

NORMATIVITY OF OLD AGE: DEVELOPING A COORDINATE SYSTEM. *Introduction*

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This thematic issue of the journal resulted from an international conference “Aging in Cross-Cultural Perspective” that took place in Saint Petersburg, Russia, on December 14–15, 2018. Organized by Maija Könönen, Professor at the University of Helsinki, and Julia Zelikova, Associate Professor at the North-West Institute of Management of the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, the conference was based on the project “Between the Normal and the Abnormal: Cultural Meanings of Dementia and Old Age in Finland and Russia,” sponsored by the Kone Foundation and carried out in 2017–2019. Conference discussions shed light on the potential of a cross-cultural approach to aging in diverse sociocultural contexts and made normativity the focal point of the issue of aging.

The problem of normativity in aging and old age has never been more relevant. The aging of the population presents a serious challenge to contemporary society and requires finding new definitions, interpretations, and conceptual normative bases with which to correlate aging and old age. Awareness of this topic seems heightened also because, until recently, the issues of old age and aging were virtually excluded from both public discourse and social research. In a sense, research of aging is in itself an instrument of normalizing aging and overcoming fear of this process (Pickard 2016).

Social scientists along with policy makers attempt to explain older people's place in society and their role in the labor and consumer markets, as well as to determine the state's and younger generations' obligations toward seniors. Some approaches suggest redefining old age; others erase age boundaries completely and suggest ignoring the peculiarities of old age (Elder 1974; “Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan” 2002; Pickard 2016; Riley, Johnson, and Forner 1972; Rowe and Kahn 1987). Along with age divisions, the conventional norms and patterns

of aging are also erased and redefined. Age and aging come not only to challenge globalization and national systems of administration, but also to give rise to personal issues linked with finding new identities and socially relevant models of behavior. The term normativity with its multiple meanings may help facilitate dialogue between the different layers of this phenomenon, from personal to global.

In social sciences, normativity is one of the most complex, hard to grasp, and, at the same time, most heuristic concepts. This notion is built into the fundamental debates about power and governance, about structural and institutional transformations, and social inclusion and poverty, and it is intertwined with topics of physicality and health. Distinctions between the normative and nonnormative are determined by well-known regulatory systems: religion, morality, ethics, and the law.

The problem of normativity also applies to every system of stratification, such as gender, class, citizenship, the hierarchical distinction between human and nonhuman. As age turns into a means of differentiation between people (Nikolajeva 2009; Riley et al. 1972), it is all the more important to develop an analytical apparatus of age-specific normativity, inscribe it into the system of social knowledge, and hone instruments to explicate the concepts and criteria of age-related normativity.

The apparatus of age-specific normativity is largely borrowed from other systems of stratification. We have multiple examples of analyzing age norms in close relation to or by analogy with gender norms (Beauvoir 1972; Gilleard and Higgs 2000, 2005, 2010; Pickard 2016). A classic scholar of gender inequality, Judith Butler defines normativity as an instrument of formation and division, a system of “mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals” (1999:xx). According to Butler, gender itself emerges when it becomes the object of a normative judgment. Similarly, we notice age once there are norms to regulate it.

The normativity of aging and old age is, obviously, historically and culturally determined. Our ideas about the norms of aging and normative behaviors for older people change over time. According to Pat Thane (2000), the so-called natural aging is associated with a cultural and moral ideal of old age where notions of aging are linked to an underlying process of physical and mental decline. The advent of industrial society and the development of medicine and biotechnologies have marked a momentous departure from natural aging (Jones and Higgs 2010:1514). Generally improved public health and an increased life expectancy in countries such as Great Britain and the United States have radically changed our notions of aging and old age. Starting in the twentieth century, the idea of a natural lifecycle passing through some normative stages and ending in infirmity and death has been challenged both by social scientists and medical professionals. Breakthroughs in biogerontology and biomedicine have laid the foundations for a more differentiated idea of normal aging. The norms of natural aging, defined by illness and feebleness, gave way to new concepts that normalized aging without substantial loss of health and level of activity (Elder 1974; Rowe and Kahn 1987, 1997). In 2002 the Madrid Plan of Action on Aging (“Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan” 2002) formalized the norm of active aging. Even the status of old age has changed by moving from the periphery of social life closer to the center of contemporary society.

While shifting away from the model of natural aging, normativity of the body—the main instrument of socialization and mutuality (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1978)—has undergone colossal transformations. Queer researchers consider an aging body to be nonnormative, losing its functions, queer. Such a body invites discrimination, exclusion from the system of mainstream social coordinates. In her 2012 article Cynthia Port directly connects radical queer temporality to old age: “The old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future” (2012:3). The loss of reproductive function and sexuality makes older people even queerer than homosexuals who are included in the reproductive sphere, even though they create their own, alternative temporality (Halberstam 2005).

Advancements in the fields of medicine, orthopedics, and cosmetology do away with multiple age-related limitations. An aging body plagued by illnesses and debilitating weaknesses is reconfigured as a body changing but still active, agile, and aesthetically acceptable (Nizamova 2016; Zelikova 2018). The biological processes leading to decline and dying are kept under a steadily improving control (Radicioni and Weicht 2018). Reproductive practices have moved to a later life stage (Beaujouan and Sobotka 2019). Normalization of sex at an older age (Rogozin 2018; Zelikova 2018), later childbirth, surrogate motherhood, and adoptive parenthood break down the major obstacle age presented to older persons that used to deprive them of societal value—their inability to participate in reproductive practices. An aging body ceases to be unequivocally queer. Moreover, a question arises whether age narrows down the limits of what is possible or expands them. For instance, a disability at a young age is farther away from the norm than at an older age (Gallop 2019). The space occupied by a reflexive project of bodily aging keeps expanding and plays one of the principal roles in the understanding of age-specific normativity (Jones and Higgs 2010).

Due to advancements in medicine and biotechnologies, natural aging is no longer the only and prevailing way to grow older. The normativity of aging has begun to expand, and the concept of diversity has entered discussions about the ways to age. Similarly to gender theory, the possibility of diversity (Butler 1999) has knocked down the dichotomies of youth and old age, health and disability, norm and anomaly, life and death. Unsurprisingly, these changes have generated multiple, heterogeneous, divergent trajectories of life in older age. In the words of Ian Rees Jones and Paul Higgs, we have entered the period when “the power of the norm loses its hold as normative ageing shifts from a state to goal” (2010:1515).

Nonetheless, the fields of the natural, normal, and normative have not disappeared. They have gone through changes and become a lot more complex, meshed together, and produced a number of coexisting hybrids. As Zygmunt Bauman wrote (2001, 2005), while significant proportions of the older population remain subject to earlier modernist notions of normal aging with its attendant discourses of decline and dependency, others relate to a different discourse of normative aging, the one that is organized around the reflexively constituted culture of fitness.

Changes in the understanding of old age and the normativity of aging have brought about considerable developments at the institutional and legislative levels (Beck 2007; Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2003). At the same time, norms and normativities by themselves have no significance anymore. According to Jones and Higgs, “No longer is the term [normative] used to describe and separate social activities that ought to occur from those that ought not to occur within particular cultural and institutional conditions. Instead pluralism, diversity and difference have themselves become normative elements driving institutional change” (2010:1515). Researchers argue that today the key task is to distinguish between the newly reconfigured spheres of the natural, normal, and normative, now used to understand aging (Jones and Higgs 2010:1517–1518; Moody 2002), to observe shifts between these spheres, and to trace transformations of diversity.

These days we live in a world where every society produces its own normativity of aging by preserving traditional forms, more or less successfully transplanting patterns from other cultures, and in different ways combining the old and the new. The current issue of *Laboratorium* lays bare the heuristic value of an intercultural and interdisciplinary approach to studying the normativity of aging. Today a concept of normativity does not imply a single coordinate system or universal norms and patterns of growing old. The study of normativity today is a matrix of manifold intercultural and interdisciplinary comparisons generating a continuum of definitions and research findings. This is where both the complexity of this subject matter and its unlimited potential lie.

This issue of the journal focuses mainly on the problem of normativity of old age and aging in Russia. Contemporary Russian society constitutes a unique blend of premodern natural aging, Soviet ascetic paternalism, and attempts to actualize the neoliberal project of aging. The current issue presents works in a variety of scholarly genres: articles, essays, field notes, reviews of monographs and collected works. To find answers to questions regarding the normativity of old age, authors employ variety of approaches of sociological and culturological research, discourse analysis, literary gerontology, and so on. An assortment of genres, topics, and approaches will allow the reader to observe the evolution of discussion around the normativity of aging, to see what topics are of interest to the authors published in this issue, what problems researchers face in studying the process of aging, and what methods they use in their work.

Olga Maximova’s article “Old Age or ‘Third Age’? Discourses of Individuals’ Subjective Perception of Their Own Age-Related Changes” presents results of a study on how people perceive their own age. The article offers narratives of respondents aged between 63 and 83, who describe their age as the time for development and self-actualization, the age of wisdom, experience, and new opportunities. This study shows that the normative image of an older person in the Russian mass media as someone “despondent and out of touch with reality” is at odds with people’s own perception of their age and lifestyle. This contradiction, in the author’s view, means that society needs to revise the concept of old and advanced age and develop a more tolerant attitude to the process of getting on in years.

Aliia Nizamova in her article "Normativity and the Aging Self: 'Active Longevity' Media Discourse in Contemporary Russia" analyzes changes in the media discourse around such concepts as "active longevity" and "successful aging." By adopting methods of critical gerontology, the scholar convincingly demonstrates that notions of active longevity and successful aging are used in present-day Russia for consumerist purposes: persons of advanced age are encouraged to continue with the lifestyle typical of their middle-aged counterparts and ignore the norms and social factors accompanying the process of aging. The author shows that this logic fills the concepts of "successful aging" and "active longevity" with new meanings and creates new concepts, such as an "elderly worker" or a "working pensioner." This discourse impacts older people's life trajectories by modifying their original life strategies.

Arturs Holavins's article "Self-Presentation of Religious Organizations Providing Long-Term Elderly Care: Between 'Service' and 'Expertise'" also studies discourses. This work examines self-presentation of two long-term nursing facilities run by religious institutions. For its empirical source base this study uses the organizations' charter documents, methodological materials, official websites, and interviews with their employees. The principal premise of the study is a hypothesis that at the level of self-presentation religious organizations are willing to forfeit their declared initial values of spiritual care and position themselves primarily as "experts" in caregiving. The study identifies three basic discursive frameworks: religious patience harking back to the original mission and identity of the organizations; humanitarianism typical of present-day geriatrics in Russia; and rational and pragmatic professionalization, that is, self-presentation as an expert. These frameworks are used depending on the target audience and the type of text. Even though patience and humanitarianism conform to the spiritual values of religious organizations, the author concludes that his hypothesis is correct, since the framework of professionalism is salient, whereas the patience and humanitarianism are emphasized depending on the situation.

Elena Zdravomyslova and Arkadiia Savchenko devote their article "A Moral Career of Caring for Elderly Relatives Living with Dementia" to studying practices of long-term care for seniors. To conceptualize and describe family caregiving, the authors use the notion of "a moral career of caregiving." This concept allows them to see how the status and identity of a caregiver changes in the process of caring for their loved ones. The work is based on substantial empirical material, including in-depth interviews with relatives caring for dementia sufferers and data gathered through participant observation. The study shows how Russian society still normalizes the model of family caregiving. Even though practices of caregiving are getting updated, in Russian society providing care to elderly family members still lacks institutional support. By conceptualizing family care as a moral career of caregiving, researchers make a compelling argument that this work demands a great emotional commitment and energy costs. Caregivers themselves are of two minds about family caregiving. They receive satisfaction from fulfilling a duty, but they also bear the brunt of social exclusion, take risks to their own health, and have a lower quality of

life. The study draws an important conclusion that an experience of caring for a family member has an impact on the caregiver's identity even after the patient's passing. The moral career of caregiving leaves an indelible mark on the person's life.

Julia Zelikova's "I Can Only Perceive Myself as a Babushka': Aging, Ageism, and Sexism in Contemporary Russia" considers aging in contemporary Russia as a manifold phenomenon consisting of certain rules and practices. Since Russian society normalizes old age as the time of decline—decline in one's ability to learn something new, in physical appeal, desires, activity level, and such—the author asks whether resistance to the negative discourse around aging is possible. What would aging look like if we were, at least to some extent, free from the negative social bias toward old age? Based on the data collected through in-depth interviews with respondents aged between 60 and 86, the scholar shows that norms and regulations of social institutions place almost physical restrictions on older persons' space, control their life, deprive them of independence, prevent them from living their dreams, and take away their agency. Russian culture compels seniors to think of their age as a physical and social problem, offers unappealing images of growing older, and makes them invest into concealing their age. This symbolic order of things brings about ageism, which exists in Russia in the form of social control. These norms and rules are interiorized by the elderly, leading them to self-discriminate and reproduce ageism.

The issue presents three essays. Jane Harris wrote the essay "Confronting Ageism and the Dilemmas of Aging: Literary Gerontology and Poetic Imagination—Baranskaya to Marinina," where she analyzes images of older people, Russian literary characters from the second half of the twentieth century. These literary works exploring the mystery of growing older have their characters destroy the social and cultural stereotypes. The author argues that contemporary Russian literature is a means of resisting not only biological but also ideological and social determinism. This is resistance to societally imposed stereotypes and norms that may qualify as ageist.

Maija Könönen offers the essay "Contemporary Narratives of Senility." She examines two ways of speaking about old age—the two discourses that compete with and at the same time complement each other: the biomedical discourse on dementia and the discourse on old age as part of "normal" aging. Both discourses influence our perception of and attitude to old age. The author's approach combines critical gerontology and narrative analysis. This combination of cultural gerontology and literary studies allows her to view old age as a historically and culturally specific concept and phenomenon. The essay uses two examples of contemporary Russian short prose (Nina Katerli's "In Two Voices" and Nina Sadur's "The Chair") to illustrate how a literary work may reflect the prevailing cultural traditions, sociological and medical discourses, and norms of aging. The author scrutinizes literary devices used in these short stories to describe the experience of aging as lived by the characters themselves.

The third essay, "The Concept of Active Aging in Europe and Russia in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic," is by Irina Grigoryeva and Elena Bogdanova. In the authors'

own words, it is a reaction to the crisis in the theory and policy aimed at solving the problem of population aging in Russia and in European countries. The current coronavirus pandemic has questioned the validity of the “active aging” concept and the entire neoliberal project of aging intended to integrate older people into the labor and consumer markets and thereby solve the problem of seniors’ social exclusion and their negative image as a burden on society. The pandemic has made age divisions relevant again and raised awareness of the physiological aspects of an aging body. The struggle for inclusion of the elderly has been (temporarily) replaced with the struggle for their exclusion. The essay looks into the theoretical premises of the concept of active aging in the version originally developed in the Western context and in its Russian derivative. The essay poses an important question: whether the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic would necessitate articulating a new concept of aging.

In the section “Field Notes” we present a study by Konstantin Galkin “Features of an ‘Irrational’ Sociological Interview: If the Informant Is Diagnosed with Dementia.” In this essay the author shares his experience of interviewing respondents with dementia. The entire methodology of a narrative interview rests on the premise that an interview takes place between two rational subjects in a relationship of trust. But in this case we deal with a situation where this conventional condition is not met. What position should a researcher take while building a relationship with a respondent whose full, responsible understanding of questions and even of the situation of the interview is not guaranteed? Galkin’s essay answers this question.

Finally, the thematic issue comprises a number of reviews of research publications from all over the world. This fact in itself bespeaks the importance of the subject matter at hand in scholarly discourse. In this issue you will find reviews of monographs by Vitaly Lekhtsier, *Illness: Experience, Narrative, Hope. Essay on Social and Humanitarian Medicine Research* (in Russian); Jane Gallop, *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging: Queer Temporalities of the Phallus*; Thorbjörn Bildtgård and Peter Öberg, *Intimacy and Ageing: New Relationships in Later Life*; alongside reviews of collected works: *Aging and Human Nature: Perspectives from Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Anthropology*, edited by Mark Schweda, Michael Coors, and Claudia Bozzaro; *Ageing and Digital Technology: Designing and Evaluating Emerging Technologies for Older Adults*, edited by Barbara Barbosa Neves and Frank Vetere; as well as a review of a collective monograph by Irina Grigoryeva, Alexandra Dmitrieva, Lyudmila Vidiasova, and Olga Sergeyeva, *Elderly Population in Modern Russia: Between Work, Education and Health*.

Happy reading!

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