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Constantinos Phellas *Editor*

Aging in European Societies

Healthy Aging in Europe

 Springer

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Editor
Constantinos Phellas
University of Nicosia
Nicosia, Cyprus

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Overview

“Crisis, Crises of Aging”

In a couple of centuries time, historians who would like to study the cultural life of our times—end of twentieth century, beginning of the twenty-first century—might characterize it as a period of “generalized crisisology.” They would base their characterization on thousands of texts, documents, books, articles elaborated on daily basis in every part of our planet. Also, they would base their investigation on the work of thousands of institutions of education, research and communication, and on the production of thousands of analysts, journalists, and scholars who try to understand the nature of the current “crisis,” contributing through their initiatives to the elaboration of a complex set of discourses, essays, and studies.

It is clear that future historians will have the luxury of time perspective and depth in order to analyze our times with serenity and objectivity. For us, who live the present (turbulent) events, history on-line, as we may say, it is difficult to have a precise diagnosis because the financial crisis covers the economic one; the economic crisis predetermines the social; the social feeds the cultural; the cultural leads to linguistic; the linguistic to esthetic, and so on. One has to formulate immediately the question: which is the best level, the best point of view from which the crisis could be approached in order to grasp its causalities, its forms, its trajectory?

The term *crisis* is an ancient Greek word and it has a lot of meanings. The non-Greek-speaking people use the term in its first strong meaning: that of non-functionality. That is to say, we are in front of a crisis when we observe a total change of normal flow of everyday life or a radical overturning of the dominant order of things. But what do we mean by *normal*? In which scale of time and space, do we consider the essence of normality? Which context gives us the framework and the legitimacy to name the transition from one situation to another, as a crisis?

However, the second meaning—equally strong—of the ancient Greek word *crisis*, is the precise diagnosis of problems of personal or collective life, the assessment of alternative solutions, the selection of intelligent strategies to face a multiplicity of obstacles of organized action. This meaning is not considered with the same attention by the non-Greek speakers. It is urgent both to stress the

polysemic character according to Greek linguistic origins of the word *crisis*, and to point out the relative ignorance of its second meaning in order to go beyond the negative perception of the crisis. In other words, we need the second meaning of crisis to go beyond the first meaning. The crisis (second meaning) of crisis (first meaning) is the basic condition for overcoming the crisis (first and second meaning).

In a period of cultural turbulence, the fundamental aspects of social life—interactions, norms, patterns, power, production, age, gender—are the best domains in which a crisis could be detected, analyzed, and understood.

In this spirit, ageing could not be left out of the current crisography. Nevertheless, a series of questions emerge here. To which degree is it pertinent to approach aging under the threat of the crisis? To which degree the crisis does modify the analysis of aging? Or, to which degree the phenomenon of aging is really dependent on the context of crisis? To which degree the questioning on aging is the same in periods of crisis and noncrisis?

The dominant discourse on crisis in our global world is economic—financial. Is there a tendency to use the same analytical tool in the case of aging? Does a theoretical framework exist that is capable of exploring both crisis and aging? That is to say, to avoid a simplistic metaphor of crisis in the area of aging? A framework that instead allows us to be vigorous from a theoretical point of view into both crisis and aging.

If we accept the economic point of view, crises are almost normal phases, in the sense that they occur almost in periodic mode (economic history gives a full description of crises in the European continent, for example) and we expect to observe their formation and birth in a national and international horizon through a set of symptoms: poverty, misery, wars, conflicts.

The crucial question here concerns whether the rhythm of economic crisis coincides with the rhythm of aging. In other words, crisis and aging share the same determinants? This means that we have to be careful when we try to establish an interaction between crisis and aging. We may assume as a first step that in different societies, in different periods of time, different forms of crisis coexist, but it's an open question what is the mode of their interactions. Of course, if one crisis is the origin of all the others (ice periods in the Palaeolithic), the sociocultural situations are more clear from a theoretical view. In our times, however, we could observe a multiplicity of poles or sources of crises (global—local—glocal, environmental, existential. . .). The multifaceted and diffused forms of crises reflect on the multiplicity of determinants of crises and their articulation, combination, and accumulation.

In this perspective, is aging a symptom of a crisis both biological and sociocultural? Or, is it an area of social life capable to reveal a new version for the crisis? Or, is aging conceived in a new radical way by technologically advanced societies and its impact as a determinant of future cultures has nothing to do with the economic crises?

One could object the above thoughts as very general or very abstract. It would be more productive to formulate some questions on the mode of existence of the aged human beings, given the fact that all societies have developed a particular (in each

case) approach for the age groups in their context. So, the questions that should be posed: What is specific for the age groups (and aging) in contemporary societies? What kind of challenges are we going to face concerning aging in our societies? Why do we observe a shifting of terms such as from third age to aging? What kind of (interdisciplinary) research is necessary on aging? What kinds of policies are necessary at different levels of governance? It is clear that the variety and the richness of the chapters of this book do not permit to create an artificial synthesis of their contents. So, I think the crisis approach could offer a unified overview (uncertain and limited by nature), and the more pragmatic and comparative questioning could permit to demonstrate the complexity of aging in the modern world. It is also evident that the authors have not been invited to answer to the above two “problématiques,” it is my effort to combine their research in a common base. What is important here is their contribution to this new and promising domain of knowledge and research. Finally, each text gives us clues to answer multiple sets of questions. The issue here is not to arrive to a final and definitive answer but to create a debate in view of the crucial role of aging taking in consideration the multiplicity of its dimensions.

In order to grasp the contents of the chapters of the book, one might propose a typology based on themes and questions treated by the authors. This typology could permit to create an overview of the material of book, but, of course, it cannot cover fully the ideas, the information, and the discussions, which compose the chapters.

The first group of texts is dedicated to explore the mode of existence of the aged population in the framework of specific societies of the European level. The mode of existence is understood in different levels, symbolic, intellectual, and ideological, for example, but also in more concrete level of behaviors, practices, and networks.

The work of Fjellström and Sydner begins with the abstract issues of dependency (different forms in different societies) and individualism (the dominant cultural pattern of so-called western societies) and concentrate their attention on the (more specific) material level of food security in relation to the third age people’s capacity to sustain their appetite for surviving and their appetite for life. The work of Mair on networks (family and friends) as social places for the cultivation of social ties between aging individuals and their environments give us the opportunity to understand how the individuals get imbedded in the social topologies.

Social networking, as the most accessible (and the most critical) interpersonal environment in which older Europeans have organized their living, is analyzed by Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra, by using the current bibliography and by taking in consideration empirical data of a European Survey. Once more, the importance of social networks for the well-being in the late life is confirmed.

Paul and Ribeiro investigate how optimism or pessimism has an impact on health, that is to say how the noetic-psychological state influences health in old age, regarding the basic epidemiological parameters of morbidity and mortality.

Davidson in his endeavor to explore the life of older men in the United Kingdom, especially those who live alone, found that their sense of masculinity plays an important twofold role and twofold in the sense that masculinity enables them to achieve control on their lives and at the same time masculinity becomes an obstacle in seeking help from the others. In the same field of research, Kuyper and Fokkema

investigate and try to explain the fact that the aging lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults are lonelier than their heterosexual peers. Two parameters are considered as crucial: vulnerability and experiences of social discrimination.

The question of different types of literacy (digital, health. . .) and numeracy becomes more and more indispensable for the functioning of “knowledge-based societies.” But literacy is not distributed in a perfect way. The work of Vidovicová puts emphasis on financial literacy and innumeracy in preretirement age of Czech older workers. This work has a supplementary value as it takes in consideration the global financial crisis. Education is an important determinant in this case too.

In technologically advanced societies, people belonging to the so-called third age have lost their symbolic and professional capital, as these societies privilege the new, the young, the innovative, the rapid change, and the obsolescence. The international crisis has contributed not only to diminish the social status of older people but also has augmented the negative factors for precocity and exclusion. The text of Ribeiro and Teixeira, having as point of departure the case of Portugal and in comparison with Europe, is focused on the evaluation of the social perception of aged populations and social groups, in view to promote social policies and changes toward a more inclusive society.

In the same scientific perspective, Torres asks some fundamental questions on the transnationalism and its implication on gerontological research. It is clear that in a multicultural social milieu or trend of contemporary societies (with all problems of past and present migration waves), it is urgent to study the dynamics of old age identity and intergenerational solidarity by taking into account the cultural difference, and to assess the capacities and mechanisms of the states to face these cultural differences.

In order to understand the present situation of the older generations, it is necessary to compare it with previous one and at the same time to establish the present situation for future comparisons. For this reason, the research of Agahi and Parker on cohort change in living conditions and lifestyle among middle-aged Swedes, and their effects on mortality, institutionalization, and late-life health, is extremely useful from methodological point of view, and also for comparative studies.

It is clear that we do not expect the above studies to give us a complete or exhaustive view of the multidimensional presence of aging in our societies. Nevertheless, we have a set of strong indications on how the aging of the population is being shaped at the beginning of our century. It is also evident that many determinants (economic, social, cultural, technological) at a national and international level contribute to the emergence of a unique phenomenon for the (present and future) aging in the history of mankind.

According to cultural patterns of our societies (e.g., the limited influence of symbolic and spiritual references on the models of life of different social groups), the question of quality of life, the well-being, and the psychological–intellectual autonomy of older population are considered as issues of high importance. In other words, what the third age has lost in institutional and ritual level (in comparison with other societies), they have gained—until recently at least in the affluent societies—in number of members of this group of the population and in care and autonomy in

a material level. It is not difficult to understand why, in this book, six studies are focused on the issue of Quality of Life (QoL).

Deeg, Huisman, and Terwee present a framework to understand and to measure QoL. Phellas also provides a critical approach to the conceptualization and measurement of the notion of quality of life (QoL), which is being transformed as a large number of changes occur not only on different levels of aging (e.g., global turbulences of climate), but also on the epistemological level (high standards for the pertinence of scientific knowledge); his theoretical analysis is tested in urban and rural populations in Cyprus. Diaz-Ponce and Cahill explore more specifically the dementia and QoL. The issue is of great importance in the European context, because of the increased longevity of Europeans.

Using different surveys, studies, and experiences and especially the ABUEL survey (ABUSE among elder people of Europe), two works are presented in this book, with an aim to give insights how family and support networks aspire (around Europe) to assure the material and no-material condition for the lives of the elderly (Chiatti et al.).

The text of Ioannidi-Kapolou and Mestheneos, from the ABUEL Survey, is focused on the relationships between inequalities in the quality of life: this issue becomes more crucial as the economic crisis will create new forms of inequalities and accentuate old ones. Finally, in this field of QoL research, Kouta and Kaite present an overview of the home nursing care of the elderly. They pay more attention to the elderly people of Cyprus, who in their majority prefer to stay in their homes.

One can assume that the above mentioned works (on mode of existence of elderly, QoL, and aging) beyond their scientific interest and merit, are or will be very useful for the decision makers and the concerned populations, in order to elaborate better founded strategies that will allow them to finally face a multiplicity of challenges and constraints. Taking into consideration the growing number of obstacles faced by the modern state to exercise a coherent policy for the older populations, research findings are valuable elements and points of departures. However, in the book, three works are more oriented or more clearly dedicated to policy issues. Amitsis discusses the complicated issues of pensions, the reforms of pension systems in an aging Europe, under the threat of global economic and financial crisis; the scenarios presented demonstrate the uncertainty and frangibility of care and support of an increased number of Europeans.

Very often, the elderly people are considered as a “constraint,” as “an inevitable obstacle” for the economy. This stereotype, this oversimplification of the social status of old people, leads to a new challenge: how to transform the “handicap” to an “opportunity.” At the level of European Union and European Commission (EC), it is conceived and planned to develop a sector of innovative products and equipment to be used in order to ameliorate the life of elderly populations. The work of Wahl is dedicated to this megachallenge. In the same atmosphere, Formosa provides a critical assessment of policies in Europe concerning (the human right of) lifelong learning in relation to late-life education. His emphasis on key directives and policies has an objective to contribute to a more inclusive European social environment.

Social anthropology or anthropology could provide a large number of documents and research to demonstrate how societies have understood and faced the variables age and old age. The main lesson is very simple: variety and specificity. In the last two centuries, in the European context a certain number of institutions and patterns have established through a complex set of sociopolitical actions, conflicts, and compromises concerning the third (fourth and fifth) age. It is a common feeling that this period has finished for many reasons (e.g., demographic, ecological, political, financial) and a new sociocultural horizon, and new milestones for personal and collective life are going to appear.

The question of aging is one of the fields in which these mega- or meta-turbulences could be traced. In this spirit, this book might be read both as a symptom of this transition and as an introduction of the new cultural era under construction, with all its uncertainties and its promises.

Demosthenes Agrafiotis

Preface

Drawing from a wider range of theory, original research, and empirical sources, the authors of this book will successfully bring the reader closer into understanding the multiplicity of aging, its complexity, and the various roles which some factors play in order to enhance health and Quality of Life (QoL) in older age. The various chapters presented in this volume will be presenting concerns of pension reforms, the performance of national systems before and during the economic crisis, the role in which technology has played upon active aging, the need to establish the importance of food and food security, the positive role of family and friends, the need to impose happiness, and participation and activity in later life. The concern of dementia, disability, and chronic illnesses will also be discussed, as the importance of social support, financial stability, and the notion of inequality in older age. Additionally, this high-quality volume of chapters will provide those interested in the topic of aging a sample of research that is at the forefront of European work on the QoL of older people. Furthermore, this volume will also present examples from European societies that illustrate innovative methodological approaches that would be relevant to professional working with elderly diverse populations (e.g., ethnic minorities). As policy makers have placed aging high in their agenda, this book wishes to contribute to the policy, practice, and productive development and to stimulate further more comprehensive discussion on the implications of the most pressing health, social welfare, economic and other issues related to aging in various European societies.

Aging in European Societies would be welcomed by students across a wide range of courses in economics, sociology, psychology, gerontology, and the social sciences in general. Furthermore, students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate courses in health studies and health promotion would benefit from reading this textbook. However, professionals will also be attracted to the book due to the dissemination of current practises in health promotion issues and practices in the field of gerontology.

Constantinos Phellas

Contents

1 Introduction	1
Constantinos Phellas	
2 Challenging Statutory Pensions Reforms in an Aging Europe: Adequacy Versus Sustainability	9
Gabriel Amitsis	
3 Technology and Ageing: Potential for European Societies	33
Katrin Claßen, Laura I. Schmidt and Hans-Werner Wahl	
4 Dependence and Individualism: The Influence of Modern Ideologies on Older People's Food Security	47
Christina Fjellström and Ylva Mattsson Sydner	
5 European Older Adults' Social Activity Networks in National Context: A Cross-National Exploration of National Cultural, Policy, and Economic Characteristics	61
Christine A. Mair	
6 What About Happiness in Later Life?	83
Constança Paúl, Laetitia Teixeira and Oscar Ribeiro	
7 Dementia and Quality-of-Life Issues in Older People	97
Ana Diaz-Ponce and Suzanne Cahill	
8 Changes in Functional Ability with Ageing and Over Time	117
Dorly J. H. Deeg, Martijn Huisman, Caroline B. Terwee, Hannie C. Comijs, G. C. Fleur Thomese and Marjolein Visser	
9 Family Networks and Supports in Older Age	133
Carlos Chiatti, Maria Gabriella Melchiorre, Mirko Di Rosa, Andrea Principi, Sara Santini, Hanneli Döhner and Giovanni Lamura	

10 Factors Influencing Inequalities in the Quality of Life	151
Elli Ioannidi and Elizabeth Mestheneos	
11 Older Men in the Community, a United Kingdom Perspective	163
Kate Davidson	
12 The Social Networks of Older Europeans	177
Howard Litwin and Kimberly J. Stoeckel	
13 Financial Literacy in Retirement Planning Context: The Case of Czech Older Workers	191
Lucie Vidovičová	
14 Home Nursing in Cyprus	205
Christiana Kouta and Charis Kaite	
15 Quality of Life and Older People: An Empirical Study Amongst Older Cypriots	221
Constantinos Phellas	
16 Cohort Change in Living Conditions and Lifestyle Among Middle-Aged Swedes: The Effects on Mortality and Late-Life Disability	237
Marti G. Parker and Neda Agahi	
17 Late-Life Learning in the European Union: Implications for Social and Public Policy	255
Marvin Formosa	
18 Transnationalism and the Study of Aging and Old Age	267
Sandra Torres	
Index	283

About the Authors

Neda Agahi is a postdoc at the Aging Research Center (ARC) in Stockholm, Sweden. She has a background in Public Health, and a doctoral degree in geriatric epidemiology. Her doctoral thesis concerned different aspects of leisure activities among older persons; cohort differences in participation rates, changes and continuities in leisure participation over the life course and the association between late-life leisure activities and survival. Current research concerns trends in lifestyle behaviors, associations between lifestyle factors and health/survival, and changes in these associations over time.

Demosthenes Agraftotis is an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the National School of Public Health in Greece. His professional activities include, among others, Engineering, Marketing, Teaching, R&D Management, Health and Illness, AIDS, Art, and Sociocultural Phenomena. He has participated and presented papers in more than 500 seminars and conferences both in Greece and abroad. He is currently a member of 20 scientific societies and committees and is also a recipient of 7 scholarships. He is currently the scientific advisor for three scientific reviews as well as acting as external evaluator for European-funded projects. He is the President of the Hellenic Society of Technology Assessment and Evaluation.

Gabriel Amitsis is an international social security lawyer, Assistant Professor of Social Security Law in the Department of Health and Welfare Administration, Technological Educational Institute of Athens. He has undertaken research and teaching at the Greek Open University and the Athens National School of Public Administration in areas relating to EU and comparative employment, social security, and inclusion policies. He serves as senior policy consultant on behalf of national administrations and international organizations. His relevant publications include “*The effect of legal mechanisms on selective welfare strategies for needy persons—The Greek experience*”, in L. Williams/A. Kjonstad/P. Robson (eds.), *Law and Poverty—Poverty Reduction and the Role of the Legal System* (ZED Books, London, 2003); “*Principles and instruments of social inclusion policies in Europe*,” in Th. Sakellariopoulos/J. Berghman (eds.), *Connecting Welfare Diversity within the European Social Model* (Intersentia, Antwerp, 2004); “*Developing universal anti-poverty regimes—The role of the United Nations in the establishment of International Poverty Law*”, in L.

Williams (ed.); *International Poverty Law—An emerging discourse* (ZED Books, London, 2006), *The European Social Inclusion Strategy* (Papazisis Publishing, Athens, 2006—in Greek), *Public Employment Agencies in the European Region* (Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, Nicosia, 2008—in Greek) and *The Greek Social Insurance System—Reforming first and second pillars in light of the EU status quo* (Law Library Publishing, Athens, 2010—in Greek).

Suzanne Cahill is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at Trinity College, Dublin. She is also Research Director at the Dementia Services Information and Development Centre at St James's Hospital, Dublin. Suzanne has a background in Social Work practice, Social Policy, and Social Research and has worked both in Australia and in Ireland as a Social Work practitioner and researcher. She wrote her PhD while lecturing in Social Work at the University of Queensland and holds an M.Soc Science and B.Soc Science from University College Dublin. During 2011, Suzanne was chairperson of the National Dementia Advisory Committee; the latter was established to oversee an extensive research review leading to the development of Ireland's national Dementia Strategy. She is principal author of the report titled: *Creating Excellence in Dementia Care: A Research Review for Ireland's National Dementia Strategy*. Suzanne has published widely on aging and dementia-related topics. She currently teaches an undergraduate course on Aging and Dementia to Social Work and Social Policy students and supervises several Masters and PhD students. Her research interests include GPs and dementia, residential care policy and dementia, assistive technology, and family caregiving.

Carlos Chiatti holds a Master in Economics and a PhD in Epidemiology. He is a research fellow at the Italian National Institute of Health and Science on Aging (INRCA) and visiting fellow at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. In addition, he teaches Health Economics at the University of Ancona. In his past professional experience, he was consultant for many public and private health institutions in projects aimed at improving services organization and the Information Systems within the Italian National Health Service. His doctoral thesis was specifically focused on social inequalities in health and health care but he has also worked on several international projects in the field of active aging. At INRCA, he worked on the project FUTURAGE, aimed at defining the roadmap for future aging research in Europe. He recently received a research grant from the Ministry of Welfare, for a large community trial (UP-TECH project) aimed at improving the provision of health and social care for patients affected by Alzheimer Disease, through a better integration of existing services and the use of new technologies.

Katrin Claßen is a psychologist and PhD student at the Department of Psychological Aging Research at the Institute of Psychology at Heidelberg University, Germany. She is writing her thesis about the relationship between psychological aspects and the evaluation of technology in middle and late adulthood. Furthermore, she is accomplishing an advanced vocational training in cognitive behavioral therapy at Heidelberg University, Germany.