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Older adults and information and communication technologies: a qualitative interview study on basic psychological needs

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Abstract

In this study, we investigated older adults' experiences and views of using information and communication technology (ICT) from the perspective of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. We collected data from thematic interviews with Finnish older adults aged 57–96 ($N = 19$). We analyzed the data using theory-driven content analysis, for which self-determination theory provided a theoretical framework and guided the analysis. Our analysis revealed various uses of technologies and several ways that older adults' experiences and views of using ICT reflected the experiences of the basic psychological needs. The results suggest that the basic psychological needs can guide what kind of technology is adopted or not adopted, how, and why. Furthermore, use of ICT can enable and hinder the meeting of the basic psychological needs. The results underline the fact that future ICT should be developed in a way that respects the basic psychological needs.

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Keywords: basic psychological needs, information and communication technology, older adults, qualitative interview.

Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) is an umbrella term for a large set of technologies and resources, such as social networking applications, the internet, cell phones, and computers (Birkland 2019). Many governments and stakeholders have adopted policies to promote the use of technology (OECD 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the global trends of digitalization and digital transformation (Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2021; United Nations 2021). Finland is among the countries that strongly desires to be one of the forerunners in digitalization of its whole society, including services for older adults (Ministry of Finance 2022). In Finland, internet use has become more common among the oldest age groups. In 2021, the share of those who use the Internet daily or almost daily was 42% among those aged 75–89, and 78% among those aged 65–74 (Statistics of Finland 2021). In reality, in Finland, using many services is virtually impossible without access to and skills to use ICT, which has multifaceted effects on citizens' daily lives and well-being when they are compelled to go virtual. Although many older adults in Finland are active ICT users, many are not, and little is known about the reasons people adopt or discard ICT.

Digital divide is a concept commonly referred to as a gap between those individuals, communities, or societies who have access to and use technology, and those who do not (Van Dijk 2020). After extensive focus on the access to technologies and skills of use (Van Deursen & Van Dijk 2014, 2019), discussions on the digital divide have been shifting toward digital inequalities based on the benefits of use (Scheerder et al. 2017; Van Deursen & Helsper 2015). The digital divide has long been discussed as something to be conquered to prevent people being digitally excluded. Simultaneously, in the previous literature ICT has been presented as a promising device to enhance older adults' psychological and social well-being (Cotten et al. 2022; Fang et al. 2018; Forsman & Nordmyr 2017; Latikka et al. 2021; Simons et al. 2023), but the potential negative effects (e.g. decreases in social contacts)

of technology use and the underlying psychological mechanisms (e.g. technology use conflicting with own values) on older adults' psychological well-being have been less pronounced.

In this qualitative interview study, we investigated older adults' experiences and views of using ICT from the perspective of the basic psychological needs of experiencing autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The goal was to understand potential psychological phenomena related to older adults' use of ICT. Analyzing older adults' technology use from a psychological perspective is important to identify the reasons for technology use and non-use, which in turn can support the development of a digital society in a more fair and sustainable manner. In this study, we applied the self-determination theory (SDT) developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), which offers a novel approach to studying older adults' experiences and views of ICT.

Self-determination theory

SDT is a theoretical framework of human development, motivation, and wellness grounded on empirical work conducted over decades (e.g. Deci 1971; Deci et al. 1982) and later established by Deci and Ryan (1985). One of the sub theories of SDT postulates that people possess three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci 2017; Vansteenkiste et al. 2020). *Autonomy* is the need to self-regulate one's actions and experiences, is related to feelings of volition and willingness in action and is marked by self-endorsed behaviors and acting in accordance with own goals and values (de Charms 1968; Ryan & Deci 2017). *Competence* depicts the need to feel capable and effective in acting and is related to experiences of opportunities to exercise, express, and expand one's capabilities (Ryan & Deci 2017; White 1959). *Relatedness* is the need to feel connected, involved, significant, and respected among others, and it is often experienced when one cares for others and is cared for in return (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Ryan & Deci 2017). These innate needs are universal, and their satisfaction is fundamental to human wellness and full functioning (Ryan & Deci 2017; Ryan et al. 2021). Need frustration is related to negative outcomes such as maladaptive functioning, pursuit of

need substitutes, and ill-being (Vansteenkiste & Ryan 2013). Low need satisfaction can gradually lead to negative effects over time, whereas active need frustration is likely to accelerate a person's maladaptive functioning and ill-being (Vansteenkiste & Ryan 2013).

Meeting the basic psychological needs can become difficult in older age for instance due to poorer physical health, reduced mobility, or changes in social situation (Clark & Moloney 2020; Ferrand et al. 2014). Research on older adults has however shown that satisfaction of the basic psychological needs is associated with greater psychological adjustment, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ferrand et al. 2014; Martin et al. 2021), and frustration of the basic psychological needs is linked with lower well-being (Ferrand & Martinent 2021). The satisfaction of the basic psychological needs is important for older adults' well-being; however, it is likely that other influential factors exist as well (Ferrand et al. 2014).

SDT predicts that technology's effect on human wellness, motivation, and meaningful engagement is attributable to its effects on autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci 2019). According to Peters et al. (2018), peoples' willingness to adopt technology to the extent that they are autonomously motivated to do so (i.e. the technology aligns with their goals and values) is influenced by the extent of their anticipated satisfaction of the basic needs. In the adoption sphere – the time prior to use experience – anticipated competence in using the technology is considered important. The role of relatedness may be accentuated as an autonomous motivator (i.e. technology use corresponds to one's goals and values) rather than a sense of relatedness, per se. The motivation to use technologies is related to the extent to which the needs are fulfilled and people sustain engagement with technologies (Peters et al. 2018).

Research applying the SDT framework on older adults' use of ICTs has been sporadic. Dupuy et al. (2016) conducted a field study of SDT-based assisted-living platforms' effects and found that deployment of the system effectively supported older adults' self-determination and technology acceptance. They concluded that self-determination is a determinant of technology acceptance. Clark and Moloney (2020) studied older adults' Facebook use and the fulfillment of the basic psychological needs and found that those who used Facebook frequently tended to report higher relatedness, and those who were less mobile tended to report lower autonomy and more frequent Facebook use. Keenan et al. (2021) studied

qualitative acceptance of telehealth in palliative care among patients and health care professionals, and patients stated that telehealth could satisfy their basic psychological needs whereas the professionals more often discussed telehealth's potential to thwart rather than satisfy such needs, suggesting that such needs' manifestations can vary across subpopulations. Altogether, the studies highlighted the role of the basic psychological needs in ICT acceptance and outcomes from use.

This study contributes to the research on older adults' use of ICT and research on SDT in studies on older adults' well-being. Qualitative interviews provided data on lived experiences and views of using ICT, which we analyzed from the viewpoint of the experiences of the basic psychological needs.

Materials and Method

Participants and Procedure

We collected qualitative thematic interview data from Finnish older adults from November 2021 to May 2022 ($N = 19$). The study targeted older people without cognitive impairment who were living in senior and service houses or nearby in three residential areas in the Tampere region in Finland. We did not set specific exclusion or inclusion criteria for recruitment. From amongst the participants, 15 were female (79.0%) and 4 were male (21.0%), and the age range was 57–96 years (mean 75.3). Most of the study participants lived in a service house ($n = 12$, 63.2%), some lived independently in the nearby area ($n = 5$, 26.3%), and a few lived in a senior house ($n = 2$, 10.5%). Most of the participants were widowed or had lost a partner ($n = 12$, 63.2%); however, some of them had a new relationship. Most of the participants had children ($n = 13$, 68.4%). All study participants lived alone.

We employed convenience sampling and recruited participants in collaboration with a local service house provider. Four members of the research team delivered a presentation on the premises of the service houses about the aims of the research project and compiled a list of participants who were initially interested in participating in the study. They also distributed leaflets about the study in the service houses with the researchers' contact information. We then contacted all initially interested participants via phone to arrange the interviews. Participants were free to choose where and when the interview would take place.

All study participants received oral and written information about the research, their participation's voluntary nature, the safeguarding of anonymity, and the opportunity to withdraw from the study if they desired. Participants also signed an informed-consent form to participate and received a study-data protection report. Before we collected data, the Academic Ethics Committee of the Tampere region in Finland granted ethical approval for the research.

Interview Study Design

We conducted thematic face-to-face interviews in older adults' homes or in the service house premises. The interview addressed older adults' social relationships, perceptions and experiences of their living environment, everyday routines, technologies, and digitalization, as well as ideas for future research. The technology theme was brought forward toward the end of the interview and included questions such as: "How is digitalization visible in your daily life?" "What do you use the internet and technologies for?" and "Is it easy or difficult to use?" The interview did not include direct questions about the basic psychological needs; such experiences were inferred from the interview data instead. The interviews lasted from 31 to 238 min, were audio recorded, and then transcribed. One of the transcriptions covered only parts of the interview due to the recordings' low quality. The first three authors of this paper conducted interviews and analyses.

Analysis Method

We analyzed the data using theory-driven content analysis. Content analysis is a method used for making replicable and valid inferences from interview transcriptions in a social context of interest (Krippendorff 2004). We considered content analysis suitable for our study purposes because it allows for context-sensitive inferring (Bengtsson 2016) and the application of theoretical notions in interpreting the data (Elo & Kyngäs 2008). First, we imported all interview data transcriptions to NVivo software, familiarized ourselves with the data, and applied an initial codebook for the analysis process. Then we reduced the data to material relevant to our research aim. We then deductively coded the transcription material into three

categories based on the basic psychological needs outlined in SDT. Use of ICT was understood to cover adoption and use of technology; therefore, our analysis included material describing participants' experiences and views of ICT and other technology as well as their anticipations of future use or nonuse. ICT was broadly defined to include all technologies older adults referred to as those they used in their daily lives. These included devices such as cell phones, computers, tablets, television, radio, as well as online tools, such as emails, social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) and instant messaging applications (e.g. WhatsApp). The participants did not differentiate between ICT and other technology use.

Results

The analysis showed multiple ways in which descriptions of experiences and views of using ICT reflected the experiences of the basic psychological needs. Next, we analyze the discussions from the point of view of each basic psychological need.

Autonomy

Autonomy was linked with participants' descriptions of willingness to decide on one's use of technology, efforts to self-regulate own use of technology, and remarks about having experienced (external) pressure to use technology.

Participants expressed willingness to decide on their use of technologies. Generally, they described they would use technologies gladly when the use brought joy or provided greater opportunities in life, such as communication with others and managing one's daily affairs:

"The phone is a really great thing when you have it. ... Fortunately, they invented it a long time ago. You can also talk about these things on the phone although it would be really nice to see in-person, of course." (Saara, 96)

Some participants said they reduced or avoided the use of technologies because they were not interested in using them, but preferred to do something else instead, as indicated by Viola, 77: "It is the interest. It's a no, I'd rather knit socks than be on the computer or be on the phone."

Participants described efforts to self-regulate their technology use. Excessive use of technologies (e.g. social media, television) was to be avoided. Over-engagement was prevented by engaging in other activities instead: "I consider myself a tv addict. But from that I have, it was very conscious that I went to voluntary activity, so that I could get away from television for a bit" (Leena, 73). Some participants said social media was also to be avoided due to unwanted content, such as numerous unnecessary notifications and friend requests from strangers. Connecting only with close friends on social media was seen as a way to navigate the newfound online social environment. Some participants did not consider sharing personal matters on social media appropriate and therefore refused to do so: "No, and neither I want to. I don't want to when I think how much people are. I don't need to share my things all over the world. I think it's disgusting" (Hilja, 77).

Participants expressed external pressure to adopt and use technologies, which invoked various reactions. Owning a mobile phone was portrayed as a necessity in society today. A mobile phone was depicted as a key component in maintaining social relationships and to provide a sense of security. However, carrying a mobile phone and using it to answer calls was also portrayed as a duty:

"Nowadays, it feels like you can't leave your phone at home, for instance. It needs to be with you everywhere. If you go to take out the trash, you take the laundry downstairs to dry, the phone needs to be with [you]. [The] landline phone was so lovely." (Hilja, 77)

Fast societal development increased the pressure to go digital. In general, the participants argued that having nondigital banking options was important because electric services are not accessible or straightforward to everyone. The pressure for everyone to "go digital" evoked uncertainty regarding the future, including potential unequal power relations between human and machine that could threaten human autonomy:

"I think technology should not go so far that a person lies in a bed and a machine tells [them] what to do. The humanity must not disappear completely [so] that humans are taken care of technically only. It goes too far then." (Sylvi, 76)

The participant's remark is also about the importance of social contacts and receiving care from other people, not just from technology.

Competence

Competence was linked with participants descriptions of their technological competence, perceptions of technology-related support, and worries of losing technological competence in the future.

The participants discussed their technological competence. Those expressing confidence in their technological competence tended to use technology for various purposes and find it useful:

“It is the easiness with which I write. We have this kind of family WhatsApp, where are my daughters and their husbands and children. There are seven of them. I need to write just one message, and everyone gets it.” (Roosa, 79)

Some participants perceived challenges related to use of technology positively. In some of the interviews, participants took the opportunity to express their technological competence by demonstrating their use of technology (e.g. door phone and hearing aid) and explaining the benefits of use. Some stated that the use of technology provided a pleasant challenge in life:

“You need all the time to challenge yourself, or I at least challenge myself because otherwise, you can’t keep up with the times if you are not, and I find it nice. I really like everything that allows me to think a little, fiddle with, and do.” (Alma, 68)

However, most participants mentioned their poor technological competence and depicted how incompetence hampered the use of technology and evoked negative feelings, such as fear and anger: *“My son takes care of my banking. I have to say that I can’t stand [the] computer. ... I can be without worrying, I don’t need to be afraid that I’ll mess something up” (Elsa, 85).*

Participants sought technology-related support from family members, technology-related stores, and customer service. Although many perceived support as readily available, it was sometimes perceived as poor quality:

“To communicate to those, telephone and a chat consultation, they could use a kind of terminology that older customers also understand because it has been several times so that it has broken down to the point that I don’t understand what they ask me to do when they used that terminology.” (Leena, 73)

Losing one's technological competence with increasing age and possible memory problems was a worry regarding the future. The participants hoped society would understand this difficulty: "So that these www's [websites/virtual environments] are no longer possible for us. And the society thinks that we will preserve the skills, and we won't. I think it is the most important thing that should be included" (Elisa, 86). The participants also expressed their wish for support to maintain technological competence, especially for those interested in receiving it.

Relatedness

Relatedness was linked with participants' descriptions of using technologies for social purposes, preference for human contact over technological contact, and technology inhibiting formation of social connections.

Maintaining social contact with friends and family was a key incentive to use a mobile phone. The participants commonly used mobile phones for voice phone calls, but some also used them for video calls and texting. For some, phone calls were the only way to stay connected with close ones: "The phone is the one through which we keep in touch. I have only one close friend, who lives about 50 km away. That's our only means of communication, the phone" (Hilja, 77).

Some described using online technologies, such as instant message applications (e.g. WhatsApp), social media platforms (e.g. Facebook), and email to interact with other people. Most participants, however, discussed social media to have a limited or no role in their lives. One reason to refuse social media was that some participants fulfilled their need for belongingness offline: "I have these social relationships so abundant here that I don't need it" (Elisa, 86). However, those who described feeling lonely did not emphasize the use of social media but discussed other activities that kept them occupied (e.g. going for a walk, watching television, listening to the radio). Access to the internet was generally depicted as useful in obtaining information for instance about community and social events.

Social interactions with other people also occurred around technology, such as a self-organized television club, hosted by the participant Jaakko, 69. Jaakko used his skills to search movies and other content from the internet to be watched together in the television group. So, Jaakko's competence helped others to reach internet content otherwise unavailable for

them, and the group was able to enjoy the fruits of his skills in social gatherings. One participant described browsing with a tablet and discussing the content as a way to spend time with a family member:

“When I’m at my sister’s place, we watch. She has a kind of a small internet. We watch ... all things from there. Let’s say she reads a local newspaper from there, and we then look up the things the device contains.” (Irma, 72)

Participants discussed the interactions and social connectedness technologies made possible, as well. Some briefly mentioned technology (e.g. radios, phones) provides companionship. Passing time with technology was described to be common in the evenings: “I usually don’t go anywhere in the evenings, and that’s how I learned to socialize with television” (Leena, 73). One participant who was very unsatisfied with their social relationships and health considered engaging with the radio as a distraction, something else to think about than the pain in her body: “And at night, when it really hurts and I wake up, I come and turn on the radio, and then the pain is a bit forgotten when I try to follow what program is coming on” (Kaija, 78). In this instance, the radio can be interpreted to offer indirect social contact, which can help divert attention from the pain.

Participants emphasized their preference for human contact over technological contact. This tendency was evident in discussions of service situations, in which the human contact was portrayed as worth waiting for: “I’d rather talk to a person face to face, or for example on the phone. ... I’d rather be in line so that I can get a friendly aunt to answer” (Roosa, 79). Human contact was preferred because of technology’s unnaturalness: “It would be even nicer to talk to a real person. If you ask a chatbot, ‘What’s up? How are you’, some ... answered, ‘Thank you. What was your question?’” (Ismo, 57). People were considered to need contact with a living being, which technology cannot provide:

“A person needs the contact of a living person. The machine doesn’t replace it. ... Even just a dog, when it’s a living being, ... can improve a person’s mental health a lot. But when you place a robot in that corner, if you don’t press the button, it won’t do anything.” (Sylvi, 76)

Participants also stated technologies inhibited the formation of social connections. They often believed other people used technology in wrong or

unexpected ways. Compulsive use of technology was generally portrayed as violating a social norm and hindering the formation of social connections offline. Online difficulties in interpreting other people's words were believed to stem from people's differences in their levels of self-expression: "There [online], people hide behind a certain wall. I am very open to those who I have seen face-to-face. I dare to share things there with my friends. Not all dare to share same things back to me" (Ismo, 57). Some participants also mentioned that sudden changes in other people's ways of using technology (e.g. not replying or constantly looking at a screen) hindered the formation or sustainment of social connections.

Discussion

In this study, we investigated older adults' experiences and views of using ICT from the perspective of the basic psychological needs of experiencing autonomy, competence, and relatedness. We used interview data collected from older adults living in Finland and analyzed it using theory-driven content analysis, for which SDT provided the theoretical framework and guided the analysis. The results offer rich descriptions of older adults' experiences and views of using ICT from the viewpoint of the basic psychological needs and provide insight into possible psychological phenomena related to the use of ICT among older adults.

Our findings regarding autonomy suggest that our participants wanted a chance to make their own decisions regarding the use of technology. They described how they organized their use of ICT by deciding on whether to, when, and how to use it, and they described their efforts to regulate their use of technology by adjusting it to align with their goals and values. Participants expressed external pressure to adopt and use technologies, and fast societal development increased the pressure to go digital. Based on our results, not all looked forward to joining the joy-ride of digitalization but searched for ways to avoid using technology. We argue that minimized use or nonuse of technology can be seen as manifestations of autonomy. In such cases, refusing to use technology could strengthen the sense of autonomy and the basic psychological need for it. However, at the same time, refusing and not using technology could weaken the feeling of competence due to the nonuse of devices and software. The participants often discussed their interest or noninterest in

using technology with notions of their competence in using technology and social connections with others, which aligns with the SDT framework and highlights the basic needs' interdependent nature (Ryan & Deci 2017).

Our results regarding competence suggest that technological competence is closely intertwined with interest in using technologies as well as perceptions of technology use. The participants often discussed confidence in their technology-related skills with regular use of technology or positive perceptions of use and a lack of competence with limited interest in and use of technology. Lack of competence hindered accomplishments and evoked negative feelings, highlighting the negative reactions to an unfulfilled need (Ryan & Deci 2017). Peters et al. (2018) discussed the difficulty and novelty of technologies in relation to competence and suggested that their importance lies in the extent to which they satisfy competence needs, that is, opportunities for learning and mastery. Our analysis also showed that learning technologies were perceived positively and provide a pleasant challenge in life for some. However, participants expressed concerns regarding ageing, fast technological development, and their future technological competence, and supported the idea of offering technological guidance to all those who wish to receive it. Ageing may bring about advancing health problems with sensory faculties and cognitive abilities, which again may lead to inability to use digital services and devices. Competencies once acquired may be lost, but this fact is not acknowledged when offering digital services for all.

Our findings regarding relatedness suggest that maintaining social contact with friends and family was the key incentive to use a phone. Sometimes, phone calls were the sole method to stay connected with loved ones who resided far away. However, although some participants regularly use social media, most believed it has a limited or no role in their lives. Research has suggested that although they are a promising resource, the role of social networking technologies in fulfilling social needs in older adults' lives is likely moderate compared to how it fulfills younger people's needs (Ten Bruggencate et al. 2019). In line with the assumptions of Peters et al. (2018), in our data, relatedness was emphasized as a motivator to use technology rather than an explicit outcome of technology use. A critical point for relatedness is, indeed, that not all social interactions create social connectedness, and even small details can become influential (Peters et al. 2018), as our findings also showed.

Our participants also stated that technologies inhibited the formation of social connections, which tended to be linked with a belief that others use technology in wrong or unexpected ways. This is an important avenue for future research on underlying mechanisms because use of ICTs (e.g. social media, social robots) has been found to be useful in fulfilling social needs (e.g. Cotten et al. 2022; Latikka et al. 2021), and to have potential negative social consequences for older adults (Ball et al. 2019; Wilson 2018). Some participants preferred human contact over technological contact and stated that technology must not replace human contact. Replacing human contact with technology could threaten human relatedness and therefore needs to be critically considered (Calvo et al. 2020). While our analysis did not systematically focus on age differences in technology experiences, it is noteworthy that, regardless of their own use habits, younger participants may have had a greater variety of ICT experiences due to the more widespread use of technology in their age group (Näsi et al. 2012; Statistics of Finland 2021).

Our study showed that the SDT framework (Ryan & Deci 2017) and the basic psychological needs outlined in it are useful tools also for analyzing older adults' experiences and views of using ICTs. Instead of approaching the topic as use versus nonuse of technology and the needs as unidimensional constructs, our analysis revealed various uses of technology (cf. Van Deursen & Van Dijk 2019) and multiple ways in which the basic psychological needs were related to older adults' experiences and views of using technology. The more nuanced approach is meaningful because focusing merely on the dichotomous counterparts of older adults' use and nonuse of technology may underestimate the complexities, ambivalences, and valuations of digital engagement and disengagement (Choolayil & Putran 2022; Gallistl et al. 2021; Gallistl & Wanka 2022). Our findings generally align with the previous studies in this area (Clark & Moloney 2020; Dupuy et al. 2016; Keenan et al. 2021), to which we add by emphasizing that use of ICT can also have negative consequences regarding the basic psychological needs and thereby undermine older adults' well-being.

The practical implications of our results include that efforts to promote digital inclusion necessitate acknowledgement of the basic psychological needs. It is necessary to advocate voluntary use of technologies or, in the face of external pressure, openly communicate one's intentions and potential outcomes of such use. Quality support related to technology

adoption and use among older adults is important and could be targeted to those who need and are genuinely interested in receiving it. Social belonging is central to human well-being (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Ryan & Deci 2017); therefore, it is crucial to understand its enablers and barriers in technology-mediated environments. From the perspective of motivating older adults to use technologies, the key is to create and maintain need-supportive environments in which people can motivate themselves rather than focusing only on the individual (Ryan & Deci 2017). In technologically advanced countries like Finland, new technological solutions should be introduced gradually, while still providing options for handling everyday matters, such as banking, in non-digital ways.

Study limitations include the fact that we collected our data only in Finland with a relatively small, although acceptable, sample size that consisted of white and mainly female participants. The results are all nuanced descriptions of participants' experiences and views, making them ungeneralizable. We included all interested participants who perceived themselves as older adults, resulting in a broad age range of 57–96 years, challenging the typical definition of older adults being 65 years or older. Only three of the participants were younger than 70 years old. In addition, we succeeded in reaching the oldest old and those residing in service housing ensuring our data represents individuals in diverse life situations. We collected the data during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the interviews to some extent; most if not all recommendations for social restrictions were dismantled in Finland, but general caution was still practiced. Finally, the interviews were conducted by three female researchers who were younger than the interviewees, which might have affected the nature of the technology related discussions. In the future, it may be beneficial to explore the topic using peer interviews to examine whether the phenomenon appears similarly. Future studies could also focus on investigating technology use more specifically certain age group among older adults, as well as from a broader life course perspective to better understand how the role of technology experiences cumulates across a lifetime.

Conclusion

Technologies play a nearly ubiquitous role in many societies, and better understanding the psychological phenomena related to the

experiences and views of using ICT is necessary to safeguard peoples' well-being and successfully deploy technologies. Our analyses showed that basic psychological needs play a multifaceted and important role in older adults' experiences and views of using ICT. The results suggest that the basic psychological needs can guide what kind of technology is adopted or not adopted, how, and why. Furthermore, use of ICT can enable and hinder the meeting of basic psychological need and thereby relate to older adults' well-being. If societies focus mainly on closing the digital divide and do not acknowledge that in some cases ICT may hinder the fulfillment of basic psychological needs, we might encounter entirely different challenges in the future. When promoting digital inclusion and deployment of technologies, it is paramount to do so with technology that supports older adults' autonomy, competence, and relatedness to safeguard their well-being. SDT provides a valuable analytical tool for addressing these topics, helping to amplify the voices of older adults in the development of digital society.

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Ethical Approval

The ethics committee of the Tampere region in Finland declared in a 2021 statement that the protocol for this research did not present any ethical issues (Statement 68/2021).

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Understanding the evolution of physical activity and sport participation in the older population. The value of the «*déprise*» concept

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to examine the concept of “*déprise*” in the context of the transition to retirement, with a focus on the participation of older individuals in physical activities. *Déprise* is defined as a complex process combining reconversion and disengagement, enabling individuals to negotiate ageing. The study employs a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with 30 participants aged 60 and above, residing in their own homes. The results provide insight into the diverse *déprise* strategies employed by participants. Some participants modified their existing practices by modifying the way they performed them, while others substituted new activities more suited to their abilities. Others intensify their physical activities by increasing the frequency of practice or diversifying the types of activities engaged in. Furthermore, some individuals resume physical activities they had previously discontinued, while others discover physical activity after retirement. Our findings indicate that the strategies employed by individuals to overcome barriers to physical activity are not fixed and vary from one person to another, depending on their specific needs, abilities, and life context. The

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study underscores the need to raise awareness of these *déprise* strategies to facilitate older people's engagement in physical activity.

Keywords: *Déprise*, older people, physical activity, sociology.

Introduction

In addition to primary and then secondary socialization (Berger & Luckmann 1996), "tertiary socialization" (Veelken 1990) aims to highlight the possibilities of including older people in society, emphasizing their ability to adapt to a new environment. This socialization takes place during the transition from working life to retirement.

It is during this third phase that the concept of «*déprise*» can provide an interesting tool for analyzing changes in the social practices of older people. The concept of *déprise* was first introduced in France by Barthe et al. (1988), who originally defined it as "a kind of diminution of the vital impulse" (1988: 22). At the time, the concept was based on two major gerontological theories: the «activity» theory (Havighurst & Albrecht 1953), and the «disengagement» theory (Cumming & Henry 1961). The concept of disengagement refers to the withdrawal of older people from society, and conversely the withdrawal of society from ageing individuals. It is the "social world that moves away as much as the individual moves away" (Clément & Membrado 2010: 121). The concept of *déprise*, introduced by Barthe et al. (1988) is in part a continuation of the concept of disengagement (the individual takes a certain distance from the world around him or her), but challenges it by considering that ageing people may not completely abandon their place in their social activities, and may therefore introduce reconversion strategies. Two concepts are theoretically close to that of disengagement: the "SOC" (Selection, Optimization, Compensation) model highlighted by the psychologist Baltes (1987, 1997) and the "adjustment" phenomenon of Peter Coleman (1994). Similar to disengagement, these two concepts focus on the ways in which individuals adapt to ageing. SOC focuses on the active management of resources to maintain functioning and well-being, while the concept of *déprise* addresses not only the compensatory strategies of ageing but also the declines that older people face. Baltes' model (1987, 1997) is often seen as

a proactive and positive approach to successful ageing, whereas *déprise* also includes the more passive and sometimes unavoidable aspects of ageing, such as “ultimate disengagement” (Clément & Mantovani 1999). In addition, SOC focuses more on individual strategies, whereas *déprise* takes into account the influences of the social environment on ageing (Caradec 2018).

Déprise has subsequently been extensively reformulated (Caradec, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2018; Hummel et al. 2014; Clément & Membrado 2010; Mantovani & Membrado 2000; Martuccelli 2002; Meidani & Cavalli 2018). The concept of *déprise* is now understood to be a complex notion, a dual process combining reconversion and disengagement. The contemporary concept of *déprise* views ageing not as a decline, but as a process that challenges the conventional image of old age. *Déprise* allows people to “negotiate their old age” (Mantovani & Membrado 2000: 3) and “also, and above all, responds to a logic of self-preservation that aims to maintain a sense of identity continuity [...]” (Meidani & Cavalli 2018: 13). Beyond the preservation of one’s own identity (Clément & Mantovani 1999), the challenge of *déprise* is also to maintain familiarity with the world (Caradec 2007), to combat or at least limit “the world’s increasing strangeness” (Caradec 2018: 144). As Moolaert and Biggs (2013) note, *déprise* emphasizes the personal experience of ageing, without giving a central place to the idea of “active ageing” and the social expectations that may arise from it.

Déprise therefore testifies to “an individual’s positive capacity to adapt to the experience of ageing” (Meidani & Cavalli 2018: 12). *Déprise* strategies are neither “irreversible” nor “universal” (Meidani & Cavalli 2018). Therefore, there are extremely diverse forms of *déprise*, just as there are extremely diverse experiences of ageing. These strategies can be classified into three areas: those that allow activities to be maintained – albeit under certain conditions – those that have led to a reduction in older people’s activities and, conversely, those that have had a positive impact on older people’s involvement in their activities. In addition to being specific to each individual, disengagement strategies are cumulative and evolve throughout life (Meidani & Cavalli 2018).

It is therefore at retirement, an important moment of transition, that the *déprise* takes on its full meaning and strategic or tactical choices

become necessary to balance the «gains» and «losses» of activity (Barthe et al. 1990: 39). Although retirement can be a complicated transition for some (Cumming & Henry 1961), creating a sense of “big break” or “social death” (Lalivie d’Epinay et al. 1983), it tends to become an expected and valued stage of existence. Whereas retirement used to mean rest, it is now becoming increasingly active (Caradec 2005), and some retirees aspire to “successful ageing” (WHO 2002).

Retirement is thus an opportunity to reorganize one’s life and redefine oneself (Caradec 2004), conducive to the implementation of *déprise* strategies. These can be identified in a variety of practices – cultural, artistic or physical – and in this work we analyze the strategies implemented in the field of physical activity (PA). The PA can be an ideal place to study the changing relationship with the body throughout life (Tulle 2008). In addition, the quality of life and autonomy of older adults are becoming central to public policy, with the development of health promotion, prevention and education programs specifically targeted at this population. Preventive health care is becoming a lever in this national and international drive for “active ageing” (Katz 2000), and PA is an essential tool (Allain & Marshall 2017). The norms surrounding “successful” retirement include “staying young and fit, increasing leisure activities, and fulfilling oneself by engaging with family and society” (Eraly 2014: 71). In a health-conscious society, transgressing this social norm can make people feel guilty, so retired people try to follow the rules in what they believe to be their own best interests (Billé et al. 2010).

Through the prism of the concept of *déprise*, we will show how older people are led to engage, reengage, and disengage from PA. First, we will show how people adapt to ageing by modifying or replacing their physical practices. Then we’ll look at withdrawing from activities when continuity is impossible. Finally, we’ll explore strategies for engaging and re-engaging in PA.

Methodology

The research presented here was conducted as part of a doctoral thesis on the participation of older people in PA-based health prevention

workshops set up by a mutual insurance company in eastern France (MFBFC).

This research was conducted in close collaboration with the mutual insurance company, which facilitated access to the study population.

The research protocol was approved by the French National Agency for Research and Technology (ANRT) under reference number 2021/0686.

As part of its range of preventive health services, the mutual health insurance company is developing preventive health workshops using PA for people over 60, defined as “independent and living at home”. The aim of these workshops is to prevent or limit the risks associated with a sedentary lifestyle, while at the same time encouraging people to discover and practise PA and creating social links. The health prevention through PA workshops developed and implemented by the structure are mainly financed by public funds and membership fees (own funds). However, the workshops are not restricted to members of the mutual but are open to everyone. In this context, all persons over the age of 60 to whom the prevention activities are offered can benefit from them free of charge. Participants are informed of the prevention workshops through local contacts (town halls, associations, etc.), through notices in the newspaper or on websites, or through telephone canvassing using the structure’s list of beneficiaries.

The sample was constructed to be as representative as possible of the diversity of the population of beneficiaries of the MFBFC prevention workshops. In order to provide a diverse sample, a maximum of variation was sought in terms of: level of autonomy, age and sporting experience, gender, socio-professional category, and geography. A total of 30 participants were identified to provide a maximum variation sample (Patton 2002): of the participants, 27 were women and 3 were men, ranging in age from 63 to 85, with an average age of 72. All respondents were over 60, independent, and living at home. The small number of men in our sample can be explained by the fact that few men attended these workshops.

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews (Patton 2002). An interview grid was used for the reconstruction of the sport and health trajectories of the beneficiaries. The person’s life

history is examined from childhood to the day of the interview in order to understand how the practice of PA¹ has evolved over time, taking into account the social, historical, and institutional context. This diachronic reconstruction allows us to highlight variations in PA practices. The interviews lasted an average of 1.5 h, were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, and were then fully transcribed for analysis. Prior to the interview, informed consent was requested, dated, signed, and sent. Participants' names were changed to maintain confidentiality. The data analysis process for this study followed the thematic analysis framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). After transcribing the interviews, the verbatim were distributed among the research team for an initial review, enabling the researchers to familiarize themselves with the content. Subsequently, each researcher independently generated a set of "preliminary codes". Code production was inductive, data driven. The team then convened to discuss, compare, and consolidate these codes, enhancing the rigor and validity of the analysis through triangulation of perspectives. Once consensus on the initial codes was achieved, the team collaboratively organized them into overarching themes. This step involved systematically grouping coded data extracts into relevant themes and sub-themes. At this stage, the analytic process was informed by theory. In a deductive approach, the concept of *déprise* was used to group together codes that could fall under different *déprise* strategies (Braun et al. 2016). Finally, a collaborative review phase was conducted to ensure the thematic structure was coherent, non-redundant, and accurately reflected the qualitative depth and nuances of the data set.

The researcher's close collaboration with the mutualist structure meant that contact with participants could be established quickly, either through the researcher's presence at the workshops or through lists of those registered for the workshops. Those contacted directly during the workshops ($n = 15$) all responded positively. The people contacted directly during the

¹In this research, we have outlined a definition of PA in terms of how it is perceived by the people interviewed. Thus, physical activity refers both to activities identified as sports and fitness activities (e.g. gymnastics, swimming, cycling) and to all leisure activities that involve significant physical effort (e.g. gardening, crafts, housework). Actual physical activity was not tracked.

workshops ($n = 15$) all responded positively. Of the 19 participants contacted via the lists, 4 refused. The lack of prior contact with the researcher and the incompatibility of schedules may explain these refusals.

Results

We will begin by examining how older individuals utilize *déprise* strategies to sustain their current PA. Secondly, we will illustrate how the renunciation of PA develops, at times resulting in its complete abandonment. Thirdly, we will examine in greater detail the various forms of commitment or re-commitment to PA.

Maintaining Practices: Adaptation and Substitution

While the majority of respondents do not stop their physical activities, they do implement strategies to maintain them. The results show that maintaining activities can be done in different ways: some adapt their activities, especially in the way they are practiced, others use technical aids to support them, while another category of people replace their activities with those more suited to their abilities or limitations.

In order to maintain the same activities, practices can be adapted. Thus, “the older person does not change the activity or the discipline, but modifies the way he or she practices” (Hénaff-Pineau 2009: 81). This is what Caradec calls “selective renunciation”, the aim of which is to “preserve oneself” (Caradec 2007: 19), “the more you hold on to one side, the more you let go of the other” (Clément & Mantovani 1999: 100).

The “adaptation of practice modalities” (Hénaff-Pineau 2009:81) takes place through various channels: rhythm, frequency, distance ... It is in a “principle of economy of effort” (Hénaff-Pineau 2009: 81) and “moderation” that Monette and Murielle explain that they have slowed down their activities:

Oh, now I'm starting to calm down. [...] Now I'm calming down a bit because at 70, that's it. (Monette, 71)

I'm using up a bit too much of my energy [...] “You'd better take care of your rhythm too!” (Murielle, 65)

Jocelyne, 70 years old, highlights the adaptation of the activity by changing the distance covered:

And I walked, I hiked. But I did up to 22 to 25 kilometers a day. We did it on Sundays, so from morning to night, that's it. When we were in good shape, well, now we don't do that anymore, because we've all grown old in this association [...] So I used to do the one that wasn't so strong, which was on Wednesdays, I think. So that meant that sometimes I walked a lot. [...] I was in the lightest group because it was on my late, let's say.

People can also adjust their walking frequency. As 82-year-old Marianne explains: "We used to walk for miles and miles, but now we're just flat on our backs [...] Now it's once a week, I'd say."

Other modalities, such as the context in which people engage in PA, can also be modified. Some people, like Patricia, age 70, will change structures to find a group at their level: "Well, yes, because it's not the same level. Now I can't keep up with the others over there." Others will not return to a club, preferring to practice independently in order to choose the most appropriate way to practice: "No, I've stopped [going to a club], but I go on my own" (Kamélia, 68).

In other cases, the environment in which the activity takes place is also adapted for safety reasons. As a result, the times and places of practice are carefully chosen, especially for walking. This was the case for Edith, 81, whose husband was worried about her safety, so she didn't go walking alone in the evening, but during the day: "So he grumbles because he doesn't like me going out alone. [...] So I avoid it." As for Suzanne, 76 years old, she thinks about where to go for a walk and meticulously organizes her routes:

Since I'm alone, I don't go into the forest, because I live on the edge of the forest, so I don't go into the forest, but I have my little circuits: I walk, I go down to the city.

Some people show great skill in developing different ways of adapting their practices to keep them going, as George, 74, who has Parkinson's disease, which limits his activities, testifies:

So now I walk with a small bench. And then I stop for 1/4 hour, sit down and walk for ... But I can't do it anymore, I can't walk for more than 1 hour, then I walk 2-3 times an hour, eh.

With this strategy, he can “continue a previous activity but adapt it to new constraints” (Caradec 2007: 18). In this case, adaptation (Caradec 2007) involves the support of a technical aid to adapt one’s practice to one’s condition. However, this form of adaptation is rarely mentioned by respondents.

The results therefore reveal “the wealth of ingenuity” (Drulhe et al. 2007: 336) that each individual uses to continue their PA. Their adaptations are varied and unique to each individual. While some have chosen to change the pace or frequency of their practice, others have changed the framework of their practice, always taking into account their capacities, their energy, but also the external environment. Although people adjust their practice, this does not always guarantee sustainability. Ageing is fraught with pitfalls and “new constraints that are likely to emerge” (Caradec 2007: 15), sometimes necessitating other strategies.

Always with the aim of “lightening the practice” (Hénaff-Pineau 2009: 81) and ensuring the continuity of a PA, people are sometimes led to replace their practices with others. Caradec (2004) calls this strategy “abandonment-substitution,” in which the existing practice is abandoned and replaced by a new one. This strategy therefore involves “replacing one activity with another in the same register” (Caradec 2004: 116). It’s a form of “circumvention” (Barthe et al. 1990) that allows us to “to face specific difficulties and obstacles that prevent “normal” practices and to find solutions that allow substitutive forms [...]” (p. 40). The activities most frequently substituted by our respondents (n=12) are dancing, cycling, and gymnastics.

For some people, replacing an activity involves a true “reconversion” (Hénaff-Pineau 2009). François switched from judo, a martial art, to yoga. In his interview, he explains how this conversion came about:

When you feel the time is right, you have to jump ship and move on to something else. So I switched to yoga. [I had been doing martial arts for a long time, so I wanted to move on. OD [his wife] had invited me, she’d been practicing for a while, so she invited me to come along. I thought I’d get bored because it wasn’t physical enough for me, but after 2 classes I realized that it’s all the same, it’s not just about the posture, you have a spiritual approach and that really appealed to me because you’re entering the world of martial arts in a way. [...] That’s why I stayed with yoga, because I really enjoyed it and it’s a great way to keep fit. You work on flexibility and softness, but it’s very deep. So it was something completely different. (François, 65)

François says he listened to his body and changed the way he exercised. He made this change without any real compulsion. This “strategic choice” (Mallon 2001) is not possible for all our respondents. For example, George, 74 years old, was forced by the progression of his disease to make tactical choices (Mallon 2001) by changing his PA several times. Today, he has turned to aquagym: “When I walk 1 km, I ... I don’t feel good at all, I fall when I ride a bike, so aquagym is all that’s left”. However, of all the APs he practiced before his illness, he was only able to replace one, causing the others to give up. He explains:

I’ve been bicycling since I retired, I used to ride more often. And now I can’t. I can’t jog either. So now, it’s ... it’s the moment where I, I ... stop doing gymnastics, but I only have aquagym, I can still do aquagym. But the rest is... (George, 74)

Renunciation

When practice adaptation or substitution (Clément & Mantovani 1999) is no longer possible, this can lead to “older people abandoning activities they consider essential” (p. 11). Certain activities are thus abandoned when they require too much effort or energy, or when they are no longer of interest to the individual. Abandonment can occur in a variety of ways. It can be chosen or imposed, although in this research it seems to be mostly imposed by various triggers, as explained by Liliane, 76 years old: “But gymnastics was good, we used to go to Héry (the village where the practice takes place) and all that, we used to spend an hour, there weren’t many of us, but it was good. It’s a pity that it stopped.”

Abandonment can take two forms: on the one hand, a single PA can be stopped while maintaining the practice of others, what we might call partial renunciation; and on the other hand, all activities cease, which corresponds to total renunciation. We did not find any situations of total renunciation (Caradec 2004, 2007) in the interviews we conducted. In fact, none of the respondents mentioned giving up all of their PA activities. However, partial abandonment is mentioned by people in our interviews, but is not in the majority, since it concerns only five of the participants. They give up one or more activities, but at least one remains. This is the case for activities that could neither be

adapted nor replaced, as explained by Patricia, aged 70, who stopped walking and Qi Gong: “I used to do Qi Gong, but it’s too hard for me now,” but who continues with another activity in the same way: “I still do gymnastics.”

Commitment

PA among the older population is on the rise (European Commission 2018, 2022; Sport England 2020, 2024). In France, the CREDOC barometers² (Croutte & Jörg 2019, 2021; Müller 2023) have shown that PA among people over 60 will increase by 8% between 2018 and 2022. Over the generations, PA has become more and more practiced and integrated into lifestyles (Berthuit et al. 1999), which could “suggest a democratization and standardization of practices for both sexes at all ages” (Hénaff-Pineau 2012: 2). This popularization of PA has a positive impact on people’s engagement in PA.

With retirement, older individuals may have the opportunity to engage in PA either by re-engaging in it or by over-investing in existing ones. This phenomenon, which has been variously termed “rebound” or “resumption” (Barthe et al. 1990; Caradec 2007), represents a dimension of *déprise* that has been relatively under-researched in the literature dedicated to this concept (Meidani & Cavalli 2018: 11). Consequently, the term “rebound” is employed to describe the implementation of actions that appear to run counter to the “agist” (Butler 1969) vision of ageing as a factor of withdrawal from social life. This strategy of reclaiming control is often employed by individuals adept at what Caradec (2004) refers to as “hyperactive retirement.” These individuals attempt to cope with the institutional constraints, norms, and values that drive it. The advent of illness and/or social disqualification, as well as the development of resistance aimed at safeguarding one’s sense of identity and autonomy, are key factors in the process of rebound (Meidani & Cavalli 2018: 11). Additionally, the objective is to “circumvent these obstacles and substitute them with multiple openings” (Drulhe et al. 2007: 336–337). Rebound, in contrast to abandonment, entails reviving a

²The *Centre de Recherche pour l’Étude et l’Observation des Conditions de Vie* (CRÉDOC), is a research organisation that conducts studies and research into the quality of life in France.

neglected activity, engaging in a new activity, or increasing one's investment in an activity already practiced (Caradec 2007: 19). This strategy of engagement or re-engagement was the most frequently reported by our interviewees.

Intensification

The majority of our respondents ($n=20$) reported that they had intensified their activities upon reaching retirement age. This took the form of either intensifying their existing practice or multiplying the types of activities they engaged in: "The more the person ages, the more he or she feels the need to redouble efforts and willpower to keep old age at bay, and develops new sports investments by increasing the frequency of exercise or the number of activities practiced" (Henaff-Pineau 2012: 27). In total, two individuals have exclusively increased their frequency of practice, while 10 have diversified their activities. Eight individuals have not only increased their frequency of practice, but have also diversified their activities simultaneously.

Many respondents report that they have been practicing a variety of PAs since retirement and are no longer satisfied with a single discipline, but rather a variety of activities. Hénaff-Pineau explains that "the increase in the variety of practices" (2009: 81) helps to develop the physical balance that retirees are looking for. Almost every day – or even systematically – a PA is performed, sometimes even twice a day. Many people automatically list their activities:

I run, hike and do gymnastics (Anne, 65).

I do all 3: walking on Mondays, gymnastics on Thursdays, and then there's aquagym at lunchtime on Tuesdays [...] I also do Qi Gong outside. (Jocelyne, 70)

Weeks are meticulously planned, leaving little room for boredom or rest. Activities are sometimes so numerous that the respondents themselves have to rely on their meticulously filled out calendars to remember where each one fits into their daily routine. The addition, variety, and sequence of activities give the impression of a busy, fast-paced life and a well-established routine:

I do my little [Qi Gong] session every morning, it depends, it changes. And on Tuesday afternoons I walk, on Wednesday afternoons I walk all day with a friend, I leave in the morning at 10 o'clock and then we go out for the day, we bring a picnic and that's it, and on Wednesday evenings I do yoga. On Thursday I do stretching, oh well, I didn't tell you about that (laughs), on Thursday. And on Friday I do Qi Gong in the afternoon, and on the weekend I relax or go hiking. (Evelyne, 67)

Sometimes activities are expanded through the substitution of others (Hénaff-Pineau 2009). Indeed, a single activity can be replaced by several, which gives the opportunity to discover new activities. This is the case for Marie, 70 years old:

I used to do gymnastics, but this year I stopped because I go to aquagym at 9 in the morning and gymnastics was at 10. [...] So I stopped going to the gymnastics because I find that aquagym makes me ... it's different, you're less tired and you also get good results. So, I gave up the gymnastics for a while. That's why I started Qi Gong and Eutonie. Well, it's not the same, but there you go.

It was the complementary aspects of all these activities that made it possible to replace just one.

Among those who have diversified and intensified their activities, walking is the activity in which they are most involved, followed by qi gong and swimming. It is also interesting to note the emergence of new PAs that were not practiced before retirement and have since been taken up by practitioners, such as Pilates, muscle strengthening, Tai Chi, and Eutonie. Although numerous authors (Burlot & Lefèvre 2009; Mignon & Truchot 2002) have indicated a decline in the number of PA practices with advancing age, our findings demonstrate a notable increase in the number of PA practices among individuals transitioning to retirement. We did not find any differences in the responses according to the socio-professional category of the respondents, although representations of ageing vary according to social class (Calasanti et al. 2022) and could have an impact on the practice of PA in retirement. In our sample, 21 people identified themselves as working class, 8 as middle class, and 1 as upper class. Pillonel has shown that people from the upper social classes, who are particularly sensitive to "ageing well," have significant resources (social, financial, cultural) that keep them at a distance "from disruptions in their life course" (Pillonel 2018:108). This may explain their low representation

in our sample. In addition, Feillet (2000) has highlighted the growing sensitivity of the working class to the challenges of “successful ageing”, which may also explain the high proportion of working class people in our sample.

The hospital sector was over-represented in the interviews, with six respondents claiming to have worked in hospitals (one nurse and five orderlies). This high proportion in our sample can be explained by professional socialisation towards “ageing well.”

The multiplication of activities is not the sole lever for intensifying PA. Indeed, individuals can also modify the manner in which they engage in PA. In our interviews, amplifying the frequency of existing PA during retirement was frequently mentioned. Isabelle (64) states that since her retirement, she “does a lot more walking, a lot more sport...” The terms “all the time” (Diane, 85 years old), “every day” (Françoise, 65 years old), and “a little more” (Anne, 65 years old) mentioned in the interviews attest to the increase in PA observed after retirement. This amplification can also take the form of a transition from a « practitioner » role to a « practitioner-trainer » role. Indeed, two of our respondents have not only increased their frequency of exercise, but have also assumed a coaching role. Françoise, 65, states:

I walk every morning. About 5 kilometers, then from my house to the tennis court, I think it's about 6 km. And then during the week, a former colleague and I do other walks, but more, like 10 km or 13 km, at least once a week. And every Friday afternoon there's a walk proposed by the social center, and I'm the one, let's say, “in charge”. So, I decide the route, but the minimum we do is 8 kilometers.

Elisabeth, 74, who has always practiced gymnastics, also became a teacher, explaining that she is a dynamic woman who needs to expend her energy: “Well, I have a lot of energy, so I have to, I have to go, I have to do, that's it, I never stop! It's just my temperament”. This “excess of effort” (Henaff-Pineau 2012) is reflected in the desire to do more and more. Whatever the form of intensification – diversification or amplification – this increase in practices is quite remarkable, with some people over-investing both in the clubs and in autonomy, leaving little time unoccupied. Participation in activities is described as a desire or even a need, as Marianne, 82 years old, explains: “As soon as there is an activity, I do it [...] I can't just sit back and

do nothing,” or Diane, 85 years old: “As soon as I find an association, a thing, an activity, I just throw myself into it.” The term “as soon as” clearly indicates this immediate need, this thirst for activity. But in many cases this thirst for PA is not satisfied. Some feel that they are not doing enough, that they should be doing more, and develop a sense of guilt. This is the case of Ghislaine, 72 years old, who walks 3 times a week at a rate of 5 km a day and who feels that this is not enough: “But it would be nice to do it every day,” or Patricia, 70 years old, who walks and does gymnastics, who explains: “It’s fine But it’s true that I could do other things: go to aquagym, for example.”

Re-commitment with Past Practices

While some individuals will intensify their current practices, others are likely to reconnect with past practices that they had previously set aside (Caradec 2007). This re-engagement is not widely exploited by the respondents, with only three individuals declaring that they had resumed previous practices.

This reconciliation with abandoned activities can occur after an event that disrupted the practice of PA over a period of time. Indeed, “total resumption” can even occur after major setbacks that may have disrupted PA practice. For instance, Suzanne, aged 76, was motivated to resume walking after a major operation. She stated, “I came to walk so that I could start walking again. I had already trained before coming here because walking 200 meters was a problem.” This period of re-appropriation and re-engagement is not only a rediscovery of PA, but also a rediscovery of the self and its possibilities (Barthe et al. 1990). Suzanne and Murielle both cycled as children, but never had the opportunity to do so again during their working lives. When they retired, they both wanted to make cycling part of their daily lives again.

I’ll tell you what, I bought a bike, I haven’t been on a bike for 50 years, and I’m learning to ride again, with a view to riding a bike without an engine. (Suzanne, 76)

They’ve put in exercise bikes at the villa, so I’m going to do that at the villa. Then I’ll take the bike and go to the Mail [a bike path]. But I don’t want it to be up and down, I

want it to be flat. [...] And then I'd like to cycle to the lake. That's why I want to cycle, to cycle again. (Murielle, 66)

It is interesting to note, especially in the second interview fragment, that the PA coping strategy is used in a way that is quite different from what we were able to highlight earlier. Here, it is not a question of maintaining an activity, but of gradually rediscovering one. Aware of her limitations, Murielle uses "tricks" (Caradec 2007) to anticipate the obstacles that could prevent her from getting back on the bike. In fact, in addition to starting on an exercise bike, Murielle has also enrolled in balance exercises to keep her stable on the bike, and she hikes the route she would like to take later on the bike. These methods allow her to feel safe and to (re) practice gradually.

Late-life Discovery

Thus far, our discussion has focused on individuals who had a substantial amount of prior experience with PA. However, there may be instances where individuals had limited or no experience with PA prior to retirement. This was the case for three of our respondents, who reported having minimal experience with PA during their childhood or working life and who discovered PA after retirement. Barthe et al. explain this new interest in PA as a result of the renewed self-confidence that comes with retirement. These people have the power to: "choose their new activities, reinvent their daily lives" (1990: 39).

Marguerite, 65, is one of these newcomers, having never practiced PA before, and she explains the pleasure she is beginning to experience: "So aquagym, for example, seemed completely new to me [...] And yes, I enjoyed it." Kamélia, 68, also discovered PA when she retired: "I started walking when I retired." In addition to walking, she is also involved in other types of PA, including Qi Gong, relaxation, wellness sessions, and is a member of an association for « overweight people ». Of the three people who discovered PA in retirement, none were involved in a single activity, but rather a variety of activities, varying both the forms and types of practice: "This is how I found myself in retirement. I found myself doing one activity, then 2 activities, then 3 activities [...] so I'm running all the time and I'm absolutely delighted (laughs)." (Marguerite,

65). The curiosity that made it possible to engage in PA led to intense investment. Other factors may lead to the implementation of strategies, in particular what Sontag (1972) calls “the double standard of ageing.” Some women, such as Kamélia and Nicole, link their commitment to PA to a “fight against weight problems.” The problems may be health-related: “I joined the gym because I had a weight problem. And I’ve been there for at least ten years now” (Kamélia, 68) and/or aesthetic: “And because I have a complex about having a big belly (laughs), that’s how it came about” (Nicole, 63). Heteronormativity and ageist beauty stereotypes are therefore key determinants of participation in the workshops offered by the mutualist structure.

Conclusion

As previously demonstrated, the *déprise* strategies employed by individuals in the context of PA during the transition to retirement are diverse and varied. They can be conceptualized as an “active process” (Caradec 2008: 103) that is “not total, linear, or homogeneous” (Clément et al., 1996: 90–91). Not a single respondent indicated that they had consistently engaged in the same PA throughout their lifetime. The “*déprise*” strategies employed are responsive to expectations within a specific context, which varies throughout the life cycle of the individual. Consequently, PA are tailored to the specific needs and abilities of each individual. Many respondents demonstrate their ability to adapt, to substitute, or to reinvest PA, even when these may have been neglected for many years. The resilience of our interviewees in the face of the changes associated with ageing is undeniable, but not infallible, since renouncing activities exists and is necessary in some cases. All these strategies are not deployed randomly, but are the result of reasoning – implicit or explicit, chosen or imposed (Mallon 2001) – prompted by different triggers.

The findings of this study highlight the need to focus on these distinct strategies to enhance the implementation of those that will encourage older people’s commitment to PA thus enabling older people who wish to do so to become more involved in PA (Grant 2001; King & King 2010) by promoting PA based more on individual choice rather than moral obligation (Katz 2000).

The data also suggest a selection bias. Most of the people who signed up for the prevention workshops were already physically active. These workshops enabled them to discover new activities or to take up an additional activity. Unfortunately, the range of activities offered does not reach people who are considered “vulnerable” or “distant” from PA. It would therefore be interesting to extend this study with a study of people who do not participate in the workshops offered by the mutual insurance company.

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Gender inequalities in extended working life: a systematic review of qualitative studies

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Abstract

Extended working life (EWL) in old age is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in aging populations. Gender inequalities constitute one of the most studied aspects of EWL. However, research on this issue has been predominantly quantitative, resulting in limited understanding of the situated meanings and experiences of work in old age for men and women. This article sheds light on the few studies that have explored gender inequalities in EWL qualitatively, systematically reviewing 47 articles.

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This study includes a meta-analysis of the papers reviewed, discusses the most frequent topics and content addressed by qualitative studies, and introduces a brief overview of the main findings on gender inequalities in the literature. These findings underscore that the literature has mainly been published in countries of the Global North, with data primarily focused on those nations. Additionally, there is an emphasis on research related to the meanings, decisions, policies, and narratives surrounding retirement, while only a limited number of articles have a defined theoretical framework. Finally, the limited number of comparisons between countries suggests a need for further research from these perspectives. We conclude this systematic review by discussing the main findings, suggesting policy implications of our work and identifying gaps that should be addressed in future research.

Keywords: extended working lives, gender, retirement, systematic review, qualitative research methods.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, many countries have witnessed an increase in labor force participation beyond the full pension age – that is, the age at which individuals qualify for a full pension (Baumann & Madero-Cabib 2021). Among the countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the labor force participation rate for individuals aged 65 and older increased by 75.8% between 2000 and 2019 (from 9.1 to 16.0%).

The extension of working life is primarily driven by the financial strains associated with pension systems, particularly in the context of rising healthy life expectancy and declining fertility rates globally. In response to recommendations from international organizations, policymakers and decision-makers in Western countries have, since the early 2000s, implemented various institutional measures to support employment among older adults. These measures include the gradual elimination of early retirement incentives, the implementation of lifelong learning programs, the enforcement of anti-age discrimination policies, and the increase of statutory retirement ages (Cabib 2025; Hofäcker et al. 2016; LaBond et al. 2022; Ní Léime et al. 2020). Therefore, gaining a deeper understanding

of the extension of working lives and its implications for future research seems crucial.

Extended working lives (EWLs) are influenced by both subjective factors (e.g. expectations about the future, identity roles, and financial needs) and socio-structural aspects (e.g. welfare regimes, employment, and retirement policies). There is no single route to retirement; rather, there are multiple pathways depending on factors such as educational level, health status, perceptions of retirement, and financial status for oneself and family members (Barlin et al. 2022; Koola & Moen 2016; Ortiz & Bellotti 2021; Quine et al. 2006). Factors that decrease the likelihood of continuing to work in old age include having sufficient pension income (Ní Léime & Street 2023), poor physical and mental health (Brown & Vickerstaff 2011), and the desire to pursue other life goals outside the labor market (Lundgren et al. 2018). In addition to structural macro-social factors and personal characteristics, research has highlighted that meso-social factors, specifically organizational factors such as working conditions and workplace characteristics, may play a significant role in shaping preferences and behaviors regarding the extension of working lives for both women and men (Ní Léime & Ogg 2019; Pietilä & Ojala 2023). Adverse working conditions that affect physical and mental health, as well as supervisors' attitudes, stereotypes, and ageism, may act as "push mechanisms" that drive older individuals out of work. In contrast, more favorable working conditions, such as flexibility, appreciation, and fulfillment, may operate as "stay factors," enabling older individuals to continue working in later life (Edge et al. 2021; Pietilä & Ojala 2023; Stattin & Bengs 2021).

There is an extensive body of evidence on gender inequalities in the extension of working lives. Scholars in this field have emphasized that gender norms are a key factor because, similar to earlier stages of the life course, labor market experiences in old age are highly gendered (Hokema & Scherger 2016; Loretto & Vickerstaff 2015; Ní Léime & Ogg 2019). Research consistently shows that women face disadvantaged working trajectories in old age. For example, in Finland, older men are more likely to have a higher formal occupational status than women, while older women are more frequently responsible for informal caregiving and employed in informal jobs, which often involve financial difficulties (Kauppi et al. 2021). Informal activities are those without a contract,

payment, or integration into formal labor structures. In contrast, both older men and women are more likely to extend their working lives when they have high occupational status, good self-rated health, and the absence of depressive symptoms. In the Netherlands, older men tend to continue working beyond the retirement age due to high satisfaction with their work and income (de Wind et al. 2016; Pilipiec et al. 2022). Research also shows that working conditions can have gendered effects on the experience of older workers, as women face both age and gender discrimination while seeking employment and within the workplace (Edge et al. 2021; Pietilä & Ojala 2023).

Although these studies have contributed enormously to the understanding of gender inequality in EWL, most of this research has been conducted from a quantitative perspective, with limited exploration of the situated and in-depth meanings and experiences of later-life employment among men and women (Brooke 2017; Calasanti 2022; Edge et al. 2021; Lain et al. 2020). This article aims to systematically review the few studies that have qualitatively explored gender inequalities in EWL, providing a more profound understanding of this phenomenon and its determinants.

Focusing on the qualitative literature on this topic allows for a deeper understanding of the human experience, discourses, and practices, offering a more adaptable, bottom-up perspective on the findings. It also provides greater visibility to the findings of these studies. Where have qualitative studies on EWL been conducted? Is gender included in these samples? Is there any information on studies from Global South countries? Are there any gaps in the samples used by researchers? These questions will be addressed through the application of a meta-analysis of the reviewed papers. In the second part of the findings, we will answer questions such as: Are there any other common topics across the selected articles? Do some topics or methodological approaches require further attention in the literature? Finally, the core results will be used to address additional questions: How do women experience and interpret the extension of their working lives? Conversely, how do men experience and interpret extending working life? How has the literature identified gender inequalities in this context? What are the gaps in the findings about gender inequalities in the extension of working life? What has been revealed through comparisons between the experiences of women and men in extending their working lives? Are these experiences similar or different?

For this purpose, a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach was employed, focusing on three primary dimensions within the existing qualitative literature. First, we conducted a meta-analysis of the reviewed articles, providing descriptive insights, including information on the data collection sources, the countries studied, and the prevalence of female and male authors. Next, we examine the most prevalent topics and content addressed in qualitative studies. Finally, we present the main findings regarding gender inequalities as discussed in the literature. In the Discussion section, we explore the broader implications of these findings and suggest potential avenues for future qualitative research in this field.

Design and Methods

Sample and Materials

This study presents a systematic review utilizing a qualitative and mixed methods approach to explore the evidence on gender inequalities during EWL. To achieve this objective, the PRISMA approach (Page et al. 2020) was adopted for data collection, analysis, and reporting. PRISMA (Page et al. 2020) facilitates sharing findings with the academic community by drawing on a set of essential, evidence-based items for systematic reviews. Throughout the reporting stage, information was presented in accordance with PRISMA guidelines (see Supplementary Material 1).

Regarding the sample, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to limit the search to articles relevant to this research. The following criteria were applied:

Inclusion criteria: (1) Studies examining the extension of working life. (2) Documents that consider gender as a significant research variable. (3) Texts incorporating qualitative and/or mixed methods as part of the research design. (4) Studies published in one of the five selected sources (explained subsequently).

Exclusion criteria: (1) Texts that consider gender solely as a descriptor of the sample. (2) Documents that do not employ qualitative or mixed methods approaches. (3) Documents that do not include individuals aged 60 and older in their samples. (4) Documents written in languages other than English and Spanish. (5) Books, book chapters, and articles that were unavailable for retrieval.

This research focuses exclusively on the qualitative aspect of these studies, as it allows us to concentrate on understanding the human experience, discourses, and practices, while also enabling a more flexible, bottom-up approach to the findings collected. A query using these criteria was executed to search for articles within the Web of Science and Scopus databases. Furthermore, we reviewed a selection of book chapters and books related to EWL and conducted an in-depth review of articles in the journal *Work, Aging and Retirement*. The data collection process is elaborated upon in the subsequent sub-section. We selected twelve book chapters, seven articles from Scopus, four from Web of Science, three from *Work, Aging and Retirement*, and 21 from a selection of journals (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of articles excluded/included for the analysis

N°	Category	Number of articles found with query search	Number of articles excluded after review	Number of articles included for analysis
1	Books (chapters)	92	80	12
2	Articles from Scopus database	89	82	7
3	Articles from WoS database	24	20	4
4	Articles from Journal <i>Work, Aging and Retirement</i>	10	7	3
5	Articles from Key Gerontological and Life Course Journals	3751	3730	21
	Total	3966	3919	47

Note: Table prepared by the authors using the information provided by the systematic review.

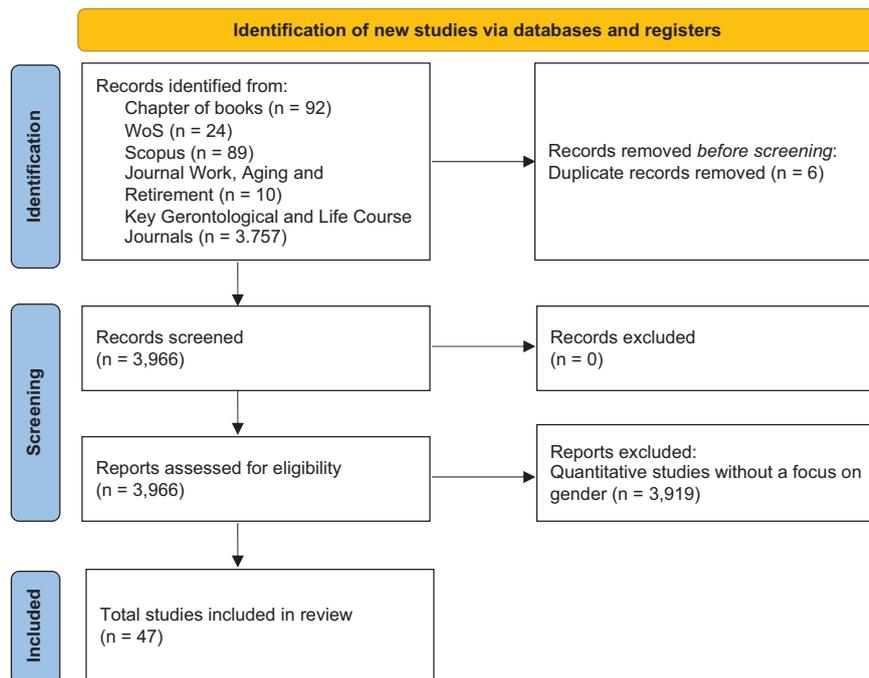
Data Collection

A selection of studies on the topic was made up until September 30, 2023. Adhering to the PRISMA systematic review approach (Page et al. 2021), the data collection process is outlined in Figure 1.

All 47 articles selected and analyzed in this research are individually identified (see Supplementary Material 2). We used five different sources to collect these documents, each employing a different strategy, as detailed later.

Figure 1. Data collection process.

Note: This figure was obtained following the PRISMA approach (Haddaway et al. 2022; Page et al. 2021).



Web of science (WoS). The search query was applied exclusively to three WoS databases: Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-EXPANDED), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI). The same query was used to search for specific terms in Keywords Plus (KP), Author Keywords (AK), and the Title (TI) of each paper. The query used was:

= (((extend* work* life) OR (old* work*) OR ("ewl")) AND ((gender) OR (women)) AND ((interview) OR (qualitative) OR (mixed method) OR (mixed methods) OR (narrative) OR (discourse) OR (qual) OR (life history)) AND ((aging) OR (ageing) OR (older worker) OR (elder) OR (old person) OR (older person) OR (old people) OR (older people)))

Scopus. The same query as for Web of Science was used, focusing on identifying the core concepts in the title and keywords.

Articles from key gerontological and life course journals. Articles from journals indexed in WoS and categorized in the Gerontology or Geriatrics & Gerontology fields were reviewed. A total of 95 journals were reviewed. A search was conducted on each journal's official website using all combinations of terms from the previous query, focusing on titles and keywords.

Book chapters. Books relating to EWL were identified, and from those, a selection of chapters that focused on gender aspects and adopting a qualitative (or mixed methods) approach was made. The chosen books were identified through internet searches and by reviewing the reference lists of articles already selected for this research.

Publications in the journal *Work, Aging and Retirement* were also reviewed. As with the other journals, its official searchable website (<https://academic.oup.com/workar>) was used, and it was last visited on October 13, 2023. This search employed terms from previous queries and focused on titles and keywords.

The decision to review articles from *Work, Aging and Retirement* and key gerontological and life course journals was made to ensure that articles from these WoS-indexed and/or Scopus-indexed journals were included in our systematic review. This step ensured that these articles were included in the data collection, as they are key journals that focus specifically on aging and work topics.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two steps. The first step involved a meta-analysis of the information collected. The second step employed thematic analysis to explore the most prevalent topics and content addressed in qualitative studies as well as their main findings regarding gender inequalities. Both analyses were conducted according to PRISMA guidelines followed in this study.

All the researchers participated actively in both the data collection and data analysis processes. These processes were led by the first and second authors of this study. The documents were distributed among them, and each researcher identified responses for the categories created based on the aims of the study. As each researcher populated the document with the respective responses, the team held regular meetings to collaboratively develop the responses and address any uncertainties. Data for each research question were mapped by deciding on categories or codes to be collected from them, which were discussed within the research team. This ensured that all of the authors would be able to suggest modifications and clarify the definitions of each category, helping to avoid misunderstandings. These categories were:

(1) Reference information: ID number, year of publication, authors, title, journal, volume, number, webpage, the researcher who reviewed the document, whether the article was included, reason for exclusion, and the download date.

(2) Meta-analysis: abstract, keywords, country of publication, authors' affiliations, authors' genders, countries of the primary institutional affiliation of the authors, funding, and acknowledgements. Available metadata, including variables like authors' gender and country of affiliation, allowed us to examine gender and Global North/South disparities in publications, as noted by Espinosa and Ortiz (2022).

(3) Content of the article: theoretical framework, main objective or research question, how "gender" is used in the article, notion of work, central concepts, whether the study is primarily quantitative or qualitative, the methodological approach, methods, sample, data collection, the country where the data are collected, framework for the data, analysis techniques applied, main conclusions (in terms of theory, methodology, and results), limitations, future research, and other relevant observations.

The prevalent topics and content were analyzed using content analysis, which helps identify the presence and meanings of themes and concepts (Drisko & Maschi 2016; Stemler 2015).

Assessment of Research Bias

To minimize biases in this systematic review, two distinct tools were employed for evaluation. First, we detail the research practices and validation methods implemented in this study, following Hannes (2011). Second, we apply the three stages of the ROBIS tool, as outlined by Whiting et al. (2016), to enhance the transparency of the research. Both techniques are briefly summarized in the following sections.

Assessment of Research Credibility

Building on Hannes (2011), four key aspects of this systematic review were assessed to evaluate its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability:

- (1) Credibility: To establish credibility, four essential measures were implemented:
 - Weekly peer debriefings allowed the researchers to share progress and address concerns collectively.
 - Particular attention was given to excluded studies; decisions regarding their exclusion were reviewed by at least two researchers.
 - Data collection and analysis were independently conducted by all researchers across multiple stages.
 - Verbatim quotes from analyzed articles were prioritized whenever feasible over interpretations or rephrasings.
- (2) Transferability: To ensure the transferability of our results, we have provided comprehensive details on data collection in our study. Additionally, once published, a GitHub repository (ANONYMIZED) containing the database and further details on the research process will be made accessible.
- (3) Dependability: The dependability of our research process was reinforced through two measures:

- Application of multiple methodological approaches during data collection to investigate the topic from diverse information sources.
 - Regular meetings among all authors to encourage self-critical reflection.
- (4) Confirmability: Confirmability was ensured through rigorous training efforts among all team members. Prior to data collection, comprehensive meetings were held to establish consensus on all systematic review steps. Additionally, weekly meetings provided a platform for ongoing discussions about the researchers' influence at each stage.

Assessment of Risk of Bias in the Systematic Review Using the ROBIS Tool

Finally, to enhance the transparency of our research, we applied the ROBIS tool, version 1.2, following the recommendations of its authors (Whiting et al. 2016). The three stages of the tool were employed, and Table 2 presents a summary of concerns identified during phase 2, along with an overview of the risk of bias in this review.

Results

The results are presented in three sections to address the central aim of the study. First, we begin with a meta-analysis of the reviewed articles, providing descriptive information such as the data collection sources, the countries observed, and the prevalence of female and male authors. Second, we discuss the most frequent topics and content addressed in qualitative studies. Third, we present the main results on gender inequalities discussed in the literature.

Meta-Analysis

All 47 publications were written in English. Since 2012, the number of articles on this topic has increased, peaking at five in 2016. Within the sample, 20 articles were published in journals based in the United States, 14 in the United Kingdom, and one in Australia. As shown in Table 3, the majority

Table 2. Summarization of the concerns of risk bias in the systematic review (ROBIS tool phase 3)

Domain	Concern	Rationale for concern
1. Concerns regarding the specification of study eligibility criteria	LOW. No concerns reported.	NA
2. Concerns regarding the methods used to identify and/or select studies	LOW. Only two concerns were reported.	Two limitations have been reported: (1) There is potential to enhance the database search process further in order to identify more relevant articles. (2) It appears that we could have expanded the search terms to include articles with low indexation, such as those provided by Web of Science.
3. Concerns regarding the methods used to collect data and appraise studies	LOW. No concerns reported.	NA
4. Concerns regarding the synthesis and findings	LOW. No concerns reported.	NA
Risk of bias in the review		
Describe whether conclusions were supported by the evidence:		
A. Did the interpretation of findings address all of the concerns identified in Domains 1 to 4?		YES
B. Was the relevance of identified studies to the review's research question appropriately considered?		YES
C. Did the reviewers avoid emphasizing results on the basis of their statistical significance?		YES
Risk of bias in the review		RISK: LOW
Rationale for risk: Overall, low concern regarding the study eligibility criteria, the methods used to identify and/or select studies, the methods used to collect data and appraise studies, and the synthesis and findings.		

Note: This table was obtained following the ROBIS tool, version 1.2 (Whiting et al. 2016).

Table 3. Number of articles by journal

Journal	Total number of articles
Journal of Aging Studies	5
Ageing and Society	5
Journal of Women and Aging	4
Work, Aging and Retirement	3
Ageing International	3
Research on Aging	2
Journal of Gerontological Social Work	2
Work Employment and Society	2
Gender, Work & Organization	2
Australasian Journal on Ageing	1
Maturitas	1
International Journal of Aging and Human Development	1
Journal of Intergenerational Relationships	1
Anthropology & Aging Quarterly	1
The Sociological Review	1
Journal of Population Ageing	1

Note: Prepared by the authors using the information provided by the systematic review.

of articles were published in *Journal of Aging Studies* (5), *Ageing and Society* (4), *Journal of Women and Aging* (4), and *Work, Aging and Retirement* (4).

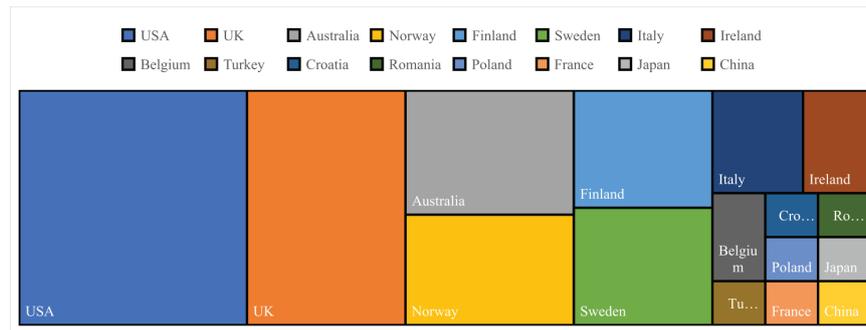
Of the 47 articles, 24 (51%) were written by a single author. The majority of the authors in the sample were affiliated with institutions in the United States (23 authors), the United Kingdom (15), Australia (9), Norway (8), Finland (7), and Sweden (7), as shown in Figure 2. Regarding the gender of the authors, most were women; of the 99 authors in the sample, 74 (75%) were women and 25 (25%) were men.

Content of the Articles

To describe the content of the reviewed articles, we analyzed each of them in detail. First, only a portion of the articles presented a clear theoretical

Figure 2. Countries of affiliation of the authors.

Note: Prepared by the authors with information from this study.



framework. However, in qualitative research, the absence of a predefined theoretical framework is not necessarily a limitation. For instance, in qualitative studies based on a grounded theory approach, the research may not require a theoretical framework before analysis, as it emerges from the results.

The theoretical frameworks most frequently used were the life course perspective (14 articles), gender theories (15 articles), the phenomenological approach (4 articles), and ageism and representations (6 articles). Regarding methodological approaches, 32 studies were entirely qualitative, including data collection, analysis, and composition. The remaining articles were primarily qualitative but incorporated different methodological perspectives. Ten articles employed a mixed methods approach, integrating predominantly qualitative techniques – such as interviews – as a complementary method alongside quantitative data obtained from surveys. Finally, seven articles were nonsystematic reviews, which lacked methodical rigor. This finding underscores the importance of a systematic review that allows for a focused examination of how gender inequalities are studied in the context of EWLs.

Among the studies using qualitative and mixed methods approaches ($n = 42$), 37 articles used interviews as the primary source of data. Of these, five studies adopted a biographical approach in the interviews, focusing particularly on work-life trajectories. Four articles did not use interviews; instead, they analyzed texts or documents. Finally, only one

paper employed ethnography. With regard to the timeframe of the data, the majority were collected between 2010 and 2020 (21 articles). Additionally, one paper used data from before 1989, six sourced data from 1990 to 1999, four from 2000 to 2009, and two from 2020 onward. In 15 articles, the timeframe required clarification. Regarding the participants, all studies focused on older workers of both genders, with five papers examining only older women and one focusing exclusively on older men. Discrepancies were noted in the definition of an “older person,” with some studies defining it as ranging from 50 years of age and others as over 60 years old.

Additionally, the country of origin for the data was identified for each publication. Of the studies conducted using data from a single country, eleven focused on the United States, eight on the United Kingdom, and two each on Ireland, Australia, Finland, and Sweden. One study each focused on Turkey, Croatia, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Poland, Italy, and China. There were only four articles comparing case studies, all of which were limited to comparisons between two countries. Those comparisons were United States/United Kingdom, United States/Ireland, Finland/Japan, and United Kingdom/Germany. Furthermore, six studies did not report the countries where the data were collected, and two articles used data from Europe as a whole.

Another noteworthy aspect of the reviewed articles is the limitations they acknowledge. Of the 47 articles, 26 discussed specific limitations related to their studies. The primary constraints identified can be categorized into two groups: First, non-representative sampling; second, potential biases within the samples, which hinder comparisons and replication in other cases. Both of these limitations are inherent to qualitative research. However, studies employing a mixed methods approach did not encounter these limitations, underscoring the substantial potential of this type of research in addressing sampling biases and enhancing replication.

Although some studies address gender dimensions in EWL, numerous questions remain unanswered. Several articles converge on particular aspects that require further exploration in future research on extending working lives. Some of the most common gaps reported in the papers within the sample are as follows:

- There are insufficient studies considering a diversity of participants and countries in their samples to allow for meaningful comparisons (Calasanti 2022; Lain et al. 2020; Lee & Prashant 2021; Ní Léime & Street 2019; Ojala et al. 2016; Stattin & Bengs 2021; Vickerstaff & van de Horst 2022).
- There is a need to enhance the understanding of the cumulative nature of disadvantages and inequalities over the long term (Brooke 2017; Edge et al. 2021; Hokema & Scherger 2016; Lain et al. 2020; Ní Léime & Ogg 2019).
- Researchers should incorporate structural categories (such as gender, race, class, and other relevant categories) within the process involving EWL (Hokema & Scherger 2016; Loretto & Vickerstaff 2015; Stattin & Bengs 2021; Wildman 2019).
- Studies need to be framed through an intersectionality perspective, considering the dynamics of gender, age, health, and education at different stages of the research (Calasanti 2022; Herbert 2021; Hokema 2017; Ojala et al. 2016).

Furthermore, the literature on EWL has primarily focused on formal work and the experiences of older men, leading to a gap in studies addressing informal work and the realities faced by older women. Additionally, most of the studies analyzed mentioned a lack of in-depth analysis of the content that qualitative studies could provide.

Gender Inequalities in Extending Working Lives

As previously mentioned, the objective of this article is to examine the presence of gender inequalities during the extension of working life and understand this phenomenon and its determinants. This third section of the results is aimed at synthesizing the evidence concerning gender inequalities during EWL, specifically from research employing a qualitative or mixed methods approach. These findings are divided into three subsections: (1) studies comparing the experiences of older women and men; (2) research focusing on the experiences of older men; and (3) articles examining the experiences of older women.

Results Comparing Genders in Extending Working Lives

Some gender differences have been identified in the motivations behind extended work beyond retirement age. While women in England tend to emphasize maintaining social connections, men in Germany more frequently mention the desire to stay physically fit and active (Hokema & Scherger 2016). It has been established that the majority of older men pursue flexible working arrangements through self-employment, characterized by higher levels of choice, autonomy, and control. In contrast, older women often work in less financially and educationally advantaged contexts (Loretto & Vickerstaff 2015). According to another study, men tend to highlight the negative aspects of aging, such as loss of social networks and diminished physical capacity, while women view aging more positively, seeing it as an opportunity for an active and healthy life (Craciun & Flick 2016). Stattin and Bengs (2021) found that older women working in a Swedish healthcare organization systematically display a preference for earlier retirement compared with older men in the same setting. The exception was single women with children, who expressed a preference for late retirement. The authors interpreted this as a constraining mechanism due to economic pressures that prevented them from retiring earlier.

The concept of retirement is also perceived differently by older women and men. Loretto and Vickerstaff (2015) found that whether they were retired or still working, many respondents were strongly attracted to the freedom that life after work provided or was expected to offer. Retired women experienced this freedom as an escape from low-quality and unsatisfying jobs, while men expressed a sense of having “done their bit.”

Studies concur that the reform of institutional policies for older individuals and the pension system must account for the distinct experiences of older women and men in work. For example, Ní Léime and Ogg (2019) noted that institutional reforms would only prove effective if both women and men held stable jobs. In Croatia, “Gender equality arguments have not been central and were typically purely instrumental, used either to ‘defend’ features of the ‘old’ system (e.g. when opposing the increase in retirement age) or argue for policy instruments that could serve employment-oriented or demographic goals” (Dobrotić & Zrinščak 2022: 205). When comparing policies for older workers across different countries, Ní Léime and Loretto (2017) concluded, “Even though the work-life

trajectories of men and women are typically different, most countries seem to have adopted pension policies designed with the homogeneous, individualized adult worker in mind. There is little evidence of recognition of gendered life courses in these policy reforms" (p. 70). The gendered dimension of institutional strategies for working and post-working life will continue to exist if there is no support for older workers from various stakeholders, such as industries and other macro-organizations (Brooke 2017).

Regarding workplace characteristics, the only article including an analysis of gender differences was by Loretto and Vickerstaff (2015), which examined how women and men perceive and experience flexible work in later life in the UK. They found that gender roles related to caregiving still shape attitudes and behaviors regarding work, particularly flexible work, in old age. Older men tend to work in flexible jobs characterized by higher levels of choice and autonomy than older women, such as self-employment. In contrast, for women, narratives of choice and autonomy around flexible work in later life were still conditioned by the blurred boundaries between paid and unpaid work. This led them to consider options such as part-time work as undesirable in old age, either because they wanted to take advantage of new work opportunities in "proper" jobs after completing their childcare responsibilities or because they perceive these jobs as unsuitable for fulfilling new caregiving roles (partners, parents, grandchildren, etc.).

Findings on Men Extending Working Lives

In the case of older men, experiences of ageism seem to affect them as well, but depending on the context, ageism practices within families are often naturalized (Ojala et al. 2016). Regarding the experience of EWL for men from a meso-social perspective, ageism in the workplace also appears as a relevant factor affecting older workers' motivation. A study in Finland examining the experience of male metal workers and engineers in old age found that a lack of respect and social appreciation for older workers was a significant aspect (Pietilä & Ojala 2023). Particularly among metal workers, there was widespread dissatisfaction with work, occupational identity, and employers, as they felt that their skills and knowledge were not

being respected because of difficulties in managing new technologies and supervisors' assumption of older workers' lower motivation.

Similarly, other studies on older men have shown that career progression norms within work organizations create regimes based on younger age groups' expectations. These regimes limit older men's career advancement opportunities, often leading to fewer promotions and less access to challenging projects (Krekula 2019; Ní Léime & Ogg 2019). As a result, older employees may feel undervalued and marginalized, which can significantly diminish their motivation to extend their working lives (Cabib & Ormeño 2025). This lack of motivation can impact their overall job satisfaction and productivity, ultimately affecting the organization's performance.

The intersection of working conditions and health in old age was also addressed by the Finnish study on metal workers and engineers by Pietilä and Ojala (2023). While long-term high physical demands causing musculoskeletal disorders were naturally highlighted by metal workers, engineers tended to emphasize the psychological distress caused by the progressive accumulation of work tasks in new managerial senior positions. They concluded that there is a need for age-friendly work environments that take into consideration the unique needs of older workers, creating a better experience for those who extend their working lives (Pietilä & Ojala 2023).

Findings on Women Extending Working Lives

Differences in working trajectories also influence women's extension of their working lives. As Vlachantoni (2012) argues, "Gender differentials in financial resources in later life have emanated from a combination of factors which include an increasing diversity in women's work and care patterns, and the inability of modern pension systems to take such diversity into account" (p. 107). Ni Léime (2017) found that women without a partner often return to lower-paid, short-term jobs to extend their working life for financial reasons, as well as for social interaction, structure, and enjoyment. Craciun and Flick (2016) compared the work experiences of older women in precarious jobs with older women in jobs with non-precarious situations. While the former group viewed aging as a continuation of active life for earning money and being autonomous, the latter group

saw it as a period for volunteering and leisure activities. The choices available to older women regarding the extension of their working lives are constrained by prevailing gender inequities related to pension gaps and entitlements, which often compel them to remain active in the labor force (Edge et al. 2021). Some female workers, in particular, entered the workforce later in life and thus have lower pension earnings, a situation that motivates them to remain employed (Furunes et al. 2015). However, extending work life is not solely driven by financial necessity, as work also provides older women with economic autonomy, temporal structure, purpose, personal agency, social connectivity, and self-identity (Herbert 2021).

Altschuler (2004) found that older women reported gaining independence from their partners, achieving economic autonomy and having the opportunity to fulfill their dreams. However, they also expressed remorse over their job trajectories, as they had not previously had the chance to be autonomous. A recent study highlights that the “lack of family-friendly policies in the United States, such as paid maternity leave made it more difficult for women, whether paid caregivers or teachers, to combine caring for children with paid employment” (Ní Léime & Street 2023: 39). Evidence from Germany indicates that “women and lower-qualified workers tend to leave the labor market earlier. If they do work, it is more often in part-time or marginal work arrangements that are increasingly part of German employment. However, atypical working arrangements are penalized by the German pension system” (Hokema 2017: 111).

Articles also explored women’s experiences in workplaces from a meso-social perspective. Organizational cultures and stereotypes that are detrimental to older workers may act as significant barriers to their intentions to extend their working lives (Edge et al. 2021). In the case of women, research shows that they experience the intersection of age and gender discrimination. Regarding the job-seeking process, some older women reported feeling discriminated against due to their physical appearance as they aged, pushing them to engage in “anti-aging measures” to appear younger, such as coloring their hair or undergoing facelifts (Altschuler 2004). In Poland, Robbins-Ruszkowski (2013) argues that older women have been marginalized from the present and future image of the nation, which has negatively affected their confidence in seeking employment.

Within the workplace, as shown by Edge et al. (2021) and Altschuler (2004), many older women reported experiencing intergenerational issues in their interactions with younger colleagues, such as lack of respect or awareness of the difficulties older workers face. For example, in both studies, some older women noted that they were perceived as mother or grandmother figures rather than colleagues. While this perception had positive outcomes for some – such as colleagues being more attentive to their needs – for others, it resulted in undesired expectations, such as being left to do the “cleaning up” (Altschuler 2004; Edge et al. 2021). Research indicates that employers can implement changes to create more inclusive workplaces for older employees, which, in turn, can foster motivation to extend working lives. For instance, they can offer “working conditions and time schedules that the older workers can arrange according to their preferences and employment opportunities enabling workers to demonstrate their competence and fulfil their potential” (Barlin et al. 2022: 172). As discussed in the literature, older women are often the primary caregivers of others, so making changes of this nature in working conditions and time schedules may be particularly critical for them. Older women have reported low self-efficacy beliefs regarding their skills, which can decrease their confidence in finding other jobs and lead to high levels of depression during these processes (Rife 1992). In Hong Kong, women face an increasing risk of job loss as early as age 40, and their representation in the labor market steadily declined throughout the 1990s (Chiu & Ngan 1999). For rural women, self-employment and remote work are two alternatives that may help them continue working and maintain the economic stability derived from employment (Herbert 2021).

Kean et al. (1993) established a strong connection between the desire to be recognized as contributors and the well-being of older women. A study conducted in the United Kingdom (Wildman 2019) found that older women predominantly continued working out of financial necessity. However, the qualitative “data support the contention that life-course proximity to the labor market is frequently not reflective of a preference for paid work over unpaid caring” (p. 13). In another study on home care workers, Butler (2013) found that older women perceived themselves as more experienced in their roles. However, they also reported an employment history characterized by low salaries and economic insecurity, particularly during periods of family change.

Discussion

Summary of the Main Findings

The primary aim of this systematic review was to analyze qualitative studies examining gender inequalities during the extension of working life and to understand the determinants of these inequalities. Our findings provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on this topic and highlight several critical areas of concern.

First, our meta-analysis of the reviewed articles reveals a significant increase in research on EWL since 2012, with a notable concentration of studies conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom. The predominance of female authors in this field suggests strong engagement from female scholars in exploring gender dimensions of EWL. However, the geographical focus on Western countries indicates a gap in the literature concerning the Global South, where different socioeconomic and cultural contexts may shape gender inequalities in EWL. This gap underscores the need for more diverse and inclusive research that considers a broader range of experiences and perspectives.

Second, our content analysis highlights the diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches employed in the studies. The frequent use of the life course perspective and gender theories underscores the importance of examining EWL within the broader context of individuals' life trajectories and gendered experiences. The predominant reliance on qualitative methods, particularly interviews, facilitates an in-depth exploration of personal narratives and experiences. However, the limited use of mixed methods and the scarcity of systematic reviews indicate potential areas for methodological advancement. The identified limitations, such as non-representative sampling and potential biases, not only are inherent to qualitative research but also highlight the need for more rigorous and comprehensive studies.

Third, our detailed examination of gender inequalities in EWL reveals distinct differences in the motivations and experiences of older men and women toward employment. Women often extend their working lives for financial reasons, social interaction, and enjoyment, while men are more likely to seek flexible working arrangements for autonomy and control.

These differences are rooted in broader gender inequalities, such as pension gaps and caregiving responsibilities, which disproportionately affect women.

The findings regarding men's experiences highlight the impact of ageism and a lack of respect in the workplace, which can hinder their motivation to continue working. In contrast, women's experiences are shaped by economic pressures, caregiving roles, and workplace discrimination. The intersection of age and gender discrimination creates additional barriers for older women, affecting their job-seeking and workplace experiences. Organizational cultures and stereotypes further exacerbate these challenges, underscoring the need for supportive policies and practices that address the unique needs of older women.

Policy Implications

The findings of this systematic review of qualitative studies on gender inequalities during the extension of working life underscore the importance of designing policies that are sensitive to gender differences and the unique challenges faced by older men and women.

One of the most pressing issues highlighted by our review is the gender disparity in financial resources during later life, largely stemming from differences in work and caregiving patterns. Modern pension systems often fail to account for these differences, resulting in significant pension gaps that disproportionately affect women. Policymakers must consider reforms that recognize and address the diverse work trajectories of women, including periods of unpaid caregiving.

Our review also reveals that older men and women have different motivations and preferences for extending their working lives. While men often seek flexible work arrangements that offer autonomy and control, women are more likely to be driven by financial necessity and caregiving responsibilities. Policies promoting flexible work arrangements, such as part-time work, remote work, and job-sharing, can support older workers in balancing work with other life commitments. Employers should be encouraged to adopt age-friendly workplace practices that accommodate the needs of older workers, particularly women, who may have additional caregiving responsibilities.

Finally, a critical policy issue involves addressing workplace discrimination. Ageism and gender discrimination in the workplace are significant barriers to extending working lives. Older women, in particular, face the intersection of age and gender discrimination, which affects their job-seeking efforts and workplace experiences. Anti-discrimination policies must be strengthened and rigorously enforced to protect older workers from bias and unfair treatment. Training programs for employers and employees can raise awareness about the value of older workers and promote inclusive workplace cultures. Additionally, initiatives that support intergenerational collaboration and respect can help mitigate the negative impacts of ageism.

Research Gaps

In this systematic review, we identified several research gaps in the reviewed articles that should be addressed in future research. Despite many articles including both women and men in their samples, gender was not always a primary focus, and gender comparisons often lacked depth. Some populations were underrepresented in the existing research, such as samples from countries and with participants in the Global South, or studies that could allow comparison between countries or diverse populations. There is a need for research focusing on Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more. (LGBTQIA+) groups, exploring the relationship between older workers and their communities and investigating rural/urban disparities. The connection between age discrimination and gender has not been adequately studied, despite suggestions that it should be compared with sex discrimination and sexual harassment (Encel 1999). Additionally, another gap is the lack of theoretical and methodological development in the study of gender inequality in EWL. The absence of theoretical and conceptual advancements may explain the lack of a common foundation upon which to construct empirical evidence on extending working life from a gender perspective. Finally, more information is needed on how men and women perceive the influence of working conditions on their expectations and decisions about how extending their working life may enhance the value of their work. Recent research, specifically in Chile (Cabib 2025; Cabib

et al. 2024), has made important progress in this direction, although it remains insufficient.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. First, literature in languages other than English did not emerge during the search, likely due to the prevalence of English as the primary language in many journals and databases. Additionally, this limitation also applies to the exclusion of journals indexed outside of Web of Science and Scopus. Second, the inclusion of book chapters in the search made it impossible to capture all relevant titles. There is no comprehensive global database of books that can be consulted, and many important resources were inaccessible for inclusion in this research. Finally, although the review considered research on non-binary genders, all of the studies reviewed used a binary gender approach. Therefore, future research should not only deepen the understanding of gender inequalities in women's experiences but also explore comparisons across genders, masculinities, and, in particular, non-binary genders.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this systematic review highlight the complex interplay of financial, social, and organizational factors contributing to gender inequalities in EWL. The dominance of research from Western countries, coupled with the limited focus on the Global South, emphasizes the need for more diverse and inclusive studies. The gaps identified in the literature, such as lack of representative samples and the need for a deeper analysis of qualitative data, point to critical areas for future research. Moreover, incorporating a broader range of methodologies to approach this topic could enhance our understanding of gender inequalities in EWL. By addressing these gaps and implementing supportive policies and practices, we can help mitigate gender inequalities and create more equitable opportunities for older workers to extend their working lives.

Ethical Approval

This research project was approved by the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts Ethics Committee at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (institutional review board [IRB] approval number: 210612002), which conforms to the provisions of the Declaration of Helsinki, the Declaration of Singapore, and the Nuremberg Code.

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Declaration of Contribution of Authors

All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design or data analysis and interpretation, as well as the drafting and approval of this article.

Statement of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

The data, analytic methods, and materials used in this study are available in an open repository via the following GitHub account: <https://github.com/FranciscaOrtizRuiz>. The data can be accessed by downloading the repository. This study was not pre-registered, as the need for pre-registration was not recognized at the time the study was initiated in December 2021. However, to minimize potential biases in this systematic review, two distinct evaluation tools were employed. First, we outline the research practices and validation methods applied in this study, based on Hannes (2011). Second, we use the three stages of the ROBIS tool, as described by Whiting et al. (2016), to enhance the transparency

of our research. Both techniques are briefly summarized in the Methodology section.

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Images of formal home care in Finnish newspapers – a social representations approach

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Abstract

Media representations play an essential role in how older adults are perceived in society. The aim of the study is to examine what kind of understanding newspaper images construct of home care and older adults as care recipients by utilizing social representations theory.

The data consist of 95 images published in Finnish newspapers in 2022 and 2023. The images were analysed using visual rhetorical analysis. The media images constructed four social representations of formal home care: (1) vulnerable older adults as objects of care, (2) efficient care workers in a hurry, (3) lonely older adults at home, and (4) vital and content older adults. The images represented care workers as active agents, while the older adults were mainly presented as passive and lonely objects of care.

The study shows that the images used in newspapers as depictions of home care reinforce the prevailing perceptions of older adults as a burden.

Keywords: care recipients, formal home care, images, social representation

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Introduction

Media representations occupy a central role in shaping people's understandings of social reality (Couldry & Hepp 2017; Martikainen & Sakki 2024), and the images used in newspapers and advertisements therefore contribute to how ageing and older adults are perceived in society. Generally, ageing is often perceived either in a rather negative light (Gullette 2015) or seen as an over-positive and unrealistic era of success and activity (Ylänné 2022). Through an ageist lens (e.g. Prieler 2020; van Leeuwen et al. 2024) older adults are typically represented and understood as being dependent rather than productive members of society (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer 2018). Also, older adults' own perceptions of later life are often associated with loss of social relations, esteem and autonomy, as well as fear of disabilities (Brunton & Scott 2015). This kind of narrow perception of ageing and older adults does not do justice to the fact that the reality of ageing is multifaceted and older adults represent very diverse experiences and social locations in society. One-sided cultural beliefs regarding older adults, also communicated through images, may further narrow the perception of ageing (Featherstone & Hepworth 2005) and may even produce age discrimination (Loos & Ivan 2018) and reinforce social exclusion (Torres 2021). While there are an increasing number of studies on media representations of older adults (e.g. Varjakoski 2023; Williams et al. 2010; Ylänné 2015, 2022), little is known on how older adults living at home with care needs are portrayed in media images. This study aims to fill this gap by examining images of formal home care in Finnish newspapers.

By formal home care we refer to care provided in people's own homes by professionals (see Genet et al. 2011). The purpose of older adults' home care has originally been to enhance and maintain care recipients' quality of life and functional health status, and to reduce institutional care for cost saving reasons (Thomé et al. 2003). When home care is delivered by professionals, it is based on a formal assessment of needs (Genet et al. 2011). In addition to individual benefits, home care has also been seen as a means to reinforce the ethos of 'ageing-in-place' (see Pani-Harreman et al. 2020; Vasunilashorn et al. 2012). In Finland, as in many other European countries, this has been implemented in policies and legislation emphasizing the aim of supporting older adults to live in their private homes for as long as possible (Finnish Act for ElderCare and Services 980/2012,

Section 14). In the Finnish context, formal home care includes personal or virtual home care visits and support services such as a safety phone or meal-on-wheels service. Formal home care is organized by wellbeing services counties (Finnish Act for ElderCare and Services 980/2012), although the providers of home care or other eldercare services may also be private companies or third sector organizations.

During recent years, public discussion on eldercare services has focused on how to reduce costs of services and improve their efficiency to address the challenges of the demographic change (see Ishikawa 2020; Varjakoski 2023). Concurrently, research has shown that cuts and reductions in long-term care, has led to a situation where many older have unmet care needs (Kröger 2022; Rostgaard et al. 2022). Negative public discourses (Torres 2021) and the reality of inadequate care may increase feelings of insecurity, isolation and not belonging to a place even when living in one's own home (Sihto & Van Aerschot 2021) and lead to diverse forms of social exclusion (Ristolainen et al. 2024). Interestingly, living at home is seen as the most desirable living arrangement at least at the policy level, but older adults' own experiences are not always heard (Barken 2019). This raises concern about whether older adults, as individuals and as care recipients, are overshadowed by efficiency aims.

As the organization of eldercare battles and balances between marketization and efficiency (Karsio 2024) and the provision of good care and a meaningful life at home (Finnish Act for ElderCare and Services; see also Haex et al. 2020), it is important to consider on whose terms the eldercare is primarily provided. Ageing and older adults are often seen as a burden (Ishikawa 2020), challenging their possibility to be equal members of society. Moreover, when delivering home care services the home becomes an intersection of private and public, where the older adults have the right to live their own private life, and where care workers carry out their caring role with a mandate from the public service system (see Roxberg et al. 2020). As a result, older home care recipients live in a situation where they have little to no control over what happens in their own homes or how they are perceived in public discourse, compounding the risk that their existence and lives are determined by other people. Also of interest is the way in which the public debate and the debate within the service system shape the perception of older adults' home care and of older adults as the recipients of care, and how these perceptions are reflected in the images

used in newspapers to portray formal home care and older home care recipients.

A wide range of studies have examined how older adults are portrayed in the media (see Loos & Ivan 2018; Yläne 2015, 2022). Here, we focus on studies of visual images of older adults or ageing used in the media. These studies have found that images of older adults are as ambiguous as attitudes to ageing in general; on the one hand, ageing and old age is portrayed as a problem while, on the other hand, successful or active ageing is highlighted (e.g. Varjakoski 2023: 45–51; Williams et al. 2010; Yläne 2015; see also Martin 2015). For example, Williams et al. (2010) found in their study that images of older people in magazine advertising in the United Kingdom represented four types of portrayal: frail and vulnerable, happy and affluent, mentors, and active and leisure-oriented older adults. In contrast, in Swedish authority-managed social media images (Xu 2022) and public organizations' websites across a range of European countries (Loos et al. 2022) older adults were represented mostly as socially engaged and physically capable.

To our knowledge, there is no prior research on media images of formal home care. However, some studies have examined news coverage of older adults' home care and institutional care contexts, such as nursing homes and residential care facilities. A study in Canada showed that in newspaper articles related to home care, the home was created as an idealistic place of dignity and safety, while older adults were positioned as passive and vulnerable recipients of care (Yamamoto et al. 2023). Moreover, in a study of articles published in American newspapers, older nursing home residents were described, largely depending on their financial situation, as either frail and dependent or successful and independent (Rozanova et al. 2016). Another study from the US over a ten-year period found that half of newspaper articles were negative towards nursing homes, 40% were neutral and 10% were positive (Miller et al. 2013).

Although a large amount of research has been conducted on media representations of ageing and older adults in general, more detailed analysis is needed on how specific groups of older adults are portrayed in the media. As older adults in need of care are increasingly living in their own homes and home-based eldercare has become a common service in many countries, it is important to explore what kind of understanding media images construct about formal home care. In this study, we examine

images of formal home care in Finnish newspapers utilizing the theoretical framework of social representations. This theoretical frame allows us to study media images as part of social meaning construction focusing on their contents and societal functions. We ask: What kind of understanding do newspaper images construct of formal home care and older adults as care recipients?

Theoretical Framework: Social Representations Theory

Social representations theory is a theory of social knowledge, of how people construct knowledge about the social world together in social interactions (Moscovici 1961/2008). To clarify the social and co-creative nature of social representations, Moscovici presented his semiotic triangle, according to which people's understanding of an object is constructed in dialogue between the Ego (self) and the Alter (other people) (Moscovici 1972, 1984). However, the Ego and Alter do not only refer to negotiation between an individual with other people in face-to-face interactions, but the position of alter can also be occupied through mediated others, such as the news and media. As for the present study, we understand social representations of formal home care to be constructed both in face-to-face interactions between people and through media representations influencing people's understanding of home care and of the older adults receiving home care services.

Moscovici (1973) defined social representations as socially shared 'systems of values, ideas and practices' that create social order and make it possible for people to communicate about the social and material world (p. xiii). He also stated that attitudes are parts of social representations (Moscovici 1961/2008). Hence, social representations can be understood as socially shared knowledge about a particular phenomenon that includes evaluative and moral dimensions (Moscovici 1961/2008, 1984).

Social representations are constructed in three processes of knowledge creation: anchoring, objectification, and naturalization. Anchoring refers to a process where (new) social phenomena are made familiar by interpreting them based on prior social knowledge. Objectification, in turn, refers to a process where abstract ideas are concretized through verbal and visual expressions. Finally, naturalization refers to a process where certain conceptions of a social object gain an unquestionable status of 'the

reality' through, for instance, frequent repetition in media (Flick & Foster 2010; Moscovici 1961/2008, 1984). Our study focuses on the processes of objectification and naturalization. From the objectification point of view, media images are understood as a means of showcasing and constructing culturally shared understandings of formal home care and older home care clients. In terms of naturalization, we sought to identify any recurrent patterns of how formal home care and older home care clients are presented visually in Finnish newspapers.

Since the beginning of the theory, Moscovici paid attention to the power of images to construct social representations; on the one hand, social representations have a figurative basis (themata) that includes visual images and associations related to the topic of social representation (Martikainen 2019; Moscovici 1984; Sakki et al. 2014); on the other hand, visual images disseminate and construct social representations (de Rosa & Farr 2001). Prior research has identified three functions of social representations related to images; they can activate, articulate and circulate social representations (de Rosa & Farr 2001; Martikainen 2020). The power of images to influence people's conceptions about social issues is also due to their ability to appeal to emotions, prior experiences and shared memories (Rose 2016).

Social representations are not neutral (Voelklein & Howarth 2005), but as Moscovici himself stated, social representation is 'a battle of ideas' actively involved in the formation of ideas (Moscovici & Markova 1998: 403). Some social representations gain a hegemonic status, whereas others are marginalized (Höijer 2011; Moscovici 1988). These different statuses of social representations do not simply emerge, but as Moscovici's notion of the battle of ideas suggests, social actors (e.g. media) foreground certain social representations and downgrade others. Hence, social representations are political in terms of promoting certain understandings of social phenomena and marginalizing – even silencing – others (Howarth & Andreouli 2015; Voelklein & Howarth 2005).

From the perspective of social representations theory, news images do not only reflect common sense understanding of eldercare but rather construct it (Martikainen 2019). Since social representations shape people's views of and behaviour towards social phenomena, objects and people, news images of older adults' formal home care may not only influence lay people's understanding and expectations of formal home care but

also impact professionals' and politicians' decisions related to it. In addition, studying media images of formal home care is also important from the point of view of the older adults themselves; for them, newspaper images can function as a basis for forming meta-representations (older adults' beliefs regarding how other people perceive formal home care) and meta-meta-representations (older adults' beliefs regarding how other people perceive them as recipients of home care) (Elcheroth et al. 2011; Wagner 2021) contributing to the way older adults perceive themselves and their role in the context of formal home care.

Methods

Data

The data used in this study consist of newspaper images used in articles on older adults' formal home care in Finland published in Finnish newspapers in 2022 and 2023. While Helsingin Sanomat is circulated nationwide, the other newspapers included in the study (Aamulehti, Kainuun Sanomat, Kaleva, Karjalainen, Keski-suomalainen, Lapin Kansa, Savon Sanomat, and Turun Sanomat) are the main local newspapers circulated in different parts of Finland. Collecting images of formal home care from all of these newspapers provided a comprehensive dataset for our study. We included in the data all photographs related to news articles that explicitly dealt with formal home care published in the aforementioned newspapers between 1st January 2022 to 31st December 2023.

Data searching was carried out via the digital platform of the National Library of Finland [Kansalliskirjasto], which is responsible for the collection, description, preservation, and accessibility of Finland's printed heritage. Our searching strategy included the formulation of the search statement and defining the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The main search terms were 'home care' and 'older person' with their synonyms. The search was carried out on 22nd January 2024 with the search statement: Kotihoi* AND (vanhu* OR ikäihmi* OR ikäänty* OR asiak*). The inclusion criteria for the articles were: (1) had to include an image, and (2) had to deal with older adults' formal home care. Home care had to be an essential part of the article, thus stories dealing only with round-the-clock care were excluded. However, if the article was about eldercare in general including the aspect of home care and the image was related to

home care or an older person receiving care, it was included in the study. We accepted all images except personal photos of managers of eldercare services or politicians who had been interviewed for the article. In total, the data consisted of 95 news images. The contents of the news articles were excluded from the data, so the analysis focused solely on images.

Analysis

We used visual rhetorical analysis to examine the newspaper images. Three key principles form the foundation of visual rhetorical analysis. First, images are not considered as neutral records of reality but constructed from different rationales and using certain means of visual expression (Hook & Glăveanu 2013; Rose 2016). Even though it is not possible to know the explicit rationales of photographers and newspaper publishers for publishing certain kinds of images, assumptions about them can be made based on analysis of the structure and content of the photographs. Second, the visual composition of the images directs the ways viewers perceive the images and interpret them using their cultural knowledge and prior experiences as a resource for sense making (Kjeldsen 2017; Martikainen 2023). For this reason, news photographs have the power to structure people's understanding of formal home care. Third, images are understood as visual arguments that derive from and must be studied in relation to their social, political, and cultural contexts (Danesi 2017; Foss 2005; Kjeldsen 2017). In this study, we examine the images in the context of eldercare policies in Finland.

Visual rhetorical analysis allows researchers to examine the form, content and functions of images (see Martikainen 2019; Martikainen & Sakki 2024). In other words, visual rhetorical analysis provides tools to study how visual choices used in the photographs (form) are used to construct certain meanings of the topic of the image (content) and how these meanings relate to the social, political and cultural context (function). We operationalized visual rhetorical analysis using compositional analysis, content analysis and socio-semiotic analysis as analytic tools (see Martikainen 2019; Martikainen & Sakki 2021, 2024). Whereas content analysis focuses on studying the people, objects and environments depicted in images, compositional analysis focuses on scrutinizing the means of visual expression (e.g. colour, proximity,

viewing angle) used in depicting people, objects and environments (Bell 2012; Martikainen 2019; Rose 2016). Socio-semiotic analysis, in turn, provides tools to make sense of the visual constructions based on a culturally shared matrix of meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006).

In terms of the concrete analytical procedure, we first examined who were depicted in the images. Based on this stage of analysis we identified three categories: images with only older adults, images with only care workers and images featuring both older adults and care workers. We then paid attention to the activities – what older adults and/or care workers were doing in the images – as well as the environments in which people were situated. This was followed by analysing the poses, gestures and facial expressions of the people as well as the objects included in the images. The afore-described content analysis was followed by compositional analysis, where we examined the means of visual expression – namely, colours, proximity/framing, viewing angle and direction of movement (compositional analysis). Finally, the findings of content analysis and compositional analysis were analysed together and interpreted based on culturally shared meanings (e.g. bright colours communicate joy, dark colours communicate sadness, close-ups communicate intimacy and approachability, and long-shots communicate distance) (see Jewitt & Oyama 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In the analysis we also paid attention to what was excluded from the newspaper images, since the absence of certain types of imagery narrows the scope of visual representation and prevents their entry into public debate (Barreiro & Castorina 2017) – and, hence, influences the formation of social representations of formal home care.

From the social representations perspective, we understand the news photographs as visual objectifications of social representations of formal home care that give the phenomenon a concrete, visual form and make it observable (Sammut et al. 2015). On the other hand, we refer to the process of naturalization, whereby the repetition of similar images may naturalize certain kinds of understanding of older adults' formal home care (see Martikainen 2019). Through their visual concreteness as well as their ability to appeal to emotions (Rose 2016), images serve as powerful means of constructing common sense understanding of formal home care and older adults as recipients of home care.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study the national guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK) have been carefully followed. According to the guidelines ethical committee evaluation and approval was not needed for this type of research. The Finnish Copyright Act (404/1961) allows the use of media images as visual references for research purposes without additional permission. However, in the analysis phase we carefully considered the images selected to represent the identified social representations so that the older adults who can be identified in the images are not presented in an offensive manner. It is also important to note that our analysis focuses on examining social representations of formal home care and how older home care recipients are represented visually in this context and not the older adults themselves.

Results

Based on our analysis, we identified four types of images of formal home care in the newspapers: images of older adults alone; images of care workers alone; older adults and care workers in the same image; and images of older adults' hands. The images were classified into four categories representing the main results of the study: (1) vulnerable older adults as objects of care (44 images), (2) efficient care workers in a hurry (17 images), (3) lonely older adults at home (17 images), and (4) vital and content older adults (12 images). Three images could not be included in these categories. The newspaper images also did not depict older adults outside the home, moving around, or engaging in leisure activities. Moreover, different ethnicities were not represented, and there were only a few images where family and friends of the older adults were represented. In the next sections, the results regarding the social representations of formal home care and older adults as its clients are presented along with the images selected for detailed analysis for each category.

Vulnerable Older Adults as Objects of Care

This social representation is based on images where care workers are depicted together with older adults. Typically, care workers are

depicted helping older adults with daily routines or visiting them at home. A notable number of images portrayed care workers holding older adults' hands.

In this image (see Figure 1), a care worker is depicted offering food to an older adult. The image portrays the care worker as active and the older person as a passive recipient of care. The activity of the worker is constructed through the composition with the worker positioned in front and the older person behind her. In addition, the worker is closer to the viewer as well as occupying the golden section of the image (torso vertically, arm horizontally), which positions her as the main figure of the image (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In addition, she is depicted performing an activity, which is reinforced by the diagonal axis formed by her body as well as its orientation to the right typically associated with energy, activity and determination (Jewitt & Oyama 2012).

Figure 1. *Savon Sanomat* 24.2.2022 (photo: Henna Kokkonen)



In the image, the care worker is positioned higher than the older person, placing her in a higher power position. The bright colours and stripes of the worker's clothes can be interpreted as reinforcing her agency. The older person's face is in the middle of the picture – both vertically and horizontally – which portrays her as the focus of the care (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In contrast, the older adult sits still and her facial expression lacks communicativeness, which creates an impression of passivity and lack of initiative. Compared to the bright colours of the worker's clothes, the dark colour of the older woman's dress may be understood as reinforcing the impression of her inactivity (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The ordinary interior of the kitchen portrayed in the image provides little indication of the personality of the older person. The care worker wears a mask and disposable gloves, which, in our interpretation, reinforces the sense that the personal needs of the older person are not the focus – rather, the encounter between the care worker and the older person is conveyed as routine.

Image two (see Figure 2) represents two home care workers visiting an older woman's home. The woman is lying in bed, and she is covered with a duvet. The austere interior of the room, the drab colour of the wall, the bed with rails reminiscent of hospital beds as well as the work uniforms and disposable gloves worn by the home care workers resemble a hospital rather than the older adult's home. These visual elements make the home care appear very similar to an institutional care setting. The position of the woman and the fact that she is lying in bed may signal that she is not in good health. On the wall, there appears to be some sort of 'patient card' providing instructions for the workers, possibly suggesting that the same workers do not take care of the older person consistently, but the workers may change from day to day.

In image two, both home care workers are depicted standing higher than the older woman lying in the bed, and they both look downwards to her. This means of depiction creates an asymmetrical relationship between the workers and the older woman (Jewitt & Oyama 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006), where the older person appears as an object of measures, likely dependent on the home care workers' care and help.

Figure 2. *Kaleva* 27.9.2022 (photo: Pekka Peura)



Image three (see Figure 3) features a close-up of the hands of a nurse and an older person. Holding hands communicates care, closeness, reassurance and comfort (Sandnes & Uhrenfeldt 2024). In this image, the older adult's hands with thin, wrinkled and bluish skin communicate vulnerability, fragility and weakness, whereas the nurse's restful hands can be interpreted as communicating tenderness and reassurance. Even though this image of home care portrays an intimate touch, it simultaneously repeats the typical and narrow representation of older people as vulnerable objects of care lacking agency and personality (Wangler & Jansky 2021).

The social representation of older adults' formal home care that these images construct may be encapsulated as vulnerable old people in need of help. In this social representation, older adults appear as objects of care, whereas care workers are portrayed as routinized providers of care. The relationship is depicted as asymmetrical, with the care workers portrayed

Figure 3. *Keskisuomalainen* 18.7.2023 (photo: Anni Reenpää)



as active agents and the older people as passive, sometimes even helpless objects. The plain surroundings as well as workers' uniforms and disposable gloves, for instance, create an impression of formal home care as impersonal and institutionalized.

Efficient Care Workers in a Hurry

The social representation of *Efficient care workers in a hurry* is constructed based on images where only care workers are depicted without depictions of older people. Typically, care workers are portrayed as taking care of diverse tasks in older adults' homes or moving between places by car or on foot. These images can be understood as communicating hurry and efficiency.

Several images of formal home care depict care workers alone. Typically, they represent movement, workers going from one place to another. In image four (see Figure 4) a care worker is depicted driving a car. This visual representation emphasizes the mobile nature of home care work in which the care workers visit older people in different locations, which often means driving long distances per day. The direction to the right usually communicates future orientation, activeness and determination (Jewitt & Oyama 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In addition, the woman does not lean relaxed on the headrest but slightly bends forward, which creates an air of efficiency and hurry. The focused presence of the care worker can be interpreted as an expression of determination.

Figure 4. *Karjalainen* 25.1.2023 (photo: Mikko Makkonen)



The image presented on the next page (Figure 5) depicts a medicine dispensing machine with written notes attached on it. The note on the left reads 'The machine should be handled very carefully' and the note on the right reads 'If you need more pain killers, phone the care worker'.

Figure 5. *Kainuun Sanomat* 15.8.2023 (photo: Jussi Pohjavirta)



In addition, there is a screen on the machine where two care workers can be seen. The care workers are thus visiting an older adult's home virtually. In this depiction of a virtual contact, the metallic surface of the machine as well as its bluish light and screen create a cold, sterile mood (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). Depictions of home care as virtual care, for their part, may also communicate efficiency, as it saves the resources of the home care personnel.

The social representation of formal home care constructed through these images underscores care workers' efficiency (see also Ring et al. 2024). This meaning is communicated through images of workers moving from one place to another, on the one hand, and through images of virtual home care saving resources, on the other hand. The absence of older adults in these images shifts the focus from the care recipients to home care workers themselves.

Lonely Older Adults at Home

The images forming this social representation depict older adults alone at home. Typically, they are portrayed lying in bed or sitting on a chair with postures and gestures communicating inaction and passivity as if they were 'killing time'.

Image six (see Figure 6) depicts an older person lying in bed at home. Despite the bright colours of the quilt and bed linen, the image communicates inactivity through the stiff, resting pose of the older person. In addition, the 'flat space' created by the high angle of the image constructs a gloomy, stagnant air (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The older adult lies on their back in the bed, hands crossed on the stomach. The image is cropped so that we cannot see if the person is watching TV, for instance, or just lying on the bed. Due to the cropping and high angle, the viewers' attention is focused on the bed and the lying body of the person (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006).

Figure 6. *Kainuun Sanomat* 15.8.2022 (photo: Juha Neuvonen)



The head/face of the person and surroundings cannot be seen. This creates an air of anonymity and impersonality (Allen 2015). In our interpretation, this kind of 'visual amputation' strongly refers to a lack of agency and ability to steer the course of life. Besides impersonality and lack of agency, the image may be understood as communicating loneliness. Although the atmosphere of the image is calm and it could be seen as depicting the older person simply resting, we interpret the high angle, focus on the bed, inactive pose, as well as the absence of other people and visual cues of the environment, as constructing more of an impression of boredom and loneliness.

Image seven (see Figure 7) shows the hands of an older person crossed on her chest. The face and surroundings cannot be seen, which creates an air of anonymity (Allen 2015). However, the person sits in an upright

Figure 7. *Savon Sanomat* 22.11.2022 (photo: Katja Juurikko)



position, they have dressed up (judging by the neat blouse) and the nails are painted. These elements suggest that the person may be in relatively good health and condition. The person wears a safety wristband. The red colour of the button as well as its location near the intersection of the horizontal and vertical golden sections draw the viewer's attention (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The image suggests that the security wristband enables the person to live at home because they can call for help when needed, thereby offering a sense of greater safety and security among older people living at home. Nevertheless, the crossed hands in the middle of the image may also refer to the importance of prayer, religion and trust in God as sources of safety for older people. Simultaneously, the image communicates loneliness, as no other people are visible, while the position of the hands may also suggest waiting for somebody. Finally, the central presence of the security wristband invites us to trust that this older person will be able to manage at home on their own.

This type of imagery constructs a social representation of formal home care in terms of lonely, anonymous old people. Instead of care, these images portray older adults as alone, just waiting for time to pass.

Vital and Content Older Adults

The last social representation is formed by images that portray contented looking older adults in their homes. These persons are depicted in upright positions with a smile on their face which communicates their vitality. Comfortable home interiors reflect the older persons' taste and personality.

Image eight (see Figure 8) depicts an older woman sitting by a table with a flower vase on it. The woman is situated in the right golden section looking to the right, which emphasizes her activeness and liveliness in the image (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). She sits in an upright position and looks to the right, smiling as if conversing with a person whom we cannot see in the image. She wears a bright red and white striped T-shirt, which, according to our interpretation, reinforces her positive presence (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The T-shirt as well as the tablecloth are Marimekko (a Finnish brand) products, which may refer to the personal taste of the

Figure 8. *Savon Sanomat* 24.2.2022 (photo: Henna Kokkonen)



woman. In the background, we can see a bookshelf where matriculation photos (identifiable by the white cap) of young people – perhaps her grandchildren – are placed. These aforementioned elements may be understood as referring to the personality and personal history of the woman, creating the impression that she leads a satisfied life in her own home.

The last image (Figure 9) portrays a smiling older woman with a care worker. They are sitting near to each other, and the smiling and alert facial expression of the woman shows that the meeting with the care worker is pleasant. The visual elements of the image create an understanding that the older woman and the worker meet each other on more equal terms, which is communicated, for instance, through the eye-level angle and the fact that the care worker and the woman are at about the same level vertically (Jewitt & Oyama 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In addition, the older adult is depicted frontally which increases her involvement (Jewitt & Oyama 2012). The mobile phone may suggest the older woman is abreast of the times and capable of digital communication.

Figure 9. Helsingin Sanomat 25.1.2023 (photo: Markus Torvinen)



In the image, the older woman is situated in the middle of the image horizontally, and her face is situated in the upper golden section vertically, which emphasizes her role in the image. In addition, the sharpness of the image is focused on the older woman, whereas the image of the care worker on the left is slightly blurred, thus presenting the older woman as the principal figure (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). Furthermore, the older woman is not being treated, rather the two are depicted as spending time and chatting together. In our interpretation, these visual means of expression – together with the alert presence of the older woman – make her appear as the main figure of the image and suggest that she is capable of expressing herself and steering the course of her life.

The images of content-looking and communicative older adults in home environments that reflect their personality and taste construct a social representation of formal home care in terms of contented older people spending a meaningful life in their own homes. Formal home care does

its part to support older adults' agency and capability to lead a meaningful life at home, as it is intended to do.

Discussion

In this study, we have explored the images of formal home care published in Finnish newspapers with the aim of finding out what kind of understanding these images construct of formal home care and of older adults as care recipients. Based on the results, the analysed media images constructed four social representations of formal home care: (1) vulnerable older adults as objects of care, (2) efficient care workers in a hurry, (3) lonely older adults at home, and (4) vital and content older adults. The images depict formal home care as an efficient activity carried out by active care workers or by technology, such as virtual home care or wristbands, while the older adults are portrayed as passive and lonely objects of care. These visual representations are complemented by a smaller number of images in which formal home care is based on an equal relationship, where the care recipients appear well and comfortable in their own homes.

The social representations of home care constructed through news images reflect the transition of home care to becoming more institutionalized and technology- and routine-oriented, which easily loses sight of the fundamental nature of home care as individual care in a familiar environment (see also Ring et al. 2024). One aim of formal home care has been to replace hospital care and institutional care with care in the home for societal reasons (Thomé et al. 2003), primarily to make the provision of care more affordable. Formal home care itself has been made more efficient, for example, by reducing the amount of time care workers spend with clients, which is also reflected in the newspaper images of older adults' home care. In our data, this trend in which speed and efficiency have become the norm, is communicated through the images of hurrying and effective care workers. In addition, the images construct an understanding of the private home as an institutionalized setting, where the ultimate purpose of living in a familiar place, surrounded by one's own belongings and memories, is lost (see also Wada et al. 2020). On the other hand, images of smiling older adults interacting with care workers create an understanding of home care as a means of providing adequate care

and attention, enabling them to live meaningful lives in their own home environment. Thus, the range of images constructs an understanding that older adults receiving home care are a heterogeneous group and that home care is provided in various ways. Based on prior research, this also reflects reality, as some home care clients manage their daily lives reasonably independently, while a significant number need frequent support for daily activities (Tolonen et al. 2024) and feel lonely (Kehusmaa 2022).

In contemporary societies, media images are an important resource for social representation, as they not only reflect reality but also serve as a means of (re)constructing reality. Social representation regarding older adults and home care through media images does not occur in isolation but draws from and engages in dialogue with the social, societal, and cultural resources on the topic available to the community, capable of both reproducing and challenging them. These social representations shape people's thoughts and actions towards the object of social representations (Moscovici 1984). The four social representations of formal home care and older people as care recipients mainly constructed an understanding of older adults as vulnerable objects of care deprived of their agency (representations 1 and 3) echoing the common cultural belief of ageing in Western societies (see Gullette 2015; Prieler 2020). On the other hand, care workers were depicted as efficient employees whose relation to older adults appeared as impersonal and routine (representation 2). These social representations reproducing understandings of older adults as a burden may have social impacts on political decisions related to later life, and the development of care services. Social representations of hurry and efficiency in eldercare may reinforce public debate focusing on saving money rather than on the quality and dignity of care (e.g. Wyman et al. 2018). Moreover, negatively valenced social representations of home care may also raise fears among the public audience regarding their own ageing. At the same time, fear and awareness of the challenges of eldercare may make people plan and prepare themselves better for old age.

Our findings supplement previous research, which has found images of old as dichotomous, emphasizing either its misery or vitality (Varjakoski 2023; Williams et al. 2010; Ylänné 2015). Considering the widely shared ideal of living at home, it is interesting that representations of home care in Finnish media are predominantly negative, often emphasizing old age as a period of decline and burden. However, this study

also identifies portrayals of older adults who do not fit simplistic categorisation and represent wellbeing despite daily care needs. Although these representations are less prominent, they diversify the often-seen portrayals of ageing and older adults. The representations situated between the very negative and over-positive images, appear to emphasize older home care recipients as active agents in their everyday life offering interesting theoretical perspectives for future research. Strengthening these types of representations, may also contribute to the empowerment of older adults in society.

Media images and representations are efficient means of shaping the public perception of older adults not only among media audiences but also among older adults themselves (Kessler 2009; Loos & Ivan 2018). Older adults may use culturally available social representations of formal home care as basis for constructing meta-representations and meta-meta-representations (Elcheroth et al. 2011) in terms of beliefs regarding how they think other people perceive formal home care and them as recipients of home care. Stereotypical media images of older adults communicating passivity, loneliness and vulnerability can be harmful, because older people can internalize this image as their self-image (Martens et al. 2005; Wangler & Jansky 2021) thus diminishing their sense of agency.

Social representations theory and visual rhetorical analysis do not understand media images as neutral documents of reality but rather as visual arguments constructing social reality (Danesi 2017; Martikainen 2019). From a performative perspective, the choices photographers make related to the visual construction of images and the choices media outlets make on what kinds of images they publish are meaningful because they shape the media audiences' thoughts and actions. As our findings show, newspaper images reinforce to some extent the prevailing narrow cultural understanding of older people as a burden and passive object of care. Questions therefore arise as to how conscious photographers are about the choices they undertake when making photographs of formal home care and, equally, how conscious are the choices of newspapers to publish certain kinds of images of formal home care. By repeatedly publishing certain kinds of images of formal home care and older adults as its clients, newspapers may reproduce and naturalize narrow and stereotypical understandings of formal home care that may influence political decision making, planning of welfare services and, ultimately,

older adults' perceptions of themselves as recipients of home care and members of society, thus serving to maintain and reinforce older adults' inferior position. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness of visually constructed meanings and the power of media (images) to shape the realities in which we live.

This study has some limitations that are important to take into account. First, the number of images published in newspapers was relatively low and therefore the data available for use in this study was limited. However, the low number of images likely reflects the overall limited visibility of older adults in the media (Ylänné 2015) rather than the quality of the data collected. Second, we have only analysed images and thus excluded the textual content of the articles. Therefore, our interpretations only concern one aspect of the social representations of formal home care produced by the media. In future research, the analysis could also be extended beyond newspapers, for example to television advertising or television series. Third, the images were analysed by researchers. Different insights would have been obtained if older adults themselves had been involved in analysing the images.

Although the data were collected in Finland and therefore represent a specific cultural and societal context, it is likely that the findings resonate with public discourses from other countries as well. Due to demographic changes, many societies are currently aiming to find sustainable ways for care provision and are at the same time required to find ways to adapt to longevity culturally by diversifying representations of ageing and older adults' care. In future research, it would be interesting to examine the possible cross-country differences in images of home care and how they represent different ways of implementing ageing-in-place policies.

Conclusions

This study shows that the images used in newspapers reinforce to some extent the prevailing understanding of older adults as a burden (see Ishikawa 2020). The results also reflect the discourse that home care has been stealthily transformed into institutional care without any benefits to the client, such as better availability of care workers. The newspaper images construct the understanding that home care recipients are dependent on care

workers' ability and time to help and meet them. From the perspective of social representations of such a specific group of older adults, it should be noted that people in dominant social positions have the power and opportunity to repeat and reproduce stereotypical representations, making them seem natural (Gorham 1999). Therefore, it is important to emphasize older adults' own perceptions when discussing and making decisions regarding them.

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Competing Interests Declaration

The authors declare none.

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Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2024).
*American Eldercide: How It Happened, How
to Prevent It*. Chicago: The University of
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(paperback)

*Reviewed by ROYA LIU**

Building on her January 2021 *Dissent* article, cultural critic and anti-ageism pioneer Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues in her October 2024 book, *American Eldercide* that the deaths of over 150,000 nursing home residents who died of COVID-19 since 2020 were preventable. Through incisive research and unflinching detail, Gullette explains how and why this Eldercide happened, advocates for policies to prevent such public health catastrophe, and promotes a more inclusive future for elders under the rallying call, "Older Lives Matter."

Major concepts that stood out: Gullette reframes COVID-19 deaths in care facilities as "eldercide" - rejecting the notion that these deaths were natural and inevitable. The pandemic exposed how deep-seated, though often invisible, ageism led to such devastating losses. She also proposes the concept of "compound ageism" to show how ageism intersects with other forms of discrimination, such as sexism, ableism, racism, and homophobia.

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Despite 50 years of scholarship since Robert Butler coined “ageism” in 1968, including Gullette’s own half-dozen books on age and aging, public hostility toward older adults persists. As Gullette observed in *Ending Ageism*, even gerontology avoided serious study of ageism until 2015, and the term has yet to enter everyday discourse as a reproachable form of prejudice. Will the COVID-19 “eldercide” finally compel public action against age-related injustice? With Gullette’s work leading the way toward combating ageism, a growing coalition of scholars, activists, and academics suggests that change is possible.

The book is structured in three parts: “Part 1: Inside” is dedicated to those we lost in care facilities; “Part 2: Instead” analyzes the causes of eldercide, including governmental failures and intersecting biases in the media; “Part 3: Ahead” calls for future efforts such as a National Eldercide Memorial to remember the victims.

Part 1 honors those who died of COVID-19 in nursing homes and their grieving loved ones. It contrasts with eldercide – the act of forgetting or discarding these residents as if they were expendable. Gullette challenges the ageist belief that “the Old will die anyway,” which has led to a sense of futility and discouraged better care and protection for those residents. She emphasizes that every resident could have been protected, and urges a timely reflection on pandemic losses and systemic ageism before they are forgotten.

In Part 2, Gullette indicts governments indifference, a failed health-care system, and media reinforcement of ageism. She criticizes former president Trump for downplaying the urgency of saving nursing home residents. With his ageist and youth-obsessed mindset, Trump framed COVID-19 as a threat only to seniors, and his administration preferred to leave many deaths unreported. Media portrayals reduced the 1.4 million residents to a hypervisible group of uniformly frail individuals, which reinforced the futility of rescuing them. Older lives were devalued in favor of idolizing youth. Preexisting age discrimination in healthcare intensified the issue when combined with “dementism,” that is, resentment against those with cognitive impairments. They conveyed ageist and ableist beliefs that older adults, especially those with cognitive differences, had lives less worth living or even a duty to die.

The final part advances three key arguments. Firstly, age must be treated as a central analytical category, not a marginal one (an issue she raised 20 years ago in *Aged by Culture*). She argues that understanding ageism provides crucial insights for combating multiple forms of discrimination. This requires developing new language and conducting interdisciplinary research to expose how ageist, ableist, and classist beliefs shape official policies. Secondly, she challenges the persistent biomedical framing of aging as inevitable decline, showing how this narrative enabled widespread indifference to nursing home deaths, particularly in media coverage. Rather than seeing these deaths as a systemic failure demanding accountability, they were often portrayed as unavoidable. Thirdly, Gullette critiques gerontology's individualistic focus, arguing that improving outcomes for older adults requires intergenerational solidarity and structural change. She insists that ageism must be understood within broader economic and political systems, not just as individual prejudice. Her call for a national monument to eldercide victims serves both as memorial and warning, urging future generations to prevent similar tragedies. With one-fifth of Americans projected to be over 65 by 2030, Gullette argues that confronting collective fear of aging, rooted in ageism, demands a deeper societal reckoning with how we value and protect older lives.

Gullette outspokenly addresses "eldercide" - the systemic failure to protect older adults - to confront ageism. Using the term "compound ageism," she shows how COVID-19 both exposed the brutal harm of ageism and created opportunities to align anti-ageism efforts with broader social justice movements. While focusing primarily on the American context, she highlights the racial and ethnic diversity of nursing home residents, suggesting the need for comparative studies of eldercide across cultures and nations.

Drawing on her dual perspective as scholar and activist, Gullette synthesizes multidisciplinary research to dissect how ageism manifests in healthcare systems and media coverage. Her approach engages with Friedman and Jones' reflection in the *Routledge Handbook of Health and Media* that COVID-19 is "the first 'multimedia disease'" (Friedman & Jones 2023). By analyzing the interconnection of media materials, ageist political ideologies, and healthcare systems, Gullette's work contributes to the ongoing scholarly discussion on health-media intersections while

positioning age studies perspectives as crucial for understanding health communication.

Gullette's healthcare analysis through an age-focused lens addresses a critical gap between age studies and health humanities, one that Erin Lamb identifies in her 2023 article "A Home for Age Studies?." While health humanities tends to reform from within rather than critique from without, Gullette demonstrates how age studies can provide that external critical perspective. Will this work help more age studies scholars find a home in health humanities, like Lamb? As Lamb noticed, age studies lacks a visible disciplinary home, forcing scholars to "pitch a tent" across different fields (echoing Andrea Charise's 2014 call). Although this disciplinary nomadism can foster valuable multidisciplinary perspectives, Gullette's work reveals how the absence of a defined institutional space for age studies reflects and perpetuates society's failure to treat age as a serious category of analysis.

Gullette's book will appeal to scholars in age studies, medical and health humanities, public health advocates, and anyone concerned with dignified aging, government accountability, and learning from the pandemic's devastating lessons about care.

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Reviewed by GEMMA M. CARNEY*

This book will open up your political imagination in a way that brings new understanding of the private and public lives of women ageing in Russia. The Babushka Phenomenon is a term used to describe the post-professional and post-sexual older woman, “not simply a grandmother” who adopts, performatively, “the position of a socially old member of society” (Staiger & Zusi in Shadrina 2025: vii). By relying on the testimony of women who might fit this category, the book foregrounds the lived experience of one of the most socially marginalised groups in Russian society. The women’s experiences of heading matrifocal families, and of living in a society which is constantly affected by war and the loss of men from family life, are eloquently expressed through seven chapters. At times, the book reads more like a novel than an academic text, luring the reader inside the homes of older women who, having survived Soviet Russia, now find themselves isolated and alone in an unrecognisable post-Soviet world. The author’s background in humanities and critical

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area studies adds richness in the form of film and literary analysis, rendering the book one of the best contemporary examples of cultural gerontological analysis I have come across.

Becoming a Babushka

Becoming a babushka is the result of accumulated disadvantage of sexism and ageism across the life course. The phenomenon is the result of clearly defined roles for Russian women, their need to perform as sexual beings at one point in life, then to raise children alone and to eventually comply with the imposed identity of babushka – a sexless woman of pension age. Some participants recoil in horror from this role, avoiding the community bonding that many babushkas practise through chatting on benches in public places. The split subjectivity many of the women experience is articulated in this rejection. For instance, for Samara, a retired university professor, the cultural pressure to conform to the ideal of babushka is rejected by making sure to dress young. She is determined to avoid becoming a housecoat wearing babushka who trails a shopping trolley behind her. It is clear from the beginning that Shadrina does not view older women within this passive stereotype. The book opens with an account of a Moscow train sit-in led by women in their 60s and 70s thereby placing the women whose lives informed the book at the very centre of the reader's imagination.

Offering Insight into Russian Society and Culture

The book is structured in a way that eases the non-Russian reader into the unfamiliar territory of Russian culture – both pre- and post-Revolutionary. It begins with a clear introduction to the Babushka phenomenon – the tendency to refer to older Russian women as “babushka” particularly if they adhere to the social norm of wearing headscarves and dressing in loose, comfortable clothing. The reluctance of some participants to adopt this identity is explained in Chapter 2 with a detailed critical analysis of monstrous grandmothers in Russian literature and cinema. The next three chapters then delve deeply into the lived experience of Shadrina's 37 participants, 30 of which are divorced or single women. These chapters

highlight several fascinating elements of continuity and change in Russian society as Babushka is clearly a phenomenon which pre-dates the 1917 Revolution, surviving into the post-Soviet era. As a reader with only scant knowledge of Russian society, I found the book's explanation of complex structural causes of Russia's matrifocal families enlightening. For instance, Shadrina (2025: 4) explains that the persistence of mother's pension funds and the absence of childcare policy which may help mothers to participate in paid work means that for most families, grandmothers fill the childcare gap. Grandmothers straddle the public and private. They are important not only in supporting the regime but also in maintaining their families. For many women, it is an extension of motherhood over two generations, motherhood being a central focus of Shadrina's earlier book (Shadrina 2014).

The chapter on Love and Sex in later life is the only one which does not offer direct insights from lived experience, perhaps because of Shadrina's reserve while interviewing women for whom she expresses high regard. Several times throughout the book, she refers to feeling respect for a participant, a level of reflective practice rarely seen in sociological work. For example, consider her reflection on Alvetina, "Her charm and sense of humour left an indelible mark on my soul" (Shadrina 2025: 70). This made me stop and think. The people we interview shape us as much as they shape the research. Perhaps this is something that we should be more cognisant of in social gerontology.

Shadrina's decision to write the book is clearly influenced by the volatile nature of politics in her area of the world – Russia and Belarus. Demographic issues have long been politicised in that part of the world, and thus, pronatalism provides a critical framework for the book. Her reference to the Russian government's 2007 Strategy for Demographic Policy at the beginning of the book is followed with a warning about the pronatalism of current leaders of not only Russia but also Hungary and Italy in the last chapter. At times, pronatalism is accompanied by a narrative where older people are presented as costly devourers of healthcare who live on at the expense of more productive, youthful generations. Such a narrative is mightily challenged by Shadrina's work. The numerous quotations from women who spoke to her, her own knowledge and experience of explaining Russia to foreign audiences, and the examples she

offers from Russian literature and film offer a powerful means of counteracting the prevailing narrative that pronatalism is a straightforward solution to the demographic crisis. Her work resonates with my own, which has long claimed that much of the demographic timebomb narrative can be debunked by paying careful attention to how social policies assume women's invisible labour will be freely available across the life course (Carney 2018). As such, I am in complete agreement with Shadrina's final comment - "There is nothing more urgent than examining the impact of neoliberal capitalism, authoritarian trends and geopolitical competition on the lives of those who contribute the most to the well-being of others yet are the least appreciated for their efforts" (Shadrina 2025: 156).

In my opinion, the best sociology speaks to the humanity of people who make up the societies we study. The best work is less concerned with making big, bold "the trouble with society" statements, instead aiming to get underneath the structures that define group identity, offering insight into the human experience that is its result. Shadrina's book walks this line between humanity and society with the balance and poise of a trapeze artist.

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