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1. Introduction

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Questions to do with ageing have become increasingly prominent in recent decades, in the media and the public political debate as well as within academia. There are several interconnected reasons for this. The most frequently alleged claim is however the ongoing process of population ageing in advanced economies, with the result that people live longer and healthier lives, in turn resulting in changed proportions between older and younger people in the population. While this is often taken to mean that societies now face challenges that are hard to solve, it is also good news that sheds light on improvements in health, nutrition, wealth and medical care (Fineman 2011; 2014), which enables older people to manage on their own for longer parts of their lives.

The latter improvements are considered to be societal goals (World Health Organization 2002; Swedish National Institute of Public Health 2007). As such, resources are invested to support research on how best to achieve what has repeatedly and sometimes problematically interchangeably been referred to as, among other denominations, active (WHO 2002), productive (Butler & Gleason 1985; Holstein 1999), positive (Hepworth 1995) and successful ageing (Rowe & Kahn 1987; 1997). When goals become normative in the sense that they come forth as natural, this, of course, has consequences, which research has repeatedly pointed out (Katz 2005; Calasanti & Slevin 2006). This is so not least for everyone who – for different reasons – does not live up to the norms. The excluding side effect of norms has been repeatedly noted (Cruickshank 2003), partly because it sheds light on how norms are supported by power relations that privilege some at the expense of others.

The process of demographic ageing, increased life expectancy and health in old age thus impacts on how ageing as such is understood. Ageing is understood here in its widest possible sense; it includes the general ageing of whole populations as well as individual ageing; it is about physical and cognitive ageing as well as about the ways in which ageing and old age are made culturally comprehensible.

This broad definition of ageing was the starting point for the interdisciplinary research programme Ageing and Living Conditions (ALC) at Umeå University, later to become the Centre for Demography and Ageing Research (CEDAR), that brought together researchers from the social and behavioural sciences, humanities and medicine. In light of an ageing population, central questions for the programme were described as 'discovering' constituents of successful ageing and considering the 'roles' available to the increasing number of older people (ddb.umu.se).

During the programme, a few of us, belonging to the fields of ethnology and sociology, realised that we were focussing on similar questions to do with culture and identity, and the way ageing is intrinsically caught up in relations of power that connect individuals unequally with overarching structures. This gave rise to a series of seminars in which we tried to delve deeper into questions of cultural meaning-making and the significance of identity, searching and finding support for our own projects, and gaining insights in each other's projects. This book is a result of this series of seminars. It contains four chapters that, taken together, give a good picture of the differences as well as the similarities in our empirical, methodological and theoretical frameworks and endeavours.

Without forestalling the theoretical points made in the respective chapters, we here wish to give the briefest of overviews of the themes that proved particularly important to us during discussions and that have left their marks in various ways in the different contributions. As the title of the book suggests, *ageing* is the common denominator, but, as hinted at above, the cultural phenomenon of ageing is approached from very different angles.

Several of the chapters focus on the life stage of old age, using interviews with older persons in order to study the ways in which the process of ageing is ascribed meaning in different contexts. Such a constructivist approach has long permeated the qualitative study of ageing. Spotlighting concrete practices (movements, speech, feelings, dressing, policy and so on), researchers have tried to describe and critically analyse how notions of age and ageing come into

being and have effects on people's everyday lives. In this sense, constructivist approaches are inherently political and hold implications for relations of power (Estes 1979). Stereotypes of older people, just like norms of old age, have proven to be persistent and seem to hold a firm grip over people's perceived possibilities. However, such stereotypes and norms are multiple and ever-changing (Gubrium & Holstein 2003), and they are often actively used and negotiated, which many of the authors give examples of.

But in this book, we also approach ageing from a perspective of demographics that highlights how seemingly neutral demographic concepts are infused with meaning. For example, notions of an ageing population have recurrently surfaced in public policy as well as in the media in a way that represents the process in terms of threat, in turn working to naturalise political measures under the flag of acute emergency (McDaniel 1987; Vincent 1996; Robertson 1997; Gee & Gutman 2000; Evans et al. 2001; Cruikshank 2003; Rozanova 2006; Lundgren & Ljuslinder 2011). The baby boom, to take another example, may be described demographically as a period of increased birth rates resulting in a large generation, but this demographic phenomenon also brings with it different kinds of problematisations as well as ideologically invested suggestions of how the perceived problems could, and perhaps should, be solved. Furthermore, the concept of the baby boom – at least in the Swedish context – soon became a description of a generation charged with valued judgements and perceptions of wealth and health.

Regardless of the way ageing is approached in the respective chapters, notions of identity and identification thus proved to be of great importance. In a few of the texts it is the position of being 'old' that is brought to the fore. It was however always obvious that old age and ageing were products of intersectional experiences (Krekula, Närvänen, Näsman 2005; Arber, Davidson & Ginn 2003). Identifying as women and as belonging to certain social strata or ethnicities proved decisive for how ageing was being lived by the interviewed women, and, as it were, narrated.

All but one of the chapters are based on in-depth interviews (Atkinson 1998). This means that the material that is analysed is made up of narratives, in which people talk about different aspects of their lives. In most cases, this brought about stories that far exceeded the primary topic of the interviews, showing the interconnections between different experiences. It was also obvious that the topics covered in the interviews implied a simultaneous constitution of

the interviewees' own identities, past as well as present. The different narratives about clothing, childbearing and Sami women's political work spoke about the persons who told them and also seemed to function as mediums for more or less conscious self-presentations.

While the interviewees' personal identities obviously impacted on the ways in which they told their stories as well as on the narrated content of these stories, we feel it is important to stress that identity has not been approached as given, and has not been treated as *the origin* of the narrated events. Rather, we have viewed identity as being intimately caught up in the cultural norms of the presence and the social relations that the subject is engaged in. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) have stated that just like people in general, older people often actively draw on existing stereotypes when creating their own identities and life-stories. In this sense, identities must be understood also as *the product* of narrative events, and the interviews, thus, as sites of identification where the interviewees and the interviewer together construct themselves together with comprehensible notions of the studied topic (Lundgren 2012).

Outline of the book

The chapters of this book are organised alphabetically by author. Chapter two, "Adult children as an important source of help for their elderly parents?", takes as its point of departure the demographic challenges that are posed by population ageing and the often emphasised assumption that in the future the care of older people will become a problem to be solved by increased informal care (Jegermalm & Jeppsson Grassman 2012). Working with survey data, Karlsson compares attitudes toward adult children assisting their elderly parents in Spain and Sweden. Lena Karlsson highlights the importance of including gender and age in studies of intergenerational solidarity and problematizes the ways in which taken-for-granted notions of familism and individualism are connected to different (national) spaces.

In chapter three, "Strategies of decolonization", Marianne Liliequist describes the political mobilisation carried out by three elderly Sami women. Studying the women's self-presentations and asking questions about their strategies, Liliequist describes their balancing act between conflicting notions. On the one hand they were positioned as doubly oppressed as older women. On the other hand they were positioned as strong foremothers, bearers of wisdom and

mediators of culture. Liliequist argues for the importance of taking such narratives about how preconceptions are navigated seriously and not losing sight of their meaning, and she cautions against one-sided readings of such narratives as (only) strategies.

Chapter four, "Struggling with choice", makes a methodological case in the study of the baby boom. Anna Sofia Lundgren and Angelika Sjöstedt Landén set out to study the narratives of women who experienced their childbearing years during the Swedish baby boom of the 1940s and 1950s. While the authors' initial goal was to get an insight into insiders' views on this process in order, perhaps, to offer new explanations for the boom, their contribution to this book is primarily methodological, asking questions about the significance of discourse for talking about experiences, and arguing in favour of a heightened methodological reflexivity.

In chapter five, lastly, Karin Lövgren takes older women's wardrobes as her point of departure. The garments have guided the women's narratives about stage of life, ageing, transitions and everyday living. The informants talked of strategic changes in what to wear as they grew older, as well as about garments that are kept even though they are no longer used and items of clothing kept as memorabilia. In "Squirrels and nostalgia – about wardrobe collections of older women", sorting through the wardrobe is described as identity work. The informants stressed that this was both a practical task but foremost an emotional one. For Lövgren, the women's reflections work as a gateway to an analysis of ageing.

Acknowledgements

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