

LONGEVITY, SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL INNOVATIONS. A SWEDISH EXAMPLE

Assoc. prof. Finnur Magnuson

Malmö Univeristy

School of Health and Society

E-mail: Finnur.Magnusson@mah.se

Abstract

The challenges of increasing longevity in the world's population are fairly known. What is less recognized is that this involves cultural as well as a demographic phenomenon. The aim of this paper is to relate this to the field of social gerontology. A long research tradition in the field of gerontology has related social integration - participation in multiple life roles and activities and access to social support in times of need - to good health and well-being among older people. Conversely, social isolation, or the lack of access to social support and the lack of meaningful social relationships, roles, and activities, is related to poor health and lower well-being. A wide range of health care and representatives of the social services have engaged in promoting social integration of older adults. However only a limited number of scientific studies have been able to prove the effectiveness of the interventions designed to mitigate social isolation. Preemptive interventions seem to be far less common. The social capital contained within older populations is a considerable resource that lies largely unused and, as such, exemplifies a societal failure to adapt to changing circumstances. This leads us to the field of Elderpedagogy as a social innovation. In Sweden we are presently witnessing the development of new ways of work with elderly. These ambitions are based on the acknowledgement of the changing needs and demands following longevity. Elderpedagogy is a newly founded educational program at the University of Malmö. The main goals of Elderpedagogy is preemptive social interventions, new forms of work together with older persons and their networks. Some tried and tested methods of social intervention methods fits well into the scientific context of Elderpedagogy as a discipline

on the borderline of social work and pedagogy. Elderpedagogy constitutes an example of how care and social services can establish adaptive interventional methods that have proven to be effective. By connecting traditional ways of social work with older adults and new ways of placing these in a world of changing conditions for longevity, educational programs as Elderpedagogy can contribute to sustainable intergenerational relations.

Keywords: social work with the elderly, longevity, elderpedagogy, social innovations.

1. Introduction

Increasing longevity in the world's population is fairly known. At the same time as people get older their health status seems to improve, although it's debatable whether this applies to the world wide situation. What we can however anticipate is that changing demands, wants and needs of the elderly will require more or less thorough adaptations of the health- and social services in Europe. Hand in hand with the growing amount of adults in the world's population, the impacts of globalization are factors to be taken into account. Commenting the globalization processes of modernity Phillipson (2007) argues that the experiences of the ageing process will be affected and most likely definitions of old age will differ. Similar has been stated in a series of comments (Warness et al 2004, Bijak et al 2007). What furthermore is being frequently pointed out is that increasing longevity is more than a demographic phenomenon. The growth of the population of older adults involves questions of cultural, attitudes beliefs and images. As been stated in social gerontological research, cultural perceptions of older adults, in Europe and the United States tend to be negative (Hazan 1994, Bodily 1994, Biggs 2001). This is evident in popular culture and media, in labor market issues, and within social services. Negative attitudes turning into ageism create a pessimistic discourse that has profound consequences for policy making and social services to older adults. Thus ongoing predictions of the future eldercare situation often bear the mark of an undertone of threats and catastrophic scenarios. Older adults are seen as a burden on society, rather than an achievement. Dychtwald for instance, (1999) has used the word old-age tsunami to describe some of the pressure connected to the growing population of people older than 65. The old age tsunami metaphor sometimes pops up in the Scandinavian debate on future increase in old age population. According to the discourse, becoming of old age is believed to be becoming increasingly vulnerable, socially as well as from a health perspective. However questioning these pessimistic forecasts and disregarding them as a discourse of ageism and misconceptions, should not hide the fact that a growing amount

of older people in Europe are running the risk of becoming socially marginalized and suffering the negative consequences that it may lead to (Walker & Foster 2006).

It is against this background that the purpose of this article is to be understood. The point of departure is recent changes within Swedish eldercare. In order to deal with the amounting demands of longevity in Sweden we have been witnessing organizational changes in care provision and social services to the elderly. Eldercare has no longer the sole responsibility of the public sector. Through changes in legislation, private enterprises have emerged on a more and more diversified eldercare market, where economical terms of cost efficiency, as well as the individual's option to purchase eldercare services, have become key words (Blomberg & Petersson 2007). This shift towards a market orientation of the eldercare in Sweden is decisively ideological and represents a radical change that is openly debated in wide circles of the Swedish society. Another and more less ideological way of approaching the needs of the elderly in Sweden is the outspoken need of creating new professions within the social services sector, which has been on the agenda for some years (Nilsson, R. 2006 Dunér & Ohlin 2011). Thus the changing circumstances and conditions of Swedish eldercare have called for new ways of thinking about and organizing eldercare work. In an attempt to label at least some of the methods used in eldercare the use of the term social innovations has evolved.

2. Aims

The aim of the article is mainly explorative. The ambition is to focus the efforts of different kind of approaches to reduce the negative impact of social isolation among older adults. Furthermore the aim is to discuss how methods of that kind may contribute to new ways of approaching social work with the elderly, and provide socially innovative ways of social work that are tailored to the life priorities of older adults. The first half of the paper provides a rough outline of some of the characteristics of social interventions in social gerontology. The latter half focuses educational and training aspects of adaptive social innovations. In this discussion I highlight the Swedish educational program Elderpedagogy. Elderpedagogy tackles the fields of lifelong learning and recognition of the social capital of an ageing population, partly using tried and tested interventional methods inherent in social gerontology.

3. Reducing social isolation

Given that one of the main challenges of future increase in aging population is defined as social integration, turning towards social gerontology and its traditional

interest in the integration of older adults in the society is logical. The development of social gerontology contains a considerable knowledge that represents various ways of preventing social isolation.

The long research tradition of social gerontology has related social integration - participation in multiple life roles and activities and access to social support in times of need - to good health and well-being among older people. This is often put forward in defining some of the central features of social work with the elderly. Contrariwise, social isolation, or the lack of access to social support and the lack of meaningful social relationships, roles, and activities, is related to poor health and lower well-being. In gerontology social isolation among elderly is commonly defined in two ways objectively or subjectively (Wegner et al 1996, Andersson 1998). Objectively social isolation is the apparent lack of social interaction, while subjective social isolation is the feeling of loneliness and communication (Weiss 1982). This means that loneliness can actually be experienced within existing social frameworks. The most common potential causes of social isolation pointed out in research are role losses (Arbuckle & de Vries 1995), living alone (Fischer & Oliner 1998, loss of spouse ((Moen 1996), health problems (Pillemer 2000) and poverty (Klinenberg 2002). In later years the ageing of the baby boomers has been related to social isolation, given their lower rates of marriage, high level of divorce and fewer children (Easterlin 1987, Easterlin et al, 1990). Thus a lot is known about the negative causes of social isolation. In addition we are able to identify a substantial amount of older adults who are socially speaking vulnerable and likely to suffer serious consequences. Given these facts it is hardly surprising that a wide range of health care and the social services in Europe and the United States have been engaged in promoting social integration and thereby reducing social isolation through interventions. On the other hand only a limited number of scientific studies have been able to stress the sustainable success of the interventions designed to mitigate social isolation. However a quick of review of the character of established social interventions among older adults enables us to point out Group Peer Support Interventions as being by far more effective than interventions based on one-to-one support. Their usual character of focusing specific groups, enables various degrees of participation and control and are connected to an existing service program have proven to show positive results. (Andersson 1984, 1985). Moreover group based interventions closely tied to the networks of local communities and networks help to ensure that the engaged participants continue establish relations after the intervention ended (Arnetz & Theorell 1983). Another successful impact of group based interventions is focused on educational components involving physical skills training (Hopman-Rock & Westhoff 2002), the psychological effects of bereavement (Caserta & Lund 1996). Summing up: The denominator of the traditional interventions of

gerontological social work is that they are assigned to focus on groups already suffering health problems, social isolation or discrimination. Preventive interventions seem to be far less common. Furthermore, social interventions have hitherto paid little or no attention to the resources of social capital contained within older populations.

4. Social innovations and the ageing population

The impact of increasing longevity on the labor market is a topic that is frequently commented upon in research. In that debate the concept of social innovation has become a key issue. Kolbacher & Herstadt (2008) have discussed the need of business corporations to attract older workers. They argue that recognizing the potentials of the social capital of older adults is a social innovation in itself. The point is that the innovating element would be to acknowledge social relations that make room for activities that would adapt to intergenerational needs leading to sustainable social engagement. This has been labeled as creating age-friendly environments (World Health Organization 2010). The interest in social innovations within the health, and social services for an adult population has been growing rapidly during the last years. I will not attempt to draw an outline of that process here. The goal is rather to discuss how the process of the changing eldercare sector in Sweden may make way to new ways of defining social gerontological practices that can be linked to socially innovative ways of creating intergenerational sustainable social relations. Some of the preconditions for a success of social innovation aiming at creating solid and sustainable intergenerational relations have to do with the concept of Lifelong Learning. As Biggs (2005) pointed out this calls for an adaptive approach. Among other things this means that the training needs of older adults needs a larger attention. Furthermore Biggs argues that the recognition of older adults' accumulated knowledge continued learning ability and social capital in general should not only be recognized, but more effectively used. But most importantly learning, training and educational efforts need to be adapted to the outspoken needs and demands of older adults. The social capital contained within older populations is a considerable resource that lies largely unused and, as such, exemplifies a societal failure to adapt to changing circumstances. However as Biggs continues the perception of older adults' potential contributions to society is gradually changing. Some of the factors contributing to this change are the expectations of older adult themselves. Another factor has to do with economic conditions and consumptions patterns of older adults (Kolbacher & Herstadt 2008).

5. Elderpedagogy

In Sweden we are presently witnessing the development of innovating ways of social work with older adults. This should be seen against the background of changing organizational principles and changing needs and demands following longevity, shown earlier. Elderpedagogy is a newly founded educational program at the University of Malmö. The scientific context of elderpedagogy is on the borderline of social work, pedagogy and social care (Nilsson 2006, Krogh-Hansen 2002). The main goal of elderpedagogy is preemptive social interventions. By working together with older persons and their networks the role of an elderpedagogue is to help maintaining good quality of life among older adults. This may be achieved by the use of efforts of focus group counselling, Group Peer Support Interventions or other methods similar to those mentioned earlier, have proven to be effective. But the most important task of is to offer socially sustainable solutions for elderly adults. This means not only focusing on the elderly themselves but highlighting stereotypes and misconceptions. Foremost the goal of this new profession involves taking into account the hitherto unexploited field of the social capital of older adults and making it apparent on different levels of society, among older adults themselves as well as in social work practices in general. This has to do with the making of new ethics within social work with older adults, which means giving the full attention their needs, demands and social capital. Furthermore the Swedish example focusing lifelong learning and adapting to the accumulated social capital of older adults shows us that educations can train students in socially innovating ways of working with older adults. Throughout the ten years of elderpedagogic existence in Malmo some profound difficulties have revealed. To begin with, the establishment of new professions does not come easy. Labour markets tend to protect the interests of groups and profession, and intruders like new professions will find it difficult to establish themselves. Secondly and more importantly, myths, stereotypes and discrimination of old age have deep roots in the society. This is proven by the fact that it is persistently hard to attract students to the program. Social work with the elderly is simply not attractive, just as the experiences from different societies demonstrate (Sharlach et al 2000, Snyder et al 2008, Weiss 2005). Obviously these problems relate to the myths and stereotypes about older people and their contribution to pessimism about ageing societies. Consequences of current myths and stereotypes of old age contribute to the image of old age is prevalent in social work as has been shown in research (Sharlach et al 2000, Snyder et al 2008, Weiss 2005). In order to deconstruct stereotypes and misconceptions in social work, some American researchers have used focus groups consisting of older adults and social

work students. The results showed that after the sessions the students not only had reconsidered negative attitudes about older adults, they had become more interested in gerontological social work (Cohen et al 2010). This leads us to the obvious fact that educational systems have a substantially important part to play in the development of adaptive social work practices. In the long run this would lead to bridging generational gaps and provide sustainable opportunities for the integration of older adults in the society. Thus educations focusing on work with the elderly have the potential to develop new ways of coping with negative consequences of stereotypes and pessimistic attitudes towards an ageing population.

Conclusions

The impacts of a rapidly growing adult population throughout the world have called for a social political as well as scholarly discussion of sustainable solutions that mitigates social isolation of the elderly. In recent years steps towards age-friendly societies have been taken for instance on the labor market field. In that process we have seen examples of social innovations recognizing experience and knowhow of older adults. Within the care and social services the development has been slower. In the article I have shown how interventional methods and techniques have a long lasting history in social gerontology in general. Placed in a new framework, as for instance in a new profession, and educational programs like Elderpedagogy that relate to gerontological social work, they are of value in comprehending the assets of social capital of old adults. In that zealous effort, tried and tested methods established in social gerontology in combination with hitherto unexploited fields such as social media, technological innovations and so forth are crucial. The greatest challenge in future social work and social care for the elderly does not only consist in inventing new methods, new forms or organizations. Instead it has to do with creating sustainable solutions that obstruct the impacts of age discrimination, negative stereotypes and misconceptions about old age.

References

- Andersson, L. (1984), “Intervention against loneliness in a group of elderly women: A process evaluation”, *Human Relations*, No 37 (4), pp. 295-310.
- Andersson, L. (1985), “Intervention against loneliness in a group of elderly women: an impact evaluation”, *Social Science and Medicine*, No 20 (4), pp. 355-364.
- Andersson, L. (1998), “Loneliness research and interventions: a review of the literature”, *Aging and mental health*, No 2 (4), pp. 264-274.

- Arbuckle, N. W., de Vries, B. (1995), “The long-term effects of later life spusal and parnetal bereavement on personal functioning”, *Gerontologist*, No 35 (5), pp. 637-47.
- Arnetz, B., Theorell, T. (1983), “Psychological, sociological and health behavior aspects of a long term activation programme for institutionalized elderly people”, *Social Science and Medicine*, p. 449-456.
- Biggs, S. (2001), “Towards a Critical Narrativity. Stories of Aging in Contemporary Social Policy”, *Journal of Aging Studies*, No 15, pp. 303-316.
- Biggs, S. (2005), “Beyond appearances: perspectives on identity in later life and some implications for method”, *J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci*, No 60(3), pp. 118-128.
- Bijak, J. et al (2007), “Population and Labor Force Projections for 27 European Countries:2002-2052: Impact of International Migration on Population Ageing”, *European journal of population*, No 23 (1), pp. 1-31.
- Blomberg, S., Petersson, J. (2007), “Elderly Care in Sweden as Part in the Formulation of Social Citizenship – A Historical Perspective on Present Change”, in Harryson L. & O’Brian M. eds. *Social Welfare, Social Exclusion, a Life Course Frame*, Lund: Värpinge Ord & Text, pp 173-193.
- Bodily, C. (1994), “Ageism and the Development “Age”: A Constructionist View”, in Sarbin T. R. & Kitsue J. L. (eds) *Constructing the social. Inquiries in social construction*,. London/ Thousand Oakes/New Dehli: Sage Publications.
- Caserta, M.S., Lund D.M. (1996), “Beyond bereavement support group meetings: Exploring outside social contacts among group members”, *Death studies*, No 20 (6), pp. 537-556.
- Cohen, H. L. et al (2004), “Using focus groups as an educational methodology: deconstructing stereotypes and social work practice misconceptions concerning aging and older adults”, *Educational Gerontology*, No 30 (4), pp. 329-346.
- Dunér, A., Ohlin, E. (2011), ”En begynnande professionalisering? Om gränsarbete och kompetenser inom funktionshinderverksamhet och äldreomsorg”, in *Socialvetenskaplig tidskrift*, No (4), pp. 336-353.
- Dychtwald, K. (1999), *Age Power: How the 21st century will be ruled by the new old*, New York, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.
- Easterlin, R. A. et al (1990), “Retirement prospects of the baby boom generation”, *Gerontologist*, No 30 (6), pp. 776-783.
- Easterlin, R. A. (1987), *New age structure of poverty in America: Permanent or Transient?*
- Fischer, C.S., Oliker, S.J. (1998), “Research not on friendship, gender, and the life cycle”, *Social forces*, No 62 (1), pp. 124-33.
- Hazan, H. (1994), *Old age: constructions and deconstructions*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Hopman-Rock, M., Westhoff, M. (2002), “Development and evaluation of “Aging well and healthily: A health education and exercise program for community living older adults”, *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, No (10), pp. 363-380.
- Klinenberg, E. (2002), *Heatwave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, Chicago: University of Chicago press.
- Kolbacher, F., Herstadt, C. (2008), *The Silver Market Phenomenon, Business Opportunities in an Era of Demographic Change*, New York: Springer.
- Krogh-Hansen, H. (2002), *Livet er et kunstværk – om aeldrepedagogisk teori og praxis*, Copenhagen Aeldreforum.
- Moen, P. (1996), “Changing age trends: The pyramid upside down?”, in Bronfenbrenner U. et al eds. *The changing state of Americans*, Free press: New York, pp. 208-58.
- Nilsson, R. (2006), *Äldrepedagogik – social arbete med äldre I ett nytt perspektiv*.

- Phillipson, C. (2007), “New Ageing and New Policy Responses: Reconstructing Gerontology”, in A Global Age, In Wahl H-W. et al, *New Dynamics in Old Age: Individual, Environmental and Societal Perspectives*, Amyville, New York, Baywood Publishing, pp. 291-305.
- Pillemer, K. et al eds. (2000), *Social integration in the second half of life*, John Hopkins University Press Baltimore, pp. 19-47.
- Sharlach, A. et al (2000), “Educating social workers for an aging society: a vision for the 21st century”, *Journal of social work education*, No 36 (3), pp. 521-538.
- Snyder, C. S. et al (2008), “Bridging the Gap: Gerontology and social work education”, *Gerontology & and Geriatrics Education*, No 28, pp. 1-21.
- Walker, A., Foster, L. (2006), “Ageing and social class: An enduring Relationship” in: Vincent, J. et al *The future of old age*, London: Sage.
- Warness, A.M. et al (2004), “The Diversity and Welfare of Older Migrants in Europe”, *Ageing and society*, No 24 (3), pp. 647-663.
- Wegner, G.C. et al (1996), “Social-isolation and loneliness in ol-age: review and model refinement”, *Ageing and Society*, pp. 333-358.
- Weiss, I. (2005), “Interest in working with elderly: a cross-national study of graduating social work students”, *Journal of Social Work Education*, No 41 (3), pp. 379-391.
- Weiss, R.S. (1982), “Issues in the study of lonliness”, in Peplau D. ed. *Loneliness: A Source Book of Current Theory, Research and Therapy*, Wiley, New York, pp. 71-80.
- World Health Orgainzation 2010 *Age Friendly Environments programme*, access via Internet: <http://www.who.int>.