

Performing Aging in Post-Soviet Latvia

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Abstract: In this article we explore how people define, evaluate and explain aging in Latvia after more than two decades since the end of the Soviet Union. Our findings result from secondary analysis of 55 semi-structured interviews on the perception of the body and biotechnologies with informants from throughout Latvia. Judith Butler's concept of identity performance allowed us to interpret the experience of aging identity construction in Latvia by interconnecting bodily experience and discursive categories, and is supplemented by Marilyn Strathern's theories on the significance of relationships with others. Aging identity in Latvia and performance that is evaluated as (dis)respectful and (in) appropriate is defined through involvement in relationships with the self, the family, and the wider community. These findings open up opportunities to widen economics- and demography-driven conceptualisations of aging at the governmental level, and to adjust policy to effectively and respectfully meet people's needs, as well as to encourage further research on gendered aging strategies, sexuality, local meanings of the morally-charged concept "rūpes" (care).

Keywords: Aging, identity, performance, relationships, post-Soviet, Latvia

Introduction

Simon Biggs and Jason Powell argue that, today, age and aging is very actively discussed in social policy and theory. They indicate that in the 21st century a debate on aging has been raised, even though "aging" has been relatively weakly developed as a concept in social policy and social theory (Biggs, Powell 2001, 1). They suggest critical analysis in aging discourse as a productive research perspective, which we employ in this article and in the research on which it is based.

Currently in Latvia, aging is a visible part of the social policy agenda, but mostly from a demographic and economic perspective. For example, in the planning document "Sustainable Development Strategy for Latvia until 2030" (Saeima [Parliament] of the Republic of Latvia 2010, hereafter Saeima), aging is mentioned as one of several aspects that influence long-term social development. In the terms laid out in this document, the aging of the population is constructed as threat to a society's long-term balanced and sustainable development, especially in the countryside where aging is cited as one of the main reasons for depopulation. One of the objectives for the sustainable development of Latvia is that "[i]n 2030, Latvia will be a thriving country of active and responsible citizens." (Saeima 2010, 11) Moreover, human capital (understood as "the average amount of the knowledge, talents and skills of inhabitants multiplied by the number of economically active people" (Saeima 2010, 19) is seen as crucial in the achievement of the state's developmental goals. Aging is mentioned as a threatening factor able to reduce the base value of human capital and to decrease its productivity. (Saeima 2010, 11) In this way, the authors of "Sustainable Development Strategy for Latvia until 2030" state that the "ageing of society is related to the loss of labour productivity and changes in the structure of the labour force" (Saeima 2010, 20). In order to reduce the negative impact of the demographic load (formed mostly by the increasing proportion of elderly people) on economic growth and social security, several solutions are suggested. Among these, an increase in social security contributions or a reduction of the relationship between pensions and work remunerations are seen as problematic: "the former increases the costs of the labour force, promotes unemployment and

reduces the competitiveness of enterprises, the latter reduces the standard of living of households and promotes poverty” (Saeima 2010, 21). Thus, the part of society that is aging is constructed as a burden accompanied by risks for the economy and the quality of life of its inhabitants.

Another strategic document, the “National Development plan of Latvia 2014-2020,” (Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre [CCSC] 2012) does not mention aging as such, but concentrates on healthy life expectancy and the working age population (mostly of 25-64 years old), while nevertheless stressing that sustainable development has no age limits. The disregard of the needs of elderly persons and avoidance of including them in strategic developmental political documents is also performed as a way towards discrimination and ignorance.

Analysis of these political documents allows the reader to conclude that aging is viewed as a risk at the political level. This perception is related to the neoliberal approach where economic justifications are the main arguments for (re)defining persons. But in some political documents in Latvia seniors can be not included, and this also indicates a certain type of attitude from the state with regards to these citizens.

The attitude where aging is problematized is also characteristic of demographic research that tends to view aging at the macro level and to associate the aging population with particular social problems. For example, Latvia’s unsustainable population age structure is explained in terms of the relative percentages of the various age groups in the population. Atis Bērziņš, Edvīns Vītoliņš, and Pēteris Zvidriņš (2006, 5) point out that “[i]n Latvia, as in most other European countries, the aging of the population has become a serious social demographic problem. Among the most prominent manifestations of this problem, we can mention an increase in the average age of the population and an increase in the proportion of the elderly.” From the point of view of the authors, ignoring the aging population can lead to social problems considered to be serious, such as the inability of state institutions to influence population development. Juris Krūmiņš, another Latvian demographer, points to Latvia’s aging population in the context of population health and other social challenges which put the sustainable development of Latvian society at risk (Krūmiņš 2006, 11).

Since 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, aging in Latvia has been researched in various ways, but primarily by economists and sociologists. As a socioeconomic group, senior citizens or pensioners have been studied through their economic activity and their consumption patterns in the context of economic development (Grīnfelde 2010; Ciemiņa 2009; Grīnfilde, Eglīte, Korpa 2007). At times, where aging has been studied in relation to quality of life, the studied target group was described as “people above working age” (e.g. Eglīte, Grīnfelde 2007) as opposed to the categorisation mentioned above in demographic research. Other perspectives used to inquire about lives have concentrated on the idea of healthy lifestyle (Eglīte et al. 2009) and the experience of illness (Mežinska 2009). Until the mid-2000s, work on ageing among sociologists focused mostly on relationship between ageing and standard of living (e.g. Ozoliņa, Zepa 1999), but later topics such as quality of life and active aging became more popular (e.g. Brants 2004; Stepčenko, Brants, Bukovska 2007).

The trend to relate aging to quality of life coincides with Latvia joining of the European Union. This was a major political and social change that also had an impact on sociological research. In 2012, for instance, social anthropologist Agita Lūse (2012) spoke about aging in the context of providing social services for seniors. Previous research in Latvia on was state funded and used for administration, thus adopting a mostly neoliberal perspective. Today, an economic and demographic perspective dominates the common perception of aging in Latvia. A healthy and economically-active population is part of the state vision aimed at developing a stronger economy and a higher standard of living. This kind of perception of aging in Latvia

is often adopted at the level of policy planning and implementation. (CCSC 2012, Saeima 2010)

However, there is a significant lacuna in research aimed at discovering how aging is defined and explained by people themselves. The abovementioned demographic- and-economy driven perspective, if resulting from a desire to boost the economy and solve population issues, leaves the experience of aging and the challenges of this experience locked to the private, personal level; nevertheless, issues related to aging go beyond the purely individual and private capacity field. For example, the (in)availability of easily accessible institutionalised help to solve problems of work, family and private life balance for families with small children and family members suffering from illness. We see the need to change this situation. Therefore, the aim of this article is to focus on how aging is defined, evaluated, and explained by people that allows for finding of new perspectives for research on aging in Latvia.

Our research explores the current perception of aging while the Latvian population is still regarded as in the midst of adjusting to the transition from a socialist to a capitalist economic system after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This gives us the additional opportunity to evaluate the influences of this transition on the perception of aging.

The aging process is closely connected with bodily experience and identity. Thus, the performance of aging is bound up with the idea of relationships. Specifically, we see an individual's performance of aging as based on the relational principle. Further, we view aging in Latvia as a performance, in Judith Butler's terms. Performance is a discursive body formed by of relations of references. Our data show that the performances of aging in Latvia are grounded in relationships with others. These relations of reference – embodied in the performance of aging – are linked to relationships. This means that relations of references used for aging performances are determined by the relationships between a person and other(s), be it oneself, his/her body, family, closer or wider group of people.

1. Performing aging as performing relationships

Margaret A. Perkinson and Samantha L. Solimeo (2013, 1) mention that discipline of anthropology cooperated extensively with the field of gerontology. Lawrence Cohen (1994, 137) indicates that from the from 1980s onwards, anthropology has given more systematic attention to the role of age, thus creating 'geroanthropolgy'. He also draws attention to the fact that at that point there were thousands of articles that included aging in their content and developed different perspectives exploring some aspects of aging: life history, life span, age stratification, grandparenting, a feminist perspective, and medicalization. (1994, 138). Each of these anthropological perspectives debate and develop different positions on aging. Our aim was to explore aging in a local context and to draw attention to meanings and definitions of aging.

Margaret Clark and Kaufman (1967) developed the concept of situated aging, which they explain as an interactive, embodied process that is experienced in certain social and cultural contexts. Kaufman (1980) suggests aging in a cultural context forms a certain identity that is not linked to chronological linear time, but a person's memory. Aging in Latvia also appears as a situated concept, set by the context of relationships, i.e. informants explained aging identities in Latvia by switching evaluation of aging from one relationships context to another.

Judith Butler's concept of identity performance provides a frame for understanding aging as described by our informants. We combine this with Marilyn Strathern's notion of the importance of relationships between people as basis for our analysis of aging in Latvia. Butler explains that the materialization of the body is performative: it is the result of

particularly strong social discourses of power (1993, 187-188). Performance normalizes the body through multiple repetitions that create and establish a new set of meanings and embody a particular ideology that is present in the case of aging in Latvia in the way the individual him/herself and society at large describes the body and aging. By multiple repetitions these ideologies become a part of each person's identity. Butler argues that ideologies are located in discourses and discourse categories, for example "old", "not so old" and similar expressions that establish the principle of the references (1993, 231). In our case these are associated with the experience and manifestations of aging. These internal discourse categories are embodied and create aging practices as well as allow for an evaluation of other persons' practices that create power relations. For example, informants expressed statements about how elderly persons should behave in order to take care of themselves and relatives. They also highlighted relatives with errant behavior such as those ate unhealthy or smoked tobacco. Thus, age-(in)appropriate behavior can be viewed as a bodily creation which is the performance of the aging identity.

In turn, Strathern argues that the status of a person in a society is based on relationships with others (for example, family members, neighbors, lovers, larger society), that allows for the cultivation of certain types of the person's behavior. She uses the concept of "cultivated persons" (1980, 90-92) and believes that not all socialization is based on a verbal text, but can be transferred by example. For instance, the role of parent can be learned by observing the behavior of others in the family. A cultivated person is someone who has been introduced into the order of things, thus taught norms which the individual will follow. This cultivation process results in persons' self-definition and performances, which is also observable in our research in the process of aging and behavioral norms.

Strathern (2005, 127) also states that every action is a result of concrete choices between alternatives that are simultaneously based on the relationship and influence the relationship. She describes the responsibility of people for relationships through the analogy of copyright, wherein the author is responsible for the content of his book. She explains that as surnames for persons are the same as authorship on a book, it is family responsibility to create by cultivating its members, but also represents each family's responsibility to act in a proper way. When seen from this perspective, it is not possible for any member of a family to act solely as a discrete individual because of their responsibility to the family as a group. Aging experience also appears to be a part of such cultivated behavior.

2. Methods

This analysis is based on 55 semi-structured in-depth interviews with people from all regions of Latvia, of whom 16 were male and 39 female. These interviews were carried out in 2011-12 by a group five social researchers within the ESF (European Social Fund) project "Capacity building for interdisciplinary biosafety research." The aim of the project was to build a new, interdisciplinary research team, and to attract and train people to take part in interdisciplinary research. Involving researchers in biology, medicine, social sciences and law, it aimed to advance research in biosafety and biotechnology management, to develop an interdisciplinary methodology for ensuring biosafety, and to strengthen its capacity at the University of Latvia, as well as to promote public participation in science administration. The research conducted by the group of social scientists had the aim of developing biosafety criteria and methodology by evaluating social, ethical, and legal factors, and the management quality of modern biotechnologies. Besides expert interviews, data were gathered through participant observation and other activities, including interviews with lay people to find out the needs of society and the degree of participation in the field of biotechnology.

Interviews with people took place and were recorded with mutual informed consent of informants. The terms of informed consent, explained at the outset of their participation, including anonymity, information on main interview topics, rights not to answer and to skip questions or terminate the interview, as well as the usage of obtained data for scientific purposes. The interviews lasted between 30 and 150 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The data obtained from these interviews were used in this paper for secondary analysis with the permission of project leader Aivita Putnina, an anthropologist at the University of Latvia.

Interview questions were organized in blocks related to the perception of the body and biotechnologies. Only one fifth of the interview was related to aging (other topics covered include questions related to health, bodily perception, assisted reproductions, stem cells, xenotransplantation and others). One of the question blocks included questions on aging and changes in the body. Some data on aging had appeared in other parts of interviews, including those related to bodily experiences.

A key informant was selected in five different regions in Latvia. They helped in recruiting other informants who then participated in this research. The informants were aged between seven to seventy-seven. Apart from one 7-year-old girl who had joined in an interview with her mother and had also responded to questions, all participants were older than 18 years. The selection of informants of different ages allows for obtaining the perspective of people of multiple ages in defining aging and growing old, both about themselves and others, and how they assign age-related designations such as 'senior' or 'young,' or perceiving aging as coming in the distant future. Seniors (age 60 and over) in interviews were noted to more often explain their aging experiences. Those who had defined themselves as not old or belonging to a younger age category gave a more social evaluation of aging or described when a person becomes old and how.

We conducted secondary data analysis associated with aging using Atlas.ti. To protect the anonymity of the informants, the interviews were coded designating only the age and gender of the informants. In the process of analysis, we were able to identify eleven key themes, including health, signs of aging, stages of aging, relationship with oneself, relationship with family, and relationship with the community. These eleven interrelated themes were later sorted into two major groups: bodily changes, and relationships.

There are some points and clarifications that should be mentioned in respect to our study. First, in our analysis data on how females perceived aging dominates compared to males. Secondly, the interviews were conducted without a focus on a post-Soviet context; however, the transition period formed a living background for all of informants. Those over age of 30 have had experiences of living during the Soviet period. Post-soviet traits were expressed directly only insofar as the informants mentioned them. Only some of the informants, when they had been talking on issues that affect the changing of perception of aging, mentioned the Soviet to post-Soviet transition. However, in some interviews, informants of advanced years talked about their experiences during the Soviet period, creating a comparison with the present.

3. Findings

3.1. Body and 'language' of aging

To understand how aging is perceived in Latvia, we first cover a body of references/discursive categories used by informants when describing aging. Informants had defined aging using a combination of references: years lived, appearance, internal feelings, and occupation. These references were contrasted or used in combination to describe an aging

person. This was the way our informants created the various categories they used in interviews, such as “old,” “not so old,” and “not so young anymore.”

Often biological age expressed as the number of years lived was used as the unit of measurement to determine how old a person was. This view was related to the idea that human life is a string of connected, yet discrete stages: birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, and death. This type of thinking formed life as a continuum that begins at birth and ends with death. However, death as the final liminal point on the continuum of life was never explicitly named when informants talked about the dynamics of the aging process.

We discovered that there was no precise boundary that divides one stage of life from another. First, the perception of where the boundary is located between life stages depends on the age of the perceiver. For example, if the person who answered a question about when a person becomes old was 30 years old, he/she defined a person as old as 50 and above; for a 50-year-old the cited age was 70. Aging was usually described as the stage following that the speaker was currently experiencing. For example, one informant described aging use a comparison between herself and her parents:

Interviewer: Tell me, at what age does a person become old? Does aging create obligations?

Informant: Yes, because in youth we feel that everything is eternal. Well now I am middle-aged and it seems to me that eighty is old. In midlife, I have come to understand that I need to spend more time with my parents, because we are not destined to have much more time together. (Female, age 43)

Second, aging was also evaluated by informants individually in each case. For example, the fact that people belonged to the same age did not mean that they would be instantly defined as belonging to the same life stage, because the evaluation focused not only on separate references such as signs of growing old, but also on the performance of a person on the whole that became apparent through the complex of bodily condition, activities presented through the body, mental and emotional reactions and attitudes, as well as indicating directly or indirectly the difference in years between that person and the speaker. Thus, a 70-year-old was not necessarily defined as old if they were active (dancing etc.) whereas a 60-year-old who was sullen, uncommunicative and often willingly remained at home could be.

The aging of the body was widely discussed in interviews as a crucial part of the evaluation of the aging performance. It was described as a visible transformation of the body, such as changes in skin and hair—for example wrinkles on the face and around the eyes (“crow's feet”), or a greying beard and hair. Informants expressed that aging was observed in bodily changes compared to some vague set reference point in the youthful past. For example, one informant referred to fact that he was not so fit as he was when he had been young. Even our older informants (age 60 and over) mostly did not refer to themselves as being old. When our older informants described themselves, they explained their age as non-youth, creating an opposition in their minds, where being young was often seen as being beautiful, agile, and healthy. In her article “Age Embodied,” Cheryl Laz states that when people speaking about aging, the “focus on bodies, body parts, and physical abilities and activities is striking” (2003, 503). This comes close very much to how people described aging in Latvia, for example:

It is difficult to say. The son says to me: your beard. Yes, my beard is greying. It isn't as if I feel old, I feel a number of different things; that I haven't been

active, that I haven't taken care of myself. But it's not as if I am growing old.

(Male, age 37)

You can never be as thin at 40 as at 20; this is not reason for any stress. (Male, age 42)

Pain and illness appeared as bodily experiences that were used as references often associated with aging in our interviews. Pain that had not been present in the past, but was now felt during common physical activities and seen as a bodily transformation was associated with aging. Informants mentioned examples of physical aging, such as a deformation of the fingers, back pain, or other illnesses that they associated with years of heavy labor on the collective farms – a common occupation during the Soviet period. Here one informant expresses how work during the Soviet period had impacted upon her aging body:

What does it matter to the *sovkhos* [collective farm] when you enter your life and have to work from morning to evening? That is why I have to walk around like this in old age. What about my hands? Look! All of my fingers are twisted. That's it. From the terribly heavy work. (Female, age 70)

The emotions and mental processes of an individual were also used as a measurement tool to determine how old or young that person was. According to our informants, the aging performance of young people was described using discursive references such as being interested in the world, in other people, and the processes around them, being mentally active and involved. Further, being of a cheerful disposition was highlighted. The informants expressed the belief that changes in mental abilities are also related to the process of aging. When people grow older, these changes could be detected in the process of communication. Changes in mental capacity (for example, clear thinking) were often used to characterize the aging progress. Thus, informants specified the significance of mental health as a discursive reference in the performance of aging identity. Some informants also used opposition between the mind and the body to describe older people. For example, e.g. the body of someone was seen as old, but the mind was not, thus indicating the perception of aging as being variable and unevenly distributed within the body. For example:

Well, thinking you can count the wrinkles on your face, but the most important thing is the way you think. Some people are already ancient at thirty, so it isn't about wrinkles. (Female, age 33)

The person's mental capacity was seen by informants as being related to the ability to take responsibility associated with adulthood. The person who continued to maintain cognitive capacity was categorized as non-elderly, regardless of their age. Sometimes informants explained that an old person could become "childlike." This designation indicates the belief that when an adult person grows old, he or she is no longer able to take responsibility and make decisions, just like a child. Thus, we can conclude that mental health functions as a crucial reference category that affects the evaluation of performance of aging identity. This is related to what is proper for an adult person or improper and therefore compatible or incompatible with social responsibilities and resources an adult person has. That means that if the evaluation of aging performance leads to the transition from adult person to an older one, this also brings changes in social responsibilities and set of available resources.

In sum, we found that aging in Latvia was described using lived years, bodily changes and mental capacity. These aspects were used differently – contrasted or in combination –

allowing the creation of age categories such as “old”, “not so old”, but also “not so young any more” and the usage of these to characterize a person as belonging to certain life stage. The boundaries that divide one stage of life from another were not so clear, depending on the speaker’s age and evaluation of each situation, which allows them to place emphasis on one indicator of aging and to ignore others or contrast this with some indicator of youthfulness.

3.2. Aging and Relationships

When answering questions associated with the body and aging, the informants did not describe aging as something separate from the self, but rather as a changing process in reference to a previous self, or as changes in interaction with another(s). The perception and evaluation of aging was described making reference to some point earlier in a timeline or making references to relationships with other people. The process of aging was explained as being placed in the context of certain relationships and functioning as an integral part of their dynamics. The experience of aging could be perceived through various types of relationship: with one’s self, with a romantic partner, with family, and with society in general, lived through from the birth until death.

3.2.1. Relationship with oneself, one’s own body

Analysis of the data shows that the type of relationship that most affected the perception and understanding of aging appeared to be the relationship each person had with oneself and own body. Older informants (60 and over) explained that for them old age was coming at the moment when one begins to feel bodily sensations more acutely, and when control over bodily manifestations faded.

The older informants expressed that the body produced signals that focused a person’s attention on a problem to make that person react. These bodily changes impacted a person’s relationship with themselves. In the interviews, they stated that one’s body may give pleasure, but at the same time in the process of aging it can remind them of its existence: it can “cry”, declare its disability, “can make one notice its presence,” for example through pain. Through these signaling activities one’s body identifies itself as an active and independent agent that one “should listen to,” setting a relational context. Informants explained that by building a relationship with their own body, an older person can strive to regain control over it:

Interviewer: “What do you think, when does a person understand that he or she is old?”

Informant: Again, the body declares that you can no longer do the things you could do before. (Female, age 39).

The building of a relationship with oneself was designated “looking after themselves” or “taking care.” Persons over 50 stated that the level at which one looks after one’s own body works as an indicator of the presence and quality of a relationship between them. One should look after oneself-- “take care of one’s self” --(“*rūpēties par sevi*”). This statement included the idea that all should engage in activities that slow down the aging process. Many informants expressed the idea that it is important to act preventatively and “to take care” by being mentally and physically active. They explained that preventative measures can reduce or delay age-related bodily signals and slow the inevitable flow of time. “Taking care” for them meant avoiding bad habits that affect health, such as smoking or drinking alcohol, engaging in regular physical activity,

using cosmetics, and maintaining an interest in what is going on in the world. A good-looking older person was described in an interview as having tended to her body, while youth is seen as beautiful in itself:

Well it works if only you find the right one, then reactions are not wrong, then people... I am glad to see a person, who cares for her hands, who loves herself. But it is so that in the country it is difficult for me to take care of myself, but if you have good quality [cosmetic] cream, then of course you feel much better about yourself. (Female, age 43)

The older informants explained that self-care is the way in which people express the feeling of love and acceptance toward themselves, but at the same time one's attitude towards oneself also affects relationships with other people. Self-care was seen by informants as the key to maintenance of physical alertness, tone and activity, as well as everyday attention to one's appearance, accompanied by preserving a sharp mind. Other informants expressed respect and admiration towards older people who are both able and willing to take care of themselves. When a person can no longer manage self-care, they are described as "old" or "very old" in the interviews. Therefore, self-care becomes as a required part of the aging performance.

Informants expressed the view that there were gendered differences in self-care. People pointed out that women care more about themselves, while men do not care enough. Some linked this gender difference with the experience of the Soviet past. Informants also mentioned that, compared with the Soviet period, there are many more opportunities to take care of oneself. In the past, there was little knowledge of self-care and cosmetics that would allow them to perform personal grooming as it is done today. One informant mentioned the Soviet past in the context of self-care in this way:

I think compared with the West, perhaps we (pause) have another experience, practice. I think our men do not care about themselves, they must think that things are fine as they are! (Laughs) Well, now I think there are more men, at least a part, who take care of themselves. But there are at least as many who don't practice personal hygiene, I think. Well maybe I am mistaken, but I think so. Why? I do not know. I think when ... (pause) upbringing, perhaps ... maybe because of the Soviet years. (Female, age 56)

Therefore, in sum, our data show that aging performance is evaluated as corresponding to a person named as young while he or she does not sense bodily signals of tiredness, pain and refusal of the body to perform actions in anticipated ways, and when it is not necessary to take special care of one's own body. Informants expressed the perception that a heightened awareness of the body goes hand in hand with taking a proactive stance to lessen negative bodily signals or to delay their appearance by performing preventive actions. Many informants indicated the existence of preference to youth, so distancing oneself from aging and maintaining the body in good condition representing a strategy used to sustain a person's value in the labor market, where age discrimination was something to be reckoned with. A person's relationship with themselves through their own body appeared to be an important component of understanding of the aging process, experienced by the person themselves and by people involved in different relationships with that person.

3.2.2. Romantic relationships

Romantic relationships appear to be another type of discursive organizing principles of aging performance constructing references, and another discursive context through which informants expressed perceptions related to aging. The interview data show that a romantic relationship was perceived as more appropriate to youthful persons. Therefore, romantic love at advanced ages allowed informants to reinterpret their position on the youth-old age continuum, making people feel younger. Some informants believed that love in older age becomes visible in a person's body:

So, not the growing older... but a person looks younger, and then his eyes are sparkling and ... Well, that's another thing, it seems to me, that the face completely radiates light. It seems to me. (Female, age 56)

A 39-year old informant who works in a nursing home expressed this idea by noting she had been surprised when she had started to work there to discover that even the over-70s loved, kissed, and were involved in romantic relationships at various stages, just like young people. This care worker also explained that love relationships between seniors worked as a curative and had healing power. She stated that love is both an emotional and a physical phenomenon that makes people forget about age and illness and allows them to feel younger:

Love is important at all ages, and here (in a nursing home) I came to see that even people in their seventies become couples. And in the beginning it seemed so strange, to see old people love each other, the same kissing, the same hugging. But then I came to understand that they like each other. From the perspective of young person those bodies are old, old bodies. But the most important thing is that they have mutual attraction for each other and then their physical problems suddenly disappear. (Female, age 56)

This informant also observed frustrated romantic relationships that had broken the lovers' hearts and even could be instrumental in causing death. The context of falling in love was also viewed by other informants as standing in opposition to death; it was a force for life that heals and renews both body and mind.

In several interviews the context of romantic relationships is broadened by a process named "growing old together," that was explained as an acceptance of partners' bodily changes related to aging and the ability of partners/spouses to maintain emotional unity and love over time. Emotional intimacy, mutual love and respect were emphasized by informants as factors that help people either ignore or confront their own physical changes and those of their partners, as emotional closeness compensated loss of physical capacity. This then made some difference in evaluating life stages with respect to aging, in contrast to growing old while being lonely – in other words while living without this romantic relationship. Therefore, "growing old together" was seen as being especially beautiful; it was viewed as an ideal that can only rarely be realized. Being old in this context became part of the life experience of the described body changes that are accepted by both partners and life events lived together:

I think it is beautiful to grow old together. I think that is the ideal. It is not in vain that there are couples who have lived their lives and experienced their golden wedding anniversary and grown old together. They see their children, grandchildren grow up. I don't know (Female, age 56).

As defined by informants', "growing old together" was seen as problematic in cases when partners have had a significant age difference between them. Partners had been evaluated as being "too young", "too old" or "just right" for each other in respect to this age difference. Thus, age (commensurate with the age of the partner) was one way in which informants evaluated the compatibility of two people. Through the process of assigning these discursive categories age became relative. Creating a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a younger partner was perceived as an attempt to stay young, to prove that one has the abilities inherent in youth, and has not succumbed to the disability of old age. However, such attempts to stay young were not always evaluated as successful, and thus earned the critical and ironic remarks of peers:

It is not for nothing that men over 40 look for younger women. They want confirmation... if he hasn't fulfilled something in himself, something like that... I don't really even understand why it seems to me that the opposite is true. To have a young man beside you would be further confirmation that you're old. But I don't know what takes place in the minds of men. I do not know! (Laughs). (Female, age 57)

In interviews a large age difference between partners was still perceived as an adverse factor affecting the quality of the relationship. Informants believed that the older age of one partner highlights the youth of the other and vice versa; they are viewed as unequal. In contrast, long-term relationships between partners of similar ages was seen by informants as a factor that allowed them to view aging less critically, mitigating sad and tragic feelings about vanishing youth.

Nevertheless, during interviews it was more typical for informants to talk about old people in general, ignoring their sexuality and gender. Both men and women were referred to as old people, old folks: "*vecīši*" or pensioners. This suggests that the experience of becoming a senior is often characterized by the experience of being deprived of one's sexuality and gender. It was the way in which old people were described by persons who were younger than 30. The age of these informants could be the reason why they had a more distanced and critical attitude to older persons. There was not enough data to find a concrete explanation why old persons in Latvia were described without mention of their gender, especially if a younger person talked about unknown, 'generic' older persons. This is interesting because in the Latvian language the use of different grammatical forms to describe males and females is normal practice, but when people referred to seniors, most informants used a gender neutral grammatical form.

3.2.3. Relationship with family

In accordance with the interview data, family relationships provided a referential repertoire that was strongly associated by informants with gender roles. Often, when an informant had spoken about aging in the context of family, he or she used kinship terms, (the Latvian equivalents of mom, dad, grandmother, grandfather), and referred to the particular role in the family and the care that person provides. Family and parent-child relationships served in interviews as a special context for how one perceives one's own age. If someone referred to yesterday's conversation with their own grandmother, their status as a grandchild could easily be inferred. The birth of a child and taking on the role of parent, encouraged others to see that person as an adult, sufficiently mature, and active and healthy enough to perform the taxing duties of parental care. We identified that the evaluation of one's own position on the youth-aging continuum can be based on counting years, as well as on the

status of involvement in a relationship. This was beautifully reflected in the statement of a thirty-three-year-old informant: “I am already still a young mom.” In this self-definition “already” is used to reference to youth of a youngster in the past and while the simultaneously used “still” references the youth of adult person in the present. Being a parent, having the opportunity to become a parent, or taking care of children diminishes the significance of age in years. The presence of children in the family served as a reference that indicated youth, not only for the parents, but also for the grandparents:

People often say—my grandchildren don’t let me grow old. For example, I feel it in my own grandma. (Female, age 20)

Age in years and the status of parent or caregiver influenced each other when informants evaluated the aging process. Seniors were often described as people who provided help to other family members, but family members were seen as a key support network for seniors. Consequently, care was characterized as an object of exchange that had been circulating within the family. In the interviews, informants stated that the care and love they received from their grandparents induced them later to take care of their grandparents in return. Aging in the context of family relationships appears as a complex system of care exchange: a complex body of references that determined the formation of discursive categories and consecutively aging performance. Yet not all family relationships work this way. If different generations of family members disrespected and disregarded each other, the quality of the relationship suffered, and that threatened the reciprocity of care relations. Informants described family respect and support as especially important when people were growing old, because it was usually essential for providing sufficient living conditions and quality of life for seniors in Latvia.

The ability to take care of oneself was inseparable from the performance of care for others – especially children and parents. Interview data suggested that if you are cared for, but don’t take care of others, then you are either too young or too old. Robust references of youth/maturity included the need to care for others and engaging in partnerships, creating a family, giving birth, and bringing up children, as well as taking part in the labor market.

Informants argued that the relationships that people have with their families also affected the perception of the “honorable” way to perform aging. Family relationships, as informants talk about them, set the context for realization of perceptions of how a “good life” should be lived in combination with the notion of how one should behave at a certain age. Family members set the terms of aging performance and of age-appropriate behavior of a person who was growing old. One informant admitted that her grandmother was aging in an improper way that relates to Strathern’s ideas on the cultivated person and its behavior in accordance with group-determined norms and acceptance:

Well, you know I have an eighty-year-old grandmother, [and she] both smokes and drinks. I say: don’t you know that it is harmful? She [answered]: you just live as long as I have. At that point our discussion stopped. I had nothing more to say. (Female, aged 33)

Relatives controlled the aging performance, and in case of age-inappropriate behavior it could be directly related to a particular family member in conversation, with the aim of pushing him or her to a more ‘suitable’ way of acting and of representing their aging.

3.2.4. Distanced, non-personal relationships

The repertoire of references for the performance of youth and aging of someone in contemporary Latvia was not only determined by their relationships with a partner or spouse and their nuclear or extended family members, but also by their ability to work, to be useful to society, and to contribute to the wider community. Davide Torsello argues that “post-socialist transformation, encompassing overall change, has strongly highlighted the dichotomy between novelty and tradition” (2005, 197). He recalls that capitalist economics works as a kind of shock therapy, which can be mitigated by kinship and community ties. Torsello recognizes that investment in social and personal networks can function as a personal strategy to help a person adapt to a new situation.

Work life is an arena where the social and the personal closely overlap. Informants explained that, similarly to taking on the role of parent, active involvement in work not only provided group membership, which was associated with youth, but also intensively activated the physical and mental resources of a person, which were important for prolonging youth. The ability to take responsibility, a reference to youth, was also related to occupation. After retirement, a person was commonly described as old. In this context, the continuation of an active work life is a way to retain the status of adult without becoming elderly.

Informants perceived young people as being actively involved in a wider range of relationships. Retirement was described by informants as a factor that narrowed one’s circle of relationships, switching one’s focus to family issues and allowing one to remain active within the personal network. One of the strategies used to avoid the transition into old age after leaving the labor market was to redefine one’s position from that of being an (economically) active person to being a support person for the family (and in many cases the work load does not change). Aivita Putniņa posits that family is the primary responsibility and the main point of identification for women in Latvia (2006, 71). Even when work life sets the structure for a woman’s daily activities, she identifies herself primarily with her family. The interview data allow us to conclude that, after retirement, women in Latvia often switched the focus of their activity to care and support of their children, grandchildren, and other relatives as a strategy for remaining “young enough to be useful.” This might be also explained by the lack of tradition in talking about the involvement of men in caring practices. Even their input could be significant, and also through the stereotypical view that men should not be as involved in the practice of care as women (Putniņa 2006, 65). However, statistical reports (Veģis 2012; CSP 2012; CSP 2014) show that after retirement men continue to participate in the labor market, working in full time jobs, more often than women do. This goes along with social research data concerning the social identity of a man being closely related with having an active working life and a position in the labor market (Putnina 2005; Putnina 2006, 71).

In interviews informants make connections between the perception of aging performance in the context of wider social relationships and the investment that an elderly person has made (family, property, professional accomplishment) during their life. Interviews show that the level of social contribution that a person has performed during their lifetime is interpreted and evaluated according to this context and reflected in the designations that are assigned to a person upon reaching a certain age. In the context of the family, the experiences of the older family members are often referred to and used as points of reference and/or support in evaluating one’s own point of view about various issues. In such cases, the older person is considered in their role as a relative: mother, father, or grandparent. That person’s experience holds a certain authority and elicits respect. If older people are seen as members of the general public, their contribution is not viewed as unequivocally positive. From the general context of public discussions in Latvia comes the idea that there should be present

economic resources or professional achievements, or accumulated property to grant a member of a general public social respect.

Conversely, an informant in her seventies described the heavy physical labor she did during her years working on a collective farm that led to the deformation of her spine and the joints in her arms – an experience shared by many people living in the Latvian countryside during the Soviet period. The informant remarked that her work and life experience no longer count in present-day Latvia due to the shift toward a capitalist economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The capitalist context that has dominated the following decades emphasizes an economic interpretation of work contribution of the different population age groups as demographers and economists refer to them. Defining a person's lifetime contribution to society in terms of social structure and welfare development has created a situation where seniors are perceived as a burden, not as people that have earned their rest after long years of heavy labor. The new retirement and pension system was skewed heavily toward work experience gained after renewed Latvian independence, thus setting the context for neglecting the working lives of people who were economically active during the Soviet period, as witnessed in the following interview excerpt:

I think that aging is not respected in our society; I think it is perceived as a burden and even a threat, even you think about it that way. When you ask young people, for example, small children, what they think about the elderly, they often answer that the old are superfluous and utterly unreasonable people, and that they never want to be like that. (Female, age 30)

Materials from other interviews confirmed the doubts expressed about whether any respect should be paid to an older person due only to fact they have reached a certain age and are referred to as old. Informants mentioned that evidence must be found that the person has made a valuable contribution to society. Informants remembered being taught that older people must be respected, because they have accumulated experience and one could ask them for advice, but fluctuated in their evaluations of the lifetime contributions that present-day seniors have made. For example, a 28-year-old female argued:

Interviewer: Is aging honorable?

Informant: Yes. My mother always said so, there are some memories... I suppose they have a great deal of experience. Yes, certainly..." (Female, age 28)

When informants expressed the idea that one can/could ask an older person for advice they referred to the "experienced older people" using an indeterminate pronoun "they," "he," or "she." In the context of having a relationship with the state, older people were referred to using the more definite and descriptive discursive category "pensioner." This word was widely used as a particular term for an older person. To unpack the word "pensioner," it appears to have additional connotations such as receiving a small pension, on the brink of survival, marginalized, neglected, and lonely. We suggest that in Latvia the lack of dignity that pensioners experience and the lack of high quality living conditions in retirement reflects the way in which the value of having a job during working age and one's contribution to the well-being of the state in the form of paid taxes could be put to doubt and undermine trust in relationships with the state. A lack of aid from the state also was viewed in interviews as evidence of disrespect. Informants believed that the state maintained the low pension payments, at least partially due to the expense of paying for the needs of the younger generation, again reaffirming the opposition between young and old:

The attitude of the state towards older people is negligent. Also, the situation in the labor market is tense, an upper age limit dominates. It may be that this is due to the economic crisis, but the public does not respect old people. I don't know if it is upbringing or what, but my mother boxed my ears if I did not greet an old man. It was brought up with the understanding that there must be respect for the dignity of elderly people. I think that the younger generation does not have such reverence. (Female, age 54)

Upon leaving the labor market due to low pensions, Latvian "pensioners" land in an unenviable situation, unless they have family members who can support them. Older informants see having a supportive family as crucial for survival, because behind the "pensioner" hides "my granny," a designation that provides an entirely different and more positive understanding of a person's position in old age and the level of empowerment that can be associated with it. Switching from the context of relationship with the state or society in general to the context of personal relationships with family members gives older people the opportunity to use their entire repertoire of references. This allows them to perform aging in a socially-respected and appreciated way.

4. Conclusions

Currently, an economic and demographic perspective mostly dominates the common perception of aging in Latvia. Discourses concerning that part of society which is 'aging' construct an image of a burden accompanied with risks for the economy and life quality of its inhabitants. These kinds of perceptions of aging are often taken at the level of policy planning and implementation, as a healthy and economically-active population is postulated as a part of the state's aim to develop a stronger economy and a higher standard of living. Yet topics of economic activity, health, and quality of life have also dominated in social research concerning aging.

Therefore, in our analysis of interviews we focused on how aging is defined, evaluated, and explained by people themselves. We believe that knowledge of this kind opens up opportunities to discover aging strategies practiced outside the frame of discourses of economy and demography and notice possible inequalities, challenging and problematic issues surrounding the aging experience in Latvia arise. The results of our analysis allow us to conclude that aging in Latvia is performed, explained, and evaluated through references to values and norms of relationships with the self, one's relatives, and the wider community. These different levels or distances of relationships create the context and set the diverse repertoire of references for the construction of the discursive aging categories such as "old," "not so old," "not so young anymore," and for the performance of aging identity. Different relationships also serve as a controlling mechanism of evaluation of the appropriateness of aging performance and thus determine the opportunities for the experience of aging with dignity and respect.

Our analysis highlights that experience and understanding of aging in Latvia is strongly associated with involvement in relationships of different kind and distance. This allow for the detection of gaps which results in disregarding and ignorance of needs emerging in association with aging process at the political and institutional levels brought about by the failure to include these needs in governmental and other regulating documents and implementations when these do not fit into the discourse of economics and administrative or institutional usage-driven discourses of aging.

In a Latvian context, our findings provide a further set of perspectives and challenges, as well as widening the range of people involved when solving the same issues of economic activity, health and quality of life if, as our results suggest, aging is perceived in terms of relationships, for example, of parents growing old with their children and of children with aging parents, rather than if aging is addressed as merely a characteristic of a group of individuals of a certain shared age. If kin relationships are taken into account in respect to aging, it means that not only precise health problem of separate individual gets resolved, but solutions for the organization of working life and care activities of family members are urgently addressed.

Jessica Robbins-Ruszkowski (2014), on the basis of ethnographic fieldwork on aging, personhood, and memory in Wrocław and Poznań, Poland, found that Polish informants actively used references to the socialist past when they talked about the aging experience. Robbins-Ruszkowski also suggested distinguishing the concept of post-socialism as a practical rather than as an analytical category, in order to escape dominant binary frameworks such as East/West or socialism/post-socialism, thus simultaneously appreciating its practical utility as helping to shape people's expectations, hopes and imaginations. Meanwhile our data on aging performance do not show usages of discursive references to the socialist, Soviet past as a dominant element of meaning and identity construction associated with aging experience in Latvia. However, at the governmental level a division between notions of Soviet and post-Soviet still is taken into account. This division in case of the present retirement and pension system is used as an argument to neglect the working lives of people who were economically active during the Soviet period and grew old after the Soviet Union ended to exist. These data allow for the adding of a new aspect to the discussion of differing usages of the concept of post-socialism as a practical category.

Our data show that aging in Latvia is not understood in terms of chronological age, and thus attributed as a characteristic narrowed to a certain, clear cut life period, for example to people aged over 60. An understanding of aging as attributed to the whole lifespan, as everyone is involved in aging, opens up an opportunity to redefine the discursive construct of old age as putting a burden and bringing risks to the successful development of society, existing in contrast to the 'worthy' youth.

Dignity and respect appear to be crucial for an experience of aging and an appropriate aging performance in Latvia. When aging is seen in a context of a wider range of relationships it also suggests a wider range of involvement in activities which can ensure dignity and respect experienced with aging. That means an escape from the situation where respect could be gained only when a person is economically active and thus narrowing respectful living to participation in paid labor and associating retirement with losing this respectful status with assignment of a designation of 'pensioners,' or 'elderly.' Here, activities of caregiving that are mostly performed as unpaid labor within a family could take their place in the social arena and bring additional moral value and sustain dignity. Performed care activities taken into account when the aging experience is interpreted within a set of different relationships not only widen the frames in which respectful aging is defined, but also enhance the switching between discursive categories of age, not sticking to evaluating people as pitiable "pensioners" and/or the elderly. The opportunity to define aging through care activities realized within relationships with oneself, younger and older family members, and/or romantic partners increases the chances of an aging performance being evaluated as appropriate and thus experienced as meaningful.

Local meanings of the concept of "*rūpes*" (care) and "*rūpēties par sevi/ citu*" (to take care of one's self/another), which comes to be associated with crucial moral values that change relationships of different levels, serve as a certain marker of well-being not only in a context of aging and seem promising for further research.

At the level of governance and general social relationships, the stress on economic activity as respectful and the disregard of unpaid care activities performed mostly in the context of family relationships, proposes another point worthy of discussion and further research. The moral values of economic activity and of unpaid caregiving appear as gendered categories affecting the lives of women and men both before and after retirement. An understanding of traditional gender roles in Latvia links caregiving mostly to females and economic provisioning of family with males. Nevertheless both genders are involved in both activities. A more pronounced connection of women with care restrictively affects opportunities for the reconciliation of work, family, and private life. A respectful evaluation of unpaid work for women before retirement, at the same time suggesting a more secure switching to a caregiver's role after retirement, makes input in appropriate aging performance in the context of family relations, if economic activity becomes restricted due to the difficulties finding a job when being retired. For men, the role of family provider, even it brings a respect during an active working life, can lead to a frustrating situation and create risks of disrespectful status of the elderly after retirement. Risks for respectful ageing performance for men stem from impossibility to continue active working life and to take the role of care-giver as seen as incompatible with performance of male gender identity.

Obtaining additional data on sexuality, gender and aging becomes especially interesting when the parallel existence of the ideal of "*novēcot kopā*" ("growing old together") in context of romantic relationships (which is seen as particularly beautiful and explained as an acceptance and overcoming of age-related bodily changes oneself and one's partner) are taken into account.

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