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Contemporary Narratives of Ageing and Old Age

Between Successful Ageing and Social Death

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- PhD thesis summary -

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Keywords

social narratives; personal narratives; old age; ageing; seniors, successful ageing; social death; social gerontology; macro-narratives; theories; weak theories; meta-theories; ageism; defiant ageism; reactive ageism; comparative analysis; neuro-scientification of the human subject; the overvaluation of extroversion and sociability; the infantilization and the cult of youth; the obsession with corporeal beauty; the positivization of old age; the hyper-socialization of old age; the hyper-naturalization of old age; the metabolization of old age; the modest socialization of old age.

Summary

As the French historian Georges Minois (1987) remarked, the contemporary interest in old age and ageing is unprecedented. This interest can be observed within the popular culture, concerned with taming old age in order, among other things, to increase longevity, in social anxieties related to the phenomenon, intensively illustrated in the media and political discourses, of demographic ageing, within the studies dedicated to this topic from various fields, in the flourishing of professional organizations and associations with goals such as intensifying research on certain thematic segments related to ageing or such as stimulating the general awareness of socially critical issues, such as age discrimination, or seeking to promote inclusive social attitudes in relation to seniors. All this reflects the social and cultural need to cultivate research on old age and ageing.

This thesis aims to contribute to the development of the research aiming at understanding the social aspects of ageing and old age, as they are manifested in contemporary times, assuming a social constructivism perspective, by investigating the fundamental roles of the two major social narratives of old age and ageing that dominate the nowadays Western societies: successful ageing and, in antithetical relationship with it, social death.

The general objective is to reveal that the two social narratives, radical and oppositional, tend to always be interconnected, and the tension between them is also reflected in the smaller narratives that are born between the two extremes, the interconnectivity being visible: 1) at the level of socio-cultural theories of ageing; 2) at the level of social representations; 3) at the level of personal attitudes/narratives.

The secondary aim is to identify both the challenges that these contradictory contemporary narratives pose for seniors, in terms of perpetuating stereotypes and forms of ageism and due to justifying or encouraging social inequality and the possibility of empowering the elderly as well as promoting a cultural reconstruction of the concepts of old age, ageing and senior that they contain (it is especially the case of successful ageing).

In addition, there are a number of seven specific aims, some of them mainly theoretical and another mainly non-theoretical: 1) Identifying and examining the characteristics of the structural components (social narratives, the theoretical core, the weak theories or quasi-theoretical discourses) and the conceptual dimensions that form the narratives of successful aging and, in relation to them, the narratives of social death, and deciphering of the most significant socio-cultural mechanisms that determine their functioning and that privilege certain attitudes and representations of old age and ageing within the Western space; 2) Delivering some theoretical contributions in the field of sociology of old age and ageing: theoretical clarifications of the concept/theory/model of successful ageing and those of social death and proposing a conceptual structuring model for each of them, examining the theoretical core and the evolution in time of this core for each of the two macro-narratives; a complex comparative analysis of the two macro-narratives; producing a meta-theoretical or architectural perspective by discussing the various relationships between the two macro-narratives and by radiographing their conceptual composition; revealing the narrative dimension of theories that develop around the concept of successful ageing and theories that deal with social death and, correlatively, identifying narratives with claims of theory (e.g.: the theory narrative of the old person as a scapegoat); discussing the strong theoretical core of the two contrastive social narratives; identifying the four postmodern paradigms that play a fundamental role in the contemporary socio-cultural configuration of old age and the role of these paradigms as important articulators for successful ageing and social death: neuro-scientification of the human subject, the overvaluation of extroversion and sociability; the infantilization and the cult of youth; the obsession with corporeal beauty; highlighting that ignoring the tension between the conceptual cores of the two narratives, with a considerable cultural history despite their postmodern profile, leads to unbalanced or risky interpretations of old age and ageing (e.g. the socio-cultural exaltation of the ageless self), the excessive positivization of old age, the hyper-socialization of old age and, on the other hand, the hyper-naturalization of old age; proposing the concept of modest socialization or partial de-socialization of old age; 3) bringing theoretical contributions at the intersection between the field of sociology of old age and ageing and that of the sociology of death: the influence of the social narratives of death on the social

narratives of old age; explaining the connection between successful ageing narrative and happy/positive death movement; observing the phenomenon of old age deconstruction (according to the model of the modern strategy of deconstructing mortality, proposed by Zygmunt Bauman), respectively of ageing deconstruction (according to the model of the postmodern strategy of deconstructing immortality); observing the double valence of the phenomenon of old age denial that can lead, in the extreme, to social death, but which can also function as a strategy within successful ageing; a plea for the socio-cultural rehabilitation of the revolt in front of one's own ageing / old age, starting from the socio-ontological awareness of death; 4) Exploring recent social representations of seniors and old age, and discussing them from the perspective of the two major narratives of ageing, with an emphasis on the general cultural logic – and, as the case may be, with Romanian specificity – that underpins them; 5) Establishing the defining contents and the social relevance (including for starting or adjusting social policies) of the personal narratives *of* old age and ageing (narratives belonging to seniors, 60+), but also of personal narratives *about* old age and ageing (narratives belonging to non-seniors, <60), by investigating in depth and comparatively the ways in which they highlight the internalization – both in a narrow, imitative and in a complex sense, of processing and negotiation, or even of creative transcendence of – the social narratives of successful ageing and social death; 6) Observing the applicability of some concepts/theories proposed in the theoretical part of the thesis, at the level of representations of old age and ageing, as well as at the level of personal perceptions about them. Correlatively, the use of data resulting from the analysis of the personal narratives of ageing and old age to build concepts (e.g.: metabolization of old age, defiant ageism, reactive ageism) or new theories/theoretical directions (e.g.: the inclusion of life story among the parameters that measure successful ageing, the potential benefits of a narrative sociology of ageing for understanding contemporary attitudes towards ageing and differentiating between success as social value and success as individual reality); 7) Explicitly and implicitly outlining of a framework of the specific traits of the discourses and social perceptions on old age and seniors in contemporary Romania.

The first part discusses the two principles that articulate the general approach of this thesis: assuming the limits of examining this topic and the humility (with two meanings, critical humility and cultural humility) in front of previous research on this subject, starting from the research difficulties arising from the object of research (namely, old age and ageing), such as the fact that a) ageing is inherent in life, but not always assumed personally, b) that the elderly tend to be seen as a radical otherness, this reductionism interacting tensely with c) the historical and cultural abundance of the meanings and interpretations of old age, but also from the

difficulties related to the sociological research: the incompleteness and vulnerability of knowledge, specific to any gerontological perspective and the need to take into account previous research acquisitions. The principle of assuming limits and that of humility does not exclude, quite the contrary, the assumption of a personal voice and the effort to obtain original research results. Also in the first part, I established the main and specific objectives, acknowledged the benefits and discussed the logic based on which a constructivist approach to old age and ageing is necessary, counteracting the risk of interpreting the phenomenon of ageing in a naturalistic manner, a phenomenon having otherwise a categorical biological substrate, and I explained that the approach will be qualitative and bifocal, having both a theoretical and empirical dimension (for both presenting sociological motivations, but also specific, gerontological arguments), and will be based on three methodological principles: critical thinking, sociological imagination and defamiliarizing the familiarity. I also highlighted the advantages of using the concept of narratives in the social sciences in general, but also in this thesis in particular (connection to the narrative turn, the coexistence of the pole of production and that of reception, the suggestion of continuity between social and personal, multiple socio-cultural sources, going beyond the fact-fiction dichotomy, the reclaiming of the humanistic roots of sociology), but without ignoring the challenges and even the pitfalls that the concept of narrative implies (the confusion between authenticity and truth, the narrative inequality of life stories, the normative nature of certain social narratives), by reference to the latest literature in various fields such as critical theory, sociology and narrative gerontology. Moreover, advantages (empowerment of the elderly who (re-)acquire their own voice and social visibility) and disadvantages of using the concept of narrative and advantages and disadvantages in strict relation to old age and ageing are identified. The paper uses narratives both as an object of analysis and as a method to obtain research results, in other more condition more difficult to achieve.

The second part of this paper, with both a theoretical and a pronounced meta-theoretical approach, deals with investigating the relevance of the two narratives of successful ageing and social death at a theoretical level. Once the general structural and functional characteristics of the two narratives are established (including the extended semiotic generosity and inclusion of the reception pole, but also the nuancing of interferences and distinctions between narratives and theories), the major meanings and configurations of the social narrative of successful ageing are discussed (socio-cultural sources, characteristics, its place within the Western popular culture, thematic patterns, etc.). Three essential, otherwise often confused, components of this narrative are established: the general narrative of successful ageing as such, the

theoretical paradigm of successful ageing, and the weak theories and quasi-theoretical discourses.

An extensive chapter is devoted to the theoretical paradigm of successful ageing, a chapter that emphasizes the difficulties of the successful ageing concept, differentiating between terms such as concept-model-theory-narrative, and proposing three stages in the development of successful ageing: the stage of historical evolution (with the first attempts to theorize successful ageing, the works of Robert J. Havighurst (1953; 1954; 1961) being extremely important here), the stage of conceptual clarification (the fundamental contribution of John Wallis Rowe and the psychologist Robert L. Kahn (1987, 1997, 1998)) and the stage of criticism that implies the theoretical and socio-cultural suspicion towards the concept of successful ageing, the penalization of the term of success and the theoretical attempts to reinvent or recover the theory of successful ageing by amending the concept and sometimes by advancing alternative terms such as active, positive ageing, healthy ageing, etc. The chapter on weak theories and quasi-theoretical discourses of successful ageing discusses the circulation of parts of the theoretical core of successful ageing narratives at certain levels of contemporary society (e.g.e, public health policies, projects, ageing organizations) and how the persuasive potential of these discourses is more related to the narrative side than to the theoretical one, the risk of the neo-liberal ideologization of old age being increased. This chapter has also, among other things, the merit of examining the bridges and the differences between the narrative of successful ageing and that of active ageing. Moreover, biological death is identified as the sub-conceptual matter for both narratives, and there are several discussions of its role and place in these narratives and comparative approaches to the meanings and functions of social death for each of the two narratives.

Two chapters are dedicated to the narrative of social death, one in which its particularities are discussed in relation to successful ageing, and one in which the theoretical paradigm of social death is viewed in relation to two stages. First, the stage of historical and infra-conceptual evolution, when a concept of social death, as such, is still non-existent, but largely predictable in the narratives of the decline and social irrelevance of the elderly (and sometimes in the positive narratives in which there is a process of in-humanization of the elderly through an excess of positive meanings), but also in the subsidiary of some gerontological theories such as the theory of disengagement, where it has, as paradoxical as it may seem, a positive role. As shaky and unnamed as it is, the infra-concept of social death forms a tense relationship with the positive socio-historical narratives of old age and ageing. Then, the stage of adoption (from the social sciences in which the concept was used, with

reference to vulnerable categories and special social contexts) of the concept of social death by gerontological theories and building an effective gerontological theory, in the extension of concepts and theories such as social exclusion and social invisibility of the elderly. Here it is also shown that a gerontological theory of social death is far from complete and new interpretations and concepts are proposed to make its use more efficient in studies on ageing. The narrative of the old person as a scapegoat is treated in a chapter subsumed to the chapter of social death, which explores how social death, with applicability on old age, enters popular culture and has the pretence of functioning as a social theory.

The last chapter of the theoretical part probably contains most of the theoretical contributions with a certain degree of originality. The chapter launches and examines the idea of a narrative and fundamentally polarized meta-theory of old age, in which successful ageing and social death represent contemporary extremes that translate the tension, classical and perennial, between positive and negative, regarding the cultural comprehension, the social representations and the theorizing of old age and ageing. For this, I discuss the double relaxation, theoretical and gerontological, of theories, a relaxation that does not cancel, but, on the contrary, exacerbates the need for theory, opening it, at the same time, to the narrative. The chapter brings some arguments according to which the terminology of successful ageing (with reference to the narrative and the theoretical component) should be maintained, despite its theoretical and cultural shortcomings, it proposes two new theoretical concepts, that of hyper-socialization, respectively that of hyper-naturalization of old age, which could account for the drifts or excesses of the narratives of successful ageing and social death, which are brought to light this time not starting from gerontological theories, but from the four elements, called contemporary cultural (dis-)articulators of old age. Also, the chapter militates, starting from the positive potential of the social narrative of successful ageing, for a socio-cultural rehabilitation of the revolt in the face of old age and, correlatively, in the face of death.

The third part of the paper is dedicated, in a first instance, but to a lesser extent, to the repercussions of these narratives in terms of social representations in recent years Romania, chapter III.2 having the role of putting the personal narratives of old age and ageing in a Romanian context. Thus, a framework of Romanian recent social narratives within the public space is sketched, and it is highlighted the narrative polarization, which offers though clear domination, as vehemence and ordering of the meanings of old age, to the narrative of social death, characterised by radical ageism (for which some socio-cultural explanations that need, however, further investigation, are proposed).

To a much more significant extent, this part aims to explore, with comparative notes, the personal narratives *of* old age and ageing (those belonging to seniors, 26 people aged between 60 and 85) and the narratives *about* old age and ageing (belonging to the 25 people aged between 30 and 59 and which I have designated by the term of non-seniors), in connection with how these personal narratives are shaped by the (macro-)narratives of successful ageing, respectively those of social death, by shaping understanding a variety of close and yet distinct processes: reflection, recreation and problematization. Thus, a general picture of Romanian attitudes on ageing, old age and the elderly is highlighted, by analysing the personal narratives of seniors regarding old age and ageing, but also those of those under 60, on the same topics. Composed of two large cores, the first generated by the interview with seniors, and the other by the interview with the non-seniors, both of them encouraging narrative as a strategy for obtaining data and as a result of research itself, it is a part par excellence empirical, but strongly analytical, which deduces certain general specificities of old age and ageing in the Romanian space, but also Romanian patterns of successful ageing, as well as revealing their interconnection with versions of the narrative of social death. Moreover, this part of the paper does not avoid proposing new theoretical concepts (e.g. defiant ageism, reactive ageism, old age metabolization, etc.), testing or crystallizing various theoretical assumptions from the previous part of the paper (e.g.: the success of continuity, activity as a guarantee of good ageing) or interpreting, through socio-cultural and gerontological lenses, certain phenomena related to old age and ageing (e.g.: body/mind dualism, the reduced narrativity produced by the theme of health, the incomplete metabolization of old age, death-old age connection, etc.).

In relation to seniors, the following aspects are identified and widely discussed: the elderly complain and fear the domestic irrelevance that functions as an avatar of social death; there are numerous internal conflicts (at the level of the individual) resulting from the status of grandparent disputed both by a traditional social imaginary and by the emancipation promoted by the influence of successful ageing narratives and models; ageing is less represented than old age, and the reason is that the temporality of ageing is absorbed by the story of life; the metabolization of old age is different from passively accepting ageing and old age, and challenging the need to take on the status of the elderly does not automatically mean the absence of the metabolization of old age or a poor personal management of social and biological problems related to old age; there is a Romanian pattern of successful ageing in which survival and continuity success play an important role; three are the components of health for seniors – nutrition, disease and exercise, the latter being the only one that is put in relation to old age (by the elders) and there is a widespread disinterest in prevention; the body

tends to be aestheticized and extracted from a strict health perspective, having the role of restricting the field of manifestation of old age; relating the brain to old age in the sense of considering it a rejuvenating agent, while identifying its fragility and the risk of precipitating social death; there are four significant forms of active social involvement (paid work, domestic work, self-enrichment activities, networks of friends); domestic work is extremely problematic, bringing little satisfaction, especially for women who have regretted retirement and loved their profession; the tendency of hyper-responsibility of the individual in relation to aging and old age and poor capitalization of social factors; old age tends to be seen as non-specific, externalized and considered irrelevant, a sign of the internalization of ageism and of the fear of social exclusion; the fear of death often hides the fear of social death; the elderly rarely show solidarity with those of their age, this being identified as a mechanism of self-protection; the manifestation of the desire for autonomy and control over one's own life is correlated with the fear of not becoming a burden for others; there is a tendency to dissociate death from old age; there is a paradox determined by the co-existence of the quasi-absence of absolute immortality and the existence of faith in divinity; life story can be observed as a favourite narrative pattern.

In relation to non-seniors, the following elements are observed and explored: the gendering of successful ageing models and criteria; the neglect of external and social factors in shaping the positive or negative models of successful ageing; strategizing successful personal ageing through activity, continuity and critical self-review; the connections of ageism with the fear of change and the need for control; the tension between the predominantly negative view of old age, ageing and the elderly and the critique of contemporary society centered on youth and promoting social exclusion; the effort to find social and psychological explanations for the behaviours and attitudes of the elderly considered negative; the three forms of ageism in relation to the elderly: compassion ageism, defiant ageism and reactive ageism; negative refusals and positive refusals to discuss or imagine one's own old age; the distinction between thinking and imagining one's own old age; the general anxiety about the personal ageing of those who question old age; the denial of (future) elderly status and the relationship with the denial of the senior status of the seniors; ideal old age and extreme old age as quasi-failed exercises of imagination; the two connections between old age and death: accidental (with the function of social criticism and with the aim of emancipation in relation to old age) for about half of the respondents and fundamental (with the function of ontologizing death and old age) for the other half; observing, as a favourite narrative pattern, the fluctuating perspective of the non-seniors.

The last part (the fourth) contains the conclusions, but it is not extremely repetitive in terms of highlighting the main information and structuring the work, focusing more on the thesis' contributions and without neglecting to discuss the research directions that the study opens. In fact, two types of significant contributions of this work are proposed and described: predominantly theoretical contributions and respectively predominantly non-theoretical contributions, while the tracing of future research directions is made starting from the assumed research limits and the under-use of research results. Besides, there are discussed some reasons why this work can be understood as a narrative, an academic one, about old age and ageing, this beyond a figure of speech suitable for the resonance it produces with the actual content of the study, reasons which belong to three levels: 1) a general, perspectival one; 2) a conceptual one and 3) a methodological and stylistic one. However, the possible temptation to consider the narrative as a triple panacea (social, cultural and academic) is dismantled in the sense that a narrative organization of a work is not a guarantee of the quality of research results and does not exhaust its meanings, revealing, instead, a certain (meta-)coherence of it, highlighting the normality of the weakening of the theoretical discourses, of their creative vulnerability in the sense of finding out their narrative potential.