

CHRIS PHILLIPSON: Structure and meaning in the construction of retirement: new challenges for Critical Gerontology

The past three decades have seen the unravelling of mandatory retirement and the welfare state, two of the dominant post-war institutions which defined the character of ageing in European society. By the early-1970s – across much of European society – retirement (mainly in the case of men) had become a normal feature of the life course, a taken-for-grant part of the individual's biography. This 'normalisation' of retirement was, however, undermined in two successive phases of social change: the first lasting from the 1970s through to the early 1990s with the rise of different forms of 'early exit' from the workplace (Kohli et al., 1991); the second – from the mid-1990s to 2008 - a reversal of this process with attempts to extend working life (Phillipson and Smith, 2005). The latter policy has continued since 2008 (reflecting fears about the so-called 'burden' of ageing populations) but in a context of, first, economic recession and mass unemployment; second, the collapse of the welfare state. The paper will argue that the reconstruction of retirement and the welfare state provides a major challenge to traditional perspectives on social ageing. The strength of these institutions was to 'decommodify' later life albeit at the expense of what was viewed as a form of 'structured dependence' (Townsend, 1991). Weakening or removing mandatory retirement, however, raises issues of both structure and meaning. The former concerns problems arising from the ambiguous nature of 'work-endings' in a context of insecurity and exploitation in a global labour market. The latter concerns the existential uncertainties attached to a social ageing now detached from mass retirement and the welfare state. Drawing on the different intellectual traditions within Critical Gerontology, the paper will consider whether new 'voices and visions' for retirement and ageing can emerge, and the conditions and actions that might lead to their development.

DALE DANNEFER: Structure, meaning and the Constitution of Retirement.

The terms structure and meaning refer to broad and encompassing aspects of social reality, distinct yet intertwined. How to understand their connection has long been recognized as central to the enterprise of social science. The social-constitutive approach advocated by Jan Baars offers a sound basis for analyzing efforts to connect structure and meaning. In this paper, I suggest how the tension between structure and action has appeared in prominent theories that intersect with problems of retirement, including 1) disengagement theory, 2) socioemotional selectivity theory, and 3) the analysis of the institutionalized life course. I propose that the first two of these approaches risk naturalization of the phenomena they seek to understand with respect to both structure and meaning due to their reliance on the organismic paradigm, while the third offers an approach to that is inadequate in relation to the problem of meaning, since it addresses primarily economic rather than existential issues. The answers implied by all three of these approaches may – apart from their validity -- offer legitimation to existing social structures and may be of some comfort to individuals. At the same time, they are often restrictive, and hence counter-productive to human interest. In contrast, nonretirement offers a model of being guided not by age-specific expectations, whether natural or social in origin, but by channeling one's energy and resources toward personally meaningful activities and humanly meaningful problems in any domain.

PETER DERKX: MEANING, WELL-BEING AND AGEING

The meaning of life does not exist in the sense that people have different views on this and in the sense that even for one person there are many aspects to a meaningful life, not just one. In this paper the concept of a meaningful life and its different dimensions will first be explicated. After that a first empirical exploration of meaning in ageing will be given. This will be done through a meta-analysis of empirical research on well-being in ageing, because the concept of well-being shows considerable overlap with meaning.

The two strands of well-being research on ageing that will be considered are the “subjective well-being” approach of Ed Diener (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) and colleagues and the “psychological well-being” approach of Carol D. Ryff (University of Wisconsin at Madison) and colleagues. The paper ends with a few remarks on the meaning of work as (in terms of Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 1985) a job, a career and a calling.

JOSEPH DOHMEN: THE ART OF AGEING

Leading sociologists and philosophers like Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens, Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor, characterize our current age as a 'post-traditional' or 'secular society'. Within late modern society, public morality has seen an important turn. Giddens characterizes this turn as *'The emergence of Life Politics'*, in which questions centre around orientation, identity and the meaning of life. These developments also affect the process of ageing. The 'struggle for a life of one's own' (Beck) means that every single individual nowadays has to grow old in his/her *own way*. In recent moral philosophy there have been some important but very different responses (MacIntyre, Gilligan, Foucault, Frankfurt, Taylor) to the late modern de-traditionalization, secularization and individualization, in particular to the dominant neo-liberal morality of self-determination. In this paper I will deal especially with Foucault's ethics of self-care and its critics. The art of ageing - growing old in your own way – can be reconstructed as a *practice of freedom*: a good alternative for the neoliberal concept of a choice-biography.