Jens Friebe and Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha

Activities and barriers to education for elderly people

Abstract: Adult education at higher age can play an important role in the preservation of autonomy and in the encouragement of social participation in later life. Hence, from both an individual and societal perspective, it is important to promote the educational activities of the elderly. Active elderly people with positive perceptions of self and ageing maintain their mental and physical fitness levels, participate in community associations and politics, and engage in intergenerational dialogue. Data from a recent study clearly show the interrelationship of individual self-perception and the perception of ageing and point to the relevance of both concepts for learning and participating in educational activities. As people age, they participate less and less in further education. This is due not only to individual learning habits, but also to the lack of learning opportunities in different regions and residential areas. In districts that are primarily comprised of people with low standards of living and low education and/or migration backgrounds, there is a lack of sufficient educational structures, which hinders participation in adult education programs. Qualitative interviews with older adults in different districts show that social environment, social embeddedness, and individual perspectives of one's own learning abilities affect learning possibilities and learning readiness.

Key words: perception of ageing, self-perception, living conditions, social environment, biography

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Introduction

Educational activities during the later stages of life are a significant part of daily living of the elderly. New challenges, useful activities and well-being at an older age require individual activities and the utilization of personal creativity. Research on ageing shows great interindividual difference between the living situations and lifestyles of the elderly. The social dimension of inequality has a particular influence on educational choices. In general, at an older age, issues of everyday life are met by potentials and competencies, which allow for an autonomous and socially participative life. These potentials can be developed and supported by local educational programmes. Unfortunately, many barriers impair educational access for the elderly including exterior barriers, such as suitable educational institutions and programmes for the elderly, and interior barriers, such as a lack of motivation and self-confidence.

This paper describes the educational opportunities and barriers for a group of elderly individuals 65 years or older based on the partial results of the Competencies in Later Life (CiLL) research project. In addition, outcomes of the Education for Elderly (EdAge) study, conducted by the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich and the German Institute for Adult Education, are taken into account. Significant influential factors on the group’s educational behaviours were noted based on images of age and self-perception, as well as socio-historical backgrounds. This information can assist adult educators in the development of regional educational programmes with and for the elderly.

Theoretical background: Later life and individual experience

An ageing population is often linked with a decrease in social adaptability, but this point of view ignores the potential and learning capabilities of older adults (Baltes 1992; Lehr 2005). Therefore, it is important to support the potential of older people to lead active and participatory lives through education and to recognize the benefits of their knowledge, experience, and competencies.
The discourse on lifelong learning necessarily leads to questions concerning the impact of old age as a phase of life on the preservation of learning abilities and competencies. Research on lifelong learning shows that to achieve greater flexibility in life courses, new strategies for the construction and integration of knowledge are required. The prerequisites for this process of active competency development are not the same among older people (Findsen and Formosa 2011). The age-based configuration of living environments, individual health, positive images of ageing, and a continuous participation in lifelong learning are important factors in enabling older men and women to maintain independent lifestyles.

Retirement changes from a life phase of consumption and leisure time to a phase of societal participation. Coping with age-related developmental tasks becomes an increasingly important issue in old age (Kruse 2008). Taking part in gainful employment and civic engagement, as well as supporting one's own family, allows older people to participate in society. Adult education plays an important role in developing the abilities and the motivation for social commitment in old age. Older people with more education and those who more often participate in adult education programs often show a higher degree of commitment. The opposite also holds true; civic or social engagement can trigger learning processes if older adults are confronted with new challenges and competency demands through these activities (Tippelt et al. 2009).

Education not only creates prerequisites for participation in different fields of social life; it is also the first step toward an active process of ageing. Therefore, we are in need of research focusing on the equality or inequality of opportunities for older people to participate in adult education that also takes into account regional and individual differences.

However, educational activities for the elderly are highly dependent on their different biographical and social circumstances. Educational interests and learning attitudes are affected by early educational experiences gained in school or during vocational training and by previous adult education activities (Schmidt 2007). Opportunities to participate in formal and nonformal learning have been and still are highly divergent for different generations and for people from different social backgrounds (Schmidt-Hertha, in press). This is why not only an individual biography, but also the conditions of basic education (school system, educational infrastructure, authoritarian teachers, etc.) specific to each generation influence both the willingness to participate in lifelong learning and learning abilities, even in older age. Common generational experiences, as anchored in the historical and cultural background (Mannheim 1928), probably affect individual perceptions of ageing just as individuals' biographies and current living conditions do. Self-perception and individual images of ageing are important indicators for educational activities and should also be seen as products of biographical experiences, individual living conditions, and cultural-historical contexts (de Gracio et al. 2004; Levy and Schlesinger 2005). This complex interaction of social environment, individual resources, beliefs, attitudes, and educational behaviour cannot be explained in simple causalities; rather, it requires an in-depth analysis that can be provided using a qualitative approach.
Furthermore, research on perceptions of age has revealed an interrelation between negative stereotypes about ageing and self-perceptions in older age. The theory of self-stereotyping is based on the assumption that negative images of ageing are, at least partly, transferred to individual self-perception as an individual ages (Levy 2003). Even though only minor differences in images of ageing between younger and older adults have been identified, their ideas about ageing seem to become operative once adults count themselves among the elderly. General stereotypes are then transferred more or less unmodified to one’s own self-concept (see ibid.). The perception of individual gains and losses related to age is biased in the sense that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1948), particularly when expected losses are overrated and gains go unnoticed. Nevertheless, studies show that self-stereotyping is only one aspect that helps explain the development of perceptions of ageing among older adults; psychological well-being and satisfaction with one’s health are other interacting factors (Schmitt 2004). The interrelation between well-being, subjective evaluation of health, and perception of ageing seems to be a reciprocal one. A similar interaction has also been noted among self-concept, self-perception, and perception of ageing. There is evidence that perception of ageing affects these factors (e.g., Ory et al. 2003), as it is for the converse causality (de Gracio et al. 2004; Rothermund and Brandstädter 2003). Based on the results of these studies, the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies could be a good vehicle to explain the interactions discovered.

**Empirical background: The Competencies in Later Life study**

At the end of 2009, the research project *Competencies in Later Life* (CiLL) was launched in Germany to examine the competencies of older adults and their learning activities and to explore the interrelation of these factors. Living conditions, social networks, challenges of everyday life, and educational biographies of the older adults were also taken into account. The study, which is currently ongoing, focuses on a group of adults 65 to 80 years old and combines a quantitative assessment of adult competencies with qualitative case studies. The study is meant to provide information on the competency demands in later life and on the gains and losses in these competencies in old age with respect to current living conditions and biographical experiences.

The core of the study was formed using a combination of quantitative assessments and questionnaires and qualitative case studies flanked by in-depth international desktop research. The main challenge of the case studies is to link the results with enquiries of former studies – especially the EdAge study and the Adult Education Survey – and to fundamentally compare them to results stemming from the quantitative competency assessment. In this paper, we would like to focus on the qualitative part of the study, which consists of 42 case studies of older adults with different living conditions.

The main purpose of the case studies is to gather data on living conditions, on older adults’ everyday lifestyles, and on the need for specific competencies arising
from the individual lifestyles and attitudes. The qualitative case studies make use of the case-reconstructive research strategy (Hildenbrand 1991), focusing on the relation between general and particular elements of every single case. The processes of struggling with everyday practical demands and challenges, individual selection, and interpretation form the structure of a case. This structure includes a basic habitual way of looking at one’s world, of interpreting it, and of acting in and interacting with this world.

In order to gain deeper insight into this world of learning processes and competency requirements embedded in daily routines or initiated by critical events in life, a descriptive qualitative analysis using the method of content analysis developed by Mayring (2003) was carried out. The interviews were fully transcribed, and a complex theoretically sound system of coding was developed. Subsequently, each coding was attached to the material. In order to verify the accuracy of the intercoder agreement resp. interpretive convergence (Saldana 2008, p. 27), some interviews were analyzed by three or more researchers, and more than half of the interviews were analyzed by at least two researchers. When dealing with the transcriptions, additional codes were developed and others were pooled or changed. Finally, a system of 47 codes was applied to all 42 interviews.

The CiLL study also includes a study parallel to the German Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies Program. PIAAC was organized by the OECD to assess the level and distribution of adult skills in three competency domains for adults up to 64 years old in 23 countries (Literacy, Numeracy … 2012). CiLL provides an additional sample for the 65- to 80-year-old adults in Germany using the same methods to deliver data in a way that is coherent and consistent to the German PIAAC sample. PIAAC uses a representative sample, and this, of course, should also hold for the sample of the 66- to 80-year-old adults.

A total of 3,600 senior citizens in 111 municipalities were randomly selected from lists held at German registration offices. Ninety TNS Infratest interviewers were active nationwide, and 1,325 interviews were conducted, which equals a response rate of 38%. The data for CiLL were collected using an elaborate background questionnaire, which covered socio-demographic data and information on educational and qualification processes, as well as labour status (including previous employment). Subsequently, PIAAC included three central adult competence domains: literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology-rich environments. Respondents with computer skills answered the test questions by use of a laptop; all other respondents were issued test booklets. Almost 30% of the elderly respondents chose the computer for answering the questions. To ensure the international comparability of the PIAAC study, including the additional sample of older adults, neither the questionnaire nor the competency tests can be readjusted for the sample of those aged 66 to 80. The design of PIAAC was arranged in such a way that exactly the same program with exactly the same instruments was administered in all participating countries in order to avoid all possible bias effects. Currently, the quantitative step of the research project is in the data collection phase, but results will not be ready until 2014.
It has not yet been decided whether the PIAAC will be continued after this first survey. A panel study on the competencies of adults would be of particular value to educational research because it would provide indicators to differentiate age effects, cohort effects, and periodical effects on the competencies of adults. For research on the participation of older adults in education and in learning, it would be of great importance to relinquish the established focus on the labour force and to systematically include people above the age of 64, not only in individual national surveys, but also in the international studies.

Self-perception and images of ageing and their meaning for learning and competency development

Depending on their perceptions of their own learning capabilities and their potential for personal development, adults are more or less open to new learning experiences and willing to get involved in educational processes. This further depends on their self-perception and whether they see themselves as active designers of their own environment or as powerless victims of their fate (Cross 1981). Of course, there are some more predictors for educational behaviour, such as situational factors, current circumstances of living, structure of offerings and educational barriers, social and vocational background, and not only age. Without a fundamental understanding of one’s own educational capabilities and a belief in the power of learning to widen one’s capability to act, participation in educational activities and directed competency development are very unlikely. Therefore, the relevance of personal perceptions of self and ageing to learning and development of the elderly is clear but remains a scientifically unexplored area.

According to the 6th Report on Ageing coordinated by the German government, the art of living, subjective well-being, readiness for social engagement, and openness to educational opportunities and learning possibilities are highly dependent on one’s self-perception and images related to age as a phase of life (e.g., Wurm and Huxhold 2012). In other words, images of ageing seem to be affected by one’s preceding educational experiences, biography, social circumstances, and current living conditions. If subjective ideas of ageing influence the willingness of older adults to participate in nonformal or informal learning and if these ideas even fit with the most important predictors for educational participation of older adults (Tippelt, Schmidt and Kuwan 2009), then possibilities of competence development in higher age are also limited or broadened by them. In retrospect, the influence of preceding educational experiences on self-perception and age stereotypes causes one to expect a more positive perception of self and age for persons with higher levels of competence (Schmidt-Hertha and Mühlbauer 2012). However, which fields of competencies could play a role in this relationship and how far these competencies could be altered remain unclear.

Theoretically, there are strong arguments for a connection between competencies, competency development, and learning in older age, as well as perceptions of self and one’s own ageing process (Schmidt 2010). However, not enough empirical
evidence for this correlation has been collected so far. The causality, in particular, remains unclear, and although complex interdependencies are to be expected, they have not been explored.

One development that clearly points to the significance of self-perceptions for learning activities is Patricia Cross’ (1981) chain-of-response model, which indicates that individual self-evaluation is the first central step in the process of making educational decisions. Even before attitudes toward education, current interests, aims, and learning opportunities become important for participation or nonparticipation in adult education programs, the perception of personal learning abilities and learning styles is crucial for the decision either in favour of or against pursuing further learning. When it comes to the elderly, images of ageing are highly relevant to the evaluation of one’s own learning abilities, as is self-perception for all age groups.

Our qualitative interviews provide an informative basis for analyzing the interaction of images of ageing, perception of older age as a phase of life, and self-concept, as well as the realization of learning possibilities. Only some explorative approaches are given here, providing direction and stimuli for further research.

Self-perception and perception of ageing

Firstly, statements related to self-perception and self-concept and statements related to perception of ageing have been differentiated. Both kinds of statements are by no means independent from each other, but within our sample, we found some participants whose ideas about higher age as a phase of life were (still) only very loosely related to their own personality and self-perception and some participants who noticed characteristics and processes within their own personality that they could trace back to higher age and that could affect their self-perception at least insofar as they differentiated between the present and the past when it came to describing their own personality and social localization. The statements of older respondents with a strong link to self-perception point to three groups with very different self-concepts. The groups have been identified by a comparative analysis of the interviews and following the principles of maximum homogeneity within the groups and a maximum heterogeneity between them. However, what we describe in the following section can be seen as empirically based ideal types in the tradition of Max Weber (1922; see also Schmidt and Tippelt 2011).

The makers saw themselves as the ones to bring things forward, who initiate innovation, and who make decisions. Within this role, they experienced the significance of their own person in their private and (former) vocational environment. They often described themselves as talented in several areas, competent in different fields of application, and successful in acting. There were male and female seniors of different ages and different levels of schooling in this group. Overall, it seems that self-perception is poorly related with socio-demographic variables.
The helpers saw themselves not so much as the ones to initiate changes, but as facilitators and helpers in the background, which is a necessary role to keep things functioning smoothly. Hard work and a high level of altruism were fundamental descriptions of their self-perception. According to these participants, if they are unable to help others, then they need to provide an excuse, even if the reasons are related to health problems. In contrast to the makers, the predominantly female helpers also shared a theme of setting limits of their own capabilities.

Finally, we identified a group of older adults who could be characterized as driven by circumstances. They described their former and current behaviour as a more or less reactive responses to difficult situations and problematic breaks in their lives. These participants stated that they usually saw events as troublesome necessities to maintain their standard of living. They referred to their own weaknesses and deficits much more often than the other groups; they also complained about a lack of self-confidence.

Some of the interviewees pointed out the positive aspects of ageing in general and especially in relation to personal age, while others focused on the negative aspects of ageing or showed an ambivalent perception of age. At first glance, no relationship is seen between perceptions of ageing and self-perception. While persons with a positive concept of ageing rated physical decline as less relevant but stressed the quality and benefits of old age, others with a more negative concept of ageing saw physical decline as the beginning of a steady and irreversible development. An ambivalent concept of ageing was characterized by the simultaneity of developmental gains and losses. Interviewees with an ambivalent perception of old age particularly pointed to their efforts to prevent further cognitive and physical decline. This attitude, which stresses the necessity and effectiveness of different kinds of preventive activities, seems to be part of the ageing concepts shared by many older adults (Schmidt 2010) but is a central focus for persons with an ambivalent perception of old age. In contrast, the link to a special quality of higher age can primarily be found among adults with a positive perception of ageing. Most participants with a negative perception of ageing emphasized the irreversibility of decline in old age. Once again, there did not appear to be any systematic differences between the three approaches to ageing and the interviewees’ sex, age, family status, or level of schooling.

A synopsis of the different perceptions of self and ageing was performed for 26 interviewees in reference to both concepts, while comments from 18 further interviewees could only be dedicated to one or none of the concepts. Table 1 shows the different combinations of self-perception and images of ageing, as they can be found in the empirical material.
Table 1: Allocation of self-perception and perception of ageing within the interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Ageing</th>
<th>Maker</th>
<th>Helper</th>
<th>Driven</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive perception of ageing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent perception of ageing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative perception of ageing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the group of *helpers* and the group of the *driven* older adults, an ambivalent perception of ageing was dominant. In contrast, the *makers* showed no dominant orientation when looking at their image of ageing. As the lines between the different concepts of ageing cannot be drawn strictly selectively, a partial aggregation of different combinations seems to be justifiable when it is taken into account that differences between the four aggregated groups are all the more visible.

**Self-perception and learning**

Within the group of *makers* with a positive perception of ageing, only the older participants who perceived themselves to still be active designers indicated that they sometimes made use of organized educational programs. The interviewees sought learning in adult education centres (Volkshochschulen), third-age universities, and other similar adult education agencies as well as through self-regulated learning activities using different forms of media (e.g., the Internet or books) and interacting with their social environment. These kinds of informal learning are often related to daily life problems but can also stem from an interest in a certain topic. These interests usually result from a search for new challenges or are completely independent from current demands of action.

The *makers* with a negative perception of ageing primarily focused on the past and exclusively identified informal contexts as learning opportunities. Once again, interactions with friends and relatives and especially the use of media were central for their learning. In particular, books and television were mentioned in which the content had a close relation to daily life but was not always linked to a particular problem.

For the *helpers*, learning was linked to effort and hard work. They saw learning as an absolutely necessary investment of time and power for solving current problems. Learning here means self-directed learning, often by trial and error (e.g., when dealing with new technologies and machines). After these goal-oriented forms of learning, which are related to situational challenges, incidental learning then plays an important role in increasing their own capacity to act.

Incidental and nonintentional forms of learning (see also Dohmen 2001, p. 44) dominated the learning activities within the group of the *drivens*. Respondents only mentioned informal learning that, in most cases, was not initiated consciously. In this context, learning seems to be no more than a byproduct of problem-solving, in which learners see themselves as reacting to a certain situation, but not constructively arranging it.
Analysis of the qualitative interviews with older adults cannot verify the relationship between perception of ageing and self-perception as documented in other studies (e.g., Rothermund and Brandstaedter, 2003) for several reasons, such as the cross-sectional design. However, interactions have become visible that point to a different relevance of the perception of ageing depending on one’s self-perception. In particular, older adults who saw themselves as active designers of their living environment showed a stronger backward orientation when they have negative images of age and ageing. This group tended to primarily connect self-perception and self-confidence to activities and occurrences in the past. They experienced their current phase of life as a slow and unintended withdrawal from being a central actor in their social and professional field. In contrast, self-perception in other groups seemed to be influenced less by perceptions of ageing if the individuals saw themselves more as facilitators or in a passive role in different contexts of daily life. Nevertheless, this is primarily descriptive evidence with very initial results; closer analysis with a longitudinal dimension is needed.

Further data analysis shows that opportunities and strategies to develop competencies are only partly related to perceptions of self and ageing. This relationship seems to be mediated by lifestyle and the handling of daily challenges. The older adults who still saw themselves as central protagonists in their living environment were autonomously looking for new challenges and fields of learning that were linked to their competencies. Others saw themselves confronted with tasks related to learning and competence development when they gave a helping hand as facilitators in their social proximity. In contrast, older adults who saw themselves as victims of life circumstances or who had negative age stereotypes and were focused on their own developmental losses tended to avoid new terrain, preferring to move within surroundings they were familiar with. For them, this means a minimum of risks but also a minimum of new learning opportunities.

The motives for this behaviour remain unclear. Further, our data cannot tell us how far existing competencies and developmental potential influence one’s lifestyle or if competency development in higher age is the product of an active lifestyle. Another unresolved question is whether positive perceptions of self and ageing account for a lifestyle that promotes developmental gains or if these positive perceptions are the product of an individual lifestyle. Other studies point to a reciprocal relation between perceptions of ageing and lifestyle (Schmidt-Hertha and Mühlbauer 2012; Sachverständigenkommission Altenberichterstattung 2010) as well as to a relationship between lifestyle and competency development in the elderly (Kruse 2010; Tippelt et al. 2009). An understanding of self-perceptions and personal images of ageing in the context of learning and competency development has to be taken into account when it comes to interpreting the results of competency assessments. Even if the results presented have to first be considered from an explorative approach, they provide valuable evidence for taking a closer look at perceptions of self and ageing in educational research.

It has become evident that perceptions of ageing are not only a product of individual biography and lifestyle, but are also influenced by cultural and historical backgrounds. The sample from the CiLL study was comprised of a generation of
adults who were born before or during World War II and who were assumed to have common attitudes and interpretation patterns (Mannheim 1928); this commonality may also influence perceptions of self and ageing.

Educational behaviour of older adults with regard to social and historical development

In the random samples from the CiLL study, participants between the ages of 66 and 80 were interviewed (those born between 1931 and 1946). Those in this age group were significantly characterized by the historic events during the war and post-war periods. A generational effect was apparent that could be described as “war and post-war children” (Radebold 2005). Therefore, a “socio-historical generation term” (Franz 2011) was used for characterizing this particular age group.

Historical background

In the early 1930s, large parts of Germany’s working class sank into poverty as a result of the Great Depression and high rates of unemployment. Politically, the economic situation paved the ground for the upcoming National Socialist era and Hitler’s assumption of power in 1933. The totalitarian regime annihilated its opponents and triggered World War II with the invasion of Poland. The educational system was pushed aside to focus on war interests. The older generation questioned in the study were children during these war years. They heard of the deaths of their relatives and endured air raids on German cities in 1943. Starting in 1944, a wave of refugees left Germany and occupied Eastern territories. The German population in Russia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia was particularly affected, and many Germans escaped from East to West Germany. The younger participants of the CiLL study were born after Germany surrendered, but their early living environment was also characterized by the distress and ruin of post-war Germany.

After the war ended, life in the Federal Republic of Germany was very different than life in the German Democratic Republic. With allied help, West Germany experienced an economic recovery, whereas East Germany faced a lack of consumer goods and emigration. The educational systems in West and East Germany also diverged considerably. The surveyed generation started their professional lives with little formal education. Schools and universities were not in operation during the last war years and right after the war as the buildings had been destroyed and there was a lack of teaching staff. Reconstruction required many specialists, who were often only semi-skilled or had become qualified after a short training period. Many participants of the surveyed group successfully held important positions without adequate formal qualification. In the late 1950s, educational expansion in West Germany restrengthened the connection between education and professional careers. The surveyed group enjoyed fairly secure positions in times of full employment and was little affected by the upcoming economic crisis during the 1970s and 1980s. Unemployment was controlled by retiring workers
early with a transitional agreement at the age of 55, first in West Germany and later in Eastern Germany as well.

In their late professional years and during retirement, the surveyed participants were far less active educationally in comparison to younger people. The Reporting System on Continuing Education confirms that this trend was common in West Germany (Rosenbladt and Bilger 2008, p. 227). However, age is not the only reason for a low level of participation in continuing education. The educational behaviour of senior citizens proves to be rather complex. School qualifications and professional positions strongly influence participation in continuing education. Those between the ages of 55 and 64 with a low level of educational and/or professional qualifications rarely participate in continuing education (Tippelt et al. 2009, p. 57). Women are particularly underrepresented in vocational continuing education (ibid, p. 43) or state that their participation in continuing education is impaired by domestic tasks (Kolland and Ahmadi 2010, p. 60). Educational behaviour is influenced by socio-historical development as well as biographic factors. In many interviews conducted during the CiLL study, the importance of starting a family and the birth of children and grandchildren was emphasized. Living situation and critical events were also regarded as significant influences on learning in old age.

Current life situations and barriers to continuing education

Gerontology frequently points out the significant individual differences of life situations and lifestyles of the elderly (Backes et al. 2004). Life and educational behaviour in old age are not only influenced by social differences, but also by inequalities. Along with educational participation, necessary resources for individual adaptation, as well as the adaptation of the environment, to critical events vary. The topics “turning point in life,” “critical life events,” and “crises” were included in the CiLL survey. Turning points, such as retirement or the child-care phase – were seen as less burdensome than critical life events. Critical life events were often related to the loss of close relationships, such as through illness or death of a life partner. Critical life events run the risk of turning into a significant life crisis if the respondent becomes ill or needy. Single and childless senior citizens (Schnurr 2010) are particularly vulnerable for crises whenever their social network becomes brittle. In this context, the family living situation is an essential factor of coping. Many respondents stressed the importance of maintaining their family contacts, and senior citizens in nursing homes particularly complained about their living situations.

In comparison to younger age groups, senior citizens are more likely to be confronted with circumstances that inhibit an independent lifestyle (Sachverständigenkommission Altenberichterstattung 2010). Three typical risk constellations are depicted based on the voluntary information surveyed in the CiLL study – the living situation of senior citizens, material changes, and need for care. Continuing education can play an important role in the problem-solving process in different life situations.
Living space and environment become increasingly significant at an older age due to decreasing mobility and the resulting increasing importance of accessibility of service structures. Social interactions often occur within the living quarters at the political, social, leisure, and educational levels. In this situation, the risks are social exclusion (Kronauer 2010) and that educational activities are often distributed rather differently depending on the living area in a city, district, or social quarter.

The early exclusion of senior citizens from the work process, the increased retirement age, and temporary unemployment have negative effects on retirement income. As a result, impoverishment among the elderly will likely increase over the coming years and lead to numerous disadvantages, which are likely to have a negative effect on educational participation (Friebe 2010).

Age often also holds the risk of illness, physical impairment, and the need for care. These situations also endanger social inclusion and bear the risk of the elderly being unable to cope with these various burdens. Social contacts are reduced, such as in the case of dementia, not only for the individual, but also for his or her family. Families with sufficient financial support can take advantage of external support and provide opportunities for the elderly individual to participate more often in educational events.

The life constellations mentioned often serve as barriers to educational participation for the elderly (Rosenbladt and Bilger 2008, p. 151). Their financial situation, as well as a lack of information and competency, can intensify the problems associated with old age. Still, while these life constellations have risks, they also offer opportunities of inclusion for senior citizens. Living in established working-class neighbourhoods can provide more resources, such as mutual support and learning, than living in newly built developments. Dealing with issues of maintaining health can provide a significant incentive for discovering new ways of learning and auto-didactic activities. The reflection of the mentioned self-images and images of age can reveal the range of activities in old age. In summary, this means that senior citizens are more vulnerable to risks of exclusion (Kruse 2008, p. 23), but at the same time, they still have potential for inclusion and improved educational activities.

**Practical perspectives and conclusion**

An individual’s historical and social background and his or her living space influence learning and competency development in all stages of life and are particularly important in higher age. “The location of ageing contributes significantly to the condition of ageing” (Kocka and Staudinger 2009, p. 65). Social participation often occurs in one’s immediate living environment at political, social, leisure, and educational levels. Being aware of the barriers that often impair educational participation of the elderly is valuable to educational planners and lecturers of adult education. The following conclusions can be drawn for continuing education of the elderly:
Reflection on the elderly’s socio-historic background reveals the socializing experiences of this age group and forms the basis for intergenerational educational programmes that meet the needs of the ageing process (Antz et al. 2009). It is also important to be aware of the past experiences of the senior citizens by examining historical events; i.e., as contemporary witnesses in political education.

Images of age contain experiences of certain groups of senior citizens that influence educational behaviour. It is the obligation of educational providers to not only consider the expectations and fears of their target group and to make age images the subject of their programmes, but also to utilize these images of age to avoid excluding a certain age group.

The phase of old age is obviously characterized by an extremely heterogeneous nature and largely divergent educational prerequisites due to the lifelong accumulation of cultural capital (Blossfeld, Rossbach and Maurice 2011). As a result, the field of continuing education needs to provide a wide range of programmes as it runs the risk of only focusing on senior citizens who value continuing education.

Public educational organizations should also target educationally disadvantaged senior citizens. Programmes that are easily accessible and free of charge can be attractive for the elderly. Their living environments, such as their neighbourhoods, can be regarded as a centre for promoting educational activities (Friebe and Hülsmann 2011).

Generally, in line with the higher life expectancy, opportunities to participate in educational programmes and to create individual learning processes in old age are increasing. Unfortunately, some social groups do not yet have access to educational programmes (Bremer and Klemann-Göhring 2010). For these groups, new educational programmes need to be developed to open up educational institutions to senior citizens, provide didactics suitable for the elderly (Nuissl 2008), and include opportunities for participation. The objective is to develop concepts of “good life in old age” (Sachverständigenkommission Altenberichterstattung 2010, p. 423), which are combined with the idea of a learning community. Strategies for “learning in later life” might be successful if some criteria are established. For example, education must be accessible, including geographic proximity to the living area of the targeted group, barrier-free accessibility, and low participation fees. To facilitate educational access, the programme schedule and topics needs to be adjusted to line up with the age group’s requirements and interests. The most effective access is gained through special confidants and word-of-mouth. So the offers have to be “transparent”. Programmes for the elderly, especially for educationally disadvantaged individuals, have to be recognizable in the local community. The conventional information exchange (printed programmes, flyer, press release) does not reach the target group. Finally “networking” of various stakeholders is particularly important. The cooperation of various local protagonists contributes to a larger distribution of the programmes. In addition, linking various programmes across target groups allows for intergenerational and intercultural encounters and learning processes.
In summary, one could say that educational behaviour is a product of impartial conditions of living and the subjective perceived development of oneself. Nevertheless, individual perceptions of one's living conditions cannot reduce the detrimental role that social injustice and inequality play in all stages of life (Blossfeld, Rossbach and Maurice 2011). Educational policy, as well as continuing education practice, can contribute to preparing for the challenges of a long-living society. Maintaining autonomy, the provision of guidelines and the development of new perspectives in the third and fourth phase of life for which new patterns need to be found, is essential for the individuals and the society.

References


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