

The Significance of Individual Agency in the Life-Course Narratives of Older German Men¹

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Abstract

Older age robs men of a meaningful role and of feeling an all-encompassing agency which reduces their chances for patriarchal dominance. Consequently, older age not only seriously impedes men's claims for patriarchal privileges and hegemonic status but also challenges their sense of self. Within this context a decline in physical and mental abilities and illnesses such as the Alzheimer's disease or dementia must be viewed as one, if not the most, serious threat to the development of a positive older male identity since age-related illnesses often lead to a marked loss of mental and/or physical control – the attribute male domination is predominately dependent on. Gaining a better understanding of how men, who used to belong to the hegemonic class of men, handle the natural decrease in agency and the omnipresent danger of declining health and subsequent loss of control in older age was at the core of the interviews I conducted with four older German men. I believe that the insights gained in these interviews could support a better understanding of both the shame and guilt men seem to experience particularly strongly when losing personal autonomy and the strategies they use to alleviate and neutralize hegemonic socio-cultural narratives of disability, deficiencies and stigma linked to older age.

Keywords: ageing, masculinity, decline, neoliberalism, socio-cultural narratives, life-course, identity, patriarchy, control

¹ This article is based on Anonymous (2020).