

Researching the agency of older migrant women: the potential of intersectional approaches

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Abstract

The paper explores the agency of older migrant women using intersectional approaches. It provides an overview of existing research on the migration-ageing nexus in the social sciences. Based on this, it highlights the need to focus on the multifaceted challenges and potentials of older migrant women, considering the intersectional dynamics of gender, migration and age. The concept of intersectionality is discussed in relation to how it illuminates the discriminatory experiences and agency of older migrant women. Putting the concept of agency at the centre, the article highlights the importance of understanding agency from a gender, migrant, and ageing perspective. Finally, it argues for an expanded understanding of agency that takes into account the intersecting categories and diverse forms of expression.

Keywords: ageing, agency, gender, intersectionality, migrant

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Introduction

In a recently completed action research project, with the aim of enhancing caring communities in urban areas (Kainradl et al. 2024), we engaged closely with numerous older migrants who played a pivotal role in our initiatives. In addition to other activities, we conducted workshops with a group of migrant women, providing us with the opportunity to gain insights into their varied life situations, compelling narratives and their requirements and capabilities. These encounters have inspired us to *theoretically* reflect approaches and concepts that scrutinise the complex life circumstances and trajectories of older migrant women in this paper.¹ We explore the topic through several approaches. We will refer to scientific findings on the migration-ageing nexus, and to theories on agency, consider the interface between gender and ageing and ask about the intersecting concepts of several categories, whereby we also link intersectionality in particular to the question of people's agency.

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research on the migration-ageing nexus (e.g. Bartig 2022; Ciobanu et al. 2020; Torres & Hunter 2023). However, numerous areas and inquiries within this field have not been thoroughly explored. As will be elaborated in subsequent sections of our paper, key challenges are found, for instance, in examining the interplay and complexity of various social inequality categories, where intersectionality emerges as a crucial approach. Particularly in contexts where migration, gender and age coincide as circumstances vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion, intersectionality as an analytical framework can provide "an integrated and comprehensive approach to examine the simultaneous interactions between multiple dimensions of social identity that are, in turn, situated within broader, macro-level systems of power" (Kobayashi & Khan 2023: 317). Nonetheless, many intersectional studies concentrate on the categories of race, class and gender, often neglecting the factor of ageing. Furthermore, research on the life circumstances of older migrants has frequently emphasised the social hardships

¹Selected *empirical* results from the project *Caring Living Labs Graz. Living well in old age* have already been published. These papers focus on the empirical outcomes and deal with topics such as life-world oriented education with older adults (Kainradl et al. 2023), needs and resources of older (migrant) adults and the connected implications for social work (Kainradl et al. 2024), and caring communities approaches & spatial planning in cities (Wegleitner et al. 2025).

experienced by this group, while their resources, capabilities and agency have received limited attention. Therefore, we are particularly intrigued by the potential of intersectionality theories and their capacity not only to focus on the adversities faced by older migrant women, but also to delve into their agency.

The depiction and characterisation of late life, as delineated by Gilleard and Higgs (2021), stand as a central topic of discourse in critical ageing studies. When investigating matters concerning older adults, it is crucial for us to consistently bear in mind that the power dynamics underpinning the categorisation of a population group as *old people* versus a group of younger individuals must not be perpetuated (Katz 1992). The various methods used to define the category of older adults based on their age are rooted either in different, often chronologically structured life stages, the differentiation between capability and infirmity, or the proximity of death (Higgs & Gilleard 2016). The differentiation between the third and fourth age has been particularly impactful (Laslett 1991). It is frequently used in the scientific and public discourse about ageing and is particularly common when referring to the agency of older adults. However, this distinction is also being intensively questioned. Gilleard and Higgs' critique of the fourth age as a "black hole" (Gilleard & Higgs 2010: 121), in which ageing occurs without agency, also pertains to the groups that are the focus of this paper. Older migrant women in the fourth age, but also in the third age, are often seen as people without agency, as we will see later. Additionally, for older migrants, the tendency to homogenise and render them vulnerable remains a significant pitfall.

The gender perspective has been a pivotal focal point in ageing studies since at least the 1970s, when Sontag's (1972) critical inquiry into the "double standard of aging" sheds light on its relevance. Notably, research on older women has been conducted under the framework of *gendered ageism*. The term *gendered ageism*, originally coined by Itzin and Phillipson (1995) to describe age-related barriers in the workplace, has since been expanded and utilised in various contexts (Krekula et al. 2018). To elucidate the diversity within the category of older women, this perspective has also been linked to the intersecting categories of race and sexuality (Calasanti & King 2015), in order to highlight that older women "are not homogenous but divided by intersecting hierarchies" (Calasanti & Giles 2018: 73).

The focus of this paper is to investigate the contribution of intersectionality theories in comprehending the agency of older migrant women. The paper commences with a succinct overview of existing research on the relationship between migration and ageing in the social sciences, encompassing all genders but with a specific emphasis on the circumstances of older migrant women. Subsequently, it delves into the introduction of intersectionality theories and fundamental concepts of agency, particularly in connection to migration, gender and ageing. A following section presents an intersectionally informed critique of agency, which leads into a final discussion on the potential strengths of intersectional approaches in examining the agency of older migrant women. This paper is underpinned by a review of theoretical perspectives within the domains of intersectionality theories, migration and ageing studies, and approaches to agency.

Older Migrants/Older Migrant Women – State of Research

In the first instance, it is important to clarify who we are talking about when we use the term *older migrant women* throughout our paper. A typology introduced by King et al. (2017) provides a valuable framework for comprehending the diverse array of potential scenarios related to the intersection of migration and ageing, including older individuals affected by the emigration of their children, those who relocate to host countries to be with their emigrated children, (often affluent) retirees who migrate internationally for an improved quality of life, older economic migrants, older labour migrants who return to their country of origin in later life, and those who have aged while residing in their destination countries. In our study, our primary focus is on the latter group mentioned, also known as ageing in place migrants (a term which should not be confused with the concept of *ageing in place* as used in ageing studies to denote individuals living in their residences, rather than, for example, in a care facility). Moreover, our analysis encompasses individuals who migrated at an advanced age to European Union/Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries for economic or personal reasons as delineated earlier, as well as those who became refugees in their later years (a category not explicitly addressed by King et al. 2017).

While the mentioned typology is valuable for illustrating the diverse potential life circumstances linked to the migration-ageing nexus, it is essential to note that a territorially constrained perspective in understanding the experiences of older migrants has its limitations. Consequently, a transnational perspective is pertinent for comprehending the intricacy of migration and mobilities, not only in general, but also in older age.

Research on the intersection of migration, ageing and gender has historically received relatively little attention in the social sciences. However, there has been a growing interest in the migration-ageing nexus in recent years (Torres & Hunter 2023). Early research, dating back to the 1990s, primarily focused on migrants who aged in the countries of their destination, but has since evolved to encompass the aforementioned complexities of cross-border mobilities of older individuals. In this paper, we aim to provide a brief overview of the main themes and some key findings regarding the social situation of older migrants present in existing studies in this field. Where relevant data are available, we will specifically focus on the life situation of older migrant women.

Several European and OECD studies highlight that in most countries, the lives of older migrants (of all genders) are more often characterised by a disadvantaged socioeconomic status compared to the non-migrant population, including poor housing conditions, less access to social participation and a higher risk of health problems and poverty² (Ciobanu et al. 2019; Gubernskaya & Dobrevna 2023; Kameraj et al. 2024; OECD/European Commission 2023; Reus-Pons et al. 2018). Furthermore, exclusion can also be influenced by language barriers. Many older migrants face obstacles in accessing services in the health and social sector. In addition to structural barriers, cultural factors may also play a crucial role in how people address specific issues, such as intergenerational solidarity norms in caregiving situations, end-of-life questions, etc. (Kainradl et al. 2024).

The majority of the referenced research or surveys have not specifically centred on gender aspects but rather consider gender as one of several socio-demographic characteristics (Honkaniemi et al. 2020; Stypińska & Gordo 2018). However, it is evident, as highlighted by

²Just in a few countries such as Malta or Cyprus, which attract wealthy retirees, the poverty rates of native-born older people are higher than of foreign-born ones (OECD/European Commission 2023).

several studies, that many older migrant women are disproportionately impacted by poverty. For instance, in 2020, migrant³ women in the European Union, aged 65 or above and not born in one of the EU-27 countries,⁴ faced a considerably higher risk of poverty or social exclusion (36.5%) compared to *women without a migration background* (21.1%) or *migrant men* in the same age group (35.8%) (Eurostat 2024). These statistics can likely be attributed to discriminations related to a gendered and racialised work history, potentially resulting in low wages, confinement to certain labour market sectors, care responsibilities and experiences of racism. Additionally, gendered informal care work (Sagbakken et al. 2018) and social inequalities impact the health status of older migrant women (Debesay et al. 2022) and their access to the healthcare system (Arora et al. 2019).

The concept of intersectional discrimination is posited to be particularly relevant in the context of the various potential disadvantages faced by older migrant women (Bartig 2022; Calasanti & King 2015; Kobayashi & Khan 2020). Large-scale surveys analysing social inequalities in old age often do not provide comprehensive insights into the multifaceted reasons behind the data. In this context, an intersectional life course perspective becomes valuable in elucidating the interactions of various categories (Ferrer et al. 2017; Gubernskaya & Dobrevna 2023; Holman & Walker 2021; Katz & Grenier 2023), as well as the impact of the structural framework, such as the welfare system, and the recognition of old age “as a source of disparity in its own right” (Calasanti & King 2015: 195). Several studies employing an intersectional life course approach have already focused on the experiences of older migrant women, such as Tunçer’s (2024) study on the narratives of Turkish women who migrated to Sweden. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex challenges faced by older migrant women, taking into account the intersecting factors of gender, migration and ageing.

In addition to evaluating existing data, examining the emphasis of studies on the *ageing-migration nexus* is valuable. Ciobanu et al. (2020) pinpoint four primary analytical foci identified in studies up to 2019. These

³Migrants are defined here as people living in another country than their country of birth.

⁴This refers to the members of the European Union since 2020.

include a *vulnerability focus* (addressing topics such as social exclusion, discrimination and loneliness), a *policy focus* (exploring connections to structural aspects and welfare systems), a *transnational focus* (e.g. family support across borders) and a *care focus* (dealing with topics such as care arrangements and care needs of migrants).

Sandra Torres (2019) conducted an analysis of more than 300 papers on *ethnicity and ageing* spanning the period from 1999 to 2017. While the focus on *ethnicity* as a lens is not inherently linked to migration (with a majority of the papers in Torres' review originating from the US context and examining the situation of African Americans, thus focusing on ethnic groups rather than migrants), ethnicity remains a significant factor in the exclusion of migrants. In scrutinizing a subset of the papers, particularly those addressing health and social care in relation to ethnicity and older age, Torres revealed that many, especially gerontological, studies did not consider the diversity among ethnic minorities and reflected a rather essentialist understanding of ethnicity. Furthermore, Torres noted that the primary focus of most research was on the social disadvantages of ethnic minorities rather than exploring their resources. Studies from Europe or Canada dealt more frequently with the accessibility of the social and health care system. Torres also highlighted that the voices of individuals were not well represented in the analysed studies.

The critique of existing studies on the social and health situation of older migrants highlights the need for a more multi-perspective and resource-oriented approach (Ciobanu et al. 2019). Some research endeavours emphasise the potentials of older migrants, such as exploring inter-generational and transnational support in care relationships (Bartig 2022; Vullnetari 2023) or examining the community and civic engagement of older migrants (Kainradl et al. 2024).

It is apparent from this critique that there is still a lack of broader perspectives on older migrant women, which fail to fully acknowledge their capabilities, aspirations and societal contributions. Furthermore, the intersection of different categories of discrimination is often not adequately considered when examining individuals as *migrants* or *ethnic minorities* (Ciobanu 2023). Consequently, a closer look on the concept and theories of intersectionality is important.

Intersectionality

As the term of intersectionality together with its underlying questions originates in the Black feminist movement of the 1970s in the United States, it addresses from its beginnings the multifaceted and intersecting forms of discrimination that individuals encounter. Therefore, intersectionality can be a useful tool as it recognises multiple factors of difference and inequality in the lives of older migrant women (Phillipson 2015).

Already in its origins, societal systems of discrimination and oppression are focused with this concept. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined the notion of intersectionality to describe the workplace discrimination Black women faced in the United States. Addressing central problems of feminist research (Davis 2013) intersectionality developed into a travelling concept that scholars use to describe discrimination and its dynamics based on more than one social category. This approach was successful because it recognised that single-axis descriptions of discrimination, such as those that focus exclusively on sexism, racism, or classism, are inadequate as they fail to account for the phenomenon of intersecting forms of discrimination. Intersectionality also underscores the necessity for continued critical vigilance towards further marginalised constituencies (Dhawan et al. 2024). Moreover, cumulative or multiplicative lenses obscure contributing factors. In its origins focusing on the intersection of the categories of race, gender, and class, intersectionality is now directed towards various, multidimensional discriminations and situations of privilege.

Ageing and migration studies predominantly employ intersectionality as a tool of analysing discrimination at the individual or group level, with a particular focus on the categories of age, ethnicity, gender and class (Ciobanu 2023). By focusing on the multiple discriminations of individuals and population groups, intersectionality offers a means of identifying social structures that contribute to inequalities. The concept of intersectionality is therefore employed to analyse the way racism, sexism and classism are efficacious within social structures, and to examine them as “interlocking systems of oppression that shape the experiences and life chances of individuals as a consequence of their multi-dimensional social identities” (Green et al. 2017: 214). Furthermore, intersectionality emphasises the underlying structures of society. In particular, it examines

the impact of capitalism and patriarchy on the negotiations of identity of individuals. In this way, intersectionality also addresses the extent to which individuals can exercise their agency and where “intersectional differences may also structure the ways in which people are enabled or constrained in expressing agency as they shape access to power and resources” (Holman & Walker 2021: 248). Giving an example from existing empirical research on older migrant women, this becomes relevant when intersectionality is used to analyse the various ways in which older Pakistani women in Norway cope with discrimination in the healthcare sector (Arora et al. 2019).

In the case of older migrants, the concept of intersectionality can be seen as a challenge that serves to highlight the heterogeneity of the older population even further, thereby contributing insights into the power relations associated with age diverse social locations (Calasanti & King 2015). An intersectional lens facilitates the observation of the interplay, for example, between gendered labour conditions, transnational mobilities and intergenerational care-relations (Ferrer et al. 2017). It challenges the ways in which frailty and disability are suppressed in representations of successful ageing and emphasises the necessary structural conditions for a good life in old age (Côté-Boucher et al. 2024). The application of intersectionality to older migrant women from a life course perspective allows for the understanding that individuals accumulate both advantages and disadvantages over time, which in turn shape their life courses (De Silva 2020) entangled on a micro-, macro- and meso-level (Ciobanu et al. 2019).

Further reflections on the categories of intersectionality have to be taken into account for the situation of older migrant women. A critical examination of the theoretical discourses surrounding the concept of intersectionality reveals an emphasis on the distinction between the categories of race, class and gender. Both the submission of diverse categories under one – such as “‘First Nation’, ‘Native American’, or ‘*pueblos originarios*’ [...] under the umbrella term ‘race’” (Dhawan et al. 2024: 72) – as well as the use of other categories of analysis to describe individual narratives are subjected to critical discussion. As Van Dyk observes, age as a category is “either omitted [...] or subsumed under the dimension of the body” (Van Dyk 2020: 37, own translation). Of course, this classification has the potential to facilitate a critical and analytical examination of the utilisation and disciplining of bodies in relation to their productivity.

Furthermore, it has the ability to describe the individualisation of responsibility for maintaining a healthy and productive body. Moreover, such a classification of age under the umbrella of the body elucidates the distinctions and parallels between age and other categories of difference such as gender (e.g. with regard to the similar processes of naturalisation).

Nevertheless, from the perspective of critical ageing studies, this common interpretation of age(ing) as anchored in the corporeality is too narrow (Twigg 2004). It is only when age is regarded as a discrete category that one can undertake an analysis of “age as a norm, age as a (discursive) resource, and age as marginalisation” (Krekula et al. 2018: 39). Conversely, the absence of a distinct age category at the structural level presents a challenge to the investigation of the “dual character of age(ing) as a marker of difference and a process” (Van Dyk 2020: 37, own translation). Furthermore, it obscures the associated temporal elements at the levels of identity, representation and structure.

Despite the marginal status of intersectionality in gerontology and ageing studies (Ciobanu 2023; Holman & Walker 2021), intersectionality has the potential to identify continuities and discontinuities in the biographies and transitions of older adults (Phillipson 2015). For researching the agency of older migrant women, this approach highlights the significance of narratives of difference and inequality. These narratives not only address contemporary issues pertaining to identity construction in relation to age, but also prompt reflection on their ageing throughout the life course.

The concept of intersectionality is therefore referred to in this article as a lens for analysing more closely the agency of older migrant women. It is employed as a “heuristic device for illuminating discriminatory situations” (Davis 2024: 319), as well as situations of privilege. In order to achieve this objective, the concept of intersectionality incorporates structural and representational levels, as well as levels of intra- and interindividual negotiations. These levels are conceptualised in a non-cumulative way. The purpose of using this concept is twofold: firstly, to facilitate analysis of, and secondly, to encourage the agency of older migrant women.

This section has introduced the concept of intersectionality, particularly in relation to its proximity to theories of discrimination. Before we look at the links between the concept of intersectionality and the agency of older migrant women, we will briefly outline the theoretical concept of agency.

Agency

In modern Western theory, agency can be understood as the power or ability of human subjects to act and to influence their environment (Raithelhuber 2008). Its main goal is to promote social change or to challenge structural constraints or social customs (Rebughini 2023). There are several systematic approaches to analyse theories of agency, many of which delve into the relationship between agent and structure, autonomy and domination, subject and object. For the purpose of our paper, we primarily reference Paola Rebughini's (2023) critical analysis of ongoing discussions on agency. She asserts that agency is debated using three different terms, all of which, however, refer to agency as a human capacity and its relationship to structures.

Firstly, in Western European thought, agency is associated with *intentionality*, where individuals have the cognitive and logical drive to act in specific ways. Modern Western thought, influenced by René Descartes, emphasises intentionality, and the individual's ability to change their world. Most approaches in social sciences adopt the idea of agency, viewing the subject as an autonomous agent, who is aware of their actions and negotiates between opportunities and limitations in a given situation (Rebughini 2023).

Secondly, the debate surrounding agency also includes *relationality*, *situatedness* and *performativity* (Rebughini 2023). Within the American sociological tradition, in the understanding of Mead, Goffman and the Chicago School, agency is viewed as part of interactions rather than solely an expression of an agent's intentionality. "Structural constraints cannot be separable from the creativity of action, because any action can potentially create new structural constraints and any action is based on socialisation to rules and environments" (Rebughini 2023: 25). Likewise, gender studies focus on mutual dependencies by concentrating on the body and embodied critical knowledge. Agency in this theoretical tradition has been conceptualised as situated performativity (Rebughini 2023).

Thirdly, agency is framed as social *practice*, attempting to overcome the dichotomy between the subject and the structure (Rebughini 2023). Pierre Bourdieu (1972/1979), one of the most prominent voices in this debate, uses his concept of *habitus* to analyse social practices. Anthony Giddens (1984/1997) also examines the extent of an agent's autonomy and their potential collective impact on social structures. Bourdieu rather

emphasises structural changes over changes through the individual and its habitus (interiorised dispositions), while Giddens perceives that agency, through individual reflection and learning from experience and information, contributes to structuration (Rebughini 2023). Rebughini highlights the significance of this *reflexivity* as an important component of agency for many scholars (Rebughini 2023).

Intersectional Critique on Agency

The main theoretical approaches on agency presented above can be criticised from four relevant perspectives:

- (1) In *gender studies* and *studies of intersectionality*, having roots in both feminism and anti-racism, the focus has shifted towards the body and embodied knowledge. Rebughini clarifies that situated performativity is perceived to be crucial for exploring an individual's capacity to act and influence the social environment within gender studies (Rebughini 2023). Influenced by Judith Butler and intersectional theoretical perspectives, agency is seen as "the capacity to develop a critical relation with social normativity. [...] It is related to the subject's ability to justify his/her choices, as well as to his/her vulnerability to the contingencies of the social environment" (Rebughini 2023: 26). This perspective on embodied knowledge offered a new viewpoint within the field of agency studies.
- (2) When considering intersectionality in relation to older migrant women, it is essential to critically re-examine the concept of *ageing* and in consequence to scrutinise how agency is exercised. Modern biological gerontology sees ageing as a process of physical and mental decline (Dyring & Blonk 2024). Even though critical ageing studies have long and broadly contested this approach (Calasanti & King 2021), this view has a strong influence on the hegemonic discourse – and it is associated with a restriction of agency. Parallel to the discourse of the ageing population as a crisis (Katz 1992), older adults "have been discovered as potentially active and productive citizens" (Van Dyk 2014: 93). Thus, it might be assumed that agency has become the main focus of gerontology. However, from a critical point of view, the active ageing paradigm can rather be seen as

a denial of agency, as it does not really allow individuals to freely choose their goals (Pfaller & Schweda 2019, as cited in De Tavernier & Aartsen 2019). Moreover, it denies the agency of older people already through the way this phase of life is characterised and its adjustment to normalised middle age is made the responsibility of older adults. As one consequence, the concept of agency used so far should be revised by taking into account these critiques.

- (3) A *migrant perspective* is also pertinent – especially one, that is critical towards Eurocentric approaches. Rebughini makes clear that a critique of the classical humanism inherent in Western thought, with its focus on the rational subject, unmasked this perspective as silencing the histories of a different critical agency, judged as pre-modern and therefore as being Eurocentric (Rebughini 2023). This is an important perspective for migration studies. Furthermore, Oliver Bakewell (2010) has noted that, in the dualism between structure and agency, theories in migration studies tend to be partial towards structuration. Migration studies that use agency as a theoretical approach tend to stay on a micro-level. This is the case, for example, studies follow De Certeau's (1984) concepts that concentrate on tactics for dealing with everyday challenges (e.g. Ramachandran & Vathi 2022). These approaches focus on the subjects rather than seeing migrants only as objects of both research and social structures or policies.

We consider these first three critical stances as particularly relevant to the discussion of the agency of older migrant women. Nevertheless, we must note that there is a fourth strong criticism that requires the adaptation of the concept of agency: (4) It adopts an anthropocentric perspective due to the reassessment of the relationship between human agenda and *nature/non-humans*⁵ – a critique that Rebughini (2023) emphasises the most. While this paper does not deeply analyse this aspect, we believe

⁵The fourth aspect poses a more fundamental challenge to the concept of the actor compared to intersectional theories. Rebughini asserts that the material dimensions, not only of the body but also of nature and environment, must be considered, leading to the analysis of material connections, including non-humans as agents (Rebughini 2023). This forward-looking aspect of integrating nature into concepts of agency is still notably absent in discussions on migration and age.

that it would be worthwhile to explore this topic further through theoretical and empirical research.

In the following section, we will discuss the possibilities to revise the concept of agency with regard to the first three critiques presented and being relevant for an intersectional perspective on our research topic.

Agency – Intersectionally Revised

Exploring the potential of intersectionality theories to enhance our understanding and analysis of agency and to promote the agency of older migrant women, we first refer to dominant approaches to intersectionality. In a second step, we address the aforementioned critiques of agency theories and discuss how agency might be conceptualised to adequately address the intersection of age, gender, and migration.

Intersectionality as a Tool for Analysis and Social Action

Intersectional theories have the potential to identify oppressive structures and to go beyond the binary attribution of agent and structure. They shed light on individuals and groups, as well as their capabilities and problems, that are otherwise invisible. The concept of intersectionality can help us to understand the multifaceted social and political affiliations of individuals' identities. The different categories, such as gender, migration and age, interact in many ways and have the potential to reinforce each other. This is the case, for example, when the deskilling of women due to their migration history, combined with a gender-segregated labour market, leads to poverty in old age – or when a wide range of professional experiences due to the migration-related changes leads to a diversity of expertise. However, different categories can also serve to render individual characteristics and experiences invisible (Knapp 2013). For instance, a medical issue encountered by older migrant women may not be acknowledged as a *gendered problem* because the framing as an older migrant overlays all other categories of difference. The same “intersectional invisibility” (Knapp 2013: 244) occurs when older migrant women are perceived solely in terms of their age, and all the ways of dealing with situations, their resources and networks acquired through the migration experience are not taken into account. Intersectionality can both describe processes

of making invisible and unveil their accumulated discriminatory experiences or expertise throughout the life course. Therefore, intersectionality potentially challenges the perception of older migrant women's agency as "passive, helpless, and powerless" (Smarika 2024: 362).

Intersectionality, as an analytical approach that renders visible the challenges and potentials of individuals, is also a starting point for social action. As other approaches that deal with discrimination, intersectionality identifies possible points of intervention at the individual, community, and societal level. In consequence, it has the potential to transform limiting social structures. This can include challenging racist/sexist/ageist attitudes, reforming discriminatory policies and creating inclusive spaces. The project *Caring Living Labs Graz*, mentioned at the beginning of the paper, provides an example of how an intersectional perspective can start to change social structures. In several workshops with older migrants, the multiple transnational caring responsibilities and activities of older migrant women (e.g. for their grandchildren, for their own parents) were rendered visible. They differ from the perspectives of older migrant men (who are less involved in care tasks), but also from older women without migrant biography, whose focus is more on the local environment. The intersectional lens allowed the older migrant women to get into exchange with each other, share their specific knowledge and experience and get appropriate further educational measures organised. Furthermore, these activities and experiences within the project had an awareness-raising effect on various stakeholders.

The potential of intersectional theories for social action is also underlined by critiques within intersectionality discourse that denounce commodification and colonisation in the production of knowledge (Bilge 2013). The critique that "[i]ntersectionality has been whitened, depoliticised, and transformed into a product of the neoliberal academy rather than the helpmeet for social justice it was meant to be" (Davis 2024: 320) goes beyond the question of reception in academia. It emphasises the importance of action inherent in the concept of intersectionality. This is also evident when Cho et al. affirm that intersectionality always goes "beyond mere comprehension of intersectional dynamics to transform them." (Cho et al. 2013: 786). Thus, by building diverse alliances through "intersectional solidarity" (Tungohan & Tormos-Aponte 2024: 295), intersectionality specifically aims to facilitate social justice.

For this reason, intersectionality is frequently defined as both an analytical tool and a starting point for social action. Collins perceives intersectionality as “a lens for examining how critical analysis and social action might inform one another” (Collins 2019: 3). She seeks to demonstrate the intertwining of intersectionality as a critical analytical lens and social action and denounces the classification of intersectionality as a mere analytical tool as “[i]gnoring intersectionality’s roots” (Collins 2017: 118).

We can conclude that intersectionality theory aids in analysing the agency of older migrant women by revealing the systemic, intersecting and power-related dimensions of discrimination and thus restricting components for the people’s agency, akin to other discrimination-focused theories. Moreover, intersectionality approaches, both in research and in social action, have the potential to reinforce the existing agency of people who are often subjected to discrimination.

Expanding and Specifying the Concept of Agency

Intersectionality theory does not only have the potential to adequately examine and promote the capacities of older migrant women to act according to their own will – either despite limiting or discriminatory social structures, or even with the aim of changing these structures. It also has the potential to re-evaluate and modify the concept of agency itself. Intersectionality achieves this by integrating the three critical stances of agency theories through the lenses of gender, migration and ageing.

Even as social theorists focused more and more on the interactions and social practices, agency “cannot be separated from an analytical definition of the agent, who is not a neutral entity: the agent has a material body, a gender, a colour, a social position, a culture and a history, can be human or not human” (Rebughini 2023: 21). Thus, an intersectional perspective is inherent in a profound analysis of agency, considering all these positions. For the group, we are focusing on, their agency is interwoven with their gender negotiations and their migration history throughout their life course.

With regard to the migrant perspective, agency is often discussed on the micro-level, as described in the section above. An analysis of the impact of agency explicitly on migration regimes, which is at the macro-level, can be found in the literature on the autonomy of migration.

This relatively recent thesis has been interpreted in different ways, but one point of view is that it relates to the social and political struggles for mobility despite restrictive border regimes (Scheel 2015). Although it does not use the term *agency* per se, but rather *autonomy*, this concept appears to be closely related to the idea of agency as the ability of individuals to effect social change. Maurice Stierl states that “thinking of migration as autonomous allows one to move away from conceptions that portray the subjects of migration primarily as vulnerable, passive, or abject victims” (Stierl 2018: 214). And it is this perception of migrants as non-passive that points to agency – an agency that constitutes “political mobilities” (Stierl 2018: 214). The literature on the autonomy of migration seems to acknowledge migrants as promoters of social transformation (Stierl 2018). On the one hand, literature on the autonomy of migration takes into account the factors of national background, residency status, racialisation, class and sometimes gender (Olmos 2019), but it often leaves out the topic of age/ageing. On the other hand, the autonomy of migration is missing in discussing the agency theories. An integration of these perspectives would allow to do justice to the lived realities and histories of older migrant women – for instance as having exercised the autonomy of migration in earlier years and acknowledging these experiences.

In the section on critiques on agency, we have argued that agency theories are not only questioned through the lens of migration, but also of ageing. In general, research and policies imply that “health, activity and independence are necessary for agency” (Grenier & Phillipson 2013: 56). But the so-called *fourth age* challenges current understandings of agency. Amanda Grenier and Chris Phillipson claim that the concept should be interpreted more fluidly to include more diverse forms of expression such as touch, voice, and non-rational models of subjective experience as expressions of agency (Grenier & Phillipson 2013). These diverse forms of expression should also be analysed intersectionally, as they could vary according to a possibly differing habitus (Bourdieu 1972/1979) along one’s biography shaped by gender and cultural ascriptions. This approach to diverse forms of expression would challenge other perspectives, including those of life course researchers. In life course studies, with some exceptions (e.g. Grenier & Phillipson 2013; Holman & Walker 2021), agency has so far

been interpreted in terms of individual discretion and voluntary action (Dannefer & Huang 2017). Dannefer and Huang argue that structural challenges in the life course that constitute inequality as well as collective forms of agency should also be taken into account. These findings can be applied to the population group of older migrant women, as they have the potential to take migration and flight histories into account and to focus on the experiences of the women. The life course approach allows to unpack, for example, the experiences of exploitation of refugee women, impacting the older women and their forms of expression also in later life, but also the active role of migrant women within care relationships.

Conclusion

In considering the agency of older migrant women, we argue for an understanding of agency (see point a below), that is consistent with the main discourses on agency in the social sciences, including debates in pedagogy that often aim to *promote* people's agency. But explicitly, given that our topic lies at the intersection of different categories with different implications, we also include major critiques of classical understandings of agency – see points b and c.

In the light of intersectionality theory, we therefore argue in favour of an understanding of agency as follows:

- (a) It is a capacity or capability of human beings to act in relation to their (social) environment, mostly with the aim of overcoming and changing social and/or structural restrictions.
- (b) It takes into account the heterogeneity of agents and includes the social structures shaped by the categories of gender, migration and age, and the different social attributions associated with these categories as well as their intersections.
- (c) It considers the different possible forms of agency, which are not only expressed through words and actions.

Finally, we can conclude that theories of intersectionality can contribute in several ways to a deeper understanding of agency in general, but particularly regarding the group of older migrant women. Bringing

these examined perspectives into a dialogue has the potential to contribute to the further development of research tools that better elucidate the perspective of older migrant women, with the aim to overcoming existing discrimination and strengthening agency.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally, regardless of the order in which they are named.

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