

Orchestrating ageing – a field approach toward cultural disengagement in later life

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Abstract

Despite gerontology's growing interest in culture, relatively little attention has been given to older adults' participation in theater. This paper addresses this gap by developing field theory as an analytical tool to conceptualize processes of cultural disengagement in later life. Ten older individuals (60+ years) were invited to investigate their access to three different theater spaces in Vienna. The investigation was documented through participatory observations, qualitative interviews, and photo diaries. The results highlight three specific sets of rules that are relevant in theater: Rules about 1) the ageing body, 2) mobility, and 3) subjectivities. Furthermore, these rules are age-coded, which means that many of the rules visitors in theaters have to follow to be able to participate in theater are not easily followed by older adults. Finally, this article outlines the potential of field theory for gerontology and highlights the importance of studying processes of cultural disengagement in later life.

Keywords: cultural gerontology, leisure, participatory research, qualitative study, theater.

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Introduction

Despite gerontology's growing interest in the cultural aspects of later life, relatively little attention has been given to theater and drama (Amigoni & McMullan 2018; Bernard & Rickett 2016), and cultural participation in gerontology has hardly been explored outside of interventions (Fraser et al. 2015; Goulding 2018). While the positive impact of arts participation on older adults, e.g. in participatory arts (Noice et al. 2013), writing (Sabeti 2014; Swinnen 2018), music (Perkins & Williamon 2014), singing (Coulton et al. 2015), visiting museums (Thomson & Chatterjee 2016; Thomson et al. 2018), or – more generally – arts participation (Reynolds 2015; Tymoszuk et al. 2020), has been extensively analyzed, the barriers older adults face in access to arts and culture are scarcely a topic of gerontological research. The arts and culture have hardly been explored beyond gerontology's "prism of health and wellbeing" (Goulding 2018; Twigg & Martin 2015: 9), which limits gerontology's knowledge on the barriers older adults face in their access to culture.

This is somewhat surprising since studies with representative samples have repeatedly shown that later life is often accompanied with declining – if not diminishing – cultural participation. Even though adults aged 65+ participate more in certain types of culture compared with the general population (Toepoel 2011) and 45–54-year-olds are the most culturally active group in some samples (van Eijck 2005), participation in cultural activities declines in most European countries after the age of 65, indicating an inverted U-shaped relationship between age and cultural participation (Falk & Katz-Gerro 2015; Hallmann et al. 2016). Especially, the oldest-old (80+) report lower participation in cultural activities than younger age groups, and participation in cultural activities is especially low among older adults with low income, low education, or health limitations (Jivraj et al. 2016). Consequently, studies on arts participation show that the majority of older adults do not participate in any artistic activities at all (Tymoszuk et al. 2020), and that the decline in cultural participation in later life is more prominent for highbrow forms of culture, such as theaters, than for cultural activities that happen at home or close to the home (Gallistl 2021). Despite this overwhelming empirical evidence, however, gerontology's knowledge on the reasons and processes behind these patterns of declining cultural activity in later life remains limited.

In contrast to gerontology, sociological research has widely explored barriers consumers face in access to culture through the concept of cultural disengagement (Gayo 2017), to describe the processes of becoming culturally “inactive” (Chan & Goldthorpe 2007) or “passive” (Jaeger & Katz-Gerro 2010). Such approaches offer a different perspective on cultural participation and its barriers, understanding the arts and culture not as a beneficial leisure activity, but understanding the theater as a social field in which arts institutions regulate a specific set of rules (*illusio*), which make access to culture easier for some social groups and more difficult for others (Bourdieu 1984, 1996; Lash 1993). Even though such approaches of cultural class analysis have been potent in describing the value of culture in older adults’ lives (Goulding 2018), they have never been applied to the barriers older adults face in their access to the arts and culture.

This article addresses this gap by, first, developing a sociological approach (Bourdieu 1996) to explore processes of cultural disengagement from theater in later life. Such a perspective asks which specific rules of the game (*illusio*) in the cultural field influence older adults’ experiences in access to culture. Second, this paper explores these barriers older adults face in their access to theater with empirical qualitative data from a participatory project, in which ten older individuals (60+ years) were invited to investigate their access to three different theaters in Vienna, Austria, through participatory observations and photo diaries.

Through these data, this article shows how the *illusio* of the theater field is age-coded, meaning that many of the rules visitors in theaters are expected to follow are not easily followed by older adults. In the last step, this article outlines the potential of a field approach to theater in later life and makes a case for the incorporation of gerontological knowledge in cultural policy. In doing so, this article highlights the role gerontology needs to play in cultural research and policy in times of demographic change.

A Field Approach toward Cultural Disengagement

What characterizes a field approach toward theater in later life? First and foremost, a field approach highlights the institutional and social

circumstances of cultural participation – and hence the social stratification that goes along with cultural participation. Such a perspective highlights that theaters operate in a specific cultural field, which regulates and governs which social groups have access to highbrow forms of culture such as the theater, and which ones do not (Bourdieu 1996). Fine arts institutions, such as theaters, function as a source of social stratification (Prior 2005), and access to theaters is, therefore, not so much dependent on participants' competences, motivation, or interest, but dependent on how far their needs are considered as relevant in a given cultural field. From such a perspective, processes of cultural disengagement in later life are not individually motivated but institutionally regulated. A field theory approach to theater in later life, hence, renders visible the institutional conditions of cultural disengagement in later life.

Central to this understanding is the concept of the *cultural field*, which can be understood as spaces of encounter between different agents: "the literary field, i.e. the spaces of literary *prises the position* that (...) arise from the encounter between particular agents' dispositions (...) and their position in a field which is defined by the distribution of a specific form of capital." (Bourdieu 1984: 311). Cultural spaces such as the theater, in that sense, can be understood as a *field* or in other words, a social space, or a social arena, in which the legitimacy of different audiences is constantly negotiated through questions, such as: who gets to decide which stories are told on big stages? Who gets to be a critic of theater, and who gets to be a silent audience member? Which resources (*capital*) are needed to participate in the production and consumption of theater?

Partly, this is due to the high volume of capital that theaters as institutions possess. Theaters, especially renowned venues and stages, might have a considerable amount of economic capital, through e.g. the material resources from public or private funding. They might also have considerable amounts of social capital, by e.g. having especially renowned artists displaying their work on a particular stage or having access to consumer groups who are high in capital themselves. Most importantly, however, theaters tend to possess a considerable amount of cultural capital deriving from the value of a company's prestige as an institution in the art world (Serino et al. 2017). Through their high volume of capital, therefore, arts institutions play an important role in governing the access to theater

and defining the rules audiences have to follow in order to gain access to these institutions.

However, Bourdieu (2018) highlights that it is not only just cultural institutions that regulate access to the cultural field of theater, but there are also certain rules of the game in place that audiences have to follow along to be able to take a legitimate position in the field, which he calls *illusio*. The struggles for legitimacy in a cultural field, hence, “contribute to a continual reproduction of belief in the game, interest in the game and its stakes, the illusion. (...) Each field produces its specific form of the *illusio*, in the sense of an investment in the game which pulls agents out of their indifference and inclines and predisposes (...) to distinguish what is important (‘what matters to me’), is of interest, in contrast to ‘what is all the same to me’, or in-different” (Bourdieu 2018: 738).

Analyzing theater as an exemplary case of cultural fields, we could, hence, argue that the field of theater produces its own rules of the game (*illusio*) that are set into practice and governed through cultural institutions: Codes and rules about when and where theater can and should take place, rules about what to wear when visiting the theater, rules for how to behave during the play or even the breaks, or about which topics are legitimate for theater (and which are not). This does, however, not imply that these rules are materialized for all eternity or outside of individuals’ agency. On the contrary, Bourdieu understands fields as a *relational* construct: Instead of focusing on the persistence of power struggles (e.g. between arts institutions and older audiences), Bourdieu stresses that it is the relationships between actors who characterize a field, and that these relationships can change over time. Even though these relationships might have historically developed or might feel as manifest or materialized power structures to an individual, this does, however, also imply that things could always be otherwise (Albert & Kleinman 2011).

Which place does that leave for older audiences? We utilize the notion of age-codings (Krekula 2009) to conceptualize the ways in which the *illusio* of modern theater addresses and governs old age. To do so, we need to move beyond our understanding of age as a biological, individual process toward an understanding of age as a relational and embedded “collaborative process that involves everyone” (Krekula et al. 2018), including institutions, symbols, materials, and structures. The role and position of older people, hence, is not just based on older adults, their health, or cognitive

abilities, but defined by institutions that enable or restrict the role they are allowed to take in different contexts. Cultural fields and cultural institutions, from this perspective, are an arena in which age and age normality are negotiated and constructed (Krekula et al. 2017) that regulate in which positions older adults have access to culture.

Applying a field approach as outlined to our data, we, therefore, ask through which dynamics older adults are addressed or governed through the *illusio* in the theater field by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: Which rules of the game are encountered by older adults when they visit the theater field?

RQ2: How do these rules of the game in the theater field address age and ageing?

RQ3: How do they enable or restrict the access of older adults to theater?

Design and Methods

Data Collection

To explore these questions, we draw upon data from a qualitative and exploratory study with participatory elements (von Unger 2014). In line with the participatory approach of the research, ten older adults were invited to explore the rules of the theater with us as coresearchers.

The project took four methodological steps. First, ten older (60+) adults were recruited as coresearchers. Second, the older coresearchers were asked to organize one theater visit for themselves and a researcher from the project team and document their experience through a photo diary (Photo Voice, Simmonds et al. 2015). The researchers from the project team documented their experiences at the theater in an observation protocol, which was structured by predefined observation topics (e.g. description of the time and place of observation, access to the building, interactions between coresearchers, description of phenomena related to ageing, and interactions between coresearchers and others at the theater). Third, we conducted semi-structured interviews with narrative elements with the coresearchers (Misoch 2015). Interviews were structured with an interview guide and covered questions about their everyday life, cultural

activities, and theater in particular. Fourth, we organized two group discussions with five coresearchers each, in which they shared their photo documentation of the theater visit and discussed barriers older adults' face when going to the theater. In these group discussions, coresearchers analyzed the meaning of their photo diaries together using the SHOWED-model for photo analysis (Simmonds et al. 2015: 39). The two group discussions and the semi-structured interviews were fully transcribed verbatim (in German). The joint theater visits between researchers and coresearchers took place in three theaters in Vienna, Austria. The three venues were chosen because they are the three theater venues that receive the most public funding in Vienna. Each of the coresearchers had the task of picking a play and a date, coordinating it with the respective researcher, buying tickets and arranging a meeting point with the researcher on site. Costs for the tickets were later reimbursed.

Sample

Coresearchers were recruited in Vienna through presentations of the study in different contexts, mainly leisure clubs and associations for older adults. Participants in this study ought to be over the age of 60 years old, and half of them should be culturally disengaged, meaning that they did not attend any form of highbrow culture in the last 12 months prior to the study (Table 1).

Analysis

The data basis for the analysis consists of 1) ten interview transcripts, 2) transcripts of two group discussions, detailing the coresearchers' data analysis of their photo diaries, and 3) ten participant observation protocols. In a first step, data were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin 1996) supported by the software MAXQDA (VERBI Software 2017). This step was conducted to identify reoccurring and important topics in the material and gain an overview of the material available. In a second step, we developed 'Situational Maps' for each case, which are one of the tools suggested by Clarke's 'Situational Analysis' (2012). This means that each theater visit was analyzed as a research situation, and the research team used dominant topics from the first step to

Table 1. Inclusion criteria for ten coresearchers

Coresearchers (anonymized)	Age	Participation in concerts, ballet, opera, or theater 12 months before the project
Mrs. H.	77 years	Once or never
Mrs. W.	72 years	Once or never
Mr. N.	62 years	Once or never
Mrs. F.	71 years	Once or never
Mrs. C.	75 years	Once or never
Mr. T.	78 years	Twice or more
Mrs. P.	62 years	Twice or more
Mr. V.	73 years	Twice or more
Mrs. K.	75 years	Twice or more
Mrs. S.	75 years	Twice or more

identify the relevant actors, discourses, rules, materials, and symbols at each theater visit. Third, the different case maps that emerged out of the coded data were conflated in group sessions, in which three researchers at the University of Vienna participated. The aim of this step was to identify common and differentiating topics between the different maps and therefore reveal the specific rules that our older coresearcher had to follow to be able to visit the theater.

Ethical Issues

The researchers' ethical responsibilities and the appropriateness of research settings and instruments were thoroughly considered throughout the process. As some of the coresearchers could be considered as vulnerable, exchange and reflection in weekly team meetings were an important part of our research strategy. In an individual introductory conversation, all respondents were given comprehensive information about the study and their role and tasks within the research process and asked for informed consent. Explanations were given with regard to the capabilities, e.g. some of the coresearchers were supported in learning how to take and send photos with their smartphone. All coresearchers were informed

that their participation in the study was voluntary, their consent can be withdrawn, and their data can be deleted at any time. Furthermore, we offered the coresearchers follow-up conversations after the completion of their involvement in the research process. All data were anonymized after data collection. Researchers conducted a research ethics screening self-assessment provided by the University of Vienna to identify ethical risks of this study. No formal vote by an ethics committee was required for this study, as all study participants were able to give full informed consent to participate in this study, and the study design did not threaten the physical or mental integrity or the right to privacy of study participants.

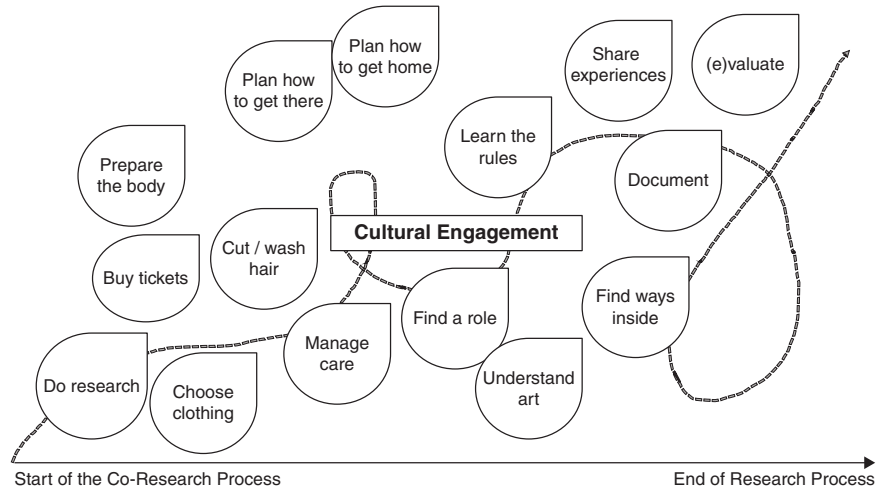
Results

Which rules of the game did the older coresearchers encounter in their visits to the theater? What are the age-codings in the *illusio* of the theater field? To answer this question, we first need to highlight all the different things that had to be done by our participants in order to be able to go to the theater, as is indicated in the joint map of relevant practices related to cultural engagement. Figure 1 shows the most commonly described practices related to the joint theater visit in our data. Cultural engagement, as it seems in our data, was not just a case of going to the theater and enjoying the show – there was a considerable amount of preparation work that went into it.

This shows that consumption (experiencing the performance in the theater) was only a very small share of the overall process of cultural engagement. To be able (and allowed) to go to the theater, it seems, there was a whole variety of things our coresearchers had to do (and a whole variety of rules they had to follow), which was one of the reasons why many of them – despite their high interest – did not attend the theater regularly.

All the practices that were connected to cultural consumption indicate which rules are in place when older adults go to the theater. In the process of preparing the joint theater visit, our coresearchers had to carefully choose which work had to be done in order to be able to go to the theater (e.g. almost all of our study participants described how they read information about the play they were going to see), and which other things were less important and could be left out. The wide variety of practices that were done before (and after) the theater visit therefore paint a picture

Figure 1. Practices of going to the theater



of what our coresearchers felt was necessary in order to be able to go to the theater, and also gives us an idea of how challenging it was for them.

This careful process of planning, evaluating, and preparing for the theater visit that our coresearchers were involved in and documented through images and in the interviews, allowed us to understand the rules that were involved in going to the theater. Mrs. W. (72 years), for example, described in her interview the specific way that a 'normal' audience member is usually dressed: "Yesterday, I saw some people in the public transport. I did not see them at the theatre, but maybe, they were going there too. You can always spot them: beautiful, chic dress, yes. The hair nicely done, yes." Through images of a 'normal' or 'legitimate' audience member, Mrs. W. explains what she feels is necessary to do before going to the theater: dressing nicely and doing your hair the same way.

In the following, we want to focus on three specific sets of rules that were important for all of our interview partners, as they did not just define their role as audiences members, but also their role as an older audience member in the theater field: 1) Rules about the ageing body at the theater, 2) Rules about mobility in going to the theaters, and 3) Rules about subjectivities allowed in the theater.

Body Work: Preparing the Ageing Body

One important element of the age-coded *illusio* of the theater field was that bodies at the theater had to be prepared in a very specific way to be understood as legitimate. Our coresearchers described a wide variety of body work, understood as the production and modification of older bodies through work (Gimlin 2007) that had to be done in order to be able to go to the theater. Our coresearchers described (and graphically documented) a wide variety of this body work: For Mrs. W., this meant going to the hairdressers to get her hair washed and cut for the occasion, the result of which she also documented in her photo diary (Figure 2). For Mrs. H. (72 years), this meant carefully preparing clothing for the occasion: "I chose the dress I only wear at ceremonies. Thank god I had a dress for that occasion!" This kind of body work spreads across different areas of the ageing body – feet, hair, faces, and clothing – all of which were prepped to fit the occasion.

While this was a (relatively) easy task for our coresearchers, this also included work that was outside of our co-researchers' agency, more difficult or even impossible to do. In these cases, it became apparent how an ageing body – one who was not fully under the control of our coresearchers' agency – was a problem in orchestrating the theater visit. Often, this

Figure 2. Examples of body work in the visual diaries of coresearchers



was related to experiencing the ageing body as problematic in the context of the theater. Mrs. F. (71 years) tells us after asking why she does not go to the theater more often: "There are health related reasons. I cannot eat for a specific time before I go (to the theatre). Otherwise, I run to the toilet every other minute." The apparent rule of the theater not to leave the venue during the play, therefore hindered Mrs. F. to go to the theater regularly.

Here, it seems as if the ageing body was an obstacle, something that stood in the way of Mrs. F. and her (desired) cultural activity. Another example was Mr. V., who fell asleep several times during the play and indicated feeling ashamed for it afterward (Observation Protocol Theater Visit Mr. V.). Ageing bodies, it seems in these examples, did not quite fit into the rules of the theater that were in place – and going to the theater made our coresearchers very aware of that. The apparent rule of the game, here, was that bodies in the theater were able-bodies, who were fully under the control of the audience member – a rule that seemed to be particularly hard to follow the older our coresearchers were.

Mobilities: Going There and Back Again

A second important challenge most of our coresearchers encountered in their theater experience was spatial: It was the challenge of researching, finding, and making their way to the theater. The body that was expected in the theater was, therefore, not only an able one but also a mobile one – and the mobility involved in going to the theater was described as one major challenge by our coresearchers, and impressions and barriers encountered on the way to the theater (or on the way back) were a reoccurring topic in our coresearchers' visual diaries (Figure 3).

Partly, this is because theater art is predominantly spatial art, meaning that access to theater is heavily regulated by the spaces in which it takes place. Spatial art calls for a stage to be considered legitimate and the different kinds of venues and stages theater is performed in making a considerable difference in the perceived quality of the theater. The visited spaces, such as the Burgtheater in Vienna, can be understood as spaces of consecration (Hänzi 2015). In order to see good art, audiences have to visit these places, which might be harder for older (and less mobile) audiences.

Figure 3. Examples of mobilities in the visual diaries of coresearchers



The spaces our older coresearchers had to cross to be able to go to the theater heavily influenced the way they experienced their visit to the theater. Mrs. K. (75 years), who had to travel from her home to the Burgtheater in Vienna's city center, described herself as feeling far away from the theaters in the inner city: "And that means: I live on the other side of the world," she said in her interview. Spatial distance, in that sense, was often experienced as an emotional distance – and the less experienced our co-researchers were in crossing the spaces necessary to go to the theater, the more emotional distance they felt from the venues. This example shows how declining mobility in later life leads to feelings of exclusion from the world – for Mrs. K., it is not the theater that is on the other side of the world, but she feels that she is living on the outside of the relevant field.

This spatial distance was experienced even more strongly through the specific temporalities the theater follows. Our data included stories in which our coresearchers described their way to the theater as uncomfortable, displeasing, or at times even dangerous because they had to happen in the evening or at night: "What happens in the public transport system nowadays – especially on weekends, Friday and Saturday night – is making me feel very uncomfortable" (Mr. V., 73 years). From this perspective, we can see how another rule of the theater – that it happens predominantly in the evening – meant that older adults often experienced challenges in coming there on time. We can also see how this contributes to our coresearchers as experiencing themselves as vulnerable: Following the rules of theater, going out at night, crossing wide distances to

go to these special venues, for them meant to often put themselves into an uncomfortable situation which made them feel vulnerable as an older person.

Processes of Subjectivation

The last set of rules that emerged as an important set of topics in our data was less directed toward external barriers, but included practices of subjectivation in the theater – questions about which roles our older coresearchers were allowed to take in the theater and which subjectivities were expected from them by the cultural field.

In many cases, our coresearchers felt the need to justify, evaluate, or explain why they were at the theater, by, e.g. thinking about what other audiences might see in them. Mrs. H., for example, obviously felt the need to explain – at least to the researcher she was visiting the theater with – why she was here and which role she had in the theater: “At the cloakroom, she says to me: ‘I could also be here with my granddaughter’, as if she had to find a justification to be in the theatre with me, a younger woman.” (Observation Protocol Theater Visit Mrs. H.). The roles of the coresearchers varied from case to case and most strikingly between those study participants who had theater experience and those who did not: In some cases, coresearchers took the role of an alleged grandmother, at the theater with her granddaughter (Mrs. H.), in other cases it was the role as an experienced critic of the theater (Mr. V.). Finding, experiencing, and feeling comfortable with the diverse roles older adults were legitimately allowed to have in the theater, however, were not always easy, and it was especially the less-experienced coresearchers who had troubles finding a role in the theater.

These struggles for a legitimate position were often especially hard to conquer for our coresearchers because going to the theater, for many of our coresearchers, meant going to the theater alone, as many of our coresearchers were divorced or widowed. This shows another rule of the theater, which was that older adults were not allowed to go there alone – and reframing, ignoring, and breaking that rule were something that was described as overwhelmingly challenging for our coresearchers. Mrs. P. describes in her interview how challenging it was for her to go to the theater alone for the first time:

“I want to go (to the theatre alone, authors). Well, ok, then I have to overcome my fears. I knew (...) that the real reason (...) was my fear. Ok, I thought, everyone is here in a couple, I am the only one who is alone. I will attract attention; they will look at me (...) And then I realized: Nobody is looking at me (...) And that’s what all the fuzz was about? You see, smooth sailing. And then I was relieved, I thought, now, you can go anywhere. And things like that (...) are key experiences.”

Discussion and Implications

Applying a field approach to analyze cultural disengagement from the theater in later life proved highly useful to understand the processes, barriers, and challenges older adults face when visiting the theater. Focusing on the socially constructed, implicit, and often invisible rules of the game (*illusio*) of the theater exemplified how modern theater follows specific rules that are often challenging for older audiences. Our study highlights how the specific timings as well as social and spatial arrangements of the theater pose diverse challenges to older audiences. Therefore, data exemplify that we can understand the *illusio* of modern theater to be age-coded (Krekula 2009), as it included specific expectations and assumptions about the age of legitimate audiences. Applying a field approach, therefore, showed how the theater fields are materially, spatially, and temporally ordered, and it is all of these orders that address older audiences in a very particular way.

What were the rules of the game that were encountered by our study participants at the theater? First, the study participants encountered rules about the ageing body at the theater. In many occasions, the way older bodies behaved (from needing earlier breaks to finding it challenging to conquer stairs) was institutionally framed as deviant in theaters. This finding is in line with studies on dance in later life, which show that the marginalization of older people’s changing bodies is at the core of the processes that order different audiences in a hierarchical relation to each other (Krekula et al. 2018). Second, the marginalization of older audiences happened through specific rules about mobilities in going there and back to the theater. In many cases, this was also connected to the timing of theater performances (which happened predominantly at night), and the regulations surrounding breaks were a challenge for older audience

members. Therefore, this article adds to literature, suggesting that the hierarchical orderings of age are done through differences in access to time (Krekula et al. 2018), questioning who gets to decide, e.g. how long visitors have to sit before a break or when they are allowed to leave the performance space. Finally, through all of these rules, our older coresearchers experienced a specific type of identity, which was characterized by feeling vulnerable, deviant, and at risk as an older consumer at the theater. These processes have often been described in ethnographic studies (Aceros et al. 2015), showing how the feeling of vulnerability in later life might not (only) be based on biological changes, but on the social circumstances and arrangements that older adults participate in.

The participatory and qualitative nature of this study, therefore, enabled a thorough understanding of the theater visit in later life not only as a beneficial leisure activity but also as a collective practical accomplishment (Wanka 2019), a careful process of orchestrating that calls for significant amounts of preparation work for our older study participants that happened at different sites (from the hairdresser to the theater venue), at different times (from weeks before to days after the visit), and involved different actors (from older coresearchers to employees selling the tickets). Visiting the theater required the careful orchestrating of different tasks, which was challenging and at times exhausting for involved older coresearchers. A field approach, hence, renders visible how cultural engagement in later life calls for the careful orchestrating of older adults' everyday practices, a process that was often challenging for our older coresearchers.

Studies that have repeatedly identified the positive effects theater and arts participation have on older adults' quality of life, health, or wellbeing are significantly expanded and contextualized by this study. Besides exploring the positive effects of arts participation on older adults, supporting arts participation later in life also means to ask in how far arts institutions are prepared to include older audiences. Therefore, this study argues toward further incorporation of gerontological knowledge in cultural institutions, opening up cultural policy as a gerontological matter of concern (Sievers 2009). Enabling older adults to age actively, e.g. through arts participation, calls for enabling and supportive structures. Practice and policy in the field of theater and drama, hence, should take processes

of demographic change not as a threat, but question how regulations that are in place marginalize older audiences.

Finally, this article opens up theater and drama in later life as a topic for critical gerontology, arguing that declining rates of cultural participation in later life are not an effect of declining health, but a result of social power struggles that include struggles around age and ageing. As cultural sociologists in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu (1979/2013, 1996) have argued that cultural participation can never be fully understood if power relations are overlooked in its analysis and vice versa. Studying the differences in cultural participation between age groups, hence, means to understand these differences as “a particular state of the social struggle, i.e. a given state of distribution of advantages and obligations” (Bourdieu 1979/2013). Which age groups participate in cultural activities and which do not, from this perspective, is not a question of individual motivation or interest, but an expression of social power struggles through which the access to culture is carefully regulated (Gallistl 2021).

This study had several limitations, including the small sample and a bias in recruitment. While the qualitative nature of our approach facilitated an in-depth look into three particular theaters, it does not mean that these results can be generalized to describe the *illusio* of all theaters. In fact, many theaters, in many European countries, are engaged in various activities to create age-friendly theater spaces, e.g. through the inclusion of older amateur acting or dance groups or making theater spaces more accessible (Mälzer & Wünsche 2019). In that sense, it might be that the wider cultural, social, and community context influences in how far older adults are addressed as a relevant audience group by theaters. This aspect, however, could not be taken into consideration in this present study. The sample for this study included white older adults, who lived in the city of Vienna. Barriers in access to culture might be very different for rural areas and other geographical contexts. Finally, the scope of this study was cultural participation and disengagement in Austria. While this means that results may be relevant to western European countries, which have a similarly structured cultural sector, the case might be different in non-European contexts. The proposed field approach, however, can still be used in various contexts, and we do hope that others take this as an opportunity to develop the proposed approach further.

The applied field approach can be useful for several settings. We consider our methodological approach as especially useful for institutional contexts that contain institutional barriers in terms of empowered participation of older adults. These can be institutions with a firm institutionalized structure such as hospitals, care homes, or educational institutions as well as contexts with a latent institutionalized structure such as sport events or concerts. We, therefore, hope that the field approach that was suggested in this study will be applied to other contexts and phenomena related to age and ageing and, in the process, will be developed further.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Federal Ministry for Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection (Republic of Austria) [2015–2017] and the City of Vienna (Hochschuljubiläumsfonds der Stadt Wien).

Ethical standards

The appropriate steps have been taken. All research participants declared an informed consent to participate in this study.

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