leading a subjectively meaningful and participatory life (Alheit, 2010; Mikula & Lechner, 2014).

Research approach

Based on the theoretical background of learning as a way of dealing with fracture and crisis experiences on one hand and social structures of recognition on the other hand, a qualitative study on ageing and learning was conducted from 2013–2017 in Berlin, Germany (deleted for anonymity). The study addressed the question of how the ways in which older people deal with their ageing experience could be understood as learning and how social structures are addressed in this learning. "Age" was not determined chronologically but according to three dimensions: discontinuation of gainful employment as a crucial caesura in the life course; corporeality as a basic condition of human existence; and finiteness as a limitation in lifelong openness (in more detail: deleted for anonymity). The research questions were as follows: 1) How do older people subjectively experience their ageing and thus the limitation of their remaining lives? 2) Which ways of coping with these experiences do they develop? 3) How can their strategies for dealing with the limitations of ageing be understood as learning?

Research design: Group discussions in senior citizen centers

Group discussions were held with older people at senior citizens' meeting places in two districts of a big city (deleted for anonymity). Such meeting places offered low-threshold access to education and encounters, mainly through regular, ongoing events without binding participation. Nevertheless, the groups usually had a stable core of participants and thus were real groups, as recommended in the literature (Lamnek, 2005). This structured meeting place enabled open discussions about ageing without immediately activating a narrow understanding of learning among the participants. It also enabled

openness and momentum in the older people's conversations with one another about their subjective experiences of ageing in late life.

The sampling criteria were open because the study was not intended to conduct a systematic comparison according to predefined groups. In addition, access to the field was difficult because the topic of finiteness was sensitive. Therefore, the criteria for the selection of the institutions were as follows: 1) they explicitly addressed older people; 2) they were low-threshold meeting places (i.e., not educational institutions based on bourgeois ideas about learning); 3) they offered regular groups, such as acrylic painting, Qigong, and so on. The selection included groups that were willing to engage in group discussions, and a thematic spectrum was targeted: physical movement groups (i.e., Qigong and Tai Chi); creative groups (i.e., creative design and acrylic painting); and intellectual groups (i.e., philosophy group and computer course).

The following criteria were applied to the participants: predominantly in the post-professional phase of life, so they had experienced the caesura of retirement; age-mixed to avoid bias towards so-called "young" old people; and gender-mixed although educational institutions that typically addressed older people were attended by mainly women.

The group discussions, which took place in rooms at the senior citizen centres, lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. At the end of the group discussions, a two-page short questionnaire on social statistics was administered, which included questions about age, gender, education level, occupation, year of retirement, economic situation, and living arrangements. Because the group discussions were planned as conversations *among the participants* about their ageing experiences, the researcher rarely intervened. The discussions began with an initial question about the reasons they participated in the specific groups. During the conversation, according to the research questions, the topics of retirement, body, and finiteness, as well as ways of dealing with ageing, were introduced in infrequent and flexible follow-up questions through a few enquiry interventions in the flow of the conversation. The topics were openly addressed by the participants, and the initial question provoked detailed narratives and conversations.

The results shown in Table 1 were based on the empirical analysis of qualitative data collected during four group discussions with a total of 31 participants. These data were collected in 2013 and analysed from 2014–2016. The groups were heterogeneous in terms of age, life situation, and educational background, which yielded a wide spectrum of experiences.

Table 1: Overview of the Empirical Survey

Survey Locations: Senior Citizens' Centres	
Meeting and Learning Places with Several Offers of Events, Education and Come Togethers	
Method: Group Discussion (GD)	
Allows for Communication of Older People *with Each Other* about their Ageing Experiences	
Analysis Strategy	
Coding and Categorising Based on Grounded Theory Methodology	
Sample	
Group	**Participants**
Creative Handicrafts (GDK)	9 Women, Age 61 – 86
Qigong (GDQ)	4 Participants (3 Women, 1 Man), Age 68 – 72
Philosophical Café (GDP)	6 Participants (4 Women, 2 Men), Age 68 – 82
Acrylic Painting (GDA)	8 Women, Age 58 – 73

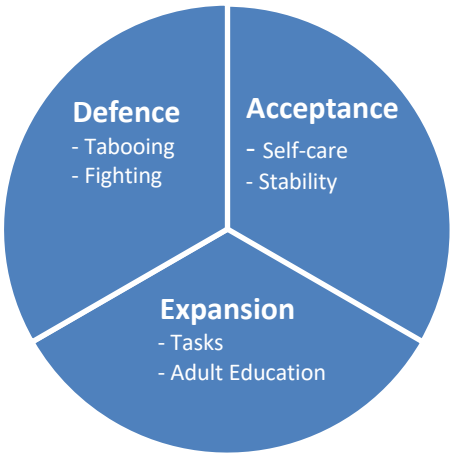
The group discussions were recorded and fully transcribed. In the evaluation, coding and categorising procedures were applied (Flick, 2011). According to the theoretical frameword, the focus of the evaluation was on reconstructing learning as a way of dealing with specific experiences of ageing. The results were also used to show that learning takes place biographically and socially contextualised activity in which age-specific experiences are processed (deleted for anonymity).

Results: Strategies for dealing with ageing and the knowledge of finiteness

Strategies for dealing with ageing were categorised (for a more detailed insights into the categorisation process: deleted for anonymity). Ageing was perceived as a creeping process. It could only be experienced in unexpected or crisis-like disruptions, which was emphasised by the participants as an irrevocable determination of ageing. *Knowledge* about a limited lifetime was accessible through reflection, which, in moments of crisis, gained practical importance in daily life. The participants' examples included not only life-threatening illnesses, such as cancer and stroke, but also positive experiences, such as the freedom gained in retirement.

The participants' strategies revealed considerable range and complexity in dealing with ageing and the knowledge of a limited lifetime. These strategies were categorised as defensive-fighting, accepting-integrating and expansive-transgressive (Kulmus, 2020).

Figure 1: Strategies for dealing with ageing and limited lifetime (own representation)



First, defensive strategies were identified:

- Taboo and denial: It is interesting that the question of finiteness was often initially rejected as irrelevant in the participants' lives. "This is not an issue for us" was usually the first reaction in the group discussions. During the discussion, however, topics could be interpreted as "finiteness-related". This taboo included, on one hand, anticipation of the views of "the others". The themes of death and dying were associated with decay, dependence, and stagnation and thus had negative connotations. The rejection of the theme also implied that the attribution was "typically" old and whining. However, it was a matter of not only "external presentation" as active but also not letting the difficult topic of death become predominant and threatening even to the participant. One participant expressed the importance of not letting oneself be overrun by uncontrollable experiences and dangers of ageing ("It must not become so dominant", GDA 867). Moreover, "speechlessness" was also evident in this defence. There was no culture of talking about dying, neither socially nor in the senior citizens' meeting places. Passages in the group discussions about finiteness were characterised by incomplete sentences, reflections, and the search for the right words (deleted for anonymity).
- Fighting against it: This strategy was initially aimed primarily at "fighting" ageing experiences as long as possible instead of accepting them ("Then I'll have to work with my inner laziness", GDQ 134). It was reconstructed, such as by referring to age-specific breaks, such as a stroke or a life-threatening cancer diagnosis. Such complications could certainly be countered by retreating. However, if the life perspective was still strong enough, such experiences were fought against ("I worked my way back up", GDK 657). The metaphor of "working" referred to the effort involved in not giving in to pain, retreat, or loneliness but to maintaining well-being and a "future perspective".

Accepting strategies were developed when taboos or resistance were no longer possible or experienced as meaningful. The "thematic subject matter" was ageing itself:

1. Self-care and defence against external expectations: This strategy was adopted when tabooing no longer worked because physical limitations and the "danger to life" became dominant and could no longer be "worked away". It was

necessary to give themselves space and treat themselves with consideration ("There is a danger that I would not wake up after the anaesthesia", GDK 204). It was considered important to accept such dangers not only rhetorically but also emotionally ("Make friends with the fact that you have lived your life", GDK 213). Such internal acceptance allowed freeing oneself from social requirements. For example, this acceptance could be extended to everyday life and escaping the work-related norm of a structured daily routine (Meyer, 2008).

2. Maintaining stability and control: This strategy was applied to structure everyday life to a much greater extent, but it also provided emotional stability in maintaining or regaining control over lifestyle. This was evident in the participants' explicit temporal structuring of days and weeks through binding dates that offered orientation ("Friday, we all appear here at ten o'clock, no chance of anyone missing, right?" GDH 77). However, this strategy included planning for dying and death. The subject of living wills and testamentary dispositions was introduced by the participants in the group discussions on the topic of finiteness. An attempt was made to counter the uncertainty of life, especially dying with the greatest possible control and thus also stability and security ("I *have* limited [my life, CK]", GDH 190).

Finally, some strategies thematically transcended the topic of ageing, which were categorised as expansion strategies. These strategies were more strongly characterised than the others by an orientation towards new topics, new tasks and an orientation towards the future.

3. Creating tasks and responsibility: This strategy could be described as topic- and future-oriented. In dealing with a limited lifetime, participants aimed to create new tasks and responsibilities even though they were no longer gainfully employed. They had chosen to spend their remaining years sensibly and enjoyably by developing sustainable perspectives on the future although it was limited. Their focus on issues other than old age was directed towards contact with "the world" and social responsibility. This strategy emphasised staying part of the world and helping to shape it. It also allowed for ensuring significance in the social structure and that one still had something to "give" (GDQ 291) and something to contribute, even in old age.
4. Further education and learning: This strategy was "world"-related because it entailed continuing to learn and develop personally. This was applied first to participation in educational opportunities, such as at senior citizens' meeting places, adult education centres, or senior citizens' universities. It was also applied to informal learning activities, such as visiting museums and reading newspapers. These were explicitly understood as further education and an opportunity to learn something new that one "has never done before" (GDQ 40). Moreover, biographical learning processes were explicitly mentioned, especially with regard to the everyday freedom of the ageing phase of life. The goal of further education was considered not only to learn new things but also to free oneself from the previous "having become", question oneself, and "get to know oneself in a completely different way" (GDQ 56).

Conclusion 1: Back to learning in dealing with experiences of disruption within framing social structures

These strategies revealed the productive processing of the ageing experience, which was countered by the threat of social exclusion and inertia at the end of life, thus by crisis-like experiences. The participants lived with ease and humour, creating necessary distance from the existential threat of (social and physical) death while maintaining their quality of life. Living in the face of an existential threat concerns not only enduring but also actively and joyfully shaping life. These strategies were the participants' ways of dealing with social and individual breaks in the continuity of life. They moved in different areas of tension between more resistant and more accepting ways of dealing with life, between more defensive coping and active shaping, and between more inward-looking attitudes towards one's and society's patterns of action, interpretation, behaviours, and activities, which were also visible to others (deleted for anonymity).

The strategies were utilised to gain control over the last phase of life and shape their remaining years in the face of structural and anthropological barriers. The participants maintained their claims to participation and development, and they presupposed a vision of a good life in old age, without, however, denying risks and disruptions in the continuity of the life experience. By acting as they did (e.g., finding new responsibilities, engaging in education, etc.), they also realised the vision of a life worth living. Hence, the participants succeeded not only in maintaining a perspective on the future despite the finitude of life but also in securing self-determination through responsibility and learning.

The above-mentioned relationship between routines and breaks and social recognition could be considered biographical learning aimed at continuity in the face of crisis-like fractures and disruptions. The findings also revealed that these individual experiences were related to social images of age and underlying social structures. The findings showed that although ageing experiences were personal, they were related to normative expectations that resulted from social images of age, such as the expectation of being active and productive in later life. Therefore, the ageing strategies of the participants in this study were not only individualised actions. They were also framed by underlying normative structures and responses to them (deleted for anonymity). Therefore, the findings of this study indicated the complexity of biographical learning and the enormous achievement of older people in a performance-based society. They are able to develop and maintain joy in life and different performance capacities as well as realistic and positive images of ageing.

Conclusion 2: The role of educational programmes in supporting biographical learning

The findings indicated that participation in educational programmes also played a crucial role. It allowed the participants to deal with topics other than their own ageing, thus helping to maintain their access to the world. However, education also allowed them to address the limitations that could no longer be ignored and thus deal with them reflexively. In these learning groups, the participants found help and support in coping with events, which restored their ability to act (deleted for anonymity). This also means that in an emancipatory adult education approach, negative social age images and underlying social structures (deleted for anonymity; Dyk, 2009) can be worked on. These findings indicate that the more self-reliant and autonomous older people are in their self-interpretation, the more self-assured and creative they can become in their alternatives and claims to opportunities for development and participation. In this regard, educational

offers can be of great use because they can enhance personal development and participation by enabling knowledge, critical thinking and sharing of experiences.

Both older people and the educational programmes they attend exemplify that lifelong learning is not only a programmatic claim but is realised by older people in a self-determined manner that is supported by educational institutions (Burjell, 2018; deleted for anonymity). During the Covid-19 pandemic, participation in adult education has been reduced because institutions have been closed and could not support older people anymore. Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate the enormous potential of older people themselves to deal with disruption and accept responsibility, which could serve as a lesson for all ages during the pandemic.

The contribution of older people to dealing with crises

As the results of the above-mentioned empirical study have shown, older people develop an enormous ability to deal with crisis experiences, with age-specific irritations and ruptures in everyday life. Such ruptures and irritations became even more apparent during pandemic, both on a social and individual level: the existential threat of old age became more concrete due to the virus, which often leads to death especially among older people. Measures such as contact restrictions also limited those routines of everyday life that were associated with social contacts. These include family contacts, but also leisure or educational events, and even everyday activities and encounters, such as shopping or visiting cafés and restaurants, were restricted. In residential and nursing homes with actually very stable routines, there were also massive breaks in everyday routines.

The strategies developed in the ageing process, however, point to such a fundamental ability to cope with crisis experiences that they may also have potential for dealing with these escalations. This impression corresponds with current research studies that show an astonishing composure of the elderly themselves in the face of the pandemic (Horn & Schweppe, 2020; Lang, 2020). They are aware of their risk of infection, but also of the benefits of taking action. Instead of falling into fear and resigning, they rather take responsibility for their own and others' health (Lang, 2020). The empirical results on ageing strategies shown above make these descriptive findings understandable and explain them. They show the resistance to crises that people develop especially in late life, where social exclusion and finiteness become age-specific risks. Their coping with everyday experiences allows them for living contentedly and responsibly despite the restrictions caused by the pandemic.

The public discourse, however, is quite different, as much of it has been fearful, polarising and exclusionary. At the end of the first major lockdown phase in Germany and in the following weeks and months, it has become apparent that the existential issues of life finiteness and risk are relevant for all people. The pandemic has triggered ambivalent reactions that have ranged from mutual consideration and responsibility to extensive ignorance and even denial of the disease. During the Covid 19 pandemic, we have also become aware of the ambivalent views of older people on death and dying. On one hand, older people are considered to have a special need for protection because, according to the current knowledge, there is a statistically increased risk for them not only to contract the disease but also to die from it (RKI, 2021). However, they are considered at risk of not only succumbing to the disease but also spreading it unknowingly and unwillingly. Furthermore, they are presumed to be responsible for social and psychological burdens on younger people, who have now been called upon to show consideration and restraint. The discussion has moved between a paternalistic,

overbearing attitude and proposals for action on one hand and the revelation of the considerable willingness to discriminate and devalue on the other hand (Wahl, 2021). In Germany and many other countries, the response to the pandemic has included suggestions and guidelines that only older people should be locked at home for their own protection and that of all others so that the remaining members of society can continue their daily life routines as unaffected as possible. Other responses, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, have been to reassure the public that the disease "only" affects old people and is therefore not a cause for concern for society because old people would die anyway (Strobel, 2020).

Despite the understanding of the many uncertainties and ambivalences associated with the current pandemic, a frightening phenomenon has emerged, which is not conducive to a "long-life society". This phenomenon has demonstrated that we still consider that older people are "the others". It also has shown how little confidence we have that these people, who have so much life experience, would act responsibly. The results of this study showed how productive older people can be in dealing with crisis experiences and how wisely they can translate the knowledge of transience, death, and dying into a new quality of life. The findings of the above-mentioned study suggest that older people could be role models in dealing with the pandemic instead of being paternalistically patronised as a risk group.

The current threat not only challenges individuals. It also presents a socio-cultural task that must be performed by both older and younger people, which requires not only short-term crisis management but also fundamental societal change. We need to think about how the acceptance of death and dying could be integrated into our culture and institutions, such as in care and hospice services in the health care system and in social practices, such as funerals, as well as in social discourse. In Germany, there has been some progress in initiatives such as hospice movements and patient orders, so death has returned to some degree to life (Schüle, 2012). The current generation of older people has an incredible wealth experience not only in life but also in dealing with existential threats such as war. They also have a high level of education, which could allow them to share these experiences in intergenerational exchanges and educational work. Older people could be effective role models in dealing with vulnerability, which may be more pronounced in old age but always exists, and which has recently been brought to the attention of all age groups. Bringing death back into our lives while emphasising the potential of older people in dealing with crisis experiences could also contribute to the development of recognition structures that are not primarily based on gainful employment. They could change the recognition of certain occupations in light of their contribution to social solidarity (Nierling, 2011). The contribution of older people to social and cultural development and crisis management could also lead to realistic but positive age images.

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