



Warning! Old age ahead!

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ABSTRACT: This article looks at the construction of old age as ‘dangerous’ and the social othering of older people. While longevity is desirable in the Global North, ageing is not. On the one hand, old age is associated with a range of negatively connoted stereotypes including vulnerability, loss of personal agency, and dependency. On the other hand, positively connoted stereotypes of the active and independent older adult relate to hegemonic midlife norms. In a context of neoliberal principles, marketisation and welfare reforms, those who age are portrayed as dangerous, while those who remain ‘youthful although ageing’ are celebrated. Through four observations, (1) the anti-ageing movement, (2) dominant gerontological discourses, (3) the COVID-19 pandemic, and (4) the slang expressions ‘OK Boomer’ and ‘Boomer Remover’, this article looks at how old age and older people are framed as undesirable, mocked, and patronised. This type of social othering does not only affect how old people are perceived by others, but it can also influence how we think about our own ageing and forms of inclusion and exclusion in society.

Keywords: old age, anti-ageing, social othering, Global North

Introduction: An apocalyptic demography?

During the last few decades, as a result of rising life expectancy and declining fertility rates, the proportion of old people is increasing globally. In response to this, in 1994, World Bank’s chief economist Michael Bruno wrote, “The result is a looming old age crisis that threatens not only the old but also their children and grandchildren, who must shoulder, directly or indirectly, much of the increasingly heavy burden of providing for the aged” (World Bank 1994: xiii). A year later, IMF (1995) and OECD (1995) also suggested that demographic ageing will pose great strains on state budgets. Till today, the conventional wisdom is that an ageing population will be harmful for economic growth. It is believed that older people will consume too many of society’s resources while producing and contributing little in return.

Although increasing life expectancy can be regarded as something positive, our contemporary ageing population is commonly framed as a crisis and burden for pension systems and health care as well as for families and communities. While the above-cited World Bank publication refers to our contemporary demographic transition as ‘an old age crisis’, population ageing has also been described as an ‘apocalyptic demography’, ‘ticking demographic bomb’, ‘demographic cliff’, ‘grey dawn’ and ‘grey/silver tsunami’. Using the terminology of war, catastrophe, and natural disaster, ageing becomes constructed as toxic and a threat to society.

Following Estes (1983, 2001), crisis construction and crisis management have come to the core of contemporary politics and affected issues of ageing. Policy debates have been shaped by notions that older people are a problem and great cost to society. Using

the rhetoric of crisis or natural disaster creates, according to Estes, a climate of fear and uncertainty which gives public officials the authority to act in certain ways and renegotiate established social contracts. In the United States, Estes and Phillipson (2002) argue that welfare cutbacks in the 1980s were framed as non-political. Rather than being seen as an outcome of complex financial issues and interests, they were largely mapped out to be a consequence of changing demography. One of the alleged threats was that the welfare state is not sustainable in its current form as a relatively small number of people in the working ages will have to provide for a growing proportion of dependent retirees.

Besides Estes, several other scholars, particularly from the political economy of ageing-approach, highlight that concerns around population ageing are exaggerated and used to legitimise anti-welfarist agendas (for e.g. Robertson 1997; Mullan 2000; Estes 2001; Estes and Phillipson 2002; Gee 2002; van Dyk 2014, 2016). Mullan (2000) argues that demographic ageing has become a politically respectable way of justifying the emergence of neoliberal policies. In the 1980s for instance, British social service minister Patrick Jenkin claimed that universalist welfare principles undermined independence and personal responsibility, and fostered a destructive dependency culture. The Tories continued this line of reasoning throughout the 1980s, resulting in a shift toward the privatisation of pensions. Welfare reforms like these are often driven by the “bankruptcy hypothesis of ageing”, in which large numbers of elderly are imagined using up all societal resources (Robertson 1997: 426; see also Estes 1983).

While acknowledging that the population in the Global North is ageing, Robertson (1997), Estes (2001), Mullan (2000) and Gee (2002) show that demographic statistics and prognoses must be approached critically. Future demographic projections are, according to Gee (2002: 751), based on certain assumptions and do not include for instance, uncertainties of new and emerging diseases, changes in the natural environment, migration patterns, and armed conflicts, or advances in genetic engineering and family-friendly policies. Many old people also continue to consume and contribute to society in various ways, such as caregiving for spouses or grandchildren, and volunteer activities. Not everyone thus becomes vulnerable and dependent. Nevertheless, rather than looking at heterogeneous ways of ageing, older people are commonly being used as scapegoats for social and economic problems. Factors such as the interdependencies that make up the fabric of social life, how health and other services are organised, and the distribution of financial resources in the population are overlooked.

Constructions of old age as a looming crisis, draw upon, and reproduce a list of damaging stereotypes of later life. In the Global North, old age is recurrently associated with physical and cognitive decline, passivity, and destructive dependency. Later life is described as a period of helplessness and vulnerability, and older people are pictured in terms of losses, such as the loss of good health, mental clarity, sexuality, and productivity (Sandberg 2013). In Britain, the Centre for Ageing Better (2020) reports that old people are all too often seen as incompetent, hostile, and a burden on others. Nilsson and Jönsson (2009) state that media representations of older people mainly tend to focus on health issues, loneliness, lack of care, or their difficulties using digital technology. According to Nelson (2011), these ageist images are often thought of as natural facts and truths rather than stereotypes, thus justifying ideas of old age as a stage of decay.

Ageism and prejudices based on (especially old) age are prevalent across societies – from

large institutions such as the World Bank, health and social care, the media, workplaces, and day-to-day interactions (Iverson et al. 2009). Drawing on postcolonial studies, van Dyk (2016: 110) argues that midlife has become “the organizing principle of a human lifetime”. Against this backdrop, older people become disdained as others, unless demonstrating independence, personal responsibility, and activity; traits that are normatively associated with midlife. According to van Dyk (2016: 113), midlife is furthermore equated with culture and control, and the aged are socially constructed as closer to nature by being conceptualised as “closer to death [and] less resistant to disease”. Or as Sandberg (2013: 12) writes, the ageing body is considered “unbounded, leaky, fragmented, and lacking control”, thus threatening a notion of personhood based on self-control (see also Lamb et al. 2017). There is thus, a “violent hierarchy” (van Dyk 2016: 112), between young and old, where each of these age categories are infused with certain norms, expectations, and prejudices.

Drawing on van Dyk and others, this article explores modes of othering older adults. It does so by looking at how common and persistent stereotypes of old age are created and reproduced, and the ways in which they come to portray old age and older people as ‘dangerous’. The aim of the article is not to examine the relationship between constructions of risk, welfare reforms, and what may be said to be empirically real or not with regards to demographic ageing. Asking the reader to hold the crisis discourse of population ageing and its counterarguments in mind, the article looks at how old age and older people are framed as undesirable, mocked, and patronised through scientific conversations, by public officials, and in media. This type of social othering does not only affect how old people are perceived by others, but it can also influence how we think about our own ageing and forms of inclusion and exclusion in society. Developing this argument, the following discussion draws on four observations, each of which show how old age and old people are framed as dangerous in various ways: first, the anti-ageing movement; second, dominant gerontological discourses; third, the COVID-19 pandemic; and fourth, the slang expressions “OK Boomer” and “Boomer Remover”.

The Anti-ageing movement: Living without getting old

In the Greek myth of the Trojan prince Tithonus, his lover Eos, the Goddess of Dawn, feared losing him to death. To avoid living without him, Eos asked Zeus to make Tithonus immortal. Zeus granted this request, but as Eos had forgotten to ask for eternal youth, Tithonus continued to age. As Tithonus became older and older, he gradually withered away. Eos found his increasing weakness and loss of physical abilities unattractive, and eventually, she transformed him into a grasshopper to relieve him from a miserable existence.

This classical story of Tithonus reveals a paradox: the strife for a life without end, while at the same time, rejecting traits normally associated with the aged. Today, human life expectancy is higher than ever before, yet views of ageing in large parts of the Global North seem as paradoxical as for the ancient Greeks. While we want to live long, we don’t want to get old. Just think of anti-ageing products, comments such as ‘she looks good for her age’ or ABBA’s reunion that included a 2022 comeback tour with holographic avatars of the Swedish pop group members in their youth.

While the quest for eternal youth has a long history – from Eos’ rejection of her weakening lover, to ancient burial rites, and the search for the mythical Fountain of Youth – Tesch-Römer and Wahl (2022) argue that old age became increasingly feared and despised

from the 19th century onwards. At that time, with the emergence of modern medicine, old age became constructed as a medical problem.

From a biomedical perspective, ageing has been defined in two ways. First, it has been seen as a process of degeneration connected to various diseases “in an approach called ‘normal ageing’ that implies a relatively stable, homogenous set of biological and physiological processes” (Estes and Binney 1989: 588). According to Estes and Binney (1989: 589) this biomedical model has impacted research on ageing, health care, and public policy. Although this branch of research has been of importance to promote health, it has also impacted understandings of ageing and its association with disease.

Second, ageing has not only been connected to heightened risks of various diseases, but also been perceived as a disease itself. Towards the end of the 19th-century, a number of experimental surgeries were made to overcome the problems of old age. While some physicians focused on hygiene and diet, others thought that the key to youthful longevity was found in the endocrine system (Haber 2004: 517). Surgical interventions aimed at rejuvenating women included radiation of the ovaries, ovary transplantations, and injections of hormones. For men, injections of animal sex glands or transplantation of testicles were thought to restore youthful vigour. After receiving a monkey gland transplant, a 76-year-old London businessman claimed to look and feel like 45 again (*ibid.*). Although he died two years after the operation, physicians portrayed surgeries like these as “benevolent acts in which they alone were eliminating the ‘grotesque’ disease of old age” (Haber 2004: 518).

A century later, in 1982, the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine (A4M) was established to promote anti-aging medicine and technology in the United States. Anti-ageing is a broad label that has come to stand for ideas and practices that aim to make people look younger, treat diseases associated with old age, manipulate the biological process of ageing, and expand lifespans (Vincent, Tulle and Bond 2008). Reproducing the crisis discourse of ageing, Dr Klatz, founder of A4M claims, “America is in deep trouble. Our nation faces the most perilous threat to our social stability since the Civil War [...] America now stands at ground zero, facing financial and sociological destruction, burning in the flashpoint of a 76-megaton age bomb” (quoted in Haber 2004: 521). While this may stand as an extreme example, A4M demonstrates how the construction of old age as dangerous is used in the anti-aging movement. One of A4M’s contemporary inventions is the software application AgeMeter, which collects physiological biomarkers to estimate its users’ functional age versus chronological age. The data can thereafter, be used to design a personalised program for optimising youthfulness and aid age reversal.

Other researchers also believe that science can be used to turn back the clock (see e.g. Rose 2001; Vincent 2009; Kaufman, Shim and Russ 2004). For instance, in *The Guardian* (2021), biologist Andrew Steele portrays ageing as a disease that can be treated. Challenging the fact that ageing is an inevitable process, Steele believes that a drug can be developed to slow down ageing and make it possible for 150-year-olds to play football with their great-grandkids. In one of the videos on his YouTube-channel, Steele (2020) says that it is important to reverse ageing as population ageing is “the single largest humanitarian challenge of our time”. Overlooking the fact that death (as well as disease, pain, and suffering) can occur at any time during the life cycle, Steele argues that ageing is particularly dangerous because it results in death.

Similar to A4M and Steele, a range of new biotechnology companies and anti-aging

start-ups aim to advance understanding of how to increase life expectancy by halting or reversing the ageing process. For instance, Altos Lab, started in 2022 and partly funded by entrepreneur and tech investor Yuri Milner, and allegedly also by Amazon's founder Jeff Bezos, focuses on cellular rejuvenation programming with the goal of preventing diseases and develop life extension therapies. Claimed to have an initial commitment of \$3 billion, Altos Lab is an example of the largely profitable anti-ageing industry, whose goal is to conquer the undesirable consequences of getting old.

At the core of the anti-ageing movement, midlife is idealised. Old age is homogenised and conceptualised as a stage of decline. Ageing is framed as a battle to be won with the help of new innovations and technologies. As Kampf and Botelho (2004: 189) write, the anti-ageing movement draws upon “an array of technologies and theories such as nanotechnology, stem cell research, genetic enhancement, neuro-endocrinal theory, and pharmacotherapy”. Biomedical approaches like these must, according to Kampf and Botelho, be seen as social and cultural practices that construct old age in a particular way, as something to be feared and fought.

Overlooking social, economic, political, and environmental factors, ageing is, through the anti-ageing movement, considered to happen naturally and self-evidently within the individual body, and it is the individual body that is targeted by biomedical innovations. At the crossroads between anti-ageing and posthumanism, the promises of biomedicine are to remove vulnerabilities of old age by (re)making the human body in new and better ways (Vincent 2009).

Apart from the inherent ageism of the anti-ageing movement – that ageing is a problem to be solved – the market-driven industry also makes the benefits of its advancements a question of equity and social justice: Who will be able to live in a body that doesn't age? And who will have to face the defined perils of later life? The defined dangers of ageing also create a new area of specialist knowledge and practice, and opens up possibilities for living a different life in a different body. From the perspective of the booming anti-ageing industry, “biology is not destiny, but opportunity” (Rose 2007: 51).

Dominant gerontological discourses: ageing successfully

During the last few decades, the self-help industry has grown considerably. Whether wishing to receive advice on how to win friends, become more effective, thinking fast, and slow or stop worrying, there is an excess of books which promise guidance. While ageing (so far) is an inevitable process, the self-help industry tells us that how we age is a matter of individual choice. Some captivating titles on the subject include: Fontana's (2020) *The Path to Longevity: How to reach 100 with the health and stamina of a 40-year-old*; Sinclair's (2019) *Lifespan: Why We Age – and Why We Don't Have to*; Esmond-White's (2014) *Ageing Backwards: Reverse the Ageing Process and Look 10 Years Younger in 30 Minutes a Day*; and LaLanne's (2009) *Live Young Forever: 12 Steps to Optimum Health, Fitness and Longevity*.

Apart from highlighting that ‘ageing to become old’ is undesirable, these books argue that one can remain ‘young’ by keeping active, having a healthy diet and paying close attention to risks concerning chronic diseases. This may be done through personal care, which includes the consumption of certain books, foods, exercises, and trips. While the anti-ageing industry believes that ‘the natural process’ of ageing can be slowed down, halted, and reversed through biomedical innovations and technologies, these self-help books believe that

similar goals can be achieved through personal effort.

Ageing well through personal responsibility has been, since the 1990s, a guiding trope in dominant gerontological discourses. In a publication by geriatrician Jack W. Rowe and psychologist Robert L. Kahn, the concept of ‘successful ageing’ gained popularity (see Rowe and Kahn 1997). Since then, ‘successful ageing’ along with ‘healthy ageing’, ‘active ageing’, and ‘productive ageing’, has dominated not only research on old age, but also public health, consumerist culture, and social policy frameworks. For instance, the European Union stresses active participation of elders in society, and the WHO declared a Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030. Also, the UNECE has developed a tool to measure the “untapped potential of older people for active and healthy ageing” (UNECE 2022: online). The tool, the Active Ageing Index, “measures the level to which older people live independent lives, participate in paid employment and social activities, and their capacity to age actively” (ibid.).

While what it means to age successfully can be defined in many ways and anchored in different philosophical traditions, cultures, and value systems, the dominant view in the Global North is that ageing well is associated with good health, a fit body, independence, (hetero)sexual activity and productivity (Sandberg 2013; Lamb et al. 2017; Tesch-Römer and Wahl 2022). Ageing well is about avoiding change, which is defined to equal loss, and maintaining traits and lifestyles normally associated with younger adults. One example of this is media descriptions of ‘successful’ older adults skydiving, traveling to faraway places or driving motorbikes “despite their age” (Nilsson and Jönsson 2005: 101).

Along with the concept of ‘successful ageing’ in the 1980s, Laslett (1989) introduced the notion of a ‘third age’. Aiming to confront unjust associations between old age and decline, he wished to foreground that later life could be a valuable stage of personal development and self-fulfilment. The third age was introduced to distinguish between active and independent older adults with a positive attitude and those belonging to the ‘fourth age’; as a time of dependency and decline. Van Dyk (2014: 93) writes, “Parallel to the picture of elderly people as a dangerous bulk, the non-frail ‘new elderly’ have been discovered as potentially active and productive citizens”. A person who ages ‘successfully’ is also often labelled ‘young-old’ in comparison to the ‘old-old’. And as more people are identified as belonging to the ‘third age’, the ‘new elderly’, and the ‘young-old’, 70 is said to be the new 40. Thus, the desired way of growing old is to continue a normative middle-aged lifestyle.

Mainstream gerontology may, according to van Dyk, be labelled as ‘Happy Gerontology’. Instead of looking at co-existing and complex experiences of ageing, it portrays later life in a hyper positive way. Following Lamb et al. (2017), the successful ageing paradigm may come across as positive, yet it rests on a deep cultural discomfort of old age, and must also be understood in a context of neoliberalism. Just like Oscar Wilde’s protagonist Dorian Gray, who sells his soul for eternal youth, the root of the successful ageing paradigm is the idea that ageing well is dependent on the individual herself. By being independent, healthy, and productive, the aged person may avoid becoming a burden onto others and retain the desired traits connected with youthfulness and neoliberal principles (Lamb et al. 2017). If a person doesn’t age well, she only has herself to blame. In other words, the good citizen is framed as someone who reduces public spending and support through personal responsibility, effort, and lifestyle choices (Lamb et al. 2017: 7). Ageing successfully is thus, not only beneficial to the individual herself, but also for “the economic viability of society” (ibid.). Rowe and Kahn, (1998: 102) who popularised the successful-aging concept, state “What

does it take to turn back the ageing clock? It's surprisingly simple... Success is determined by good old-fashioned hard work". While this approach not only neglects factors such as air pollution, widowhood, racism, income, and class, those who develop vulnerabilities, such as chronic diseases or dementia, are perceived to lack the right attitudes and self-control (Lamb et al. 2017).

Ideas of how to maintain healthy and active lives may inspire some and offer an important alternative to the decline narrative and 'ill-elderly' approach to ageing. Nevertheless, it simultaneously marginalises the ageing process and overlooks structural inequalities, changes in the welfare system, socioeconomic factors, inevitable physical changes, and the unpredictable happenings and coincidences that are part of life. Hegemonic ideas of what it means to age successfully might be unattainable for the majority, yet it has had penetrative power across society in promoting a normative dichotomy between what is considered 'good' and 'bad' ageing. Phrased differently, it divides between cherished, capable, and productive human beings on the one hand, and dangerous, decaying, and dependent elders on the other (van Dyk 2016: 117).

The COVID-19 pandemic: Risks of old age

In April 2022, I was on fieldwork in northern Värmland, a county in western Sweden, to explore the living conditions of women retirees in rural areas. During a conversation with 80-year old widowed Emmy at her kitchen table, we started talking about how everyday life had been during the pandemic. It had not changed much for her; she had still photographed birds, met friends to play boule outside, engaged digitally as a board member of a housing association, and would speak daily with her son. Having gathered information about the risks of the virus and how to avoid it, the only times she stayed at home by herself was when she did not feel well. She took a sip of her coffee and laughed at how the Swedish Public Health Agency had recommended that persons over the age of 70 should not meet anyone due to their age. "I have decided for myself!" Emmy declared and described the recommendations as "custodian manners" (*överförmyndarfasoner*).

Emmy is not the only one who has criticised how older people have been spoken about during the pandemic. Both in Sweden and globally, ageism has become apparent in unprecedented ways during the pandemic (Reynolds 2020; Naughton et al. 2021). In March 2020, at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden, the Swedish Public Health Agency declared those aged 70+ a 'risk group'; a group of heightened risk of severe disease and mortality following infection. Consequently, restrictions were implemented. Persons over the age of 70 were recommended to minimise, and ideally, avoid social contact. Anders Tegnell, former state epidemiologist at the Public Health Agency, declared that 'the aged' needed to be isolated. Tegnell is quoted saying, "Now it is time [...] to try and isolate them as much as possible. They may need help by someone to do shopping, so they don't go out and meet a lot of people", and "We really have to protect this group, for their own safety as well as their relatives and also for the health care system" (Andersson et al. 2021: online). In short, according to Tegnell, old people needed to be isolated and protected.

Although COVID-19 is a grave and potentially fatal disease that should indeed be taken seriously, there are many striking elements in Tegnell's statement. First of all, illustrating the ageism that penetrated much of the debate around the pandemic globally too, Tegnell makes a distinction between 'us' and 'them'. "Them", i.e. persons over the age of 70, are framed as

a homogeneous group that are invariably different from ‘us’ (see also Andersson et al. 2021). Making older people into ‘social others’, they are considered at risk, and as such, in need of protection and supervision.

This social othering of old people draws upon and reproduces stereotypes of later life as a period of ill health, vulnerability, helplessness, and loss of personal agency. With regards to the association between old age and vulnerability, older age has been globally identified as a risk factor to become seriously ill from COVID-19. However, the UN (2020) states that the overemphasis on old people may have created a false impression that the virus mainly affects the aged. Younger adults who have experienced negative consequences from the pandemic have also, in instances, framed these through ageist attitudes. In a Swedish newspaper a woman describes her experience of post-COVID, “I had just turned 50, but became 90 overnight” (Dagens Nyheter 2022: 11). The middle-aged woman explains that symptoms such as loss of memory, tiredness, and inability to multitask, have made her feel like 90, making the assumptions that these conditions as well as pain and suffering belong to later life.

Returning to Tegnell’s statement, he also frames older people as unable to make responsible decisions concerning their own lives. Tegnell encourages the general public to ‘help them’ and ‘protect them’ in light of the pandemic. Portraying old people as a danger to themselves and others due to their lack of ability to make informed decisions, was common during the pandemic. In a chronicle for one of the largest tabloids in Sweden, Pozar writes, “The old folks (*gamlingarna*) need to take more responsibility [...] As it is now, Ing-Marie will still have coffee with Kerstin and then go on a sale hunt in the nearest shopping center [...] What is going on?” (Expressen 2020). Pozar continues to claim that old people (portrayed as a homogeneous group) deny that they are old and that they pose a risk to themselves for doing so. Speaking directly to people over the age of 70, Pozar explains that ‘they’ need to take responsibility and that social isolation is for their own good.

Ageist associations like these, between old age and ignorance, appear to have justified how older people have been spoken about and for, rather than with during the pandemic. Tegnell’s and Pozar’s statements exemplify how older persons have been framed as incompetent and irresponsible. In a policy brief of 2020, the UN states that older persons have not been seen as speaking subjects or advisers to authorities. Although old people have been highly visible in media and public debates, their own experiences and thoughts have been neglected. Significantly, older persons have not been consulted in political decisions, thus excluding them from having power over matters that directly affect their lives. Naughton et al. (2021) argue, some ‘helping behaviours’ during the pandemic reinforce stereotypes of the helpless and incompetent older person. The naturalisation of old age as a state of vulnerability, decline and dependency, “cultivates acceptance of marginalization (being treated as a second-class citizen) and [...] rationalizes personal behaviors and acceptance of social policies that marginalize older people” (Reynolds 2020: 501). Looking at the Swedish context, Andersson et al. (2021) write in a similar way that people over the age of 70+ were not portrayed as independent and responsible individuals, but in need of help from younger generations. In their online note, they argue, “Persons over 70 were constructed as a vulnerable and passive collective. Heterogeneity among older adults – various ages, gender, ability, ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions and circumstances – were overlooked so that restrictions could easily be administered at the population level”.

Apart from being framed to be at risk for becoming seriously ill, older people were also pictured as a risk for society during the pandemic. According to Tegnell, older people take a risk if they go out in society as this can burden an already strained health care system (Andersson et al. 2021). Instead of pointing to problems in the health care system, older people are here held responsible for its sustainability.

In Sweden, health care personnel have reported that they were understaffed, exhausted, lacked sufficient management and forced to choose to whom they should prioritise care and treatment (e.g. Expressen 2020). In the Swedish Health and Medical Services Act it is stated that all citizens should receive equal care and that the dignity of each individual should be respected. Despite this, the National Board of Health and Welfare published a set of guidelines on how to prioritise medical care during COVID-19 in light of insufficient resources. Although these guidelines did not include age – as the Italian policies of no intubation for those over 70 – they reveal insufficient resources within the health care system; insufficiencies that older people were framed to take responsibility for, by socially isolating themselves. Instead of pointing to problems in the health care system and including older persons in decision-makings, old people were made into a homogenous group, dangerous both to themselves and others.

‘OK Boomer’ and ‘Boomer Remover’: Scapegoats for world crises

In November 2019, 25-year-old Chloe Swarbrick spoke in the New Zealand Parliament about the Zero Carbon bill that aims to reduce carbon emission to zero by 2050. During the speech, when Swarbrick criticised the government’s ability to address climate concerns, she was interrupted by an older opposition spokesman. In response to his interruption, Swarbrick raised her hand and said ‘OK Boomer’; a phrase often used to indicate generational difference and dismiss or mock the opinions of older generations, or more specifically those born during the baby boom generation (between 1945 and 1965) (Meisner 2021).

It is not known exactly by whom, when, and where, the slang expression ‘OK Boomer’ originated, yet in 2019 it went viral. The clip of Swarbrick spread globally across the internet and the phrase was created, reposted, and spread in the forms of memes, and through the hashtag #OKBoomer on various social media, including Twitter (now X) and Instagram. It was also printed on merchandise, such as clothes, phone cases, water bottles, and notebooks, and it gained popularity and spread on TikTok, Soundcloud, and Spotify. The most popular song by Jedwill and Kuli was identified as the expression’s own anthem by the New York Times (2019). The song is about older adults and includes condescending lines such as: “Old ladies suck/ Ok boomer [...]/ Aye, it’s funny, you think I respect your opinion/ When your hairline looks that disrespectful/[...]You’re all old and racist”. The slang expression was also developed into the song “Ok! Doki Boomer” by Youtuber Senzawa. Between 2019 and 2022, it was viewed almost 13 million times. Parts of the lyrics are “Whatever you say, boomer [...]/Your dusty mood don’t vibe with me/ You are old and so, therefore/ I must say ten-four dinosaur”.

‘OK Boomer’ seems to have been especially used by young adults, those labelled as Generation Z (1997-2015), as an outlet to portray older adults as close-minded, ignorant, and outdated (Meisner 2021). It has been used to express feelings that boomers have caused global financial inequalities and climate change, and that they now are denying progress on these issues (Meisner 2021; The New York Times 2019). In an opinion-piece for The

Guardian (2019: online), Swarbrick writes that her comment in the Parliament was a form of humour to shed light on the fact that politics for long have been dominated by “older dudes in suits” (ibid.). From these perspectives older generations are however, portrayed as a static group and a dangerous other. They are portrayed as the ones who have polluted the planet, hoarded wealth, and contributed to rising inequalities and the marginalisation of certain groups.

Taking age as an important factor for structuring social relationships and commenting on contemporary world issues, the media response to ‘OK Boomer’ has focused on its creation of intergenerational divide based on difference and conflict. According to the New York Times (2019: online), the expression “marks the end of friendly generational relations”. To make sense of a time penetrated by uncertainties, ‘OK boomer’ is used by younger generations to differentiate between ‘us’ and ‘the dangerous older other’. Accordingly, younger generations differentiate themselves from older generations in order to create hope for the future.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, ‘OK Boomer’ became reformulated into morbid memes and hashtags such as ‘2019:ok boomer, 2020:bye boomer’, ‘Senior Deleter’, ‘Elder Repeller’, ‘Boomer Doomer’ and ‘Boomer Remover’ (see for e.g., Meisner 2021; Skipper et al. 2021). A study made on the initial use of the hashtag ‘Boomer Remover’ on Twitter (now X) shows that the tweets in which it was used either ridiculed older adults or downplayed the value of their lives (Jimenez-Sotomayor et al. 2020). In another study, it was found that tweets using #BoomerRemover celebrated the fact that the pandemic now removed older adults who had “created social problems for subsequent generations during their lifetime” (Skipper et al. 2021: online). There were also direct encouragements to spread the virus among older adults to “thin out boomers” (ibid.). Meisner (2021: 58) shows that it has been written online that the purpose of COVID-19 is to “remove older adults from society so that more jobs, opportunities, and resources can be provided to younger and healthier people”. To draw a parallel, in the United States, fears that social distancing during COVID-19 would negatively influence the economy made Texas governor and Republican Dan Patrick suggest that grandparents should sacrifice themselves. According to Patrick, old people should be willing to risk their health and life for the good of the economy and the future of coming generations (Reynolds 2020). However, attitudes like these, and the use of hashtags such as ‘#BoomerRemover’ cannot be seen as anything but grim ageist discrimination. Following Meisner (2021: 58), “Younger age groups are “the desirables” while the older age group is portrayed as “the undesirables” [and] they are viewed as an expendable nuisance to younger generations”.

Conclusion: A dangerous context

Van Dyk (2016) argues that forms of othering of, for instance, women, ethnic groups, or the aged, serve to legitimise logics and practices of domination and the exclusion of certain groups. At the same time as the global population is ageing, there exists a widespread concern of growing older and a social othering of old people. Whether being positively connoted stereotypes such as the third age, or the devaluation of vulnerable and dependent older adults, the message is the same: old age is undesirable unless taking the shape of age-imperialist standards that centres on midlife (van Dyk 2014: 96; 2016: 113). The older person who ‘actually ages’ is, in a sense, socio-culturally constructed as a ‘dangerous other’

in the Global North.

Indeed, the fear of ageing draws on the stereotype of ageing as a natural stage that departs from neoliberal midlife norms of independence, personal responsibility, activity, and production. ‘Natural ageing’ is associated with or even synonymous to physical and cognitive decline, vulnerability, passivity, and dependency. While midlife norms are not unproblematic for middle-aged people themselves, they have become points of references for the ongoing production of difference based on old age. This becomes apparent in the anti-aging movement as well as in dominant gerontological discourses that praise successful, healthy, and active ageing. Older people who, through personal achievement or with the help of new innovations and technologies, ‘look young’ or live in a way associated with midlife, are celebrated.

Among the observations discussed in this article, there is however, an interesting paradox. While independency and activity are celebrated in later life, old people who were too active and independent during the COVID-19 pandemic were described as ignorant and irresponsible. Not only were old people framed as incapable of taking decisions by themselves, but those who did and decided to continue an active lifestyle were considered a ‘danger’ to themselves, others, and to the health care system. The ‘dangerousness’ of old people is also reflected in ‘OK Boomer’ through which older adults become constructed as responsible for the climate crises and economic inequalities. Rather than addressing the contributions of today’s older generations, elder discrimination on the labour market, the redistribution of financial resources in society, and ageist attitudes, older people are being used as scapegoats for social and economic problems.

The social othering of old people is highly consequential. This was manifested during the pandemic when old people were subjected to restrictions without being given a voice. For instance, instead of being able to take decisions on how to live by themselves, restrictions of social isolation were imposed on residents in old age homes in Sweden.

The examples show that old age, on the one hand, is framed as an uncontrollable natural process of decline and degeneration. Following discussions around covid-19, old people, consequently, need to be protected, avoided, isolated, and even excluded from decision-makings. On the other hand, there is an emphasis that undesirable ageing can be controlled through either new innovations and technologies or personal effort and achievement. The wish to control the ageing process becomes apparent in the billions invested into age reversal.

Dividing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ageing makes ageing not only a domain to control through medicalisation, commercialisation, and governance, but it also creates and reproduces social inequalities between those who have the means to affect their ageing process and those who don’t. As Lamb et al. (2017: 15) point out, successful ageing, as defined through dominant gerontological discourses and the anti-aging industry, is attainable only to an elite in global society. The binary view of ageing also neglects individual differences and the diversity of experiences along the life course.

Several scholars argue that contemporary midlife norms and the omnipresent crisis discourse of population ageing must be understood within its wider social, economic, and political context, which includes midlife bias, neoliberal principles, marketisation, and welfare reforms (van Dyk 2014, 2016). In an environment where consumerism and the “individualization of risk and achievement” (van Dyk 2014: 95) are emphasised, vulnerability and dependency become ‘dangerous.’

Homogenising people based on age, reproducing ageist attitudes, and a narrow and normative framework for the lifecycle, create a dangerous context in which to live. As Mullan (2000: 91) writes, “Today’s panic over the demographic time bomb is a sign of a society that feels itself to be in trouble – a sense of danger that is the outcome of social and political rather than demographic factors.” And it is this dangerous context, rather than the dangerous old, which we need to focus more of our attention towards.

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