



“Senior coolness”: Living well as an attitude in later life



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ABSTRACT

With demographic change becoming an ever more pressing issue in Germany, old age (80+) is currently talked about above all in terms of being a problem. In mainstream discourse on the situation of the oldest old an interpretive framework has emerged that effectively rules out the possibility of people living positively and well in old age. With regard to both individual (personal) and collective (societal) spheres, negative images of old age dominate public debate. This is the starting point for an interdisciplinary research project designed to look at the ways in which people manage to “live well in old age in the face of vulnerability and finitude” – in express contrast to dominant negative perspectives. Based on the results of this project, the present article addresses an attitudinal and behavioral mode which we have coined “senior coolness”. Coolness here is understood as both a socio-cultural resource and an individualized habitus of everyday living. By providing an effective strategy of self-assertion, this ability can, as we show, be just as important for elderly people as for anyone else. “Senior coolness” is discussed, finally, as a phenomenon that testifies to the ways elderly people retain a positive outlook on life – especially in the face of difficult circumstances and powerful socio-cultural pressures.

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Introduction

Is it possible to live well in old age – and if so, how? Indeed could it be that it is more common than public debates about (multi-)morbidity and the care needs associated with it might suggest? In the context of a cultural studies research group set up as part of the interdisciplinary project “Living well in old age in the face of vulnerability and finitude”,² we set out to examine these issues in two ways. First, we analyzed popular discourses about old age found in high circulation German-language print media (newspapers and self-help literature) between 1990 and 2012. Second, we conducted 75 qualitative interviews with people aged between 77 and 101, as well as with relatives of

elderly people, in order to find out what “living well in old age” meant for those interviewed.

We have presented detailed results from our discourse analytical study elsewhere (Grebe, 2012; Grebe, Otto, & Zimmermann, 2013; Otto, 2011, 2013; Otto & Grebe, 2013; Schroeter & Zimmermann, 2012; Zimmermann, 2012a, 2012b). In the present article, therefore, we offer just a brief summary of this aspect of our research, placing our focus much more on the results obtained from the qualitative interviews. In particular, we highlight a phenomenon that we have coined “senior coolness” and that we wish to put forward for debate.

Elderly people’s experiences have begun to attract greater attention from academic researchers, often with the express intent of providing a counterpoint to prevailing negative portrayals and debates (Katz, Holland, Peace, Taylor, & Blood, 2011; Poon & Cohen-Mansfield, 2011). Our own view is that more positive perspectives on old age certainly can be grounded in individuals’ accounts of their own lifeworld experiences. The crucial issue here, however, is to identify the links between people’s personal perspectives (their own accounts) and practices on the one hand and those locally

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² The full title of the project is “Living well in old age in the face of vulnerability and finitude – an analysis of images of old age in public discourses and everyday practices” (Kruse, Rentsch, & Zimmermann, 2012). Funding for the project was provided by the Volkswagen Foundation.

specific and collectively relevant settings that constitute (elderly) people's socio-cultural location on the other, given that these contribute towards shaping their specific understanding of themselves and of the world (Biggs & Powell, 2001; Estes, Swan, & Gerard, 1982; Katz, 2000; Richter, 2012; Schroeter & Zimmermann, 2012; Twigg, 2004; Zimmermann, 2012a).

Thus elderly people's everyday activities and their experience of reality in their own lifeworld are also influenced by public debates. In particular, mass media representations of old age need to be taken seriously in terms of the impacts they have on people's everyday practices. Life as an elderly person can evolve into a stressful experience for the simple reason that many influential metaphors (Grebe et al., 2013) and catchwords used in German media discourses – including *Altenlast*, a word used to signify the (financial) burden on society posed by large numbers of old people, *Rentnerberg* (“mountain of retirees”), and *dunkle Demografiewolken* (“dark clouds on the demographic horizon”) – cast doubt on the capacities and capabilities of elderly people and thus offend their dignity (see also Gullette, 2004; Laws, 1995; Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011).

Our study of print media texts and self-help literature³ – to summarize briefly – has revealed a dramaturgy based on a clear-cut distinction between the third age and the fourth age.⁴ The third age (65 to 80) is represented throughout in positive terms as the phase when a person is no longer in paid work and has the opportunity to take up other activities, including those that contribute towards self-realization. This optimistic view is reflected in catchy self-help titles such as the following: *Das Beste kommt noch – Männer im Unruhestand* (The Best is Yet to Come – Men and Unretirement, Hammer, 2010); *111 Gründe, sich auf die Rente zu freuen: Ein Loblied auf das, was nach der Arbeit kommt* (111 Reasons to Look Forward to Retirement: Celebrating Life After Work, Brost, 2011); *Endlich alt! Jetzt mache ich, was ich will!* (Old at last! Now I can do what I want!, Oppermann & Tippelt, 2005).⁵

Representations of the fourth age (80 plus) are in stark contrast to this. Our impression is that, since 1990,

representations found in newspaper articles and self-help literature have increasingly come to serve as a negative foil for an active, productive and successful (process of entering) old age: all the negative and pessimistic stereotypes of old age that circulate in German culture and society are increasingly being projected onto the group of the oldest old. Life for people aged over 80 is frequently described principally as a phase of rapid physical and mental deterioration (Otto, 2011).

This is indicated most clearly – to give a striking example – by the large number of newspaper articles on dementia-related problems (Grebe, 2012). The tone of such reports is reflected in the following (translated) quotation from a major broadsheet: “The progressive loss of all memory functions and cognitive capabilities makes it increasingly impossible for people to cope with everyday life and destroys the very core of their personality.” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 279/2005) It is repeatedly claimed that aging with dementia means losing one's identity and dignity, ending up “no longer being a person” (*Bild Zeitung* 78(14)/2008). This portrayal of an ineluctable process of dehumanization also finds concise metaphoric expression in descriptions such as the following (Grebe et al., 2013): “It is only at the start of their free fall that sufferers still notice their own biography leaving them (and, with it, that which had made their life what it was) along with their identity – in other words, their ‘self’ – slipping away inexorably toward nothingness.” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 220/2006).

The style of reporting observed in relation to dementia-related illnesses in particular also applies in general to individuals who require intensive nursing care: here there is a highly noticeable discourse of deficiency and loss that extends beyond the elderly themselves to include the burdens experienced by relatives and local communities and even society as a whole. A typical description of the situation faced by the elderly person's family is this: “Seventy-five percent of old people in need of nursing care are looked after in the home. By their daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters, or wives. Many of these become depressed, many feel frustrated and burnt out, many become ill themselves as a result of feeling trapped.” (Brigitte Woman, 4/2002).

Care work can be stressful and is usually done by women, this much certainly is true. And yet carers also have positive experiences. They speak, for example, of growing personally as individuals, of experiencing better, more intense relationships and of gaining a richer perspective on life (Netto, Jenny, & Philip, 2009). Yet such issues are rarely reflected in the media context. Instead, negative sensationalized stories that focus on horror scenarios are common fare.

Statistical data on predicted longevity in society provide the basis for an “apocalyptic demography” Robertson, 1990, see also Katz, 1992. Here, slogans such as the following predominate: “Squeezed by the pressure of an elderly population” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8/2011), “Old people exploit the young” (*Bild Zeitung* 60(11)/2008), “Germany is sliding further into the Methusalem trap” (Focus Online, 2012). Alzheimer's and dementia are portrayed as a “national disease”, or *Volkskrankheit* (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 213/1997), and thus as a collective destiny that is fatal not only for the many people affected by it but also for the welfare state and the economy, indeed for the entire global economy: “Alzheimer's disease: A threat to the global economy” (*Kieler Nachrichten* 152/2011).

³ In terms of printed media, the daily newspapers analyzed were: *Bild* (circulation approx. 3.5 million), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*/*Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (circulation approx. 900,000). Popular magazines and customer magazines analyzed were: *Apotheken Umschau* (a free fortnightly magazine available at pharmacies, circulation approx. 9.8 million), *Senioren Ratgeber* (monthly circulation around 1.7 million), *Neue Post* (weekly circulation roughly 960,000), *Reader's Digest Deutschland* (monthly circulation around 650,000), *Brigitte Woman* (fortnightly circulation approx. 346,000), *Menschen. Das Magazin* (quarterly circulation roughly 60,000). The source for the circulation figures given here is the database of the German organization that monitors the distribution of advertising media (IWW, 2012). The data corpus additionally covers a selection of 22 titles with an especially large circulation from the sphere of advice literature for the elderly. This, for example, includes a book that is extremely popular in Germany, “Grey is colorful: opportunities in old age” (*Grau ist bunt: Was im Alter möglich ist* (Scherf, 2008) by Henning Scherf, former mayor of the City of Bremen).

⁴ In differentiating between the third and fourth age we are following the 12. coordinated population prediction of Germany's Federal Office of Statistics (*Statistisches Bundesamt*). This defines people “aged 80 years and older” (*Statistisches Bundesamt*, 2009, p. 16) as the “oldest old” group.

⁵ This book titles as well as all the following quotations from media texts/research texts and interview excerpts have been translated, where necessary, from German into English. The original German versions can be made available by the authors upon request.

Although these negative descriptions of old age predominate in the media, alternative discourses can be found. Some texts within our corpus – to offer a striking example of the opposite kind – display a veritable enthusiasm about life lived at an advanced age. This positive focus is directed partly at aspects of intellectual life and partly at particular physical capabilities.

Popular role models for this set of discourses are elder statesmen as well as elderly artists from the fields of painting, literature, film or music (Zimmermann, 2011). The most famous figurehead in media paeans to old age in Germany is former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (*1918). According to a survey conducted by the German opinion research organization *forsa*, he is the “coolest guy” (*coolster Kerl*) in Germany (Sky, 2008). Rather like the case of post-war Germany's first Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, the appreciation expressed by broad sections of the media and the general public towards Helmut Schmidt (his name often prefixed with the term *Altkanzler*, or old (as in “former”) Chancellor) is nowadays focused almost entirely on his age-acquired wisdom (*Altersweisheit*) (Tagesspiegel, 2012). The “wise old man/woman” is part of the standard repertoire of representations of old age (80+) in Germany.

This age-acquired wisdom, furthermore, is usually associated with coolness. This has been pointed out previously in this journal by Kathleen Woodward: “Throughout the history of western thought, wisdom has been associated with the coolness of reason and evenness of judgment, with detachment and balance” (Woodward, 2003, p. 58). Although such images serve to enhance perceptions of old age, they are somewhat problematic nonetheless, with age-acquired wisdom quickly becoming a new normative model image. In other words, an appreciative acknowledgment of old age comes to depend on a person's ability to act wise and cool. But what of those who are insecure, who have (self-) doubts, or who display intense emotions? The well-meaning image of age-acquired wisdom can become a stereotype (De Beauvoir 1970, 1996, p. 3) that effectively disparages all those old people whose lives apparently show little evidence of wisdom.

At the same time, the media also focus positively on certain physical activities that are (still) possible in old age. The 101 year-old “Marathon-Methusalem” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 84/2008), for example, or the “oldest artist in the world” (*Neue Post*, 14/2006) who, even at the age of 94, is still able “effortlessly” to do pull-ups – these and others similar to them stand out from the crowd by “still” being active and full of energy, whereas other people of their age have long since succumbed to “old-age infirmity”. Thus the criteria for success in the third age – fitness, activity and productivity being foremost among them – are carried over into the fourth age. The message is: physical decline can be slowed down even at 80+ years of age. However, only those who engage long term in preventive exercises such as Nordic walking or “brain training” are likely to be successful in this. Here too, then, we are dealing with a thoroughly ambiguous form of praise for old age: while “sprightly” old people are assured of the media's approving attention, all the others more or less come under suspicion of having failed – for which they themselves are held responsible (by not doing sufficient exercise, for example).

To summarize, then, in current mainstream discourse on old age in Germany there is a prevailing trend and a secondary trend. The prevailing trend is towards narratives of decline and

loss. Alongside these, though, are also narratives of intellectual coolness and physical fitness. These latter positive images have a double-edged impact, however. This is because, in structural terms, they are still related to the principal discourse of deficiency and loss: the descriptions of decline and loss contained therein act both implicitly and explicitly as an alarming negative foil for the success stories embodied by “wise” or “lively” elderly people.

When analyzed in terms of discourse theory – specifically, according to Foucault's concept of “governmentality”⁶ – the way old age is addressed in newspaper articles and self-help literature, as described above, leads to two “bio-political” consequences: (1) to recommendations and exhortations directed at individuals, and (2) to ideas and cautionary stipulations directed at the population as a whole.

The strand of discourse relating to the individual as a subject of policy (1) comprises “the disciplines of the body: the harnessing, intensification, and distribution of forces, the adjustment and economy of energies” (Foucault 1978, 1976 p. 145). In current discourses on age and aging this disciplinary “micro-power” (ibid.) is exercised above all “pastorally”, with appeals to each individual to take responsibility for themselves. This responsibility is seen almost exclusively in terms of keeping oneself fit and healthy for as long as possible. Staying active and productive is considered to be the most promising way to postpone for as long as possible the onset of the final phase of life (understood as a rapid decline into morbidity) and to limit it to as short a period as possible.

The policy-related discourse of aging directed at the population as a whole (2) focuses on “[...] propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary.” (Foucault 1978, 1976, p. 139) The main issue addressed here are the impending crises in the health care, nursing care and pension systems: who is going to pay the bill? Who is going to look after the growing number of elderly people and, if necessary, provide nursing care? The general public is put on a kind of general alert, the purpose of which appears to be fourfold: (a) to prepare them for the prospect of a longer working life; (b) to limit or cut back on social welfare and insurance payments; (c) to encourage them to undertake their own preventive initiatives; and (d) to motivate the elderly to bear their share of responsibility by keeping themselves “fit” for as long as possible so that they don't place any unnecessary burden on the community or on social insurance funds.

Both trends – the discourse aimed at individuals and that aimed at the general population – follow the same logic of judgment: is a person active or inactive, fit or not, productive or unproductive? This banal distinction calibrates our view of the final phase of life and of our own old age. In each case, however, the issue of living well is either not mentioned at all due to the predominance of references to old age as deficiency and burden, or else it is reduced to a discourse of disciplining. On the one hand, fear-laden and discriminatory accounts predominate, giving nothing but negative responses to queries about vulnerability, frailty and the finitude of life in old age. On the

⁶ We have explained Foucault's terms “governmentality”, “bio-politics” and “pastoral power” in greater detail elsewhere in relation to age and aging (Zimmermann, 2012a, 2012b; Schroeter & Zimmermann, 2012; see also Powell & Wahidin, 2006).

other hand a mood of panic prevails with the demographic scenario of a progressively aging population, bringing with it the threat of collapse of the health care, nursing care and pension systems.

When we come to compare these observations with the results from our interviews, a totally different picture emerges. When old people themselves are queried about the issue, a whole range of issues to do with living well come into the picture. Positive aspects of old age are mentioned even despite the experience of vulnerability and frailty. It becomes apparent that living well is regarded, on the one hand, as a matter of having particular things in life – specific circumstances, experiences and activities – and, on the other, as one of certain ways of living, including attitudes and ways of maintaining poise in the face of old age.

As far as life circumstances are concerned, the big issues are plain right away: being in good health, remaining independent, being included in social networks, and enjoying material security. In addition, though, it is clearly the small, everyday experiences and activities that make people content and happy: thinking back over one's life; visits from relatives, friends or neighbors; discussing what is going on in the local community and further afield; looking at nature and the environment; consciously enjoying rest and relaxation as well as food and drink and so on.

While these outcomes are similar to those that have emerged from similar studies (Borglin, Edberg, & Rahm Hallberg, 2005; Katz et al., 2011; Wilhelmson, Andersson, Waern, & Allebeck, 2005), we have additionally been able to obtain some telling results concerning habitus-related aspects of living well in old age that emerged from our interviewee remarks about dealing with old age in general. The general tone of such comments is, "it's important not to let yourself go"; "you mustn't allow yourself to get upset about losses and limitations"; and "you have to take things with a pinch of humor, not take everything so seriously". Apart from everyday experiences and activities and specific life circumstances it is evidently also the way a person approaches their situation – the attitude they adopt, the degree of composure they bring to it – that is crucial for living well, particularly in the face of vulnerability and finitude. This is what comes across in author Arno Geiger's book about his father, who suffers from dementia:

Having reached that stage in his life where his mental powers are gradually diminishing, he is relying on his own personal attitude; something which – for lack of effective medication – is also a practicable option for relatives when dealing with the misery of this illness. (Geiger, 2011, p. 8)

Thus it is all about attitude. But what is the attitude referred to here? In our conversations with 77 year-old Mrs. S., a former secretary, she explicitly used the English word "cool" to express her idea of a desirable attitude towards old age:

[My mother,] she was *cool*, you know, cool right to the end. [...] I don't know if I'll manage to, but I really would quite like to stay calm and composed, [...] that's what I'd really like. That's what you need if you're going to endure it all.

Taking up this idea here, we speak of "senior coolness" (*alters-coolness*). What we wish to convey with this phrase is

a particular kind of composure and poise in the face of old age, namely, the "thermodynamic" ability, as it were, to keep one's cool. And that means not allowing oneself be thrown off one's stride by the miseries of old age – maintaining perspective, viewing things from a distance and maintaining a distance, not least by means of humor and irony. This ability relates on the one hand to a person's own existence and to their own self and on the other to the outside world, to society in general. It is also about the ability of relatives and the wider public to deal with the miseries of old age. What is meant by the phrase, then, is the kind of comprehensive composure, indeed nonchalance and indifference, towards old age which we encountered with various conversation partners. "Senior coolness" can be thought of as a habitus or as the art of aging that is relevant at both a subjective (personal) level as well as an objective (societal) level.

To begin, we describe the nature of the data as well as the methods of data collection and analysis on which the present article is based. We then develop our concept of coolness in theoretical terms, at the same time giving examples of the extent to which keeping cool is important for elderly people. These observations are finally brought together under the rubric of "senior coolness".

Empirical data and methodological approach

The key selection criterion chosen for sampling respondents was chronological age (≥ 80 years). In isolated cases we lowered this threshold (≥ 77). This is because the label "old age" does not denote any clearly demarcated phase in life but rather an advanced stage of life in which physical and cognitive vulnerabilities and death itself become more likely. The selection we undertook also reflects heterogeneous circumstances and personal characteristics: differences with regard to gender, social and cultural heritage, socio-economic status, educational background, physical and cognitive constitution (people with physical and/or cognitive impairments, relatively unimpaired people), degree of social inclusion, socio-spatial setting (rural or urban) and living situation (private household, institutionalized forms) were included. Our interviewees had previously worked as housewives, unskilled auxiliary workers, skilled workers, sales staff, self-employed small-scale entrepreneurs, care workers, teachers or doctors. Their financial situations varied accordingly, ranging from people receiving the lowest level of pension through to those receiving the generous pension payments disbursed to retired employees of the state.

The phenomenon of "senior coolness" that we encountered when conducting our interviews proved not to be tied to any specific life circumstance, however. Rather, it permeated the distinctions listed above, as we will show: examples of "senior coolness" can be found among both women *and* men, among low-income *and* high-income pensioners, among impaired *and* unimpaired individuals, in private housing *and* old people's homes, in rural *and* urban areas. What we describe in the following, then, is not one of the class-specific forms of habitus such as those developed by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1979, 1984) but rather a creative attitude and way of living that cuts across social milieus.

We utilized four different methods to find potential interviewees:

- 1) In newspaper articles about our research we included an invitation to participate in our interviews, to which we received a positive response.
- 2) Individuals involved in running or managing care facilities for the elderly (including residential old people's homes) established contact to their residents for us.
- 3) A local chapter of the *German Alzheimer Society* provided us with access to people with dementia and their families.
- 4) Finally, we were able to interview elderly people related to students at the university.

Using these four approaches we were able to interview 75 elderly people and 20 relatives of elderly people. We included relatives in our study because illnesses such as dementia occur more frequently in old age and can lead to restricted communicative ability. We sought – and found – in the interviews with relatives an additional source of information for the question underpinning our study.

Due to the relatively small interview sample, our study certainly cannot claim to constitute a representative cross-section of the age group concerned. Nonetheless our research does provide illuminating examples and grounded analysis of the complex life situations in which very old people in Germany find themselves today.

In terms of method, we based our data collection strategy on the approaches summarized under the heading of “narrative gerontology” (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011; Kenyon, De Vries, & Clark, 2001). Following this approach, we conducted narrative interviews. The aim was to find out which subjective narratives elderly people develop in relation to their current life prospects and experiences. The following theoretical assumption was fundamental:

[S]tories are potentially important in terms of operating as counter-narratives. These can provide alternative maps regarding aging in ways that can potentially displace the dominant story about aging within Western society. That is, the “narrative of decline” (Gullette, 2004). These types of stories might operate to challenge and resist social oppression, and allow different body-self relationships to emerge. In this regard, narrative bears within it the promise of fashioning a kind of scholarship that seeks to practice the possibilities of societal and individual transformation. (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010, p. 3)

In the conversations, which lasted between 45 min and 4 h, our interviewees had an opportunity to speak at length about themselves and to elaborate their ideas and perspectives. We deliberately took care to ensure that the conversations were not dominated by the problems and negative aspects of aging. Indeed we asked quite deliberately about the positive, satisfactory and indeed pleasurable aspects of life in old age. We also talked to our conversation partners about how their age group is portrayed in newspapers and magazines. Thus our approach involved first asking them to talk openly about their experiences and perspectives on life in old age, while in a second stage the aim was to get a clearer idea about the effects of predominantly negative media

accounts and what “aging successfully” means for the individuals themselves. At this point we establish a connection between the results from the media text-based discourse analysis in the first part of our research project with ethnographic survey methods to produce an approach that might be called “discourse-ethnographic research on images of old age” (*diskursethnographische Altersbildforschung*) (Grebe, 2010). The media text analysis is based in theoretical terms on Michel Foucault's concept of discourse (Foucault 1972, 1969) and is oriented methodically towards discourse analytical procedures that draw on Foucault's ideas (Diaz-Bone et al., 2007).⁷

The conversations were recorded digitally and stored for subsequent transcription with the consent of the people interviewed. Once the transcriptions were completed, the phase of analysis began. At the heart of the analysis was a process of categorization based in part on the method of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012) and in part also on ideas taken from grounded theory, including the method of theoretical memoing (Glaser, 1998). This system of categorization enabled us to create a synopsis of the interview transcripts, making it possible to identify common features across the different interviewees as well as individual specificities in terms of perspectives, experiences and practices. All the work steps (such as creating categories, categorizing the text and conducting a synoptic analysis of them) were done with the aid of computer software MAXQDA (Kuckartz, 2001).

We examined 15 of the 75 interviews in an initial, exploratory analysis of the data. The sample concerned consists of twelve females and three males aged between 77 and 101. The average age (arithmetic mean) is around 86. Our views about “senior coolness” draw on this initial partial analysis but are fully confirmed in the analysis of the corpus as a whole.

Coolness as a form of resistance

Ever since the student protest movements of the 1960s the English word *cool* has increasingly found its way into German usage as well (Diederichsen, 2003; Mentges, 2010) – not least thanks to the US film and culture industry (Früchtl, 2004). It is generally agreed, whether approvingly or disapprovingly, that there has been an Americanization of German culture in general and of popular culture in particular (Maase, 1992). As a rule older people seldom use the word nowadays. But when they do, it is above all to emphasize a certain attitude (as we observed among our interviewees).

When we speak of coolness we are not, of course, referring to the almost indiscriminate way the word is used nowadays to mean almost anything and everything (see also Diederichsen, 2003). What we have in mind instead is a critical concept of coolness for which – ancient models of serenity and equanimity aside – three main references can be provided, oriented towards a three-way social division: coolness has been studied as a mode of behavior of the lower class, the middle class and the upper class.

⁷ We have provided a detailed account of the discourse theoretical approach and discourse analytic method of our research project elsewhere: Grebe, 2010; Zimmermann, 2012a.

First, coolness is seen as a habitus-based strategy of survival for African-Americans in the white-dominated US (Conner, 1995; Majors & Manzini Billson, 1992; Thompson, 1973). As the ode “Keep cool” written by Black politician and poet Marcus Garvey in 1927 puts it, there is no point in “[getting] hot” when discrimination, poverty and humiliation are the everyday norm:

This is what you ought to do
Let no trouble worry you [...]
You can win if you would try;
Keep cool, keep cool
(Vincent, 1995, p. 131)

Coolness came to be a habitus of relaxed self-control, controlled casualness and casual improvisation, finding creative expression in “cool jazz”, among other forms. As such, coolness presents as a “technology of the self” (Holert, 2004, p. 43), as a form of resistance to the denial of life opportunities generally and of recognition and respect in particular.⁸

At the opposite end of the social hierarchy the European *avant garde* of the 1920s developed a “behavioral theory of coldness” (*Verhaltenslehre der Kälte*, Lethen, 1994), largely in the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche. Again, this is a technology of the self, specifically of the aristocratic and esthetic subject, deployed to avoid being leveled down to the point of becoming unrecognizable in the *melting pot* of an anonymous mass society. Among others, Helmuth Plessner’s anthropology articulates this notion of coolness as a distinct fundamental form of resistance (ibid., p. 75–95): the idea is to maintain poise and composure and keep a cool head in a society that in many respects has become overheated, whether on account of the intrusive regulation of everyday life by officialdom or because of an encroaching “tyranny of intimacy” (Sennett, 1977).

In the middle classes coolness also became established as a form of affective modeling from the 1920s onward. Its purpose was to maintain one’s own social position and to gain opportunities to climb the social ladder. This was to be achieved by cooling down the passions and behaving pragmatically instead and by avoiding any kinds of embarrassment in order to not appear foolish (Stearns, 1994). At the same time, coolness also makes it possible to exercise discipline in expressions of physicality and emotionality. The sport and fitness movements are part of this, but so too especially are those poses, gestures and facial expressions that have become established and widespread within youth cultures (Mentges, 2010). So in the middle classes in particular coolness is an ambiguous phenomenon: it is a defensive subjective strategy but also a strategy of social positioning (Stearns, 1994). It is a middle-class habitus of commercial modernity: the culture of consumption encourages a cool emotionality (Hochschild, 1983).

The habitus of coolness develops, then, in three very different socio-cultural milieus. At the same time it is possible to identify a mode that extends across milieus and social strata, namely, that of resistance. In order to analyze

this mode in greater detail we draw on Georg Simmel’s 1903 treatise “The Metropolis and Mental Life”. We use Simmel’s concept of “resistance” to draw out the related aspect of coolness, deliberately bracketing out other, more ambiguous aspects of the concept. Our aim here is not to project an image of “acquired wisdom” or of intellectual or indeed “cheerful composure”, as regularly appears in print media texts and self-help literature. Simone de Beauvoir has already argued against such an approach, counting it among those social strategies that “aim at holding up the elderly man as someone who is different, as *another being*” (De Beauvoir [1970], 1996, p. 3). In this view, this form of wisdom and composure is part of “the myths and the clichés put about by bourgeois thought” (ibid.), which attempt to pin down old age to specific attitudes.

Instead we use the term “senior coolness” to point to a form of resistance used by old people to reject stereotypical views of age and aging (“othering”) and to assert their “alterity” (*Alterität*, Zimmermann, 2012b, pp. 18–32). When doing so they are definitely not always “cheerful”, “composed” or “wise”: they can also express resistance and forcefulness, responding quite simply out of their everyday experience of life and their worldly wisdom.

Simmel formulates for a cross-section of classes, social strata and milieus something which can be regarded even today as “critical coolness”: an attitude of resistance adopted by individuals to assert their independence and uniqueness. The aim is to assert oneself over against a society that turns the individual into a “quantité négligeable”,⁹ an irrelevance in the face of “an enormous organization of things and powers” (Simmel 1950, 1903, p. 422). In view of this trend, a “resistance of the subject”¹⁰ emerges, a resistance consisting in the refusal “to [be] leveled down and worn out by a social-technological mechanism” (ibid., p. 409).¹¹

Applied to the societal debate about aging, this means that the widespread discourses of lack, loss, burden and disciplining present a flattened perspective on the lived reality of people of advanced years. They give shape to this life by means of a banal either/or judgment: success or failure. Those deemed to be successful in this sense are the ones capable of fulfilling norms that have become established under the labels of “anti-aging” or “active aging” and are aimed at avoiding old age, not least with the motivation of retaining a certain physical esthetic. Implied by these labels, however, is a highly foreshortened understanding of activity. Its key elements are fitness training, civic engagement and university courses for senior citizens. In contrast to this,

⁹ At this point in the English translation of Simmel’s text the phrase “a mere cog” is used. The words in the German original, however, are “quantité négligeable” – in our view, a much more illuminating description which we therefore make use of in the following.

¹⁰ The English translation of the text at this point reads “the person resists”. However, Simmel speaks of the “*Widerstand des Subjekts*”, the “resistance of the subject”. Here too the original German version is more illuminating, which is why we use it here.

¹¹ The more recent reception of Simmel in Germany (cultural studies) addresses the blasé and cool attitude of the modern urban resident not so much as a problem than as a resource. The growth of cities gives rise to a modern lifestyle characterized by matter-of-factness and precision as well as by a ubiquitous distance, reserve and resistance (see also Lindner, 2004). This is how the Chicago School of urban sociology responded to Simmel as far back as the 1920s (Hayner, 1928).

⁸ Indeed according to Margalit (Margalit, 1996), those societies that deny certain groups or individuals respect and recognition and systematically treat them with contempt should be termed “indecent”.

failure is attributed to the life plans of those who are either unable to meet such demands or are unwilling to “work on” their own age(ing) in line with the usual “prescriptions” for doing so (Rozanova, 2010, p. 221).

In fact, our interviews revealed that such recipes for “anti-aging” and “active aging” (see also Katz, 2001) do indeed meet with approval and are followed. Nonetheless a not insignificant proportion of our interviewees resolutely distanced themselves from them, such as former administrator Mrs. W. (88). When asked what she thinks about attempts to influence the aging process using cosmetics, medication or fitness exercises, she remarks:

Not much at all. I've never put a thing on my face. Now and again I take some X [a vitamin product]. When the weather's nice I work with a small exercise machine [exercise bike].

Mrs W. distances herself clearly from practices aimed at cosmetically creating an “ageless appearance” (see also Andrews, 1999; Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Mehlmann & Ruby, 2010; Öberg & Tornstam, 2001): “I've never put a thing on my face” – in other words, no anti-aging products either.

In our view this is evidence of a self-determined way of dealing with the external signs of aging, a refusal to accept the blanket ideal of beauty propagated by the media. Mrs. W. follows her own personal recipe for aging, one that does not unquestioningly reproduce hegemonic physical norms.¹² At the same time, though, Mrs. W. does not distance herself to the extent of rejecting cosmetics and similar treatments completely. She decides in a self-confident manner (“now and again” or “when the weather is nice”), meaning that she makes her choices critically and selectively. Instead of following age-related recommendations unconditionally, Mrs. W. responds skeptically and with reserve towards pushy programs aimed at preventing this or activating that. She herself defines the circumstances (nice weather) in which she chooses to be active (training on the exercise bike).

The example provided by Mrs. W. elucidates an initial facet of the phenomenon we describe as “senior coolness”. We see this phenomenon as a form of self-assurance, a mode of resistance, and as an attitude of maintaining a distance from an over-determined, over-exaggerated and overheated public debate with its normative disciplining demands and its commercial interests.

However, coolness is not only helpful in keeping the *big* societal debates at bay. It is also an attitude adopted towards the many small, everyday demands made upon individuals, such as cultural ideas about order, or tidiness. According to a widespread proverb and norm in Germany “tidiness is half the battle”. Keeping things tidy, though, can be particularly difficult in old age. Former nursing assistant Mrs. B. (87), for example, is less and less able to do so due to certain physical limitations: “Whenever I think: ‘Oh, you ought to tidy things up again!’, I don't do it every time, it doesn't bother me.” In

her response to the problem of not being able to do full justice to the social imperative to keep things tidy, Mrs. B. states calmly “it doesn't bother me”. In this way she keeps the norm of tidiness at bay and is able still to feel at ease even in a flat that is not very tidy. Thus “senior coolness” can act as a form of resistance even in the micro-sphere of everyday demands.

Coolness as habitus

Coolness is a constitution of the self in the form of resistance “to being leveled down and worn out” by prevailing discourses. Constitution means, however, that it is not simply a matter of a person's *intellectual* power of judgment (*Urteilkraft*) or their decision-making capacity but also of a personal constitution that encompasses the “whole person”. It is this wholeness that Simmel examines in terms of three classical aspects: body, soul and mind (*Leib, Seele und Geist*). Simmel ascribes to these aspects three terms that characterize the “resistance of the subject”, i.e. that which gives the habitus of coolness its specificity, namely, indifference, reserve and intellectuality.

Indifference

Indifference refers to the *physical* “resistance of the subject” against the indignity of “being leveled down and worn out” into a “quantité négligeable”. Indifference, according to Simmel, means standing firm against the “enormous organization of things and powers” by distancing oneself emotionally from it. However, individuals additionally don the armor of emotional indifference not only against powerful external influences but also against the indignities of inner life, against physical and psychological limitations. In other words, they distance themselves from themselves. One way of doing this is by not allowing their own difficulties to spoil their whole life or check their desires, however inescapable these difficulties may be. This is done not so much engaging in strenuous acts of self-discipline as by using emotional nonchalance. Coolness is a form of affective modeling which kicks in almost incidentally, as it were. In the face of extremely powerful indignities, both within and outside the individual, the body responds with indolence (Simmel 1950, 1903, p. 414).

To give an example of this aspect of “senior coolness” we quote Mrs. M. (88), a retired secondary school teacher whose mobility both within the home and outside is severely constrained. She depends on a walking frame for getting about. For this reason, she no longer considers herself capable of undertaking longer journeys. On account of her physical condition, so Mrs. M. notes in conversation, she will never be able to see the ocean again. Similarly, a longed-for trip to Greece appears to her to be impossible in the future:

I'll never get there [to the ocean] again either – *never mind*. That's just the thing, you make the most of the things you've had. [...] Of course, it's a shame I've never been to Greece. But: *so what?* As a child I saw half the world. [Phrases in italics uttered in English]

Here Mrs. M. clearly shows indifference towards a situation that is highly constricting and that bothers and frustrates her. Her explicit use of two English phrases –

¹² We do not wish to imply here that engaging in sporting activities, taking an interest in fashion, using cosmetics or having cosmetic surgery in themselves are an expression of “denying age”. As Garnham convincingly argues, such practices may be “a contemporary regimen of ‘care of the self’” (Garnham, 2013, p. 38) that cannot be reduced to merely reproducing hegemonic ideas about the body.

“never mind” and “so what” – is particularly revealing: for one thing, they are key phrases in a “code of coolness”, phrases that represent a physical-affective habitus of self-distancing in abbreviated form. A further interesting aspect is that the ability to adopt such an attitude in old age may require specific resources: looking back on one’s own life and re-experiencing events from the past are some of the key behaviors used by elderly people to (re-)gain access to positive aspects of experience in the face of physical limitations and encumbrances (see also Bohlmeijer & Westerhof, 2011; Cappeliez, Guindon, & Robitaille, 2008; Cappeliez & Webster, 2011).

“Senior coolness” may also find expression in the use of irony. For example, former laundry shop worker Mrs. H. (86) says of her incontinence: “I can think of more pleasant things.” Mrs. H. is speaking here about a highly undesirable physical problem that is associated with extreme feelings of shame and the fear of embarrassment (Elias 2000, 1939). At first sight what she says appears completely superfluous: surely there is absolutely nothing pleasant about incontinence – everyone knows that, and Mrs. H. assumes this to be so. Yet in this context her statement is transformed into an ironic formula that enables a physical malfunction known to trigger a socio-cultural response of disgust to be named (see also Twigg, 2000). This form of *self-irony* enables the speaker to distance herself from her own body (see also Randall, 2012). Being able to rise above one’s own problems, as Mrs. H. does with her supposedly insignificant remark, testifies to a high degree of self-assurance.

This ability to rise above one’s own problems is also apparent in Mrs. L. (84), a widow who used to work as an unskilled assistant at, for example, various industrial trade exhibitions. She tells movingly of difficult war experiences she had as a child. Her current health condition is also far from easy, as she suffers from severe chronic pain as a result of shingles. She is also progressively losing her sight. Despite all this, Mrs. L. shows no sign of despair:

You know, the older you get and the more you have gone through and the worse those experiences were, the – I wouldn’t say [...] harder you become as time goes by, nor calmer either – or perhaps so. At any rate, you take what comes. What else can you do? I can still take pleasure in this and that.

Here, Mrs. L. displays an attitude directly reminiscent of Marcus Garvey’s words quoted above: “Let no trouble worry you”. Over the years Mrs. L. has acquired a certain serenity and has learned to accept the bad experiences and the problems she can do nothing about. In this way she “still” manages to take pleasure in certain things. This “still” (in the sense of “nonetheless”) is a key component of “senior coolness”: it is not a matter of denying the difficulties and burdens and neither is it about merely accepting them passively. Rather, it is about living as well and with as much dignity as possible “despite it all” – that is, with full awareness of the difficulties and burdens.

Reserve

Reserve describes the *emotional* (*seelisch*, soulful) “resistance of the subject” to being turned into a “quantité

négligeable”. It is a “mood of the soul”¹³ (Simmel 1950, 1903, p. 414), which demands restraint above all in relation to other people. According to Simmel reserve means “the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces” (ibid., p. 409). It also refers to the willingness to maintain this same distance toward other people. The individual’s own view of him or herself is also determined by it: the individual shows their reserve towards others as well as towards themselves by “keeping cool” – not least in their mode of expression, in their gestural and performative behavior. One does not impose one’s problems on other people just as one does not wish to be treated by others in terms of being a problem.

The idea that elderly people may display such behavior is rarely present in the context of public debates. Indeed, the opposite is more often the case: 1) Older people find themselves portrayed over and over again as individuals who almost relentlessly impose their own problems and complaints on the people around them. 2) The public discourse of aging foresees barely any other role for elderly people in need of nursing care than that of a “problem case”, of someone who is a burden to their relatives and, due to the high costs of the health and nursing care system, to the economy as well. The interviews we analyzed, however, provide firm evidence of how important an attitude of reserve is for elderly people in order to avoid such negative identifications that entail this form of “othering” (Zimmermann, 2012b).

To illustrate this we refer to some remarks uttered by Mrs. W. (88). With regard to the possible future course of her life, she states:

I want to stay in my own home for as long as I can. [...] I don’t want any home care, either. I don’t want to be a burden on the state. [...] Of course, I don’t want to go to Y [place where her son lives] either: I think that’s asking too much, you can’t put your family in that situation, they have their own life.

Here Mrs. W. states her firm intention not to accept any major support from her relatives. She does not want to become a burden to the people close to her and, in particular, she does not wish to be too demanding emotionally. Equally, though, she does not want to become a burden to the state or the local authorities. We repeatedly heard similar comments in the course of our conversations which can be described as a widespread “fear of becoming a burden to families or society” (Minichiello, Browne, & Kendig, 2000, p. 265). In this context it is apparent that the option of exercising reserve may acquire greater significance in situations where independence begins to become fragile: when elderly people emphasize in word and deed that they do not wish to be either a burden or a problem, they are simultaneously maintaining a distance to a highly disparaging role ascription. This is essentially a strategy of self-assertion in the face of prevailing stereotypes of old age which regard people in an impersonal and hurtful way as mere *Pflegefälle* (a derogatory term for people dependent on nursing care).

¹³ The English translation speaks of a “mood” here. Yet Simmel refers to a *Seelenstimmung*, literally a “mood of the soul”.

Intellectuality

Finally, intellectuality describes the *intellectual* “resistance of the subject” to being transformed into a “quantité négligeable”. It is imperative, says Simmel (1950), p. 410/411, to distance oneself intellectually, that is, to gain a critical distance on both the overpowering influence of external demands as well as the immediacy of personal (physical or psychological) indignities. Doing so, however, serves as a means of retrieving and cultivating rationally those elements being engaged by body and soul: indifference and reserve are turned into a habitus of intellectual resistance, even in the face of death.

This can be illustrated by the case of Mrs. D. (88) who, along with her husband, ran a small retail business and who now lives as a widow in a sheltered housing facility in a small village (rural setting). Due to her physical limitations, she requires comprehensive support (including help with washing and getting dressed). When asked whether she ever thinks about what age she might reach, Mrs. D. responds nonchalantly, “No. Whatever happens happens. [...] I just don't want to become dependent on nursing care.”

Despite its apparent banality, the phrase “Whatever happens happens” is, to our way of thinking, an expression of intellectuality in the Simmelian sense: 1.) Mrs. D. speaks of the end of her life as an unavoidable occurrence. So she is aware of the approaching end and accepts this rationally. 2.) Her own mortality is rendered workable, as it were: the end may be certain, but when and how it will come remains undecided, which is why it makes no sense to get upset about such things. What is important instead – this is emphasized both by Mrs. D. and by many others of our conversation partners – is to live in the here and now (see also Kennedy, Fung, & Carstensen, 2001). The existentially devastating recognition that life will soon be over is countered here with an approach that is focused on the present and calmly allows the end to happen when it will. This fits well with an insight expressed by Jean Améry: at the end, it is a matter of “retreating with dignity” (Rentsch & Birkenstock, 2004, p. 615). Taking a transcendental order as one's point of orientation may be influential in the emergence of such an attitude (Tornstam, 1997). “Anything that may happen to me, even this incredible pain, no matter what – I place it all in God's hands”, says 95-year-old Mrs. K., who has been a housewife all her life. This is how she explains her ability to remain calm and composed despite all limitations and troubles.

Lest there be any danger of misinterpreting the data at this point, we would like to stress that neither Mrs. K., who suffers from severe pain, nor Mrs. D., who is fearful of being increasingly dependent on nursing care, respond with complete indifference to their life situation. In our view, such an attitude would not be an indication of reflexively keeping one's cool but rather of plain self-negation. Intellectuality, by contrast, constitutes the capacity to clearly recognize existential conditions of great suffering and yet to deal with them in such a way that they do not exclude awareness of all else or make it impossible to experience the positive aspects of life that are still there – even in the face of impending death.

For example, 80 year-old retired doctor Mr. K. grapples regularly with the limited nature of his existence. In doing so, however, he doesn't follow the motto “whatever happens

happens” but rather looks squarely at the available data on average life expectancies:

I recently took a look at the latest insurance statistics. If you've made it as far as 80, as I have now, then [...] you've got another 9 1/2 years. All being well, of course. [...] If I had been faced with that figure at 40, I would have got into a panic, and I bet at your age you wouldn't much like it either, would you? That's the question, though: is this some kind of detachment? I don't know, but perhaps it's only sensible [...] to understand – in terms of getting a feeling for – the fact that life is limited.

In the face of his own statistical life expectancy Mr. K. doesn't get into a panic at all. Instead what we observe here is “senior coolness” par excellence: Mr. K. speaks of a “kind of detachment”. Here, an element comes clearly to the fore that, in our view, makes it legitimate to speak of an *age-specific* coolness, a *senior* coolness. Mr. K. faces his own mortality in such a detached manner precisely because he has already reached advanced age. If he had been middle-aged he too would have “got into a panic”. So Mr. K. has found that advanced age can, despite all loss and limitation, nonetheless bring some benefit in terms, at least, of detachment, understood as a rationally and emotionally evolved and steadying habitus of reserve.

When asked where this “detachment” comes from, Mr. K. replies: “It sounds a bit dramatic, but I feel I can say that I've done what I was here to do – in terms of society and for myself as well, because I enjoyed doing it. It was good.” This response reveals two further aspects of “senior coolness” indicative of a certain ambiguity. The ambiguity consists in the fact that, on the one hand, the specific reasons for Mr. K's coolness are rooted in his life history while, on the other, his coolness fulfills an epistemic function.

Taking the former aspect first, the knowledge of having lived a good and fulfilled life can contribute greatly towards behaving in a detached way in one's old age: a biography perceived as positive provides a crucial basis for “senior coolness”, rooted as it is in a person's actual historical experiences. This is why, for example, former teacher Mrs. M. (88) (see Section *Coolness as habitus*) reacts in a detached way to knowing she will never be able to fulfill her travel wishes: “As a child I saw half the world.” Thanks to the many varied experiences of travel she had in the course of her life, Mrs. M. is able to face her current limitations with a nonchalant “so what?”. At the same time, however, a positive perception of one's biography is itself dependent on certain attitudes and preconceptions. A detached perspective can also enable one's own life history to appear in a relaxed light in retrospect. Understood as an epistemic strategy, “senior coolness” can also be regarded as an emotionally based mental posture that makes it possible to judge one's own biography in a balanced way at the very least.

To sum up our discussion so far: Coolness is a habitus of *objective* self-assertion. It makes it possible to face *external* demands and indignities with an attitude of self-assurance. Coolness is also a habitus of *subjective* self-assurance. It makes it possible to face personal indignities, crises of vulnerability and finitude, with an attitude of self-assurance. However, this is not a reference to the discriminatory, ageist attribution of stubbornness and inflexibility.

Such a chilling and drying out of body, mind and soul in old age is not what is meant by “senior coolness”. Rather, what this approach does is perform the remarkable feat of facing external and personal indignities with physical, mental and emotional resistance and distance, yet without becoming stubborn or inflexible. Equally, it is not a matter of suppressing or even glorifying losses, fears or pain, either. “Senior coolness” confirms and reinforces the self-assurance of old age precisely by being prepared to speak with poise and dignity about indignities, frustrations and crises – be it in an ironic tone or otherwise.

Senior coolness

What we refer to as “senior coolness” corresponds to gerontological insights that point to the particular mental strength of very old people. This strength, observed above all in psychological studies, consists in an ability to compensate for burdens and losses by deliberately choosing certain activities and optimizing ways of making the most of them (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002). Our approach extends this individual psychological perspective: “senior coolness” is more than a SOC strategy to compensate for individual adversities; and it is a wide-ranging disposition, a habitus, which enables people to deal with the internal (personal) as well as the external circumstances of their existence – in a calm and composed manner.

“Senior coolness” is more than merely a psychological SOC strategy because it is not adaptive but rather critical and resistant, especially towards discriminatory stereotypes in public discourse. It constitutes a habitus-based critique of images of old age that portray an old person “as someone who is different, as *another* being” (De Beauvoir 1970, 1996, p. 3). Our notion of “senior coolness” is meant to express a habitus that enables old people to counteract processes of “othering” and to convey a different image of themselves than the negative and pessimistic image (influenced by scenarios of decline and metaphorical apocalypse) currently being circulated in media texts and self-help literature.

The term “senior coolness” also goes further than those psychological and medical insights which deal with the impact of positive or negative stereotypes of old age and of self-images (Butler, 1969; Green, 1981; Palmore, 1990). What we are interested in is the art of living (*Lebenskunst*) in a comprehensive sense (Foucault 1986, 1984).¹⁴ This means more than specific attitudes, opinions or psychological dispositions. It has to do with the profound ways in which aging individuals adopt a stance towards themselves and towards the world. For us, “senior coolness” refers to a personal constitution and composure that gives aging people a sense of inner security and poise. It is about facing the indignities of aging with reserve and distance. It is about giving a dignified form to life and the process of aging.

In addition, “senior coolness” can be considered as part of a larger set of practices summed up by “care of the self”. Following Foucault, we see these as various “techniques of existence” (Foucault 1986, 1984, p. 5) that serve our

interviewees as ways of cheering themselves up, accepting themselves, boosting their own sense of dignity or protecting themselves. We have presented elsewhere a detailed model of “care of the self” practices engaged in by old people (see Grebe, 2013; Otto, 2013). Here, we would merely like to point out that coolness is not the only way our conversation partners responded to losses and burdens and to personal and external indignities and challenges. The individuals mentioned here as examples do not always behave in a cool way. The opposite of coolness, namely, becoming annoyed and angry, is also important for elderly people.

Mrs. L. (84), whom we have already mentioned, provides an example of this. She recounts a highly unpleasant incident at the local branch of her bank. Here she had been refused payment of a sum of money, the reason given being that she was no longer (legally) competent. Mrs. L.’s own daughter had had Mrs. L.’s account frozen after the latter had told her of night-time hallucinations and confusing dreams. In addition to the bank, Mrs. L.’s daughter had also notified Mrs. L.’s doctor. The doctor in turn notified a psychiatrist in order to have Mrs. L.’s psychological condition examined. Since then, Mrs. L. has regained access to her bank account, but she cannot get over the incident. When asked what she felt at the time, she said: “Anger, anger, nothing but anger. You can’t feel anything else in that situation. [...] But you can’t fight back either. And ever since then I don’t dare tell anybody anything. Not even my daughter. Like about any weird dreams, you know.”

Mrs. L. doesn’t respond coolly – on the contrary: she gets angry. At the same time she feels deeply helpless in the face of the presumptuousness of her daughter, the bank and the medical profession. But Mrs. L.’s anger leads her to adopt a specific strategy of rational and emotional self-defense: she resolves not to talk to her daughter or other people about things that could give the impression “that I’m not capable of doing things on my own”. She keeps silent about anything that might cast her in an unfavorable light. In this way she protects herself and actively safeguards her autonomy. This is a form of “care of the self”, a “technique of existence” that we subsume beneath the term “self-protection”.

Of course, these ways of dealing with aging cannot be reduced to a personality trait according to which some people just are naturally cool (or angry) and others are not. Even if there may be natural dispositions, coolness, as Simmel has shown by looking at behavioral strategies among urban dwellers, is a phenomenon that emerges for the first time in the modern world.

As our interviews show, coolness in old age is above all a matter of asserting self-assurance:

- On the one hand, self-assurance in the face of reductionist representations of old age. This is an attitude of resistance towards external indignities such as those currently being dramatized in a highly existential manner in Germany. Constant debates are conducted about what an old person “still can” or “can no longer” do: he or she can no longer walk well but is still fairly active mentally.¹⁵ In this interpretive framework, though, life in old age shows

¹⁴ We have given a more detailed account of Foucault’s theory of the art of living elsewhere in relation to age and aging (Zimmermann, 2012a, 2012b; Grebe, 2013; see also Powell & Wahidin, 2006).

¹⁵ We thank our Interviewee Mr. A. (82), a former librarian, for drawing our attention to formulations involving “still” and “no longer”.

itself to be anything but good. In fact it almost appears as a daily tragedy: whether a person is still fit, active and productive or is no longer so – that is the question. The question itself implies that the emphasis is increasingly tilting towards the “no longer”. Could coolness enable older people to reject the banal either/or option of success or failure?

- On the other hand, self-assurance toward oneself: “One must especially keep a mental distance to one’s illnesses”, says former nurse Mrs. O. (91), “otherwise they take over completely until nothing more is left.” Could coolness enable older people to maintain their composure in the face of burdens and losses? Coolness might even be useful in a society where there is no discrimination against old people: even a *decent society* (Margalit, 1996) would not be entirely able to ease the sorrow over our declining physical and intellectual capacities or over the loss of those close to us. Could coolness be a way of asserting oneself even despite personal losses and burdens?

Expressions of “senior coolness” are nowhere to be found in the prevailing negative portrayals of old age. What becomes plain from our analysis of the interview extracts quoted above is that they effectively constitute counter narratives: whereas media sources predominantly assert that life cannot be lived well in old age because of vulnerability and finitude, the interviews we conducted show that old age can yield certain benefits, even despite the various losses and burdens. These benefits consist not least in greater detachment, in what we have called “senior coolness”, understood as both an intellectual and an emotional habitus of resistance.

In summary, then, “senior coolness” can be regarded as an art of living that is used by individuals to try to create “a culture of humane aging” (*eine Kultur des humanen Alterns*, Rentsch, 1995, p. 60). It should be understood as a “habituated technique of self-withdrawal” (*eine habituierte Technik des Sich-Entziehens*, Sommer, 2007, p. 31). Here, though, the act of withdrawal consists in countering personal and external overheating thermodynamically: to gain distance by cooling down and to gain self-assurance through distance – this is the purpose of this kind of cooling exercise.

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