

## **Conference Report on "Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Aging"**

NAR – Network Aging Research, Ruprecht-Karls-University Heidelberg,  
March 24-25, 2011

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Growing older, for humans, is not to be addressed as a purely biological or physical process but as one also determined by social, cultural and psychological factors. In giving attention to the different dimensions of gerontological research, the Network Aging Research addresses issues of aging as a transdisciplinary challenge. The congress held on the occasion of the 625th anniversary of Heidelberg University and the fifth anniversary of the Network Aging Research thus presented panels on epidemiology, biomedicine, the humanities, and the social sciences. The focus was clearly on the empirical sciences: whereas five presentations were given on medical, epidemiological, or biological topics, and one on the impact of dementia on national economy, only two presentations explicitly dealt with perspectives roughly integrating with (non-empirical) cultural studies. From the perspective of the humanities, the value of the conference clearly did not lie in the dissemination of specific gerontological knowledge, but in the discussion and attempted translation of models, metaphors, and concepts of aging that circulate in various academic discourses.

The public opening session started with a talk by THOMAS RAUSCH, prorector of Heidelberg University, in which he addressed the 'mission' of the NAR to attend to the complexity of aging holistically and in transdisciplinary dialogue. His statement that "there is no such thing as aging—all we know of are aging people" (based on Ludolf Krehl's famous statement on disease) pointed to the conceptual difference between generalizing approaches to aging in the sciences and the concrete, individual experience of aging, and the challenge of bridging the experiential and the general dimension of aging in research. Addressing the current boom in medial representation of population aging, life expectancy, and symptoms of old age, he criticized sensationalism and 'promises of salvation' from the finality of life and the inevitability of growing older, thus implicitly addressing an ethical dimension of gerontological research in medicine.

The first presentation on "Understanding, preventing, treating and accepting Alzheimer's disease" (originally in German) was held by KONRAD BEYREUTHER (Heidelberg), professor of molecular biology and genetics, and ANDREAS KRUSE (Heidelberg), professor of psychology, both



from the board of directors of the NAR. Beyreuther addressed the integration of medicine and ethics in raising the question of the aims of medical research and progress, concerning, for example, the prediction of disease by genetic testing and the definition of health as a state between the absence of pathological processes and the absence of suffering. He finally raised the question whether Alzheimer's could be understood as ontologically meaningful in its function of alleviating the burden of finality and making it easier to 'let go of life,' without, however, expounding on the potential for controversy that such an understanding of disease raises. Kruse then addressed the psychological and anthropological dimensions of aging with Alzheimer's by discussing the impact of dementia on personhood: if memory constitutes selfhood, what concept of personal identity can be formulated for a state of being in which biographical and cultural framings are becoming more and more unreliable, and the potential for agency declines rapidly? This radical reduction to the unrelated self, he stated, can be met by actualizing the aspect of selfhood related to sensory and emotional experience, as emotional acuity usually survives memory and mental power. Kruse mentioned the remarkable upswing in addressing dementia in literature, and implicitly raised the question of the function of fiction in designing images of the unimaginable: how can we think, imagine, or write of a state of being in which the power of thinking is declining, or already lost? Finally, Kruse turned to the cultural dimension of aging with dementia. Assuming that it is not so much the symptoms of Alzheimer's and the suffering they induce but rather the prevailing cultural images and representations of dementia and cultural techniques of othering the Alzheimer's patient from an assumed healthy norm which constitute the horror of dementia, he encouraged renegotiating images of demented otherness as well as the concept of human dignity in the face of degradation and loss of agency.

The panels on epidemiology and biomedicine that followed on the next day presented recent findings in medical gerontology and geriatrics. Biologist THOMAS KIRKWOOD (Newcastle) in his talk "Building Bridges Between the Disciplines to Address the Complexity of Aging" juxtaposed two aspects of cell development in aging which seem especially apt for translation into other discourses of aging: that of apoptosis—the 'suicidal' death of cells—and that of mutation—pathological processes of change in cells. As translatable metaphors, these represent an image of aging as a linear development, which essentially maintains original selfhood until ending in death, juxtaposed with the image of becoming an-other through aging by developing or acquiring pathological qualities that are in conflict with (former) concepts of the self.

The final panel on aging in the humanities and social sciences began with a talk by social scientist and psychologist SIMON BIGGS (Melbourne) in which he addressed cultural and psychological techniques of coping with the challenges of aging. Referring to Martin Kohli (2005) he stated that, in the 21st century, class conflicts had been replaced by intergenerational conflicts. Stressing the relevance of bridging generational differences for the sake of social solidarity, Biggs raised the issue of the relationships between age-cohorts in a culture that both euphemizes and devalues what he terms the age-other. In accordance with Kruse, he referred to aging as the greatest challenge to psychic and social integrity in life. The difficulties of coping with aging are not only due to the experience of 'time running out' and fear of death, but also to the nature of role models of retirement, senility, and elder care which fail to provide assistance with the integration of discrepancies encountered by the aging person: conflict and dependence (such as in the relation to children or caregivers), disability and agency, solidarity and othering, all of which need to be contained and endured. Age-othering is addressed as an ambivalent process: whereas othering is generally understood as a process of delineating what induces fear (in this case senility, very old age—the 'fourth age'—or age-related disease) it can also be a problematic technique for the exclusive norm-group. In cultures encountering economic troubles due to the aging of their population or, more generally, cultivating the denial of age and the valorization of youth, there is a tendency to "make 'them' like 'us'". The assimilation of third-agers to the younger age cohort certainly has an effect on images and expectations of the older generation's productivity. The tendency to postpone retirement age and represent older people as active and productive leads to a decrease in the distinctiveness of generations. In blurring these boundaries, it becomes harder to distinguish the age-self from the age-other—yet, as Biggs's argument seemed to go, the 'denial of age' also makes it more difficult to acknowledge the age-other in his/her own right through a perspective that integrates empathy with distinction.

The last presentation covered here was on "Becoming oneself in aging—a philosophical ethics of late life", held by philosopher THOMAS RENTSCH (Dresden). It addressed the question of how a good life in old age could be realized in the face of a radicalization of corporeal vulnerability. He stated that enlightenment and modernity had forgotten about old age by only addressing the rational subject, thus seemingly suggesting that rationality was no longer essential to personhood in old age. Stressing the relative nature of human life, Rentsch asked what eudaimonia, a happy and flourishing life, and selfhood could mean to the individual under the respective conditions of growing old, and addressed the need he perceives for an extension of theories of moral development to include old age and aging. After explicating the notion of happiness and the good life in ancient ethics, he referred to notions of the totality and seriousness of life—meaning the impossibility of interchange and rehearsal of individual existence—which become increasingly evident in the process of aging. Thus, the task of negotiating and shaping the "unique totality" of life in dialogue with others is complicated by the challenges that come along with old age—the increasing frailty of the body, the sense of time running out, the loss of social connectivity, and the sense of cultural estrangement. In spite of the radicalization of the seriousness of existence in old age, Rentsch made a stand

against othering old age. "The old are no exotic race", he summed up, referring to the fact that in all stages of life the individual needs to cope with an irrevocable past, an unsettling present, and an evasive future, fragility being an essential quality of the human condition at all times. By accepting the finitude and vulnerability of life, the individual has the opportunity to continue the actualization of the self into old age. This insight into finality is what Rentsch called "positive disillusionment", a state of grace representing the "highest form of existential sovereignty". Achieving this insight, according to Rentsch, is a virtue of old age, as the experience of "becoming final" and confronting the irrevocability of one's life-course responsibly is earlier hindered by the principles of speed, strength, and growth that prevail in youth and middle age. He concluded in stating that aging was, above all, a lesson in modesty as the individual goes through the experiences of becoming a body, becoming aware of time, and becoming final.

All in all, the conference addressed various perspectives and disciplines in gerontological research, providing thought-provoking insight into the rules and methods of approaching aging in the empirical and natural sciences. As became clear in every single presentation, the multifaceted concept of aging cannot be adequately addressed by means of specific disciplinary methods. To what extent will the natural and the life sciences, on the one hand, and the humanities, on the other, be represented in gerontological discourse, and how will their rules of interaction develop? That remains to be seen.