

# ‘I am not *that* old’: inter-personal experiences of thriving and threats at a senior centre

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## **ABSTRACT**

The high cultural valuation of youthfulness and fitness in the mass media and more generally in western consumer society is the contextual frame for this study. It examines older people’s attitudes towards their own ageing and towards people who are older or frailer than themselves. Participant observation was conducted of the attitudes, actions and interactions of the users of a senior centre in Norway. The users held two sets of attitudes that led to quite different activities and actions at the centre. On the one hand, they saw the centre as helping them ‘thrive’, which was associated with involvement in the community and participation in the structured daily activities to promote the senses of belonging and being useful. On the other hand, some perceived the centre and particularly the other users as ‘threats’ – as reminding them that they were getting old and increasingly vulnerable to sickness and disability. To some, the centre was for old people with disabilities, and they used subtle strategies to distance themselves from this group. Some users’ attitudes and behaviour were in tension: they wished to participate in the valued activities but also to distance themselves from frailer users, while not denying their own ageing. The distancing strategies and behaviour amounted to age discrimination in interpersonal relations and interactions at the centre. This behaviour accepts rather than challenges the cultural valuation of youthfulness and the negative representation of old age.

**KEY WORDS** – ageism, consumer culture, notion of ageing, seniors’ experiences, youth orientation.

## **Introduction**

This article critically examines questions about what it means to grow old in today’s western consumer culture that promotes a youthful orientation and ageism, and about how older people live and relate to these ideals.

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The aim is to illustrate what it means to older people to be 'old' and 'not old'. Evidence is drawn from participant observation of the interactions of the users of a senior centre in a Norwegian city. The theoretical and methodological premises are that the cultural and societal contexts of the communal setting are a useful lens for analysing and understanding the perceptions and behaviour of older people.

The last 20 years have seen increased research on old age, but most has focused on meeting the rising need for health-care and social services (Andrews 1999). The medical and needs perspectives generally focus on longevity, autonomy and independence in older age (Bowling 2007). While the dynamics of ageism and the denial of ageing have been well documented, little attention has been paid to the conflicting messages about what it means to be old and how the ensuing contradictions are implicated in a process by which individuals distance themselves from 'the old'. Recent studies of the personal experience of ageing have emphasised the difference between 'being old' and 'feeling old' (Daatland, Solem and Valset 2006; Torres and Hammarstrom 2006). Hurd (1999) explored the ways in which women at a senior centre in Canada actively and interactively constructed and negotiated age categories, by distancing themselves from those whom they perceived and considered as 'old'. Further research is needed into the interactions between beauty standards, gender, ageing, physical characteristics and perceived desirability, not least to situate personal ageing as a central constituent of contemporary culture. The article describes successively the setting of the study, the participant observation method, and our analysis and interpretation of the interview and observation data.

### *Senior centres in Norway*

Senior centres are voluntary meeting places that provide social contact and the prevention of loneliness and isolation for people aged 60 or more years. They explicitly seek to promote health and prevent disease. In Norway there are approximately 330 senior centres, and most are run by voluntary organisations (Helse og Omsorgsdepartementet 1996; Slagsvold, Daatland and Guntvedt 2000). Around 40 to 55 per cent of the older population in Norway are registered as users (Pettersen and Laake 2000, 2003). A literature search in June 2007 in PsychINFO, MEDLINE and PubMed identified no recent studies of users' experiences, communication and interactions at the senior centres, but there have been a few evaluations of Norway's senior centres. The most recent in 2006 was a survey of 2,764 users at 41 centres in the City of Oslo. The findings showed that the senior centres are important in the users' lives, and that there was

a positive relationship between the age of the user and the importance that they attached to their visits (Helse-og velferdsetaten 2006).

### **Western consumer culture and the personal experience of ageing**

Understanding the role of culture in contemporary society is crucial to an understanding of the position of older adults (Tulle-Winton 1999). The various cultures of ageing each have their own representation of old age (Gilleard and Higgs 2000). The standpoint of this paper is that culture is a dynamic system in which human beings weave self-made meanings, and that these are created, negotiated, contested and changed through interactions with others and the environment. The culture is complex; it has been described as 'the air that we breath' (Geertz 1973; Thorsen 2005), and it is continuously in flux and contradictory, which gives rise to different meanings. Many have seen contemporary western culture as first and foremost one that creates a general expectation of staying young (Sassatelli 2007), in contradiction to the unavoidable fact that we all age day by day. If the consumer culture has been created mainly by the media, arguably it is reinforced by health-care and social policies that promote healthy lifestyles and encourage 'active ageing', physical activity and good nutrition.

#### *'Go-go' and 'no-go' images*

In the western media, different versions of personal ageing are presented, but the most influential convey a dichotomy between 'go-go' and 'no-go' attitudes and behaviour (Blaikie 2006; Danielsen and Valset 2004; Mountain 2004). Older people are represented as an increasingly affluent, active group of people, of whose concerns politicians should take note, and from which more workers might be found to sustain the economy (Mountain 2004). Older adults are also seen as creating 'senior markets' to which 'successful marketing to the 50+ consumer' is directed (Sawchuk 1995). In line with the 'go-go' images, the media delight in exceptional stories of the abilities of very old people. On the other hand, there are also many representations of 'no-go' older adults, characterised by frailty, illness, dependency on health-care and social services, demeaned, and a social and economic burden to society (Blaikie 2006). These polarised images contribute to stereotypes and place older people in a social ghetto. The individuality of each older person is neglected and ageism is created (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995; Reynolds and Lim 2005).

*Active ageing*

Health and social policies have adopted the notions of ‘active ageing’ and ‘healthy ageing’, because they are thought to promote ‘successful ageing’ through healthy lifestyles, physical activity and good nutrition. The ambition is to help people remain independent and active into old age (World Health Organisation 2002, 2006). The foci on active ageing, activities and occupation have been welcomed by occupational therapists, gerontologists and others concerned with seniors’ wellbeing, but there have also been cautionary and critical responses to the wholesale promotion of ‘positive ageing’ in policy documents and the media (Andrews 1999; Laliberte Rudman 2006). Expositions of ‘successful ageing’ cite inconsistent definitions and promotional factors. Several studies have shown that older people believe that they have aged successfully even when they have disorders and functional limitations, which the medical perspective sees as markers of lack of success (Bowling 2007). ‘Active ageing’ has taken on a moral significance in the understanding of what it is to age well. Promoting an expectation of good health and functioning in old age could limit the understanding of successful adjustments to ageing and of appropriate existential priorities in later life (Biggs 2006).

*Resisting the ageing process*

People use various overt and subtle strategies to resist, deny and postpone the ageing process (Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Gilleard and Higgs 2000; Tulle-Winton 1999). Promoting the ideal of youthfulness is not a new historical phenomenon and has been expressed variously at different times (Öberg and Tornstam 2001). Today, there is increasing use of clothing, diet and cosmetics to mask the visible evidence of ageing. In western society, the body is often regarded as both symbol and product, and a homogenised ideal of body and beauty based on consumer values has wide currency. A dominant media message is that nobody needs to live with an unsatisfactory body. The focus on the body may create vulnerability and anxiety, however, and raises issues of the subjective understanding of the body (Engelsrud 2006). The value of cosmetic surgery seems to be widely accepted by women, and to be increasingly considered by men. Its use represents an attempt to conform more closely to a cultural standard of beauty and even of identity (Askegaard, Gertsen and Langer 2002; Heyes 2007). Consumer culture promotes solutions that draw upon medical and technical expertise in featuring active youthful older adults, which can be regarded as a continuation of the long-established tradition of interest in rejuvenation and longevity (Featherstone and Wernick 1995).

If one's body has become a symbol of one's identity, being fit reflects the person's willpower, energy and self-control in achieving the cultural norm of a 'youthful' old age. An approved strategy has become to pursue fitness activities to change body shape, instead of passively resigning oneself to losing shape and vigour (Öberg and Tornstam 2001). A third way of dealing with growing old is to distance oneself from the old body with thoughts and expressions such as, 'I am not as old as I look', and 'Inside I feel young' (Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Öberg 1996). Studies in Sweden and Norway have found that about 70 per cent of 40–85-year-olds would like to be 10 or more years younger than their chronological age (Andersson and Öberg 2006; Daatland, Solem and Valset 2006; Öberg and Tornstam 2001). Youthfulness, physical strength and fitness seem to be regarded as age-independent and a criterion of social value (Andrews 1999; Biggs and Daatland 2006; Thorsen 2005). The present culture creates a tension between the inevitability of the decrements of ageing and youthfulness. The negativism of the former is exaggerated by common stereotypes of old age and older people, which stigmatise older people in society, and by which ageism is created and maintained (Danielsen and Valset 2004; Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Hurd 1999). The Norwegian composer Halvdan Sivertsen expressed the tension between the idealised ambition and awareness of its unreality in the song, *We Will Live Long, But We Will Not Grow Old* (Sivertsen 1994).

## **The participant observation study**

### *The senior centre*

The senior centre for the study was selected in consultation with one of the main organisations that run them, the Norwegian Health Association. Its mission statement focuses on the promotion of 'thriving, security, social contact and networks, stimulating experiences in daily life, good food, inclusive atmosphere, information and guidance regarding personal economy, nutrition, health, activity and assistance in practical activities'. 'Thriving' is emphasised and in this context associated with 'good health' and 'subjective well-being', consistent with terms used in social gerontology (Slagsvold 2000). The centre has 3.5 permanent posts – the manager, a cook and two assistants. In addition, more than 40 pensioners volunteer their assistance, from once-a-month to almost daily. The centre is near the centre of a city of around 500,000 and accommodated in a well-restored, old Suisse villa. One entrance is accessible using stairs and another from a ramped path. In the entrance hall, there is a notice board with information on the programmes for the day, the week and the month. At one

visit, the following messages were prominent: 'Welcome to the senior centre. The door is open from 8 am to 3.30 pm on Mondays to Fridays', 'Today's meal is homemade meatballs', 'Welcome to today's lecture, *Laugh and Prolong Your Life!*', 'Every Monday [there is] Nordic walking', 'Senior dance for active seniors', 'Welcome to the handicrafts group' and 'Welcome to the music-café on Sunday, once a month'. The senior centre therefore offers many cultural, hobbies and exercise activities, and several personal services, including catering, hairdressing and pedicure (Lund 2005).

### *The participants*

The participants were drawn from the 2,339 registered community-dwelling users and volunteers aged 60 or more years; they all lived locally. The number of registered users who visit the centre more than twice a year has increased from around 500 in 2003 to 636 in 2004. Women are the main users and only 19 per cent are men (Lund 2005), which is in line with women's higher average life expectancy.<sup>1</sup> The age profile of the users in 2004 was older than the general elderly population: the average age was 77 years, and 44 per cent were aged 80 or more years. Each day 20 to 70 seniors visited the centre. Some attended for a specific reason, such as to visit the hairdresser, for the French course, to have a meal or to meet people. Others visited the centre regularly and talked with people they met every day. The volunteers undertake many tasks at the centre, for example managing the café, doing office work, welcoming new users, or organising the bridge or computer groups (Lund 2005).

### *The participant observation method*

Participant observation was used to gather data about the seniors' communal activities and interactions at the senior centre, and their lives and stories outside the centre have been considered only indirectly through what they said.<sup>2</sup> To approach an understanding of the meanings that the users of the centre had of its activities (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), the researcher (AL) attended the centre for about 100 hours spread over 17 days through three months. Field notes were written at the centre and carefully recorded at the end of each day. The researcher worked as a volunteer, which enabled interactions and collaboration with the seniors (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer 2005). Instead of just observing, the researcher participated in the activities, such as serving meals, activity groups, the management of the café and office work. It should be recognised, however, that the researcher was not of the same age or in the same social situation as the senior users. She had a dual perspective that fluctuated

between distance from and closeness to the senior users, comparable to an apprentice in the workplace (Wadel 2002). The centre's activities were unfamiliar to the researcher, which created many opportunities to ask questions and learn from the users, and encouraged the sharing of experiences through 'doing' and 'saying'. The researcher interpreted the shared experiences by applying her occupation-focused approach that was sensitised to the ways in which the seniors both raised control over their environment and used inter-personal interactions to improve their wellbeing (Wilcock 2006).

### *The analysis of the data*

The process of analysis began while developing the research questions and continued as data were gathered (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Fangen 2004; Wadel 2002). The field notes were categorised as 'observation notes', 'theory notes' and 'methodology notes' (Fangen 2004). The concerted search for understanding and system in the data involved repeated selections from the three categories of notes and iterative comparisons and changes of perspective. The researcher sought to differentiate the way the material was created from her own experiences and interpretations. Interpretations were closely discussed with the second author (GE). The analysis identified various themes in the seniors' expressions about personal ageing and growing old. In deciding the labels for the themes, terms close to the seniors' vocabulary were preferred. 'Thriving' strategies were emphasised and described as such by the users. We defined the 'thriving' strategies as those that referred to or engaged with 'a sense of community', 'the rhythm of daily life' and 'feeling useful'. The notion of 'thriving' in these senses is close to subjective wellbeing (Slagsvold 2000; Thorsen 2002). On the other hand we found that 'threat' strategies were actualised and described in subtler ways. We found that the informants who distanced themselves from the centre and from other attenders connected these thoughts with striving to 'stay young'. We show how distancing strategies were used both in the users' conceptualisations of the senior centre and in their relations and interactions with others.

### *Strategies to promote thriving and to engage with a sense of community*

Many users expressed their appreciation of the services offered at the centre and of the opportunities to meet other people. As one woman said, 'we have a nice time ... as human beings, we are created for community [social beings] which is particularly important here, since many of us live alone'. Belonging to the centre's community was expressed by using 'we'.

As one woman said, 'we will sit here until someone throws us out'. Another remarked, 'this (centre) is like our second home'. The way the users talked about the centre referred to both emotional and practical dimensions of belonging and community. For example, in the café there is one table where men regularly gather, and another where women sit. One of the men said, 'It is very important with these tables, because we can sit together with people we know'. The significance of the social contact was commented on by many users. One couple that had been married for more than 60 years emphasised the value they attached to the social network. The wife said, 'one of us will die first, and it can be difficult to be alone without people you know and can talk to'. Another user said, 'when you live alone it is important to get out and meet other people'. One woman said, 'I don't have any children, and I have been a widow twice and that is the reason why it is important for me to be here'. These users created meaning in their lives from being part of the social group at the centre, and by acting and interacting with each other. They were conscious of the importance of social contacts and of the sense of community and explicitly related them to a sense of thriving.

#### *The value of rhythms in daily life*

Visiting the centre helped many informants create a structure in their daily life, as was variously reported. One woman said, 'I started here when I was 78, when I stopped working'. Another woman said that she was keen to maintain a daily rhythm in her life and to be independent: 'I get up in the morning, dress, make breakfast, read the newspaper, tidy my bed and go to the centre'. Another woman who attended every day said, 'I go for my usual walk at half-past-nine ... I walk for about an hour every morning, and then I go to the centre'. Another user visited every Thursday because 'on Thursdays there is fish for dinner'. The 'fish days' created a weekly rhythm and continuity. One woman recollected, 'I started to visit the centre when I lost my husband ... and I have been here almost every day since'. There had been a change in her life but she had found new meaning through her visits to the centre. There were frequent mentions of the food and especially the dinner menu. One user arrived almost every day at one o'clock and explained, 'I visit this centre at dinnertime ... I do appreciate the homemade meal'. Every midday there was a long queue of people waiting to buy the excellent value, homemade food. One woman said, 'I belong to another local centre but I come here for dinner because they have such a good cook'. These examples reveal the importance to the users of a predictable and enjoyable rhythm in their daily lives.



*The importance of feeling useful and productive*

The senior users created different personal meanings from 'having something to do'. One woman who participated in the handicraft group said, 'it is nice to do something creative and what we make will be sold at the Christmas market to raise money for the centre'. A man added that 'they are doing something which is useful for the centre'. To feel useful was important for the volunteers. A female volunteer said, 'being a volunteer gives me something to do and I feel useful'. To feel useful, active and productive has a positive value for a person's identity and social regard. To summarise, the users of the centre gained a sense of thriving from experiencing the sense of community, from the rhythm of daily life and by feeling useful. There were also, however, contrasting expressions that can be interpreted as distancing or threat-avoidance strategies.

*Strategies to avoid threats: the senior centre as a place for the old and sick*

Not all saw visiting the centre in a positive light. The perceived threat of getting old manifested itself through several users' preconceptions and conceptions of the centre. A few said that 'visiting the centre is degrading'. When a woman was asked, 'are you old enough to visit the centre?' she replied that visiting the centre is undesirable because it is seen in the wider community as a place for 'old people', by which she referred to a stereotype of the socially isolated and frail. Some users' conceptions of the centre revealed that they also saw it as associated with 'being old', to which they implicitly attached a negative value. As one woman said, 'growing old has no status in society today'. The informants believed that the centre provides a service for 'old people', and because that group has low status, the centre's value is demeaned. Such preconceptions were revealed in one user's observation that, 'I think there are many people who don't know what a senior centre really is. They think it is a place for old and sick people'. These preconceptions are consistent with and may reinforce the stereotypical understanding of old people as sick and needy. Another user had an even more negative view: 'the centre is in a way the last stop before a nursing home. ... I do hope I don't need to move to a nursing home'. In these statements, the perceived threats of old age appear to be actualised and connected to the existential threat of dying.

For some users, however, their experiences at the centre changed such preconceptions. One woman instanced the effect: 'Previously I thought that the centre was not a place for me, because I thought people would only be talking about illnesses and negative things'. Another woman recollected that she was persuaded by a neighbour to visit the centre. She agreed to try it for one day and recollected that 'I was

surprised that I liked it here ... I have been here every day since'. Through her personal experience, her preconceptions of the centre were changed. A male user reported that some years ago, he was involved in changing the centre's name from the Norwegian name *eldresenter* [centre for the elderly] to *seniorsenter* [seniors' centre]. He said, 'we are seniors' and implied that the word *senior* conveys more respect for people's life experience than 'the elderly'. He associated 'seniors' with positive attributes, but in so doing distanced himself from 'the elderly' and the frailty it signified.

#### *Striving for feeling and being young*

One female user said, 'we are supposed to be young these days'. Distancing strategies from those who did not conform to this ideal were revealed in the ways that some users strived to feel and be young and in how some related to other users. Two examples are given. On visiting the centre for the first time, a man aged about 80 years asked, 'are there only so old people here? This is not for me'. He never returned, which might mean that his self-image was incompatible with his impression of the centre. His statement reveals that he saw 'others' as old but not like himself – he did not identify with the category 'being old', and responded by distancing himself from those that he perceived as 'older' than himself. The second example is of a woman who visited the centre once a month. One morning she whispered to the researcher, 'I feel too well to come here but I think the regular users need a breath of fresh air ... I am only 65, you know'. She mentioned her chronological age to distance herself from those whom she perceived as older. At lunchtime the same woman joined the regular users and talked about the pleasure she gained from a literature course at another centre 'because there are many young and vigorous participants in that group'. She thought a while, smiled and added, 'at least they feel young inside ... many of the users are more than 80 years-old!' She expressed the importance of being young, fit and healthy. She denied her own old age by using the distancing strategy that asserts that one feels young despite one's chronological age.

#### *Distancing from conventional signs of ageing*

One day a few regular women attenders were sitting at a table in the café. They projected a sense of community and were aware of the other users. Another woman was sitting alone in the café but then rose and shuffled back-and-forth buying a cup of coffee. The group at the table looked at each other and shook their heads. One said, 'Oh, why doesn't she lift her feet while walking!' This and other critical comments created distance between the group and those who 'shuffle', which was seen as a sign of old

age. Their reactions employed a negative symbol of old age and at the same time sustained a positive image of themselves. Another example of this strategy was when some regular users drew attention to a man who played the piano at the café. One remarked, 'he really plays nicely, even though he has a very crooked back'. This observation pointed to a (formerly common) sign of old age and reasoned that playing the piano well is inconsistent with being old – it was found remarkable that he played well in spite of a bent spine. The users had ways of commenting on each other that distanced themselves from those that they perceived to be frailer. This was revealed by remarks about a woman who used a wheelchair and at dinner was helped while eating by a personal assistant. One user said, 'It must be sad to be like that ... I do hope I won't get there'.

Some users visited the centre seldom, and it seemed important to them to define and rationalise their attendance. One woman said, 'Good morning; I am in a hurry, I am only visiting the hairdresser'. Another woman who was youthfully dressed in jeans said, 'I am only attending the French course. I feel we are younger in that group ... not necessarily in age but in behaviour'. These remarks might be interpreted as expressing personal strategies to resist seeing themselves as 'regular' users. They create distance from those that they perceive as older or frailer than themselves. Paradoxically, the strategy draws on a cultural stereotype that demeans old age and older people. The ideal celebrates a youthful body and indiscriminately places a negative value on natural ageing processes.

The actions and expressions of some volunteers distanced themselves from those whom they perceived as frailer than themselves. One woman said, 'it is important to volunteer because one day we will all be like those over there'. It is interesting that she did not yet feel 'that old', but recognised that ageing is inevitable and that one day she will be old 'like them'. She created distance from those that she perceived as 'old', yet accepted that she will join that category. This way of creating distance appears to deny that old age has been reached and supports the feeling of being young, but also alludes to the threat of one's own old age. The users' expressions showed awareness of the signs of normal ageing and created distance from the perceived threat of old age. These attitudes and expressions displayed a tension in an equivocal identity, as they denied old age and strived to avoid perceiving themselves or being perceived as old.

Our interpretation of the senior users' experiences suggests that their attitudes and behaviour contained contradictions between a sense of thriving and perceived threats from their participation, and particularly

from the social context and their interactions with others at the centre. The negative views manifested in the users' descriptions of their self-image as 'not yet old and frail', which tended to draw on and reinforce negative stereotypes of old age. The sense of thriving derived from involvement in a community, the rhythms of daily life and feeling useful. The feeling of being threatened was more insidious and derived from anxieties about and vulnerabilities related to ageing processes and finitude, which our interpretation suggests have roots in the negative valuation of old age in western consumer culture. Tension was revealed as the users deployed various strategies to distance themselves from those whom they perceived as frailer and older than themselves, while at the same time perceiving that their own ageing was inevitable.

## **Discussion**

### *Thriving, health and well-being*

The users' accounts of their experiences of and responses to the senior centre provided evidence of older people's diverse strategies for dealing with growing old in a consumer culture and revealed the insidious influence of the widely-held ideal of youthfulness. The users' positive accounts of the community, of belonging to a social network, accorded with one of the main objectives of senior centres, to foster social contacts that may prevent loneliness and isolation (Slagsvold, Daatland and Guntvedt 2000). Research has shown that it is valuable for older people to engage purposively in activities that avoid isolation, and that these may help maintain and promote health and subjective wellbeing, and even to prevent functional decline (Avlund *et al.* 2004; Jackson 1996). 'Health, wealth and social relations' are positively associated with wellbeing, quality of life and, in the users' terms, the sense of 'thriving' (Slagsvold, Clausen and Hansen 2006). The importance of the daily rhythm of activities was emphasised by some users. Visiting the centre regularly established continuity and a structure or rhythm to the users' daily activities. Structure and diversity in daily activities foster the senses of belonging and stability and help people live harmoniously with their own natures and with their environment and contribute to health and wellbeing (Jackson 1996; Meyer 1977; Thorsen 2002; Townsend and Wilcock 2004). Many of these associations were evident among the senior users' perceived benefits of attendance, were consciously recognised and manifested in their expressed motivations for attendance – these can be interpreted as personal strategies to promote thriving, health and well-being.

*Strategies for resisting ageing*

The senior users' distancing strategies from growing older revealed their perceptions of their own age. Some perceived themselves as young, despite their age and their awareness of conventional signs of ageing. They said 'although I look old, I feel young inside', which has an element of the denial of old age. This strategy alludes to the 'mask of ageing' notion, that people assume a distance between their external appearance and their internal, inner or subjective 'real self'. The external mask has the physical signs of ageing but creates a schism between the inner and outer selves, with the inner self remaining young (Andrews 1999; Featherstone and Wernick 1995). It also asserts the Cartesian mind/body split, a construction which has come under severe attack in many academic debates but not in studies on ageing (Andrews 1999; Gilleard and Higgs 2000). Andrews (1999) argued that this might express a way of denying old age to enable successful ageing. Some senior users seem to be influenced by these constructions. The possible consequences of such thinking are that experiences at all stages of life, particularly its later stages, lose their value in a culture that is influenced by ideals of external youthfulness and beauty. The senior users were in effect endorsing the societal and cultural prejudices of ageism. The women at the senior centre in Canada also sought to distance themselves from the category 'old' and the accompanying ageist stereotypes (Hurd 1999). They strove to establish and preserve their membership of the 'not old', but at the same time reported their fear of declining health, the realities of widowhood and the loss of their youthful attractiveness.

The seniors' negative representations of old age might be because they see themselves as consumers in a consumer society, but the ways in which they consumed differed greatly (marking the users' heterogeneity). Their disparate patterns of consumption revealed the social identities that they had developed through their lives in different contexts (Sassatelli 2007). The 'Norwegian Life-Course, Ageing and Generation Study' has shown that growing older entails experiences that change on several dimensions and which are both positive and negative. With increasing age, there is a stronger focus on the negative associations: the experienced threats are revealed with expressions exemplified by, 'as I age I have to give up many activities'. On the other hand increasing age strengthens a positive feeling of self-acceptance (Daatland, Solem and Vasset 2006). Through personal experiences of the centre, some users found a way of accepting themselves and substituted their negative preconceptions with positive evaluations – the centre became a place where they liked to be. The change

exemplified an adaptive strategy to sustain health and wellbeing (Jackson 1996).

### *Active ageing and occupational possibilities*

Some users manifested 'active ageing' through their activities at the centre. To be doing something and to feel useful were valued by both the users and the volunteers. The significance of 'feeling useful' might owe something to the oldest users' early lifecourse experiences – in the late industrial society of their youth, it was a prerequisite for an adequate sense of self. 'Using time well', being hard working, capable and self-reliant were positive ideals (Thorsen 2002). In western consumer culture, with its focus on being active, these values are promoted as strategies to postpone old age. The idea was echoed in some users' focus on 'doing something' in contrast to 'just sitting there', and also in the esteem accorded to making donations and practical contributions to the centre. Some users explained that they only managed to visit the centre once a month because they were busily occupied with other activities, such as dancing, Nordic walking, sea cruises or trips to France or America. Some volunteers also stressed the importance of doing something valuable for others as a contribution to maintaining their own fitness and activity levels. 'Active ageing' and 'productive ageing' were in these ways positively valued by the users of the centre, and were clearly associated with the senses of thriving and wellbeing. Many of their expressions affirmed the espoused benefits of 'active ageing'.

What then can we add to the critiques of active and positive ageing? Laliberte Rudman (2006) argued that positive ageing discourses are shaped in a way that limits occupational possibilities and promotes occupational injustice. Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) suggested that the positive ageing discourse creates a new form of ageism, by its high valuation of youth and beauty (see also Featherstone and Wernick 1995). The discourse influences occupational possibilities by creating ideal, possible and not-ideal occupations. Ideal occupations for 'positive ageing' include contributing to the economy as a consumer, being self-reliant and caring for one's self (*i.e.* not requiring tax-funded formal care). From this fiscal perspective, being in paid work is more honoured than occupations such as care-giving, passive and solitary leisure activities, political activism and volunteering (Laliberte Rudman 2005, 2006). Some of the users of the senior centre might have been sufficiently influenced by the positive ageing ideas to have adopted conforming behaviours, attitudes and self-constructs, for example, in their high regard for the tasks at the centre that generated income, such as managing the café and making handicrafts for sale.

Townsend and Wilcock (2004) also argued that cultural values structure people's occupational (or activity) opportunities and create occupational justice or injustices, the latter being occupational deprivation, occupational alienation (loss of meaning), occupational imbalance and anxieties around participation or non-participation (Townsend and Wilcock 2004).

## Conclusions

By investigating the users of a senior centre's inter-personal experiences, it has been shown that the meanings they attach to their participation are diverse and continuously developed, contested and refreshed. The users were more or less influenced by western consumer culture's high valuation of active ageing, youth, fitness and beauty. Evidence was found that many users experienced a tension between a 'sense of thriving', which the centre's activity and social opportunities provided, and a subtler 'sense of threat', in that attendance exposed them to the inevitability of personal ageing. The study has raised understanding of the paradoxical situation that many old people face: they are encouraged to remain youthful and to embrace healthy and active ageing while, at the same time, they get older day by day. It has been shown that many of the users perceived ageing as a process that can be negotiated, resisted and denied through their interactions with the other users. The senses of community, belonging and social well-being were generated by the centre and valued, but attendance also brought them face-to-face with who they are, what they want to be, and how a person is perceived by others. This experience was variously found stabilising and destabilising but was always negotiable. At the centre they see each other. The users articulated who they *didn't* want to be in relation to others, and these expressions revealed various ways of creating distance from one's own ageing. Ageism and occupational injustice were both maintained and contested by the users in various paradoxical ways. The centre's reminders that life is not for ever raised the sense of vulnerability and the existential anxiety of growing old.

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## NOTES

- 1 According to (Statistics Norway 2007), average female life expectancy at birth in Norway is 81.3 years, and the male figure is 76.5 years.
- 2 Concerning ethical issues the project is evaluated and accepted by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) and The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH).

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