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Monika Wilińska\*

## WELFARE SPACES OF (NON)AGEING – A DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE

The aim of this paper is to articulate an approach for discursive research on welfare cultures of ageing that responds to the challenges facing contemporary research on old age and ageism. It is based on the assumption that to understand conditions under which people are ageing in different countries, various societal levels and actors need to be examined and their roles in setting the old age agenda need to be accounted for. Additionally, this paper reflects upon the welfare spaces of ageing in Poland, spaces where people in Poland grow old and/or are allowed to do so. As a result, this paper indicates the lack of spaces of ageing in the welfare context in Poland. People are expected not to grow old; old age remains a misunderstood phenomenon. Contrary to the excessive knowledge *against* old age, there is considerable lack of knowledge *for* old age. Therefore, spaces of non-ageing are invoked in order to elaborate on these processes. Spaces of non-ageing identify various societal domains and show what needs to be done in order not to grow old. Spaces of non-ageing repudiate the idea of old age as something terrifying and, on many occasions, immoral.

Key words: spaces of (non-)ageing, old age, discourse, welfare culture

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Welfare culture is a relatively new concept in the field of social policy research. The idea stems from attempts to incorporate a cultural aspect into social policy studies and stress the lived implications of the welfare state (see: Chamberlayne 1999; Clarke 2004; Lockhart 2001; Oorschot 2007; Pfau-Effinger 2005). Proponents of such perspectives point to the values, ideals (Pfau-Effinger 2005), assumptions and emotions (Freeman and Rustin 1999) that pervade the welfare-state space and contribute to social policy change (Jo 2011). Consequently, the welfare state is assigned a new meaning that accentuates its contested, constructed and contradictory nature (Clarke 2004). The role of the welfare state is seen as exceeding frames of welfare provision, and its active function in shaping and “producing people” (ibid.) is acknowledged. Therefore, the welfare state ceases to be “an abstract concept, it translates into, or is transfigured by, the experience of real actors in concrete situations” (Russell and Edgar 1998: 6). Each welfare state favours some groups of people and forms of behaviour. Simultaneously, certain groups of people are less privileged and

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their status and positions are considered as secondary. The key to understanding the welfare state, within this perspective, lies in explaining the moral and ideological underpinnings of social policy and the perspectives of people who embody particular welfare cultures and take part in the processes of change.

In this paper, I take the example of welfare culture of ageing in Poland. There seem to be many unknowns regarding the shape of social policy in Poland, and attempts at naming the welfare-state model in Poland face many difficulties. Researchers agree on the unique and undefined character of the welfare state in Poland (see: Golinowska 2009; Steinhilber 2006). However, attitudes towards this condition differ: whereas some use a disease metaphor to comment on it (see, for example Golinowska 2009), others present a more optimistic view and allude to a “work in progress” perspective (see Inglot 2008). Social policy in Poland mainly takes the shape of reactive policies (Golinowska 2009) that deepen social inequalities among various groups rather than counteract them (Krzyszowski 2011). In comparison with other post-socialist states of the region, Poland seems to be the least universal when it comes to social assistance and welfare provisions (Orenstein and Haas 2002). The country is more oriented towards residualist and familial welfare models: welfare benefits are means-tested, and the family is the main unit of policy (Steinhilber 2006). Social services are not fully developed and levels of social transfers are very low (Mikołajczyk-Lerman 2011). Social exclusion remains the prime issue of concern (Golinowska 2009), and the so-called the 3B<sup>1</sup> syndrome of poverty, unemployment and homelessness (Kawula 2002) pervades social reality in Poland.

In the public discourse about the effects of post-1989 transformations, the categories of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the change from a communist to capitalist market economy have often been evoked. Because this transformation entailed changes to lifestyles and values, unbeknownst to the socialist agenda, many social groups found themselves without proper support and became disoriented. Old people are regarded as one such group. The experience of old people is sometimes referred to as a type of identity crisis caused by the fall of communism; old people entered a new reality, which, in general terms, worsened their situation (Synak 2003). Old age became a discriminatory factor that causes marginalization, social exclusion and the disappearance from social life (Halik 2002; Trafiałek 2003). The lifestyles of old people tend to be confined to a private sphere as their existence becomes ‘domesticated’ (Trafiałek 2003).

The aim of this paper is to articulate an approach for discursive research on welfare cultures of ageing that responds to the challenges facing contemporary research on old age and ageism. It is based on the assumption that to understand conditions under which people are ageing in different countries, various societal levels and actors need to be examined and their roles in setting the old age agenda need to be accounted for. Additionally, this paper reflects upon the welfare spaces of ageing in Poland, spaces where people in Poland grow old and/or are allowed to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> In Polish: bieda, bezrobocie, bezdomność.

## 2. DISCOURSE AND OLD AGE

This article takes as its starting point the idea that old age is a socially constructed phenomenon. This perspective does not deny the biological processes in our bodies that accompany ageing. On the contrary, it shows how changes in our bodies become socially relevant. The aged body becomes the object of various practices that aim at putting it in the right, socially acceptable place (Green 1993; Hazan 1994; Katz 1996; Vincent 2006). This perspective accentuates the processes of assigning different meaning, roles and positions to people based on their age. In this view, age becomes a determinant of one's societal situation that is grounded in the established orders, structures and codes of age (e.g. Calasanti 2007; Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Krekula 2009). Consequently, our lives are stirred by age ideology, according to which one's age is informative of their identity (Gullette 2004). In other words, we are what our birth certificate says. Moreover, old age has become one of the main welfare categories. Old age is often stigmatized and problematized in contemporary welfare states due to the process of welfarization. This concept stresses the process of the social degradation of old people, whose lives are seen through the perspective of a social problem (Thompson 2005).

According to Howarth (2000), the main thrust of discourse theory is that all objects and actions are given meaning, and this meaning is context-dependent. Discourses change as times and spaces change. For instance, the discourse on old age has been changing, and its different meanings have been produced across times and can be found in different places. Therefore, no social phenomenon is ever complete in terms of meaning it has; hence, apart from being context-dependent, meaning is also open (Jørgensen and Phillips 2010[2002]). What we know about old age and how we feel about old age is bounded by the era we live in and the spaces we inhabit.

Discourse is understood as a symbolic system and social order (Howarth 2000) that is composed of "meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects" (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 3–4). Everything we do has some meaning that is relevant to our way of living, yet this meaning changes. In other words, "discourses have implications for what we can do and what we should do" (Burr 2007[1995]: 75), and whom we can become (Foucault 2007[1972]). Discourse, hence, is not coterminous with a social practice; it is created as a consequence of various practices (Andersen 2003). For example, the discourse of age discrimination is created at the axes of many different practices, such as the use of discriminatory language, the production of anti-ageing face creams, and the building of age-segregated housing, to mention just a few examples. These are ready-to-go practices that show what to do to fit in and to be included. In addition, institutions and social relations take part in (re) producing certain discourses and are shaped by them.

Discourses embody rules, principles, and values that, at a particular point in time and in a particular place, are crucial for the construction of social reality. These aspects of discourses are considered as normal, natural and standard. Take the example of discourse of ageism that associates old age with the process of decline, misery and disease, and constructs ageing as worthless and hazardous. Consequently, people tend to fear ageing and engage in various activities to stave off its appearance. The concept of discourse allows us to understand, for

example, not only why people spend money on anti-ageing treatments but also why elder abuse has been presented as less dangerous than other forms of abuse. The discourse of ageism produces a divide between old-bad and young-good, and affects the ways in which old people and young people interact. It also explains the attempts to build segregated living areas for old people, and it sheds new light on active and positive ageing policies. These examples also highlight that discourses have material consequences and affect even the smallest choices people make on daily bases.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To examine the welfare culture of ageing in Poland, I conducted four studies<sup>2</sup>, in which I used four different methods of data analysis (see Figure 1). Although I used different methods of data analysis in my studies, language received the most attention in all of them. The concept of discourse indicates a variety of social practices that impart meaning in our lives, and language is one of them. Although language may not be the most important practice, its vast role in constructing the social reality cannot be denied. We learn to know and feel the world through the language; thus, studying language is essential for understanding the social world (Burr 2007[1995]; Pascale 2007; Smith 2005). The four methodological approaches: attitudinal positioning, motive analysis, narrative analysis and nexus analysis present different aspects of language and its presence in social life, yet all of them agree that language is not a pure reflection of the world.

The main premise of discourse theories is that discourses organise our lives. However, individuals are not doomed to be powerless and they can make choices. In the light of this, a focus on analysis of discourses and discourse analysis is recommended (Bacchi 2005). While the former identifies discourses, the latter acknowledges things that can be done within given discourses. I find this differentiation very helpful because it does not present different approaches as incoherent but as complementary ways of looking at the same phenomenon.

**Figure 1**

Welfare culture of ageing – summary of a research strategy

Welfare culture of ageing			
	aim	data	method
Study 1	to examine attitudes towards old age and old people, and critically reflect on them with the reference to ageism	121 articles from four major weekly news magazines in Poland: “Newsweek”, “Wprost”, “Polityka”, “Przegląd”	attitudinal positioning (affect, judgement, appreciation)

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on a PhD thesis: Wilińska, Monika (2012) *Spaces of (non)ageing: a discursive study of inequalities we live by*. Doctoral Thesis: Dissertation Series No 24; School of Health Sciences, Jönköping University. A detailed description of methods and theories used in different studies can be found by referencing to each of them, see notes 4–5 and 8–9.

Study 2	to examine motives of ageing policies	two social policy documents: one from Poland, and one from Sweden	motive analysis (acts, agents, agency, purpose, scene)
Study 3	to examine stories of old age told by the University of the Third Age (U3A)	interviews, written narratives, U3A publications and documents	discourse-oriented narrative analysis
Study 4	to examine the process of old age identity construction within a setting of social welfare work	interviews, videos, field visits, organizational publications and documents	nexus analysis (social action: historical body, interactional order, discourses in place)

Old age is a category very much related to the contemporary welfare state discourse. Through focusing my attention on social policy, media, a non-governmental organization and the U3A, I aimed at describing some of the welfare state scenes where old age was given its meaning. I decided to look at media first because I saw them as an important ingredient, or rather as the co-producer of the welfare culture. Not only do media texts reflect the reality they purport to describe, but they actively construct it as well. While studying media, I simultaneously observed social policy texts to understand developments at the level of the immediate organisation of welfare for old people. From there, my attention was drawn to two different types of welfare organisations, a non-governmental organization and the U3A. These two organisations presented themselves as having a lot to say about old age and the welfare of old people, and I decided to listen to them. I looked at each organisation as an individual actor, and as a collection of individual people, places and times. Thanks to that, I describe common sense knowledge about old age, the type of knowledge that appears to us as natural and obvious and is reproduced through a variety of social practices (Pascale 2007).

#### 4. FOUR FACES OF WELFARE CULTURE OR ONE FACE AND ITS FOUR SIDES?

##### 4.1. MEDIA FACE<sup>3</sup>

The discourse in news magazines appears to both reflect and create attitudes towards old people, which, in turn, has implications for ageing policy. Media can be seen both an important element of social reality construction and a powerful actor that affects our thinking about the world. However, the media do not exist above our social reality; the former is part of the latter, so the messages the media display are part of our social reality construction. Such constructions not only make us think in certain ways but also tend to influence

<sup>3</sup> Wilińska, Monika and Elisabet Cedersund. 2010. "Classic Ageism" or "Brutal Economy"? – Old Age and Older People in the Polish Media, "Journal of Aging Studies" 4: 335–343.

our feelings, and ultimately, our actions. The method of attitudinal positioning that I applied in this study allowed me to inquire into the ways in which the media evoked and provoked certain attitudes toward old age and old people.

I selected four large Polish weekly opinion newsmagazines and analysed articles that appeared in the 2004–2007 period. Newsmagazines that were selected for the purpose of this study had various political affiliations, ranging from left- to right-wing ideologies. The first finding of the study was that, in spite of these differences, attitudes expressed towards old age and old people were similar. The type of subjects and main images presented in those four newsmagazines were alike. The overall picture was similar in terms of negative and discriminatory attitudes. It seemed that the topic of old age was not pleasant; on the contrary, emotions such as fear, disgust and anxiety underpinned many of the analysed texts.

There were three main areas in which old people and ageing were discussed: family, market and society. These spheres were distinguished on the basis of main referents used to talk about old people and old age. Consequently, grandparents, pensioners and older people were discussed. In this material, very strict and one-dimensional subject positions were produced: e.g. a grandparent is the one who takes care of grandchildren; s/he does not have any history, interests, or friends. In cases when one category was moved to a non-original sphere, for instance, a grandmother to the sphere of society, such shifts provoked negative attitudes. While in the sphere of family a grandmother was loved and admired, in the societal sphere that was not the case. “Grandmother” was used there as a judgmental statement, reminding everyone that the character/person in question is out of her space; moreover, that this space is highly inappropriate for her.

Another aspect of the analysed media material is the fact that biological age was not discussed. The age of old people was not a topic of discussion because everyone knew who old people were and, more importantly, how they were. This observation shows deeply rooted assumptions that are key to understanding common sense knowledge which is seldom questioned (Pascale 2007). There were two exceptions to this observation: people in their 40s who decided to have a child, and people in their 50s who decided to retire. While the former group was portrayed as far too old for parenting; the latter was presented as far too young to stop working. What united these examples was very ‘loud’ emotional and judgmental language. Both groups were clearly condemned, and their actions were described as egoistic.

Old people were presented as valuable and admirable when they could fully devote their lives to helping and caring for grandchildren and/or when they could consume and contribute to the national economy through their occupational activity. In the study, I refer to these two processes as the familisation and marketization of old age respectively. Old people are presented with two choices: life for the family or life for the market. In both scenarios, great responsibility is put on their shoulders. The processes of familisation and marketization of old age are accompanied by the process of individuation of old age. If a person fails to meet these standards, it is her own fault: s/he is the one to blame. The standard presented in these magazines is unanimous: young worker, preferably, young male worker.

#### 4.2. SOCIAL POLICY FACE<sup>4</sup>

This study was based on two policy proposals, one from Poland<sup>5</sup> and one from Sweden<sup>6</sup>. The main aim was to show ways of making old age a social policy problem. The discourse analysis applied in this study followed the key principles of motive analysis. Each policy proposal presents a vision of reality that gives bases for various actions, which in turn, has organisational and institutional consequences. To study motives of such policy proposals is to attend to *agents* who are seen as the key players, *acts* that are seen as necessary, *agency* as envisaged ways of pursuing various acts, *purposes* that exemplify goals of such acts, and *scenes* that contain all these elements.

The main findings of this study indicate that neither document was primarily concerned about old people and their well-being. People and their lives were secondary, if at all, to the main focus of the analysed policy proposals. Ageing was feared in those documents, and imagined consequences of the population ageing were attenuated. There were two main assumptions about old age and old people that could be found in the analysed documents: old age was bad, and old people were a problem. In Poland, this negativity was related to lack of labour activity; in Sweden, to lack of health. In both cases, these two conditions were presented as self-evident and natural to old age. Social policies in both countries, based on negative assumptions about old age, were creating material conditions for people by introducing organisational and institutional changes. As shown in the study, economy played a key role in such reasoning, though differently in each country. In Poland, costs of supporting the labour inactive people were of a main concern; while in Sweden, costs of caring for the sick were put forward.

This study offers an insight into discursive space of old age in Poland and Sweden. It draws attention to discourses that shape social policy and are reinforced by it. It brings to the forefront two main categories that were seen as unproblematic and natural to old age in both countries. In Poland, a division of a population into productive and post-productive groups was presented as the natural way of thinking. A person's value is contingent upon their input to the market economy; in such situations, people who do not work constitute a problem. Old people, presented as naturally weak, are an example of the unfortunate ones. In Sweden, the main value at stake was health; therefore, those who are sick were seen as the problem. The linkage between illness and old age was, again, presented as natural. Old people were a burden because they required help and support. These two cases show the process of enacting a precautionary principle in social policy that often leads to reductionist and simplistic perspectives that focus on only one aspect of a given phenomenon.

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<sup>4</sup> Wilińska, Monika and Elisabet Cedersund. 2011. *Stay Healthy, Be Active and Work! – Motive Analysis of Policy Proposals on Old Age*, "Language, Discourse & Society" 1: 54–78.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Social Policy. 2005. *Strategia Polityki Społecznej na lata 2007–2013* [Strategy of Social Policy for 2007–2013], <http://www.mpips.gov.pl/index.php?gid=486> [2009–03–03].

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. 2006. *Nationell utvecklingsplan för vård och omsorg om äldre*. Proposition 2005/06:115 [National development plan of care and welfare for elderly], Stockholm: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs], <http://www.riksdagen.se/webbnav/?nid=37&dokid=GT03115> [2009–03–05].

This study draws attention to several features of policy-making processes that also have consequences for the way in which old age is problematised. It displays different styles of thinking about a country's population and the state's role. In Poland, a great deal of the arguments revolve around issues of preventing people from being a problem. Work and other types of pro-social activities are presented as the remedy for everything. Indirectly, it is said that you live as long as you are contributing. There is no place for help, compassion and support, if needed. Predominately, the document focused on things that people should and could do, rather on things that the state may offer. In Sweden, the opposite is the case. It seems to be inevitable that old people become a problem; hence, the main arguments revolve around possible ways of dealing with it. Here, the state is presented as the main agent, where agency is often equated with bureaucracy. Old people are portrayed as being a problem, and their main task is to wait and accept all forms of help, care and support that the state has to offer.

#### 4.3. THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE FACE<sup>7</sup>

The study of media and social policy discourse on old age in Poland gave a rather pessimistic view. It seemed that there was no place for old age in this country. Therefore, my attention was drawn to the University of the Third Age (U3A), which claimed to have found the right place for old people. The main aim of this study was to find out about the role and position of the U3A in the social space of ageism. In 2008, I initiated contact with the U3A; in Spring 2009, I conducted a field study during which I interviewed board members of the U3A and collected written narratives from other students of the U3A. Additionally, I gathered various publications prepared by and about the U3A, such as newspaper articles, annual bulletins and leaflets.

The results of this study indicate that rather than resisting ageist discourses, the U3A simply rejects the idea of old age. The U3A characterises its members as exceptional people who have nothing in common with old people outside of the U3A. The U3A draws a very clear line between its members and the rest of society. The U3A members tend to refer to themselves proudly as 'we' and contrast this with people outside the organisation who are simply old. Their common-sense knowledge tells them that the negative images of old age and old people refer to them, that although no one mentions one's age, this is what is meant. One of the main criteria for being old is not working. The U3A members have reached the retirement age or are younger and unemployed.

The idea of old age and old people appears as scary and unacceptable. The reality of old age is maintained by both the fear of old age and by the longing for youth. Members of the U3A want to forget their age; they want to get back to yesterday. They see old age in media, they observe the making of old age in social policy, and they reject the reality they see. However, instead of trying to see what is behind negative images of old age, they spend a great deal of effort on separating themselves from others, especially those of the same age. 'Those old people' become a reality that they want to avoid at all costs. The U3A and its

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<sup>7</sup> Wilińska, Monika. 2012. *Is There a Place for an Ageing Subject? Stories of Ageing at the University of the Third Age in Poland*, "Sociology" 2: 290–305.

members are, therefore, actively taking part in constructing old age as a negative phenomenon. Their role is to act against it; they always see it coming, and they defend themselves against old age. This role is enacted against the backdrop of images of old age as a personal risk that, in the advanced economy, simply excludes one from social life.

Paradoxically, although the negative image of old age is presented as a main reason explaining why the U3A is needed, it also thrives well thanks to the U3A. The main category used at the U3A is a category of third age: age that is not old. Discourse of anti-ageing is vital to the third age construction (Gilleard and Higgs 2002, 2007). Third age is presented as positive, and the U3A members enjoy talking about themselves in these terms. It helps them to distance themselves from old age that, as they know and feel, refers to them as well. However, the category of third age is not only constructed against old age; there are several aspects of social reality that can be seen in it. The processes of consumption and individuation pervade the ideal of third age (Gilleard and Higgs 2007). The U3A is affected by the power of choice ideology that gives individuals the main responsibility for their own life project. According to this vision of reality, everything is conditioned upon one's own choices; there are no structural elements that may influence individual lives. This scenario is very appealing to the U3A members: it makes them feel better about themselves and convinces them that it is possible to master one's own life. People who do not belong to the U3A are, as a result, seen as lazy and narrow-minded.

The U3A actively reproduces negative images of old age, and it positions itself as an actor that can successfully counteract this type of threat. This position is also gendered. The majority of the U3A members are women, and many of the activities organised within the U3A frame are addressed to women. Being involved in multiple projects, performing volunteer work, and being engaged and committed are qualities that are constructed as female. These are also the qualities that are presented as favourable at the U3A. Female members of the U3A belong to the natural, normal course of life; male members are always exceptions to the general rule. When old men lose their jobs, they lose their social value; when old women lose their jobs, they simply have more time for engaging in other types of activities. The reality of old age is also deeply intertwined with the reality of gender.

#### 4.4. THE NGO FACE<sup>8</sup>

In the fourth study, I decided to focus more closely on concrete social welfare practices addressed to old people. The main objective of this study was to examine the process of old age identity construction within a setting of social welfare work with old people. I sought to identify social welfare practices that construct and enforce certain old age identities. I decided to use the term 'old age identity' to stress the socially constructed nature of this concept and to note its intrinsic instability, flexibility and multiplicity.

The empirical material analysed in this article comes from a study of a non-governmental organisation in Poland. The method of analysis was inspired by nexus analysis, which analyses

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<sup>8</sup> Wilińska, Monika and Cecilia Henning. 2011. *Old Age Identity in Social Welfare Practices*, "Qualitative Social Work" 3: 346–363.

social actions through a historical and ethnographic perspective. During the course of study, I wanted to observe concrete actions performed by the organisation to see the interplay of various elements of the situation in which old age was ascribed its meaning. At some point, the organisation with which I corresponded decided to include old age and the welfare of old people as part of its program. My initial question was: why? The contact with the organization lasted for two years (2008–2010), and during that time I collected multimodal data, including the organization's web-page, annual reports, and all documentation and videos related to the project organized for old people in four different communities. I could also interview the staff members, several volunteers and project participants taking part in activities for old people.

The results of this study demonstrate a complex process in which welfare professionals create the identities of preferred clients. The study shows that social welfare practice is often oriented toward imagined client identities that have little to do with real people. In the course of the analysis, I could identify the following practices that organised meaning of old age: expertise, solutions, fitting in, and compliance. Each of these practices had different aims, and each of them drew upon various aspects of social reality. Hence, the results of this study show an intricate matrix of interacting discourses, places and actors, and relations among them.

The organisation began with common-sense knowledge about old age and the type of social problem old age constitutes in Poland. The problem approach to old age was not questioned then; it was simply taken for granted to provide a rationale for the organisation's actions. Old age was a negative phenomenon, old people were sad and miserable, and the organisation identified its own role as a potential solution. Other 'experts' that were invited for debates concerning the problem of old age and old people supported this view of old age. Simultaneously, a research survey was ordered by the organisation to gain an insight into problems of old people. A street-based, quantitative survey was addressed to people who looked old in the eyes of the researchers. The survey was used to confirm the unfortunate situation of old people.

The solution to the problem of old age included many various initiatives taken in cooperation with local authorities. Moreover, the organisation designed a social welfare project that was addressed to old people in four communities. The project was aimed at answering the needs of old people, whom the organisation never met, and to establish an example of good practice that could be easily implemented to old people living in different areas. Within the frame of the project, old people were those between the ages of 50 and 65 who were unemployed and living in impoverished, rural areas. At this moment, the concept of old age identity gained a new meaning.

However, such a construction of old age was surprising to many, shocking to a few, and unacceptable to the majority of the program's addressees, who eventually decided not to take part in the project. Those who participated did so for different reasons; some wanted company, some were 'dragged' by their friends, and some were attracted by the activity discourse promoted by the program. At the end of the 6-month program, participants were encouraged to engage in production of short video-films that would promote the aims and main forms of the program. With these videos, the organisation produced valid evidence showing the relevance and importance of the project.

The story of this project would not be complete without acknowledging its spatial and temporal context and its relationships with different actors occupying the same spaces. First of all, the project designed for old people was a welfare project, in which the professional power of social workers came to the forefront. Evidence-based practice and expert knowledge of objective facts affected the type of expertise and solutions that the organisation provided. Second, the financial aspect constructed a dependency web that caught the organisation between influences of both national and international actors. Third, the prevalent image of old age in Poland affected the type of actions that the organisation proposed. Because old age is equated with labour inactivity in Poland, the discourse of active ageing appealed to the organisation immediately. All actions were directed towards increasing the level of activity of old people. This activity was specifically aimed at proving people's values for the community in which they resided.

This study draws attention to various 'imaginaries of old age' (Gullette 2004) that were put into action to create old age. The reality of these imaginaries was intertwined with other ideas relating to the concept of knowledge, good social-work practice, and community. People who were addressed to join the project were pronounced to be old, and they were offered a solution to their problems of old age.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS: WELFARE SPACES OF (NON) AGEING

The aim of this paper was to outline an approach for discursive research on welfare cultures of ageing that responds to the challenges facing contemporary research on old age and inequalities. By attending to four different welfare-state scenes, I could follow how the concept of old age was used, reproduced, and sustained. Such a research design gave an account of a diversified body of data produced by various collective and individual actors and serving different purposes. As Pascale (2007) states in her study of race, gender, and class, a focus on processes and practices of inequality (re)production entails research that can move freely between broader cultural contexts and local cultures. This approach allows us to look at the same phenomenon from different angles. It is based on an understanding of social policies as reproducing the meaning shared by their context as well as categories and codes invoked to explain it (Schram 2000). Within the welfare context, some topics are discussed, others are not, and the choices of what will be discussed make certain social problems visible (Bacchi 1999, 2009; Schram 2006). The language of these discussions not only reflects the context, but it also actively constitutes the social realm.

When looking at the empirical material that I gathered, I started seeing that ageing, or rather, being old is something that people may or may not be allowed to do. As the number of spaces for people 'of a certain age' is increasing, the spaces of old age seem to shrink. Spaces of (non-)ageing are to be found across various societal domains that show what needs to be done in order not to grow old. Spaces of (non-)ageing repudiate the idea of old age as something terrifying and, on many occasions, immoral.

Spaces of (non-)ageing that I found in my studies were characterised by several features, among which the ideas of activity and utility dominated. In the post-socialist Poland, activity,

particularly labour activity, is of primary importance. The practice of referring to the Polish population in terms of pre-, post- and productive ages in social policy is one indication of this. To have value, people need to produce and contribute. Consequently, the public debates on ageing in Poland tend to push forward the economic perspective that discusses old age in terms of financial distress (see Mucha and Krzyżowski 2010).

The space of (non-)ageing is constructed as public, desirable space. The private sphere, oriented around home and care, is presented as belonging to women (Rukszto 1997). For example, the position of a grandmother is presented in the media discourse as the most preferable role for old women. It situates old women in the home space; in this way, it can be seen as an extension of the established gender order that delegates women to the private sphere. The values of the liberal market economy coexist with so-called 'Polish Catholicism' (Johnson and Robinson 2007; Kramer 2007) to define what is female and male in Poland. The ideal of the Polish Mother is exemplary here; it places sacrifice at the core of the existence of women, who should devote their lives to the family (Hardy et al. 2008) regardless of their age.

Men lose their access to the public sphere when they retire. Retiree is not a gender-free category; in the Polish media discourse, it is a male category. The retiree figure puts forwards the process of ageing, showing that, when people (men) age, they stop working. Retiree, a category belonging to the public sphere, brings the value of the past experience. However, this category indicates that a space of work has been closed, but no other has been opened. Similarly, when presenting old people engaged in cultural activities, old women are called 'anti-grandmas', while old men, 'dinosaurs'. The present prepares one space for old women but it does not offer anything for old men, they simply 'used to be', but are not any more (Wilińska 2010). Old age puts an end to the productive man and makes him fade into oblivion.

At first look, the U3A and the exemplary NGO could be read as an example of extending welfare spaces of old age. However, what became apparent at the U3A was the orientation not towards, but against, or away from, old age. The more the U3A stresses the separation from old age and old people, the more it contributes to maintaining the ageist order in the society. The example of the NGO demonstrates how such an image is used to inform the rationale of proposed welfare programs and projects. As a result, old people are invited to participate in activities that would bring them back into a public space, providing that they will refrain from any other activities that are associated with being old. The public space is opening, but only under certain conditions.

The empirical material, which this study reflects upon, covers the years 2004–2010. Those six years brought many changes not only to the Polish socio-economic situation, but were also filled with many global processes that impinged on the shape of social policies, particularly policies on aging. The results of this study should not therefore be read as an accurate reflection of the current socio-political situation in Poland; moreover, this was not the aim of this research. By applying cultural lenses to the study of the welfare state, it becomes feasible to reach values, norms and ideas that permeate the welfare state. Although culture is a process that is never static, norms and values discerned in this research are results of years of history and tradition, and similarly, to change them, many years will have to pass. Importantly, welfare spaces of ageing are never only about ageing and old age; as shown above, many other discourses play an important role in shaping them. By the same

token, changes in welfare spaces of ageing are and will be dependent on the type of changes occurring within other spheres of social policy, public life and everyday norms that define what a good life and who a good citizen is.

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#### PRZESTRZENIE (NIE)STAROŚCI – PERSPEKTYWA DYSKURSU

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie perspektywy dyskursu do badań nad *welfare culture* w kontekście starości. Praca ta wykazuje, że w celu zrozumienia warunków starzenia się występujących w różnych krajach, niezbędne jest zbadanie różnych poziomów społecznych oraz aktorów życia społecznego, którzy mają wpływ na kształtowanie debat dotyczących starości i osób starszych. Artykuł stanowi także refleksję nad przestrzeniami starości w kontekście polskiej polityki społecznej. Wnioski z tego artykułu wskazują na brak przestrzeni starości w kontekście polskiej polityki społecznej. Starość pozostaje niezrozumianym zjawiskiem społecznym, co wiąże się ze społecznym oczekiwaniem (nie)starości wśród mieszkańców kraju. Podczas gdy wiedza na temat starości jest okrojona, wiedza skierowana przeciwko starości wydaje się obszerna. Artykuł wprowadza pojęcie „przestrzeni (nie)starości” w celu nakreślenia charakteru owego zjawiska. Przestrzenie (nie)starości odnoszą się do różnych przestrzeni życia społecznego i wskazują na szereg praktyk i zachowań, które zarówno na poziomie jednostek, jak i grup prowadzą do przeciwdziałania starości. Przestrzenie (nie)starości odrzucają starość, przedstawiając ją jako budzące strach zjawisko, które często określane jest jako niemoralne i antyspołeczne.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzenie (nie)starości, starość, dyskurs, *welfare culture*