RELATIONAL AGEING IN A FUTURE SHAPED BY PANDEMIC

ESA CONFERENCE: RN01 MIDDAY SPECIAL
Wednesday 1st September - 14.15 to 15.15 (CEST)

Speakers
Esther Ramsay-Jones - Open University, United Kingdom
Bernhard Weicht - University of Innsbruck, Austria

Chair
Lucie Galčanová Batista, Masaryk University, Czech Republic

Session Abstract
This session addresses how a social world affected by Covid-19 shapes, and will continue to shape, the nature of ageing in European societies. Covid-19 has had disproportionate impacts within populations, with mortality rates higher for older people. This has prompted different national responses on how to protect populations, including the most vulnerable members of society. Fundamental tensions inhere within endeavours to mitigate the interrelated health impacts and economic consequences of a pandemic. These endeavours seek to reconcile limits to the contagion, which curtails social activity, with the maintenance of economic stability, which requires the stimulation of social activity. In simplistic terms, it has been argued that limiting the contagion prioritises older people, while the stimulation of economic activity prioritises the needs of working age people and children. Nevertheless, this simplification could reinforce a sense there is a zero-sum association between the needs of older people and those of younger people. Such conceptualisations could reinforce social divisions at a time when positive solutions to substantial socioeconomic challenges are required. The Covid-19 situation thus raises profound ongoing questions for sociology and ageing research, related to older people, intergenerational relations, and conceptualisations of age and ageing. Sociology is well placed to evaluate micro and macro dimensions of the impacts of Covid-19, including how relationships at an interpersonal level are influenced by changing economic and cultural contexts. Crucially, how will the relational basis of ageing be affected by the pandemic and how should sociology inform positive responses to its impacts?
SPEAKER BIOS AND ABSTRACTS:

Esther Ramsay-Jones - Open University, United Kingdom

Esther Ramsay-Jones is a practising palliative and organisational psychotherapist, working psychodynamically with people living with life-limiting conditions, their families and within a counselling service for older adults. She lectures on Death, Dying and Bereavement with the Open University. Her book, Holding Time: Human Need and Relationships in Dementia Care (2019) is an ethnographic exploration of the care home context drawing from her PhD research. More recently she has written The Silly Thing: Shaping the Story of Life and Death (2020).

Old Age and Youth: what becomes of the projective object in a Covid world?

Recent Government figures (May 2021) show that 128,000 people have died from Covid-19 in the UK. The inescapable reality that human life is fragile is likely to have upended our imagined certainties. If we are to think broadly about old age and youth, we know that there have been more than 40,000 deaths in care homes in the UK since the start of the pandemic (Duncan, 2021). Writing about the psychic concerns of the individual, Waddell (1998) notes that, ‘the psychoanalytic picture of mid- to late-life’ involves facing ‘loss of all kinds’. For younger people, the number of people aged 18-24 claiming unemployment related benefits has increased by 267,900 from March 2020 to April 2021 (Powell & Francis-Devine, 2021). This, when the younger person is grappling with and reshaping his or her identity. Developmentally, the picture for young and old is already one of heightened anxiety. One emotional response to fear is to resort to splitting, i.e., the division of persons or groups into ‘good’ or ‘bad’, often destroying our capacity for relating. This paper will consider some of the reciprocal projections between the ages - partially informed by dominant ideologies, normativising prescriptions of identity, which have hooked into our terrors of death and dying at this time. And to pose the question, what would it mean for the intergenerational relational field if we were to pay closer attention to the culturally sanctioned unconscious processes operating in the social world?
Bernhard Weicht - Department of Sociology, University of Innsbruck, Austria

Bernhard has studied Economics in Vienna and Social Policy in Nottingham. He holds a PhD from the University of Nottingham where he researched the social and moral construction of care for older people. After postdoc work at Utrecht University and Leiden University College he received his Habilitation at the University of Innsbruck in 2018 with his work entitled “A Caring Sociology for Ageing Societies”. Bernhard has published on the construction of care, ideas of dependency, migrant care workers, the intersection of migration and care regimes and the construction of ageing. He is the author of *The Meaning of Care* (2015).

The Vulnerable Subject: relationality as foundation of personhood

The global Covid-19 pandemic has shaped our understanding of vulnerabilities profoundly. First, older people have been addresses as risk groups which the *others* have to be protect. Subsequently, old age has become one of the main determining factors for prioritisation in vaccination strategies. Intentionally or not, the discursive links between old age and vulnerabilities have thus been intensified. The identification of risks and vulnerabilities, however, cannot be limited to a depiction of older individuals. Rather, vulnerabilities, risks and dependencies need to be understood as inherently relational. While the political response to the pandemic has often been to identify individuals and/or to categorise groups according to their risk situations, public awareness of interdependent relations between people has risen. On the one hand, vulnerability stems from relating to others; on the other hand, relations of dependency are the main answer to the challenges intensified by the pandemic. Focusing on the relational character of vulnerability rather than on individual, autonomous subjects, enables an ontological shift which challenges the conceptualisation not only of older people but of all members of society. The sociology of ageing has long since developed perspectives to start an investigation of society from such a standpoint of vulnerability and dependencies. Drawing on narratives from the global pandemic, I propose a relational concept of personhood that understands all people as relational, vulnerable and dependent on others. Starting from this ontological perspective will allow a concept of personhood that is more adapted to both social and health crises.