

## The role of empowerment and agency in the lives of older men living alone

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### Abstract

*Longevity and changes in family status are leading to a growing number of men living alone in later life. They are often considered an at risk group in terms of deprivation, suicide and mental health problems, a perspective that has informed community services. This paper reports on a study that set out to get a better understanding of this historically new group, particularly in light of significant structural and cultural changes to later life and ageing. The study used interviews with stakeholders and biographical interviews with older men living alone in Frankfurt/Main, a city with a particularly high rate of men over 65 in single occupancy households. The analysis suggests that service providers were interested in encouraging men to recognise and act on their needs, an approach informed by empowerment as well as active ageing strategies. The analysis from the biographical data shows that living alone was a learning process and involved the ability for men to care for themselves as well as others. Learning to live alone enabled them to maintain an identity as an independent individual.*

**Keywords:** Agency; empowerment; Germany; living alone; masculinities; older men



## Introduction

Older men living alone represent a rising and historically new social group that will significantly impact the future of ageing. Although later life in Germany as well as in many other countries is still characterised by higher numbers of women compared to men gender differences in life expectancy are gradually drawing closer as men's risk of mortality is decreasing and – more than 70 years after World War II – more men survive into old age. Similarly, living alone in later life is attributed to women but recent numbers tell a changing story: In Germany, where one-third of the over 65s live on their own, 20% are men (DeStatis, 2015), compared to 12% in 1991 (DeStatis, 1997). This increase is not only due to more men surviving into later life but to changes in the family status of ageing men as well. The past 20 years have witnessed an increase of never married (15.5% to 20.4%) and divorced men (13.1% to 29.5%) and a decrease of widowed men (71.5% to 50.1%) (ibid., 1997, 2017). The increase of single-occupancy households (here synonymously used for 'living alone') across all age groups and emerging singularity is a symptom of postmodern Western societies. Singularity implies the social position of being on your own, both in terms of reduced relationality with significant others (e.g., partner or spouse), but also in terms of increasing personal agency (e.g. having to make decisions for oneself). Thus, singularity in the sense of living alone is neither per se synonymous with loneliness nor with social isolation - it is a (voluntary or involuntary) lifestyle bearing risks and potentials that the study we report on here explored in more detail. More specifically, the paper will concentrate on concepts of masculinities and empowerment in understanding how older men come to terms with living alone.

## Older men living alone: resources and vulnerabilities

A dominant view on older men living alone is that they are a small and at risk group. This is supported by research that has focused on higher mortality rates, poorer health outcomes (Manzoli, Villari, Prion & Boccia, 2007), signs of neglect, depression and suicide (Lindner & Fiedler, 2014; Wächtler 2014) as well as fragility of living arrangements (Haslbeck, McCorkle & Schaeffer, 2012). On the other hand, qualitative research on older men living alone has shown that older men living alone are a highly heterogeneous group with men being able to adapt to a new lifestyle after divorce or bereavement (Höpflinger, Spahni, & Perrig-Chiello, 2013; Lalive d'Epinay, Cavalli & Guillet, 2009; Moore & Stratton, 2003; Yetter, 2010). Such adaptations do not necessarily imply remarriage, with rates of remarriage being described as rare (Carr, 2004; Rothenbacher & Fertig, 2015). This is partly due to society wide shifts leading to the deinstitutionalisation of marriage since the mid-1980s and a trend to seeking a different kind of relationship after long co-habiting relationships that help men and women to maintain their independence (Bildtgard & Öberg, 2017). This would suggest that some older men can adapt to living alone despite having previously been looked after both emotionally, physically and in terms of housekeeping.

Looking beyond intimate relationships, social networks and meaningful relationships are often seen as missing or underdeveloped in the lives of older men living alone (Bachmann, 2014; Russell & Porter, 2003). Although this does not by definition mean that these men are lonely or isolated, they can be described as at risk of increasingly mistrusting others, especially when confronted with change (Höpflinger, Spahni & Perrig-Chiello, 2013). Visiting social, cultural or education groups has been recognised as an important first step to leading older people out of potential social isolation (Agahi,

Siverstein & Parker, 2011; Oswald & Konopik, 2015). However, older men (whether living alone or not) often do not participate in or are reluctant to join groups which may contribute to their social isolation and vulnerability (Kosberg, 2005; Milligan et al., 2016; Moore & Statton, 2003). This is partly due to the culture of services that try to address older men and in doing so appeal to stereotypical male traits, thereby potentially excluding men from other communities and cultures (Nurmi et al., 2018).

### **Men, masculinities and agency in later life**

When theorising the experiences of men's ageing it is important to consider the power relationships in terms of gender and age. From a feminist perspective, Jeff Hearn (1988) describes the lives of old men as an absent presence, in which the ageing of men is protected by sexism but threatened by ageism. Compared to older women, older men have better financial resources and their (bodily) ageing is seen as less problematic (Sonntag, 1972). However, compared to younger men, older men's masculinities can appear to be threatened by decreasing economic, bodily and social powers. The experience of ageing and declining powers can be particularly poignant for men transitioning into retirement. Several studies have argued that older men will try to maintain a so called "ageless masculinity" (Thompson & Langendoerfer, 2016) even when the circumstances require them to engage with domestic (female) domains, such as health maintenance (Meadows & Davidson, 2006) caring (Calasanti & King, 2007), house-keeping and cooking (van den Hoonaard, 2013). However, these presentations and experiences of masculinity do not easily fit the new post-war cohorts of men who are transitioning into later life (Fooker, 2014). Their biographies are characterised by shifting relationships between men and women and most importantly changed ideas about what constitutes later life. Following the work of Gilleard and Higgs (2000, 2005), the post-war cohorts have taken such changes brought about by individualisation, mass consumerism, youth culture and identity-work into later life and continue to engage in practices that they developed in early stages of their life. Moreover, current cohorts of post-war baby boomers (cohorts 1955-65 in Germany) are bringing their own dispositions and aspirations into retirement and are not accepting the ascriptive passive status which previously defined the old (ibid.). Research on the changing nature of grandfatherhood (Mann, Tarrant & Leeson, 2016), older men caring for wives or partners (Jackson, 2016; Russell, 2007), as well as intimacy (Bildgard & Öberg, 2017) are an indication that later life might constitute an arena for a new generation of ageing men to engage in domestic and care work (Jackson 2016; Leontowitsch, 2017). Thus, men who engaged in predominately female connoted activities in young and middle adulthood take these experiences into later life. At the same time, bystanders to shifting patterns of reproductive work between men and women may see later life as a time in which they can safely experiment with such activities (Leontowitsch, 2017). As Mann and colleagues (2016) pointed out, these shifts in masculinity can be tentative, temporary and instable, but they show that the current cohorts of ageing men are different to the cohorts before and that these changes are driven by increased agency in later life.

### **Empowerment and active ageing in work with older people**

The changes to later life and ageing have left their mark on geriatric community and social work services that have transformed from paternalistic (top down) and compassionate

welfare services to client-centred, empowering approaches. The idea of clients as active, vocal drivers of community services (regardless of age) emerged across many welfare state countries in the 1970s and was strongly influenced by social movements in the United States, such as the women's, disability and civil rights movements. As a result, the second half of the 1980s saw a rise in empowerment concepts in health, care and residential settings, most visible in advocacy groups of older people getting involved in national and regional networks and committees (Aner, 2017; Karl 2000). These developments coincided with the newly postulated active ageing paradigms that encouraged older people to stay healthy so as to live longer independent lives (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), and to embrace later life as a time and space for self-development and social engagement (Laslett, 1989). This was however, met with mixed reactions within some circles of German social work and geragogy that argued that community programmes for older people were becoming too geared towards groups of retirees who could relate to and afford consumerist forms of activities that had no wider social value (Aner, 2017). Parts of German social work with older people tried to forge an alternative route that on the one hand encouraged a productive later life in which previously untouched potential could surface, and on the other hand kept a clear focus on age and ageing as a time of increased social inequalities (ibid.). The relative stability in the principles of self-advocacy and autonomy were disrupted around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when neo-liberal measures aimed at shifting responsibility from the state to the individual level seemed to undermine these principles. Newer theoretical approaches to social work have tried to counteract this development by supporting clients as the primary drivers in developing services, and viewing their needs as outcomes of social contexts rather than private circumstances (Hammerschmidt, Aner & Weber, 2017). This resonates with Payne's (2012) work on 'citizen social work' that recognises older adults' rights to remain fully connected to society, to engage in meaningful relationships and to be protected against ageist mistreatment and disrespect. The focus on rights underlines governments' responsibilities towards older people at the same time as encouraging older people to actively claim their rights. It is within these historical, social and political developments that current empowering practices with older men living alone need to be understood (Kolland, Gallistl & Wanka, 2018). Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine how ideas of empowerment influence the work of professionals in the field of adult learning and how empowerment and shifting ideas of later life are expressed in the narratives of older men living alone.

### **The Frankfurt/Main context**

Frankfurt/Main has a population of just under 730.000, making it one of the larger cities in Germany. Men and women aged 65 and over make up 15.9% of the population, which is less than the national average which stands at 20.8% (Destatis, 2015). The proportion of men and women over 65 are relatively equal, with a significant female majority only emerging from age 80 onwards (Stadt Frankfurt, 2017). Frankfurt/Main has long had a reputation for being a 'city of singles' with 54.9% of households across all age groups being single-occupancy (ibid.). This single-status is usually associated with younger, economically mobile age groups. However, in the age group 65-plus, 20.6% of households are single-occupancy, of which 32.1% are headed by men (ibid.), making Frankfurt/Main one of the cities in Germany with the largest group of older men living alone. Frankfurt/Main also has a large infrastructure of cultural, educational and social services for older people. It has one of Germany's largest Universities of the Third Age

as well as municipal and independent trusts providing care, housing and neighbourhood services for an increasingly heterogeneous ageing population. Given these contexts, it seemed particularly fruitful to investigate the lives of older men living alone in this city.

## Methods

The study is based on the grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) using several methods of investigation: scoping review of services for older men living alone in Frankfurt/Main, semi-structured interviews with stake-holders in the field of service provision for older men, and biographical interviews with men aged 65+ living alone. This method and data triangulation allow the research team insight to the object of enquiry from different perspectives (Denzin, 1989). For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the latter two methods.

For the stakeholder interviews, Miranda Leontowitsch and the research assistant working on the project selected key actors who either organised services that were aimed at older men living alone or who had insights into the needs of older men and particularly those living alone. Five interviews were conducted with stakeholders who were involved in offering a variety of services aimed at different groups of older men, including gay and migrant men. The interviews focused on the stakeholders' expertise as professionals/actors in the field of service provision for older men as well as their experiences of organising and overseeing programmes. In line with theoretical sampling preliminary findings from each interview informed the sampling of the next person to be interviewed. Miranda Leontowitsch conducted four of the interviews, the research assistant conducted the fifth.

Miranda Leontowitsch conducted biographical interviews with four men aged 69 to 88 years. They, too, were sampled purposively to achieve maximum variation within the sample in terms of age, educational attainment, employment, sexuality and ethnic background (see Table 2). The sampling process was facilitated through the outcome of the scoping review. Each participant was interviewed twice with four to six weeks between first and second interview. Interviewees were asked to tell the story of how they had come to live alone. A biographical approach was sought as the men's lives as well as the socio-cultural context in which events were embedded was seen as key to understanding their current situation (Gilleard & Higgs, 2015). In one instance, the participant had been interviewed as part of another research project in 2014. He was included as his precarious employment history made an important contribution to the sample and because it is difficult to recruit older men with low educational attainment. The biographical nature of the first interview lent itself for reanalysis and the participant agreed to be interviewed a second time.

### *Ethics and data handling*

All interviewees were informed verbally and in writing about the purpose of the study and what taking part would involve. Informed consent was obtained in writing before starting the interview. The audio files were transcribed by the research assistant verbatim. One stakeholder interview had to be based on detailed notes taken during and after the interview, as the stakeholder in question did not agree to have the interview audio recorded. Transcripts were crosschecked by Miranda Leontowitsch and the analysis process was supported by the use of qualitative data analysis software (F4analyse).

During the analysis Miranda Leontowitsch repeatedly went back to the transcripts to ensure concepts were rooted in the data.

### *Analysis*

The interpretation of the data sets was team based involving all project members. The analysis of the stakeholder interviews followed the process developed by Meuser and Nagel (2009). Miranda Leontowitsch wrote synopses on the topics that each stakeholder had talked about and developed thematic headings to which the synopses were attached (one synopsis could be attached to more than one heading). Having completed this for each interview, the authors conducted a thematic comparison across the synopses checking for similarities and differences. The transcripts from the biographical interviews were subjected to open coding, consisting of descriptive codes, in the initial stage of the analysis. This was followed by axial coding that involved the identification of themes, clustering of open codes, and recognising of relationships between axial codes. At a later stage of theory construction, the inductive, data-driven analysis was widened by using theories of masculinities and agency as heuristic devices. Empowerment emerged as a data-driven theme during the early analysis of the stakeholder interviews.

### **Introducing the interviewees**

Table 1 below, and subsequently, Table 2 provide an overview of the stakeholders and older men interviewed and the following two subsections describe the people interviewed in some detail. This allows for a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of what was encountered and provides the necessary background to the emerging themes: empowerment and agency.

Table 1: Sample of stakeholders interviewed

<b>Interview number</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Trust/organisation</b>	<b>Project(s)</b>	<b>Project duration</b>
<b>1</b>	Director (retired)	Ecclesiastical, city-wide	Adult education Focus on men and ageing	ongoing
<b>2</b>	Four local volunteers (men aged 77 -81)	Ecclesiastical, parish-level	Neighbourhood help for older men living alone	8 years
<b>3</b>	Cross-cultural access manager	Independent, large national organisation	Centre for older migrants; Weekly older men's group	25 years  1 year

4	Social worker	Independent, city-wide	Peer-support visiting project for older gay men living alone	10 years
5	Gerontologist	Ecclesiastical, large national organisational	Peer-support visiting project for older migrant men and women living alone	10 years

### *Stakeholder interviews*

The first interview, conducted with a retired director of an adult education organisation, provided insights into how the social changes of the 1970s brought men into the limelight of adult education. The interviewee had started his work with projects such as father and child weekends and later seminars on transitioning into retirement or reflecting the experiences of post-World War II childhoods in Germany. In his opinion, men's rationale for joining courses had changed over time: During the 1980s he saw a trend in men coming together as a result of the women's movement. Not primarily as a way of securing men's status, but as a safe place in which men could exchange experiences and discuss the increasing demands for change. More recently, the men in his seminars were motivated less by social change but more by seeking a space in which they could talk to other men about feelings, changes in their lives and significant others in a way that was not possible in other social settings.

The next interview was conducted with four local volunteers (aged 77 to 81) who ran a neighbourhood visiting project for older men who needed help with small chores, such as shopping, carrying items or requiring a lift to a doctor's appointment. The initiative had received much media coverage and won a community prize. The service was modelled on an existing one that was organised by older women in the parish and who thought that men would prefer to be visited/helped by other men rather than women. During the group interview the older male volunteers explained that they were not sure this was indeed the case. In their experience the demand for help by men had been very small and only one of the volunteers had been allowed to provide ongoing support for three older men who had lived alone. The other three volunteers had only had ad hoc requests, some of which they had deemed inappropriate (e.g. driving a younger man with mental health problems to appointments; tidying up jobs). The volunteers had no intention of closing down the service despite the low uptake.

The third interview was conducted with a cross-cultural access manager who described himself as belonging to the second generation of Turkish migrants in Germany and who organised support services for older migrant men and women. Recently, he started a weekly club for older men both as a social hub and as a place for learning as in his experience older divorced or widowed migrant men had problems in dealing with every-day life (household and admin). Ten to twelve men aged 55 to 75 from different ethnic backgrounds attend this group. Several of the men who came to the meetings were

described as actively looking for new partners, either during visits abroad, through friends or in public places.

The fourth interviewee organised regular social meetings and coordinated a volunteer home visiting programme for older gay men living alone. The volunteers in the home visit programme were usually gay men aged 35 to 75, who visited their clients once or twice a month for at least half a day, often over many years. He described the process of matching volunteer and client as a slow and careful one as both sides require a great deal of trust so that a long term friendship could evolve. The volunteers received regular team supervision in which they supported each other.

The final interview was conducted with a gerontologist who coordinated a programme of events and services for older migrant men and women. Having recognised the needs of isolated migrant men, she started a peer-support visiting project for older migrant men living alone. Here, too, the volunteers were men and the stakeholder ensured they were matched with older men from the same ethnic background. However, finding male volunteers as well as men who were willing to receive visits proved to be challenging. In her opinion there was a high threshold for older men living alone to acknowledge they needed help despite living in deprived circumstances or showing signs of severe neglect. The men who volunteered, however, benefited from supervisory sessions in which they reflected their own ageing.

### *Biographical interviews*

Biographical interviews were conducted with four men aged 67 to 88 years. Table 2 provides a summary of the men's demographic details and socio-economic status. Despite the men's considerable differences, they also shared some commonalities: all four had been renting their current flat for over 40 years; three were living in a LAT (living apart together) relationship; they had all experienced health problems around the time of their retirement; and two identified as belonging to the '68-generation'.

Table 2: Sample characteristics of the interviewed men

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Mr Rost</b>	<b>Mr Ün</b>	<b>Mr Färber</b>	<b>Mr Willershäuser</b>
<b>Age, and year of birth</b>	76, born 1941	69, born 1947	86, born 1931	88, born 1930
<b>Family Status</b>	Unmarried, living apart for 12 years	Divorced, instable living apart together	Widowed, living apart for 10 years	Unmarried, single since 1980
<b>Relatives</b>	No children, one brother with family	2 children, 1 grandchild, extended family in	4 children, 8 grandchildren, 2 great-grandchildren	No children, one sister, nephew and niece



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		Turkey and Germany		
<b>Education</b>	Degree-level	Left school at 18, teacher training	Apprenticeship	Apprenticeship
<b>Financial situation</b>	Good	Previous debt problems	Precarious income, now good	Good
<b>Social Network</b>	Many friends for different activities	Many acquaintances, feels lonely	Large circle of friends and acquaintances (church, political party)	Acquaintances

Mr Rost can be described as a proud older man living alone. He decided in his early forties that he no longer wanted to co-habit as he felt that living together brought about a greyness and drabness that was not conducive to loving another person. He had a succession of relationships, many of which lasted about ten years or longer. Mr Rost explained that living alone required men to learn several skills: to cook, to furnish a home and to build and maintain a social network. In his opinion he had mastered all three. It is important to note that Mr Rost had a high educational attainment and good financial situation. Given his professional background, he was able to reflect his behaviour and circumstances with like-minded older men with whom he exchanged experiences and ideas in regular meetings. Mr Rost also had a considerable circle of friends with whom he engages in different leisure activities.

Mr Ün, by contrast, described himself as an unhappy older man living alone. He had immigrated to Germany from Turkey in his early 20s with his first wife. This marriage had ended in divorce with the separation being messy and prolonged. He returned to this theme repeatedly during both interviews drawing on this experience as a key to his current unhappiness. His two children, one from his marriage and one from a later relationship, both grew up with their mothers in different cities and meetings with him were irregular. Mr Ün has sought a close relationship with both his son and daughter, but as adults, both appear to have resisted this. His professional life and political work (both focused on cultural integration) have been an important source of meaning and belonging to him and involved a large network of acquaintances. However, he felt no close bond to anyone in particular. He described his current relationship as purely sexual, despite seeking companionship and co-habitation.

Mr Färber can be described as a pragmatic older man living alone. After a long marriage his wife died after a relatively short but aggressive illness. His family and long-standing social network through church and political work supported him in the transitions into widowhood. He began a new relationship with a woman he met through this network about a year after his bereavement but they decided not to move together. At the time of the second interview they had been together for about ten years. Over the

past one to two years, she developed dementia, but continued to live in her flat with her daughter's help. He visited her several times a week and every weekend taking on more and more of a caring role as her illness progressed. He also visited several people from his local community who lived in care homes. At the time of the second interview he was planning to move into a serviced flat as he no longer felt comfortable living alone.

The fourth participant, Mr Willershäuser, can be described as a self-sufficient older man living alone. He identified as homosexual at the start of the interview and explained that after the death of his long term partner he had not sought a new relationship and had gradually withdrawn from the gay-scene in Frankfurt. His carefully furnished flat was very important to him and was the place where he engaged in a variety of pursuits that had developed across his life, such as dressmaking and listening to music. His social network had become increasingly small and he no longer entertained friends at home. His day was structured by a succession of errands he ran for a fixed group of people, including his sister, cousin, landlady and neighbours. These tasks support his view that not he needed help but other people.

## **Empowerment and agency**

Empowerment and agency emerged as central themes from both data sets and have been broken down into the following three sub-themes: (1) activating and empowering clients; (2) singularity leading to increased agency; (3) volunteering and shifting expectations.

### ***Activating and empowering clients***

This theme was particularly poignant in interviews with stakeholders who had a background in social work or education, with stakeholders in adult education, work with older migrant men and gay older men describing how they sought to empower clients. The stakeholder who organised the weekly older migrant men's group for instance, explained how the men wanted to have breakfast at their meetings, as they knew the older women's group did. However, none of them knew how to prepare breakfast, indeed they hoped somebody would provide it for them. The stakeholder explained that he took this as a starting point to engage the group members in a learning project. To begin with he gave the group money, showed them where and how to go shopping and how to use the kitchen facilities at the centre. Consequently, the men have been preparing their own breakfast every week since the project started over a year ago. The interviewee talked explicitly about wanting to support the men in recognising their needs and enabling them to develop solutions. In doing so he has established similar projects that have helped older men learn new skills (e.g., doing their laundry) as well as supporting activities they are familiar with (e.g., gardening). He was aware that his empowering approach might prevent some men from joining the group, as another older migrant men's group in Frankfurt attracted a larger group of men. However, he felt that it was his professional duty to support older migrant men in learning new skills rather than merely providing them with a space to drink tea and play cards.

Activating men was also a theme in adult education, where participants were encouraged to engage in reflexive exercises and learn new ways of thinking about their role in society. Courses were designed in a way that required participants to relinquish their passive role as listeners and engage in activities, for example by designing and conducting research projects on topics close to home such as the transition into retirement. Empowering approaches were resisted by some men who could not relinquish traditional

notions of masculinities. Described by the first stakeholder as the ‘axiom of masculinity’ several stakeholders talked about men’s resistance to accepting help, expressing feelings, or learning new skills. This was also evident from the interview with Mr Ün, who had repeatedly sought professional help for his (self-diagnosed) depression and had asked for advice from friends on how to meet more people and potential new girlfriends. However, he had discarded advice when the onus was on him to change his habits or learn a new task (e.g. use email) as the following quotation illustrates:

Yes, I read the newspaper online, German and Turkish, but mostly Turkish as I don’t have enough language [German]. I haven’t learnt to use the computer, many people say I have to learn, get electronic mail, I don’t have one, I could find women that way. But no, I am bad at technical things and lazy and have little patience for finding out new things. No, can’t do it. Can’t be bothered or lazy, I’m not sure. (Mr Ün)

It is important to note, that Mr Ün’s perceived lethargy and low self-esteem had been triggered by a succession on tragic personal events of which two stood out: the death of his girl-friend five years previously and the sudden death of his brother two years previously. As a result, he had withdrawn from many social networks and activities.

### *Singularity leading to increased agency*

Stakeholders described how men had adapted to living alone in a pragmatic way, which involved the ability to identify needs and draw on their social environment as and when needed. These men had not been mobilized by any educational or community project but by the necessity of managing everyday life as a way of keeping their independence. The four neighbourhood volunteers described an over 80 year-old man living alone who was visually impaired and who only on occasion accepted their help (e.g. having a crate of beer carried into his house). Otherwise, they knew that he had a family member visit once a week and the mobile library stopped in front of his house so he could stock up on audio books. In their opinion, older men were resistant to extending social contacts or asking for or receiving help, but they were capable of learning to deal with their situation. Some of this perceived independence and resilience was related to the men’s professional careers and wartime experiences.

This resonates with the life-story of Mr Färber, whose precarious line of work had forced him to change jobs repeatedly to stay employed and provide for his family of six. Having cared for his wife before she died and for his current partner required him to stay self-sufficient and flexible. He had also learnt to strike a balance between being there for others and caring for himself. In the process of transitioning into retirement, which he had anticipated to be a time in which he could increase his social participation through voluntary positions and activities, he had overloaded himself with responsibilities which had severely affected his mental and physical health. After being widowed he made use of his large social network and increased his voluntary work slightly but this time in moderation, now more motivated by being with other people than having a position. Organising his day around daily visits, meetings and a lunch club helped him to compensate for living alone, something that stood in stark contrast to his experience of living in large households with many people for the best part of his life: “Well, the children are there and they do look after me, but at home I am alone” (Mr Färber).

Mr Rost was the most vocal about having to learn to live alone and to meet one’s own needs. In this view learning to cook, furnish and socialise also meant letting go of gendered understandings of what men and woman can and should do. He reflected on his

biography and the influence of his mother and grandmother as key people who prevented him from learning housekeeping skills.

I always had to struggle against the message of my mother and my grandmother, who were of course housewives and who continuously implied that they could do that [cooking, cleaning], but I couldn't. (Mr Rost)

His professional life and his identification with the cultural rebellions associated with 1968 provided the backdrop against which he set and accomplished these female connoted tasks. However, this did not apply to all domestic work, as he employed a cleaner on a fortnightly basis. Mr Willershäuser also employed a cleaner although his division of labour was more strategic: he cleaned his flat whereas the cleaner mopped the stairways of the small block of flats he lived in as carrying a bucket of water had become too difficult for him.

I do everything around the house here, but I have a cleaner but just for me, just for the communal stairways. Well, I find it quite difficult to walk down the stairs with a full bucket of water. So, I have had the cleaner for two years now. (Mr Willershäuser)

Cleaning the stairways is a task often required in housing estates in Germany and being able to fulfil this requirement was one of Mr Willershäuser's many displays of independence.

### *Volunteering and shifting expectations*

The role of volunteers was central to many services mentioned in the stakeholder interviews and often involved men over 60. One of the neighbourhood volunteers who had visited several men over longer periods talked about how humbling the experience had been and how gratifying it had been to learn about the men's lives. He also explained how he had become active on a man's behalf whom he had visited at hospital:

(...) you used to call that incapacitating patients on behalf of the hospital. I was totally dumbstruck and he didn't get it either. He suddenly received a visit by a judge who was supposed to assess, because one of the doctors was of the opinion he was not able to understand information and was being stubborn and things like that, whether he was in need of a legal guardian. I think I was able to intervene at this point and the judge decided a legal guardian was not necessary either. (Stakeholder interview no. 2)

This stakeholder explained that providing support and acting on (disempowered) men's behalf was a key component of 'successful' volunteering. His idea resonates with traditional notions of volunteering, where well-off people wish to reciprocate their good fortune by helping those who have been less fortunate or who have taken a bad turn of events. In line with somewhat Victorian ideals of charity (deserving poor), those in need should not have brought about their situation themselves (undeserving). However, the challenge for this volunteer and his group was that it proved difficult to find enough (deserving) disempowered people in need of help and willing to accept help. However, another trend in volunteering could be seen in the data that focussed on volunteering as a learning experience and bringing on a generational change. Although recruiting volunteers was difficult, once on board their engagement lasted many years. Middle-aged men who volunteered used the supervision sessions to talk about the need to extend social networks and learn domestic skills in preparation of their own later life. This reflexive

mood was in part associated with a change in generation, particularly among the gay volunteers:

I think the generation ageing now, the ones aged 50 to 60 plus, they have different expectations of life, they want to live and age as openly as they have done. This is being taken into the services for older people. (Stakeholder interview no. 4)

Being part of a different generation and having different ideas about how to live later life was central to some of the men interviewed. Mr. Rost's narrative circled around being a member of the cultural changes brought about during the 1960s as did Mr Ün's. Both put an onus on gender equality, that Mr Rost lived in his relationships and Mr Ün had made a central component of this teaching work and political work after retirement. Despite being born in different countries and six years apart, the political and cultural contexts of their lives, had more influence on their sense of generational belonging than their chronological age or membership of a certain cohort. This is important when considering services aimed at older men and the involvement of volunteers.

## Discussion

This paper set out to investigate how older men come to terms with living alone in a city such as Frankfurt/Main from the perspectives of experts in the field of cultural, voluntary and social services as well as from men themselves. The vulnerability of older men living alone was apparent across all five stakeholder interviews providing a dominant narrative against which to design and offer services. In doing so, stakeholders divided clients into those who were emotionally, cognitively and materially capable of looking after themselves and those who lacked resources to look after themselves. Stakeholders in professional positions used varying degrees of empowerment strategies as a way of engaging men to think about and voice their needs, whereas stakeholders in voluntary positions focussed on providing support. Both groups contended that getting vulnerable older men involved in services continued to be challenging. This was partly ascribed to traditional notions of masculinity (i.e. displaying independence and resistance to help) as well as to the residual space some men found themselves in due to ageing stereotypes and accumulated inequalities across their life course.

Resistance to the dominant narrative of the vulnerability of older men living alone was evident from three of the biographical interviews. In their self-descriptions as 'proud', 'pragmatic' and 'self-sufficient' older men living alone talked about how they had adapted to living alone despite not having role-models. In addition, the men's narratives included examples of treading new paths rather than solely holding on to familiar structures. Living in a LAT relationship that allowed them to share their lives with a significant other at the same time as managing their own domestic duties is an example in case. Moreover, initiating (Mr Rost) or agreeing to (Mr Färber, Mr Ün) such a kind of relationship signifies several things: that singularity in later life requires men to be agentic and that later life is recognised by some men as a (safe) space in which to experiment with new life styles and kinds of relationships. This was also evident from their attitudes to domestic work, such as cooking, cleaning, washing and shopping. Although mothers, grandmothers and partner/wives had taught them that this work was 'women's work', their first experiences with housework dated back to a time before they lived alone. Mr Rost had shared domestic duties in co-habiting relationships, Mr Willershäuser, having always lived alone, acquired these skills in his mid-twenties after

leaving home, and Mr Ün had cooked meals for his mother during the eight years she lived in his flat prior to her death. Only Mr Färber conceded that his wife had taken on all housework and that after her death he had sought ways of reducing the domestic chores, e.g. by going out for lunch and having his partner iron his shirts. These narratives can be read as ‘counterstories’ (Phoenix & Smith, 2011) to the dominant cultural narrative of untidy and unloved older men living alone. It is in their telling and living that people can become aware of new possibilities (Andrews, 2004) and are thus a clear sign of agency in the lives of the interviewed men.

Voluntary work was a dominant theme in both data sets. This is unsurprising as volunteering and neighbourhood involvement are a staple component of contemporary retirement. The work the men took on involved considerable efforts in terms of time, personal resources and emotional engagement. It also provided volunteers with the possibility of extending social networks, developing ideas and receiving public recognition. Thus, volunteering can be interpreted as a marker for third age agency, which can also act as a buffer against the looming fourth age characterised by dependency and lack of agency (Formosa, 2019; Gilleard & Higgs, 2005). From a gender perspective, social engagement has been viewed as a way for men to counteract loss of social recognition and productivity brought about by retirement (Böhnisch, 2004). However, there is another way of looking at older men’s engagement: The data here has shown that volunteering and caring for others helped the men to reflect their own bodily decline and proximity to possible independence and care-needs. Getting involved in projects aimed at helping older men, or visiting friends and acquaintances in care homes may have been born from a ‘third age’ ideal of getting involved and *caring for* others at a practical level, but the men’s prolonged engagement with these tasks and their emotional involvement provide evidence that the men learnt to *care about* others thus integrating values of interdependence and relationality into their masculine identities (Elliott, 2016).

The possibility of change is both important at the individual level for men who are coming to terms with living alone and at a collective level in recognising the potential of older men and providing services that contribute to this development without ignoring the social, cultural and political factors that enable this process. Thus, men who lack the health and socio-economic related resources need support in gaining access to income, information and health at the same time as encouraging them to claim their rights (Payne, 2012). At the same time, a ‘new’ generation of older men with shifting ideas of perceived and lived masculinities are living with relatively high levels of agency in later life, and are changing the way society views the ageing of men.

## Conclusion

This paper has drawn attention to the growing number of older men living alone and the ways in which they live their singularity. The findings contribute to the small literature on older men living alone that has highlighted the heterogeneity of this sub-group within the ageing population and their ability to adapt to life changes. The findings from this study suggest that older men’s capacity to learn through empowerment are constructed in different ways across services, men’s biographies and in light of contemporary social changes. Moreover, agency in their daily lives, was both a result of living alone and was a driver in helping the men manage their daily lives. By being able to take care of themselves and others the men maintained an identity as an independent individual. Learning to live alone was integrated into the lived and embodied masculinities of the men in this study, thereby appearing to strengthen the argument that independence is key

to traditional (taken for granted and ageless) masculinities at the same time as pointing to shifting (reflexive and ageing) masculinities.

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