

## RESHAPING ELDERCARE TOWARDS NEW PROFESSIONS

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Received 1 April, 2014  
Accepted 10 October, 2014

doi:10.13165/SD-14-13-2-05

### **Abstract**

*The impacts of global longevity are commonly regarded as a threat to future social policy systems and structure of future welfare organizations. Focusing future needs of older adults, social gerontologists have long since recognized the importance of different types of socially interventional aspects. The methods used in this article are based on a survey of scientific literature on some central topics related to social gerontology. The main object is to discuss how these may be imbedded in rethinking future Swedish eldercare. Challenges and needs of longevity in Sweden have been met with the efforts of reshaping eldercare through new aspects of training and education. The article draws attention to the educational program of elderpedagogy at the University of Malmö. The main goal of elderpedagogy is to comprehend the assets of social capital and social experiences of old adults, in order to reduce social isolation. The scientific soil of elderpedagogy is made of influences from traditional social gerontology as well as social pedagogy. Despite its ambitions and well proven innovative potentials, elderpedagogy faces difficulties in recruiting students. The obstacles are well known in an international context where similar educational programs within social work focusing the social dilemmas of older adults share the fate of having to cope with ageist discursive attitudes towards later life.*

**Keywords:** *elderpedagogy, social gerontology, social work with the elderly, ageist discourses*

## Introduction

Social gerontology has a long history of methods and techniques used in order to reduce the negative impact of social isolation among older adults. The objective of the article is to discuss whether and how the establishing of new professions through new educational programs preparing for work within the eldercare sector may play a crucial role in mitigating social isolation of older adults. An important point of departure in such a venture is the hitherto unexploited field of social experiences and knowledge – social capital – of the ageing populations. Furthermore, the article draws attention to the connections between obstacles and hindrances in the making of educations and professions within gerontological social work.

The article is based on the review of thirty scientific publications within social gerontology or disciplines closely related to it. The topics of these studies are social isolation, social capital, interventional programs as well as education for an eldercare profession, such as elderpedagogy.

The challenges and consequences of global longevity are fairly known. The strain of longevity upon social policies and welfare systems has been commented upon in research focusing on aspects of later life. In a discussion of the conditions of future later life, Dychtwald (1999), for instance, used the word *old-age tsunami* to describe some of the pressure connected to the growing population of people older than 65. What is more, it is seldom considered that the augmentation of the life span involves demographic as well as a cultural changes. The growth of the population of older adults raises questions of cultural, attitude beliefs and images. Changing circumstances have led to complex and multiple intergenerational patterns, sexual habits, learning opportunities, behavior of consumption, housing patterns, labor market relations, etc. The social experience of older adults has become much more heterogenous compared with what has been previously experienced and, as Biggs and Daatland have pointed out, we are witnessing *multiple pathways of ageing* (Daatland and Biggs, 2006, p. 3). As it has been stated in several studies, cultural perceptions of older adults in Europe and the United States tend to be negative. These attitudes have been cast in the mold of age-discriminating discourses imbedded in public life, policy making and social services to older adults, as well as within educational programs (Bodily, 1994; Palmore, 1999; Biggs, 2001, 2006; Adelman, 2009; Cohen *et al.*, 2010). These discourses forecast alarmist scenarios within future eldercare as a part of a view of later life as a state of “misery” (Tornstam, 2011). However, these future calculations, in many ways representing expressions of ageism and misconceptions concerning the living conditions of older adults, should not blur the fact that due to altering social policy circumstances a growing amount of older people in Europe are running the risk of becoming socially marginalized and experiencing social isolation (Walker and Foster, 2006).

### 1. Background

The backdrop of this paper is some ongoing changes within Swedish eldercare. In short, changing circumstances and conditions of Swedish eldercare are gradually

developing new ways of thinking about eldercare work and organizing it. In order to approach changing needs of the elderly in Sweden, demands for new professions within the Swedish social services sector have been claimed as being of vital importance. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare has attracted attention to the need for alternative ways to manage the amounting demands of longevity (SOU, 2008). This has been followed by different local and nationwide authorities, the central topic being the demands for rethinking the professional needs of future eldercare. On one hand, the discussion has focused on the remaking of traditional professions in social and medical care for the elderly. Improving wages and working conditions in general has been believed to be of importance in order to enhance the status of eldercare professions (Nilsson, 2006; Dunér and Ohlin, 2011; Magnússon, 2013). This should be seen against the backdrop of work within the eldercare usually being given low priority. On the other hand, the overall discussion entails a process involving the need to establish new professions based on new ideas of tackling the renewed demands of longevity. Attempts to establish new professions within eldercare, based on untested combinations of scientific approaches, are currently being witnessed. Altogether rethinking eldercare by means of educational efforts has, however, shown limited signs of progress owing to tenacious professional organizations of the eldercare, not to mention persistent negative impacts of ageist attitudes.

## 2. Reducing social isolation

One of the main challenges of future increase in aging population is geared towards promoting social integration of older adults. The background of social gerontology contains a considerable knowledge that represents various ways of preventing social isolation. As stated by Dannefer and Philipson, social gerontology is based on influences from social sciences in the study of *“ageing individuals and ageing populations and the interrelations of each with social forces and social change”* (Dannefer and Philipson, 2009, p. 21). Combining the multiple interdisciplinary approaches, social gerontology focuses on the social reality of later life. Within social gerontology, older adult’s participation in multiple life roles and activities and access to social support in times of need has been related to good health and well-being. Social isolation, and the lack of access to social support and meaningful social relationships, roles and activities, is related to poor health and lower well-being. Ar buckle and de Vries (1995) point out role losses as common reasons for social isolation. Other results indicate living alone, loss of spouse, health problems and poverty as potential causes of social isolation (Moen, 1996; Fischer and Olicker, 1998; Pillemer, 2000; Klinenberg, 2002). Furthermore, lower rates of marriage, high level of divorce and decline in childbirth have been highlighted as conditions that may increase the risk for social seclusion (Easterlin, 1987; Easterlin *et al.*, 1990). Thus, a lot is known about the negative causes of social isolation and research results, which identify a substantial amount of older adults constituting risk groups who are likely to suffer serious consequences. Briefly summarizing the characteristics of successful methods aiming at social interventions in gerontological social work, it is shown that they are assigned to focus on groups rather than individuals suffering health problems, social

isolation or discrimination (Cedersund, 2013; Magnússon, 2013a, 2013b). Preventive interventions seem less common. Furthermore, in the discussions of social interventions within social gerontology little or no attention seems to have been rendered to the resources of social capital of older adults.

### 3. Social capital of later life

The impact of increasing longevity on the labor market is a topic that is frequently commented upon in research. In focusing later life and labor-market issues, Kolbacher and Herstadt (2008) discussed the need of business corporations to attract older workers. They argued that recognition of the potentials of the social capital of older workers would be to acknowledge social relations that make room for activities being adaptive to intergenerational needs, and in the long run leading to sustainable social engagement of older adults. As Biggs (2005) argued, the social capital contained within older populations is a considerable resource that lies largely unused and, as such, exemplifies a societal failure to adapt to changing circumstances. As it has been pointed out in research, older adult's lack of access to meaningful social capital resources is a considerable threat to successful ageing (Smith *et al.*, 2002; Cannuscio *et al.*, 2003; Schwadel and Stout, 2012). Social capital resources of older adults have obviously not been present within the debate on health and social services. But still, the concept has potential advantages. It points at the social resources available to individuals and groups of older adults. The concept is naturally equally complex as that of any other groups within the society (Cannuscio *et al.*, 2003). However, the use of the concept of social capital may facilitate the discussion of the inclusion of older adults in the society, which is a central focus within social gerontology, as it has been seen. Biggs (2005) argued that the recognition of older adults' accumulated knowledge, continued learning ability and social capital in general should not only be recognized, but more effectively adapted to the outspoken needs and demands of older adults.

### 4. Elderpedagogy

The interest in later life and learning has attracted a considerable amount of attention and gradually evolved towards a field of educational gerontology (Kern, 2010; Findsen and Formosa, 2011). Lately, several Scandinavian researchers have explored the connections between later life and social pedagogy (Frstrup, 2010; Cedersund, 2013; Åhnby, Svensson and Henning, 2013). In the Nordic countries, we are presently witnessing the development of innovating ways of social work with older adults. This should be seen against the background of changing organizational principles and changing needs and demands following longevity, as it was shown earlier. In 2003, the educational program of elderpedagogy was founded at the University of Malmö. The scientific context of elderpedagogy is on the borderline of social work, pedagogy and social care (Nilsson, 2006; Krogh-Hansen, 2002; Magnússon, 2013a, 2013b; Hallstedt, Högström and Nilsson, 2013). Among others, the traits of elderpedagogy entail the

exploration of the fields of lifelong learning and recognition of the social capital of an ageing population. Elderpedagogy constitutes an example of how care and social services can establish adaptive interventional methods that have proven to be effective. By connecting traditional ways of social work with older adults and new ways of placing these in a world of changing conditions for longevity, educational programs, such as elderpedagogy, play an important role in creating sustainable intergenerational relations. The methods of elderpedagogy are to a large extent based on tried and tested interventional methods inherent in social gerontology as well as social pedagogy, such as future workshops (Åhnby and Henning, 2009) and local peer group activities based on the ideas of empowerment (Nyqvist and Cech, 2010). Hence, the establishing of elderpedagogy illuminates a process of creating new ways to work with elderly. These ambitions are based on the acknowledgement of the changing needs and demands following longevity. The main goals of elderpedagogy are preemptive social interventional forms of social work *together* with older persons and their networks in order to offer socially sustainable solutions for elderly adults. This means not only focusing on the elderly themselves, but highlighting social and cultural stereotypes and misconceptions, as well. A central task for an elderpedagogue involves exploring the social experiences of older adults. This does not so much entail the mapping of social capital of older adults as it means making sense of it in different levels of society, among older adults themselves as well as in social work practices in general. In the long run, this means introducing new ethics within social work with older adults. The conclusion is that the multidisciplinary roots of elderpedagogy provide a breeding ground for innovative ways of social work with the elderly, targeting the mitigation of social isolation and exclusion connected to later life.

## 5. Social work with the elderly and the ageist discourse

Throughout the ten years of elderpedagogic existence in Malmo, some profound difficulties have revealed. To begin with, the establishment of new professions does not come easy. Secondly, myths, stereotypes and discrimination of old adults have deep roots in the society as ageist discourses, described earlier. This is proven by the fact that it is persistently hard to attract students to the program. Social work with the elderly is simply not attractive, as the experiences from different countries demonstrate (Sharlach *et al.*, 2000; Snyder *et al.*, 2008; Weiss, 2005). Thus, these problems relate to pessimism about ageing societies, oddly enough, prevalent in social work (Sharlach *et al.*, 2000; Snyder *et al.*, 2008; Weiss, 2005). In order to deconstruct stereotypes and misconceptions in social work, some American researchers have used focus groups consisting of older adults and social work students. The results showed that after the sessions the students not only had reconsidered negative attitudes about older adults, but they had become more interested in gerontological social work (Cohen *et al.*, 2010). As it has been shown by Adelman (2009), educational systems have a substantially important part to play in bridging generational gaps and provide sustainable opportunities for the integration of older adults in the society.

## Conclusions

The impacts of a rapidly growing adult population throughout the world have called for a social political as well as scholarly discussion of sustainable solutions that mitigates social isolation of the elderly. The research questions posed in the article have focused on the establishment of new ways of thinking and organizing eldercare professions and practices. By reviewing 30 articles within the field of social gerontology, the author has highlighted a number of interventional methods and programs rooted in the development of social gerontology and social pedagogy. The reviews indicate that interventional programs often lack streaks of preventive measures. Furthermore, interventional programs fail to take into account the social experiences and social capital of the elderly. However, a combination of programs ensuring preventive measures as well as taking into consideration later life social capital may provide socially innovative patterns within social work with the elderly. One such example is the Swedish educational program of elderpedagogy. As discussed in the article, this program has successfully incorporated streaks of traditional social gerontology and social pedagogy in new directions of dealing with some of the social dilemmas of later life, such as social isolations and sufferings of ageist attitudes and conceptions.

Against that backdrop, a reasonable suggestion is that educational programs, such as elderpedagogy, are of considerable value in comprehending the assets of social capital of old adults and alleviating social isolation of older adults. In general, educations focusing on work with the elderly have the potential to develop new ways of coping with negative consequences of stereotypes and pessimistic attitudes towards an ageing population. However, different types of educational programs in gerontological social work have to deal with serious drawbacks. Social work with the elderly does not attract a large number of students, as the eldercare sector as a whole is not a matter of priority when students choose professions. This drawback has proven to be the case in Malmo, as in a number of comparable educational programs elsewhere. The causes of the reluctance towards social work with the elderly should be discussed against the background of prevalent discourses in society that describe later life in terms of negative misconceptions and ageist stereotypes.

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## LINK NAUJŲ VYRESNIO AMŽIAUS ŽMONIŲ PRIEŽIŪROS PROFESIJŲ

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### **Santrauka**

*Sparčiai augantis vyresnio amžiaus žmonių skaičius visame pasaulyje vis dažniau tampa socialinės politikos ir mokslinio diskurso objektu, ieškant sprendimų, kaip mažinti vyresnio amžiaus žmonių socialinę atskirtį. Straipsnyje keliami tyrimo klausimai siejami su inovacijų paieška teikiant socialines paslaugas vyresnio amžiaus žmonėms. Trisdešimties mokslinės periodikos publikacijų, analizuojančių socialinės gerontologijos problemas, analizė leido išryškinti keletą paplitusių intervencijos metodų ir programų, taikomų socialinės gerontologijos ir socialinės pedagogikos srityse. Minėtų publikacijų analizė taip pat leido įsitikinti, jog intervencijos programose retai skiriama dėmesio prevencinėms priemonėms. Be to, intervencinės programos, skirtos vyresnio amžiaus žmonių gerovės užtikrinimui, per menkai atsižvelgia į jų per ilgą gyvenimą sukauptą socialinę patirtį*



ir socialinį kapitalą. Norint sukurti inovatyvius socialinio darbo su vyresnio amžiaus žmonėmis metodus kaip tik būtina užtikrinti, kad kuriant vyresnio amžiaus žmonėms skirtas prevencines programas būtų atsižvelgta į jų sukauptą socialinį kapitalą antroje gyvenimo pusėje. Vienas iš tokių pavyzdžių yra Švedijos edukacinė programa, skirta vyresnio amžiaus žmonėms, vadinama elderpedagogy (verčiant lietuviškai – vyresnio amžiaus žmonių pedagogika). Kaip atskleidžiama straipsnyje, šioje programoje buvo sėkmingai integruotos tradicinės socialinės gerontologijos ir socialinės pedagogikos išvalgos, kurios buvo nukreiptos sprendžiant socialines dilemas, pasitaikančias antroje gyvenimo pusėje, tokias kaip socialinė izoliacija ir nepalankus požiūris į vyresnio amžiaus žmones. Šiame kontekste siūloma inovatyvi edukacinė programa, konkrečiai elderpedagogy, kuri yra vertinga dėl to, kad integruoja vyresnio amžiaus suaugusiųjų sukauptą socialinį kapitalą ir mažina jų socialinę izoliaciją. Edukacinės programos, skirtos darbu su vyresnio amžiaus žmonėmis, turi potencialą plėtoti naujus būdus, mažinančius vyresnio amžiaus žmonių stereotipizaciją ir pesimistinių požiūrį į gyventojų senėjimo procesą. Vis dėlto, reikia pripažinti, kad įvairios edukacinės programos, praktikuojamos gerontologinio socialinio darbo bare, turi esminių trūkumų. Socialinis darbas su vyresnio amžiaus žmonėmis daugeliui studentų nėra patrauklus, taip pat kaip ir visas vyresnio amžiaus žmonių globos ir priežiūros sektorius nėra prioritetas studentams renkantis profesijas. Tai atskleidė ir Malmės atvejis, kaip ir daugybė panašių studijų programų vykdymo patirtys kitose šalyse. Dominuojančio socialinio diskurso kontekste, kuris vaizduoja antrąją gyvenimo pusę neigiamų nusistatymų ir amžiaus stereotipų sąvokomis, būtina ištirti priežastis, dėl kurių jauni žmonės vengia rinktis socialinį darbą su vyresnio amžiaus žmonėmis.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** vyresnio amžiaus žmonių pedagogika, socialinė gerontologija, socialinis darbas su vyresnio amžiaus žmonėmis, nepalankus požiūris į vyresnio amžiaus žmones.

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