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Article

Representing Life and Death in Care Institutions: Between Invisible Victims and Suffering Old Women

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Abstract

The article examines the representation and (in)visibility of ageing people in German care institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Within the framework of a qualitative content-analytical and discourse-analytical study of 185 articles, including 108 images from German newspapers, the authors trace the patterns behind the representation of ageing people. In so doing, they argue that in the media discourse ageing people are often represented without agency and in a strongly homogenised way as “others.” By emphasising pre-existing conditions and vulnerability, older and disabled people appear naturally at risk. The article also problematises the mere counting of life and death in care institutions, which contributes to a naturalisation and symbolic annihilation of the death of ageing people. Furthermore, the authors identify the notion of the suffering old woman as a key figure in pandemic media discourse, performing a critical function. She embodies an appeal to society to show sympathy and solidarity and to act reasonably with respect to the pandemic measures yet contains no elements of discursive agency or personal characteristics beyond that. Additionally, the suffering old woman reinforces traditional patterns of patriarchal representation. The authors conclude that the pandemic has placed the German care crisis in settings of institutionalised geriatric care into the media spotlight. However, the comprehensive inclusion of ageing people has been absent. Emphasising one’s own ability and thus adapting to the midlife years seems to be the only way to precarious inclusion for ageing people in the discourse.

Keywords

ageing; agency; Covid-19; German newspapers; institutionalised care; media representation; vulnerability

Issue

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is the latest crisis to highlight the harsh structural inequalities that exist in societies. Just like “HIV/AIDS, hypertension, poverty, diabetes, climate change disasters, unemployment [or] mass incarceration,” Covid-19 has once again reminded the world that “we are *not* all in this together” (Bowleg, 2020, p. 917, emphasis added). Inequalities that structure the degree of vulnerability to a given crisis are exposed and highlighted as if through a “burning glass” (Graefe et al.,

2020, p. 431) as the crisis unfolds. The worsening of the already acute care crisis in Germany and many other countries during the pandemic has drawn (media) attention to the struggle of old and disabled people who live at the mercy of the structures and conditions of the nursing home (Navarro, 2020, p. 272). The risk of infection as well as the possibility of shaping one’s life according to one’s own ideas are thus dramatically dependent on the quality of the residence and staff (Hawranek et al., 2021).

However, long-term geriatric care has already become increasingly troublesome in the last few

decades, marked by a severe shortage in guaranteed investment. Staff shortages in the years after 2000 have steadily worsened due to the neoliberalisation and privatisation of nursing homes. Chronic underfunding and the marginalisation of the issue in the media are key characteristics of the care crisis (McGregor, 2001, p. 83). The marginalisation and symbolic annihilation of care-dependent ageing people in settings of institutionalised care not only reveal the consequences but also the operating principles of the undermining of the welfare state by neoliberal politics and market-oriented logic (Lolich, 2019; Tremain, 2020). The already marginal attention given to the care crisis and the miserable working conditions of nurses is only trumped by the structural neglect and violence towards ageing people in need of care. For years, there have been repeated reports about critical conditions in nursing homes in the media—so-called nursing scandals (Fussek & Schober, 2009, p. 13). These scandals are instances of visibility, yet the flood of reporting is repeatedly followed by the ebb of silence.

The pandemic emerged against this backdrop, creating new challenges and exacerbating existing ones (Albert et al., 2022, p. 36; Hebblethwaite et al., 2021, p. 171). The *Care Report 2021* indicates that the mortality of nursing home residents in Germany increased dramatically at the beginning of the pandemic (Kohl et al., 2021, p. 9). In the wake of these events, and due to the perception that ageing people were categorically vulnerable, stringent restrictions were placed on nursing home residents. The pandemic was marked by a ban on visits, a ban on medical or any other out-of-home treatment, restriction of movement, and isolation (Albert et al., 2022, p. 40). Coupled with many devastating Covid-19 outbreaks in nursing homes and the “new” visibility of old failings, the issue of geriatric care and the situation of ageing people in nursing homes became a perennial topic. Thus, the pandemic not only shone a spotlight on current inadequacies but also on the existing, pre-pandemic deficiencies in care institutions. From this point of view, the pandemic can be understood as a crisis within a crisis (Albert et al., 2022, p. 36).

Therefore, this article investigates how care-dependent, ageing people in settings of institutionalised care are represented in the German media discourse during the pandemic. Which ageing people are portrayed in what ways and along which axes of intersectional inequalities are these representations structured? What value is ascribed to the lives and deaths of ageing people in this discourse? These questions set the general framework for this article.

2. The Neoliberalisation of Age(ing) and the Role of the Media

Recent decades have seen the restructuring of the welfare state, neoliberal transformation, and privatisation take place throughout Europe. Tasks that were once the responsibility of the state have become pri-

vatised responsibilities and individual risks (Sakellariou & Rotarou, 2017, p. 3). This process can be traced to the pre-pandemic discovery of ageing people as consumers and brand ambassadors. Instead of being portrayed as feeble and withdrawn, older people were rebranded as active, consumerist, modern, healthy, and able in the media, science, politics, and the economy. In this way, a part of the ageing population was successfully incorporated into the neoliberal discourse of productivity and youthfulness and thus won over by the market (Roanova, 2010, p. 220). In this process of the neoliberal normalisation of ageing bodies (Rudman, 2015, pp. 11–12), ageing people were divided into two categories: The first of these is the *third age*, which includes the so-called “young old,” meaning all those who conform to the norm of productive youthfulness (Thiele et al., 2013). This group of successfully ageing people has become increasingly visible and celebrated in the media for its abilities (Roanova, 2010, pp. 214–215). At the same time, the negative stereotypes were shifted to the *fourth age*. This phase of chronic illness, disability, and care dependency becomes legible through the lens of disability studies and its rich insights into the socio-cultural construction of (dis)ability, helping to delineate the processes of *symbolic annihilation* (Tuchman, 1978). These ageing people belonging to the fourth age are discursively constructed as helpless, needy, old-fashioned, unproductive, burdensome, and disabled. They are “the other” to the “good”—that is, youthfulness and ableness (Gibbons, 2016, p. 78). Thus, they remain invisible and politically irrelevant, pushed to the margins of the discourse (Adlung & Backes, 2021, pp. 79–81). Gender also plays a key role in the representation of age, as well as disability, and while there is extensive research on gendered representations of the third age, the fourth age can be considered a desideratum (Adlung & Backes, 2021, p. 82).

Drawing on cultural studies, we consider the public sphere to be a powerful place for the construction of social meaning. In this sense, Klaus and Lünenborg (2012, p. 204) regard “media as a particular form of cultural production” and “an engine and an actor in the processes of self-making and being-made, in which people acquire their individual, group-specific and social identities.” Journalism plays a crucial role in the media as a “discursive authority” (Allan & Zelizer, 2004, p. 5), with both the power to reproduce unequal social positions and to unveil and criticise them. The pandemic presents a special context for the production of inequality as it created a situation in which far-reaching state-ordered restrictions became necessary, and, in liberal democracies, such actions must be legitimised through public negotiation. In this context, the model of cultural citizenship as “an essential dimension of citizenship in media society” developed by Klaus and Lünenborg (2012, p. 204) can help analyse processes of inclusion (into a journalistically imagined we-group) and exclusion (as others) by and through the media. Cultural citizenship “unfolds under

the conditions of unequal power relations” and further “entails all those cultural practices that allow competent participation in society and includes the rights to be represented and to speak actively” (Klaus & Lünenborg, 2012, p. 204). The allocation of cultural citizenship is particularly interesting when it comes to the fourth age, as the state of research suggests comprehensive symbolic annihilation here (Adlung & Backes, 2021). Following this perspective, we pose the following question: Where and when are ageing people included in the journalistic we-group, and where do they appear as others or remain invisible altogether?

3. Method

In order to investigate this question this study has employed a combination of content and discourse analysis. The material was systemised using content analysis by means of closed categories. The discourse analysis then allowed for a more in-depth examination of selected aspects. The articles were excavated from popular German daily and weekly print newspapers. Based on the selected sample the entire political spectrum was considered, including both information-oriented newspapers and entertainment-oriented tabloids. Differences between the two are only presented as they occur. *Bild*, the most widely read newspaper in the country, and its Sunday edition, *Bild am Sonntag*, were categorised as tabloids, while *Die Tageszeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* were classified as information-oriented broadsheets covering a spectrum from liberal-left to centre-right. The selected tabloids and broadsheets together comprise a corpus of material that reflects German newspapers with nationwide distribution and a high level of impact.

Our analysis and discussion of the sampled data will delve into the liminal spaces between living, dying, and death, between health and disease, between seemingly productive and seemingly burdensome parts of society, and between autonomy and dependency. Because the nursing home is the intersection where age and disability are institutionalised, it constitutes the pivotal focal point of the study. The context of the pandemic is crucial for the analysis, as several fatal Covid-19 outbreaks occurred in German care facilities during the selected sample period, which have contributed to increased coverage in the media. Thus, our study examines two waves of the pandemic, from March 1 to April 30, 2020, and from November 1 to December 31, 2020. Using the keywords “nursing home” (“Altenheim” and “Pflegeheim”) and “Corona,” this study sampled 185 articles.

The collected data was systematised through closed coding using deductive categories (Mayring, 2015), for example, to distinguish between topic-oriented and subject-oriented articles. Through open coding, the study then identified designations for ageing people, speaking positions, and metaphors in headings. To deter-

mine the agency of old people in the articles, different categories were clustered into agency types. The schematic determination was helpful to select subject-oriented articles for a more profound analysis. Therefore, discourse analysis was employed following predefined dimensions such as portrayals of ageing people (Keller, 2006). The objective was to explore the subject-oriented articles in depth and to investigate linguistic moments of othering or inclusion. Furthermore, the linguistic layer was dissected regarding the word fields and metaphors utilised in the discourse.

In addition, 108 images that illustrate the discourse in the sample were analysed. An analytical approach to image types by Grittmann and Ammann (2011) was applied, which is an extension of the iconographic–iconological approach (Müller, 2011). This analysis asks for the situational context of visual representation and seeks to sort the material according to types of (political) coverage. As we discuss the results of the visual analysis in greater detail elsewhere (Adlung & Backes, in press), the present article will only briefly mention them.

4. Results

In this section, we will present selected results dealing with the language, agency, and portrayal attributed to ageing people in the discourse under study. Broadly speaking, the sample includes both brief and in-depth accounts of the lives and deaths of ageing people in care institutions during the pandemic. However, primary reasons for reporting include instances of infection with Covid-19 in care facilities and the process of vaccinating vulnerable groups. In this context, some articles focus on specific ageing people, while others only report on “the elderly” in general. Above all, the inadequate preparedness for a severe pandemic situation (lack of protective clothing, poorly equipped public health offices, hospitals, and care facilities, especially in the first phase of the investigation), but also curfews and bans on visitors (especially in the second phase of the investigation) take centre stage in the reporting. Particularly in the tabloid press, the forced separation of family members due to those bans is frequently emphasised as a major issue.

4.1. Metaphors of Nature and War

In the analysis of metaphors used in the articles, the study finds that the rhetorical image of war and crisis is dominant, creating an apocalyptic atmosphere. While retirement homes turn into “time bombs” (Rößler, 2020, p. 3; all quotes from newspaper articles were translated by authors), “the Second World War,” “the fear in the air-raid shelter,” and Covid-19 infections in settings of institutionalised care are presented as having the same level of severity (Kittan, 2020, p. 9). The tabloids create neologisms such as “home-of-death,” “fever-fear” (Ringleben et al., 2020, p. 7), or “Covid-19-catastrophe” (Piatov, 2020, p. 2), speak of a struggle for life and

death (Rákóczy, 2020, p. 10), and use the metaphor of “a bomb falling on a nursing home each day” (Reichelt, 2020, p. 2). Covid-19 appears as a sort of force of nature, equated with “a hurricane” (Davis, 2020, p. 11). These kinds of metaphors make infections of ageing people in care seem like unstoppable natural disasters. Thus, death becomes fate, and the structural conditions of infections and vulnerabilities are pushed to the margins of visibility.

4.2. Agency of Ageing People

Ageing people are represented in the sample either with (a) no agency in a quantifying and victimising, topic-oriented way, (b) with low agency, or (c) with high agency as central actors and narrators of the events.

The first and dominant type is comprised of articles in which no ageing person is directly part of the representation—That is, “the elderly” are described in a homogenising fashion as a uniform risk group and no other identity or character traits (such as gender, education, or sense of humour) are addressed apart from life in a care facility. In purely quantitative terms, this type makes up 66% of the sample, i.e., all those articles are topic oriented. Ageing people are quantified and victimised in this type. The mere counting of deaths in nursing homes stood out unmistakably. Some of the articles consist exclusively of a string of one to three sentences, finding their climax in the counting of the dead as if in a spectacle. Numerous examples of such quantification can be found in the headlines. As in a sports competition, a score is updated: “Already 24 dead in a retirement home” (“Schon 24 tote in seniorenheim,” 2020, p. 9), followed by a headline one day later “already 27 dead residents” (“Jetzt schon 27 tote bewohner,” 2020, p. 9). Moreover, the analysis of the image types reveals two recurring image types, mainly illustrating articles in which old people have no agency. The two motifs are evacuated nursing homes and isolated ageing people. In both cases, it is predominantly ageing women who are represented. In the articles of this agency type, old people are not described in their gender but, in the images, they are represented as feminine. Repeatedly, it is the ageing woman who is being rescued or who suffers from loneliness in these images.

The second type concerns the representation of ageing people with low agency. This describes 26% of the total sample and is to be found in the subject-oriented articles, which make up 34% of the sample and contain some form of depictions of ageing people. While at least one representation of a particular ageing person occurs in this second type of low agency, the person only plays a minor role and speaking positions are rarely to be found. The representation is used to portray a complex topic on a personal level. Often it is the relative’s perspective that is spotlighted, while the affected person is only mentioned by name. The ageing people represented in this type are predominantly women (67%), whereas ageing men are less frequently featured (33%).

This is also reflected by the 108 images accompanying the articles: 77 of the ageing people depicted are ageing women and a mere 27 are ageing men (in some depictions the respective sex is not indicated). Thus, the agency of the represented ageing person is low in this type of reporting, even though they are named and sometimes even pictured.

The third type, representing a high level of agency of ageing people, is apparent in only 8% of the total sample and again exclusively in subject-oriented articles. Here, the ageing persons are the main protagonists of the article. They are addressed by name and are given central speaking positions, serving as role models in dealing with the pandemic. Usually foregrounded in this type is the (mental or physical) ability of the ageing person. This happens, for example, when the capabilities of the person are highlighted, distinguishing them from other ageing people. The tabloids do this often, recurrently reporting on heroes and heroines of the crisis. For example, the 94-year-old Ingeborg Körner is described as “sitting at the sewing machine every day” to produce masks and is celebrated for it (Lochte & Sievering, 2020, p. 9). In this portrayal of high agency, ageing people are active and independent, and the article primarily represents their perspective. Compared to the ratio of masculine and feminine representations in the entire sample (2:1), men are more frequently represented here with a ratio of 1.45 women to one man. When old people appear in articles with low or high agency, it is more likely that the article will be accompanied by a portrait, and the face portrayed is more likely to be feminine. However, when they are depicted in their past as younger adults or in their (former) careers, men predominate.

Thus, ageing people, and perhaps counterintuitively ageing women, do become visible in the discourse analysed by the study, yet very few articles are truly centred on older people as individuals with their own perspectives and offer them the opportunity to speak for themselves. These initial insights demonstrate the pandemic as a moment of visibility for ageing people in care who normally receive little media attention. How this new visibility is structured and what meaning the predominant representation of women in the discourse, speaking in quantitative terms, could also have for their representation in qualitative terms will be the subject of the following section.

4.3. Attributes of Ageing People

Utilising discourse analysis, we found five dominant patterns of representation. Those presented here are the recurring ones (for more details, see Adlung & Backes, in press).

The first pattern concerns the representation of ageing persons as being lonely. For example, the article “Is There Anyone?” (Maestro, 2020, p. 53) begins with the sentence, “Loneliness is the most difficult thing for many people living in nursing homes.” Yet the article

emphasises that this loneliness is not simply due to the current crisis but is inherently rooted in old age. “The long-time friends are missing. Many are dead. The children must work, the grandchildren prefer to meet their friends” (Maestro, 2020, p. 53). Loneliness is portrayed as the primary issue of almost every ageing person in many articles analysed. The connection between solitude and old age, however, can be observed in discourse even before the pandemic. As previous studies have shown, loneliness appears “as an inevitable part of old age” (Uotila et al., 2010, p. 116; see also Agren, 2017).

Secondly, a pattern emphasising vulnerability can be observed in many articles. Ageing people are portrayed as “the most vulnerable” (Ludwig, 2020, p. 1) and “the weakest” (Hellwig, 2020, p. 13). Marked as a “high-risk group” (Gertz, 2020, p. 3), they are depicted and described in a constant state of worry (Przybilla, 2020, p. 27). For instance, a resident is quoted saying that she is “in fear for her life” (“Schon 10 corona-opfer,” 2020, p. 6). Likewise, the management and the nursing staff are portrayed in their concern for the residents, again emphasising the latter’s alleged vulnerability: “The nurses and the directors of the home are afraid that the virus will enter the retirement home. For the old and most often frail residents would be exposed to it almost unprotected” (Jaeger, 2020, p. 3).

Thirdly, ageing people are represented as grateful. Some of them are quoted as giving thanks to care home staff: “They do superhumanly good work” (Völkerling, 2020, p. 6). If people try to liven up, entertain, or distract ageing people, they are portrayed as “the heroes of the elderly” (Ackermann, 2020, p. 14). Repeatedly, people are depicted playing music in front of nursing homes to cheer up the supposedly lonely residents. Kindness and solidarity are highlighted, and old people appear as grateful, humble, and selfless. For example, an accordion player states, “I’m here because I feel I can make the elderly feel cheerful and happy,” while one resident comments, “This is a really nice moment of light. I’m thrilled. When I heard his bell, I thought the ice cream man was coming” (Ackermann, 2020, p. 14).

Fourthly, ageing people are represented as being insane or confused. They are pathologised through an infantilising language; for example, one article describes care home residents as making “big eyes” (Drügemöller, 2020, p. 54), language usually reserved for awe-struck children. Dementia insinuates incapacitation, as can be seen in this quote: “Our residents don’t know what’s happening to them” (Conti, 2020, p. 4). In this way, the implementation of measures which go against the will of ageing people is justified through the infantilisation and incapacitation of people in need of care. In addition, being old and being confused or insane are strongly naturalised and constructed as inherently interconnected in the discourse. At times, the portrayal of older people is even disrespectful, for example in an article describing a woman staring at a bottle of body lotion as if it is “a wine of a good vintage” (Knobloch, 2020, p. 3).

Lastly, we found a recurring pattern of heteronormative portrayals in the tabloids, with a focus on family and love within marriage. Ageing people are represented as being unconditionally loved and loving. A story about a man still loving his wife despite her having dementia illustrates this pattern (Ringleben, 2020, p. 11). The tabloids speculate that this is the secret to a successful, lasting marriage. Stories such as this one are revealing of the way in which the portrayal of sexuality, relationships, and lifestyles in old age is directed into narrow, heteronormative channels. Despite this not being the primary focus of our study, it became obvious that other aspects of diverse identities in old age are denied space in media coverage as well (e.g., history of migration, race, or a past connecting to the German Democratic Republic do not feature in any article analysed).

In summary, the overall picture painted by the limited set of characteristics and representations of ageing people is narrow and mostly negatively connoted. This sets the scene for an insufficient perspective on ageing that focuses on the alleged deficits and emphasises old age as a process of physical and mental decay. The analysed sample reveals patterns of (in)visibility, which in turn indicate the precarious cultural citizenship of ageing people.

5. Discussion

In the following section, we will reflect on the intersectional entanglement of age with disability and gender, focussing on selected peculiarities of the discourse around older people during the pandemic. Finally, we will discuss moments of transgression, subversion, and irritation of prevailing patterns as signifiers of potential for change.

5.1. Pre-Existing Conditions, Vulnerability, and Numbers: Naturalising Death, Producing Invisibility, and Ungrievability

The fourth age can be understood as a period of intersectional entanglements, among them the intersection of age and disability; the analysis below is therefore also informed by disability studies. The category of vulnerability, a major characteristic in the representations in our sample, played a particularly vital role in the framing of the pandemic (Tremain, 2020). Since “86% of all Covid-19-deaths lived in care facilities” (“Bis zu 86%,” 2020, p. 2), old age appears as a natural risk factor. In this logic, death is viewed through the lens of age and pre-existing conditions. In our sample, the death of “the vulnerable” appears—cloaked in metaphors of nature and war—as fate. This prompts the question of *when life is grievable* in the journalistic discourse (Butler, 2009). Regarding disability in times of pandemic, Ktenidis (2020, para. 3) notes:

The deaths of those belonging to the “vulnerable” groups were deemed natural and, hence, mattered

less, in opposition to the deaths of people who were not vulnerable, and, therefore, their death was “unnatural” and mattered more. A hierarchical division between valuable, grievable lives (and deaths) and invaluable, un-grievable lives (and deaths) is in place.

Within our study, a comparable distinction in death in the context of the fourth age can be observed. Here, our findings are in line with a study that emphasises a similar portrayal of ageing people during the pandemic (Jen et al., 2021). The study indicates that while the deaths of young Covid-19 patients were presented in-depth as tragedies, ageing people’s deaths were not depicted with the same level of detail but instead were merely counted. Ageing people were shown either in the context of care institutions or statistical evaluations of incidences, death figures, or risk distributions. This shapes a certain image of old age that is limited to institutional contexts and associated with dying. Numbers do not have choices, voices, names, or faces, nor do they have biographies or families, as our analysis of agency demonstrated. Thus, they can hardly be grieved for. This distinction serves mainly to reassure all non-old people of their own safety. Personal fears can thus be projected onto others. In their study of news reports in the UK and Canada, Abrams and Abbott (2020, p. 168) state: “Each announcement of deaths in the first week was caveated with the ‘reassurance’ that most if not all of the people who had died had such [pre-existing] conditions.”

Through this framing of old age as a natural vulnerability, structures and political decisions remain invisible. However, when vulnerability is defined by age alone and not by socio-political circumstances, the underlying structural distribution of inequality is overlooked. Thereby, the distribution of risk becomes a biological fact, even though the risk of infection is by no means solely dependent on age and is not equally distributed among ageing people either: “The biological and medical construction of vulnerability...renders invisible the social, economic, and political relations that contribute to the increased precarious conditions of certain populations and allow for understanding their lives as unvaluable and thus un-grievable” (Mađarová et al., 2020, p. 17).

In summary, the devaluation of life at the intersection of age and disability is naturalised through the concept of pre-existing conditions and vulnerability. In this framework, the lives of ageing people remain invisible, their deaths un-grievable, and the political conditions shaping risk distribution remain undiscussed.

5.2. Ambivalent Visibilities: The Suffering Old Woman as Damsel in Distress

From a feminist perspective, old age can be conceptualised as an intersectional entanglement of age and gender. Emerging from the discourse, we see roles for women that follow traditional patterns of patriarchal

representation. The ageing woman dominates the pandemic discourse in both images and text. At first glance, this might be unsurprising since a majority of ageing people living in care facilities in Germany are women (Destatis, 2020). At the same time, however, positions with agency and explanatory roles are occupied by ageing men. The way in which the *old suffering woman* is made visible, therefore, is gendered.

The pandemic is narrated using metaphors of war, a highly gendered topos. While the notions of the fight, the saviour, and the hero have masculine connotations, women must be fought for because they need to be liberated or protected from the enemies (Archer, 2020). In the media, women are represented mostly as victims or as “damsels in distress.” This is a well-known sexist narrative in war reporting but is also common in video games in which a masculine hero rescues an innocent, passive woman (usually portrayed as sexy). Women’s power and agency are symbolically annihilated; they are forced into roles of traditional femininity. In this context, Klaus and Kassel (2005, p. 339) write:

Women are most often shown as victims of war and suffering from its consequences, while men have a much more active role in the media’s narratives either as defenders of the family and guardian of the “Heimat” or as perpetrators.

A very similar constellation is created by the media in the fight against the invisible enemy Covid-19. The lonely and highly vulnerable woman is grateful to be rescued by the saviour and is barely endowed with agency. She appears as the passive other, clearly distinct and demarcated from the acting journalistic we-group. Nevertheless, it is her for whom society stands together in solidarity, it is her who is to be saved by “us.” In the process, the needs of the ageing woman are not heard; even possible criticism of strict measures beyond what could have been expected of society—for example, being locked in a room—remains unnoticed. The questioning or demanding voices of the discourse are silenced just as the voice of the suffering woman is rarely heard. Only in instances when an ageing woman describes herself as vulnerable or grateful is the female position recognised.

This exemplary image depicts a woman who is locked in her room in a retirement home (Figure 1). The waving symbolises her contact with the outside world, while the gaze reflects her sorrow at the isolation she is experiencing. This image is part of the frequently utilised image type of isolation, primarily portraying women who are locked up during the pandemic. This motif echoes the gendered narrative of the damsel in distress. Depicting the dependency and suffering of the old woman, the image calls for solidarity. The accompanying article highlights the pandemic as a severe crisis that is particularly deadly for older people living in care facilities. At the time this article was published, the discourse is mainly characterised by an appeal to society to act collectively. This

joint effort is to be undertaken, inter alia, on behalf of the suffering old woman, in the name of her freedom, and to enable her to reunite with her family. In this context, the grandson of the woman photographed but not cited herself is being quoted with the following words:

It is very difficult for my grandmother (93). She is alone, can't leave her room most of the time, she can only be in the garden 30 minutes a day....Until a few weeks ago, only weekly visits by one person were allowed. Now we can only wave from the courtyard and bring her little things. We are very worried. (Neugebauer & Dombrowski, 2020, p. 9)



Figure 1. Image of the suffering old women in isolation. Source: Neugebauer & Dombrowski (2020, p. 9).

The suffering old woman can be interpreted as the face of the crisis, functioning as a morally charged symbol to make the exceptional situation comprehensible. She can be considered the embodiment of an appeal to the wider society to show sympathy and solidarity towards fellow human beings and to act reasonably with respect to the implemented containment measures. At the same time, within the discourse, her voice and her perspective are overlooked. This case illustrates the ambivalence of visibility, well known to feminist scholars and already illuminated by Schaffer (2015), who has noted that visibility does not equate with gaining power or having an actual say in the journalistic discourse. This point is particularly true when it comes to marginalised groups who can be both highly visible and powerless at the same time.

5.3. Irritations and Breaks Within the Discourse

Overall, the patterns which depict age as a burden to society remain widely unquestioned in the discourse.

Nevertheless, we traced two narratives with subversive potential.

Firstly, a potentially transgressive narrative emphasising the activity and ability of ageing people can be observed. They become visible as competent individuals in the discourse who can function as full and equal members of society. For example, one picture displays an ageing woman who is a retired doctor vaccinating her nurse ("Piks des tages," 2020, p. 1). These representations have the irritating potential to question hierarchically structured binaries—that is, activity and passivity, victim and saviour, as well as employee and retiree—through the reversal of roles. However, the focus on ability causes the exclusion of ageing people dealing with limited autonomy. For them, no positive integration into the discourse is provided. In this way, the focus on ability devalues the fourth age which is intersectionally affected by both age and disability.

A second but rare subversive moment is found in articles addressing the care crisis. At times, this critique is quite radical, pointing at the connection between the care crisis and global capitalism. In this frame, retirement homes in rich nation-states appear embarrassingly poorly equipped as an effect of the privatisation of the social sector within a neoliberal environment. Usually, this argument is illustrated by descriptions of the catastrophic and inhuman conditions ageing people are living in, both preceding and during the pandemic. This form of criticism addresses political structures and policy decisions but formulates its arguments mostly on the basis of stressed and underpaid staff while excluding ageing people's perspectives. By talking about them rather than with them, the articles victimise and passivise ageing people rather than render them visible. For example, a former nurse is cited with the following words:

I still see this small old woman who couldn't leave her bed, huddled in a foetal position, a very kind one, always polite. And then a nurse, longing for the end of the shift, yelling at her: "Did you shit yourself, old cunt [alte Sau]?" (Mayer & Wilhelm, 2020, p. 20)

In conclusion, it can be argued that certain social inequalities have come to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic. The new intensity of existing intersectional inequalities could not be ignored or negated in this state of emergency. This has contributed to the new visibility of old insufficiencies. Overall, our analysis of the media representation of old people in institutions of care has demonstrated that the pandemic has placed the German care crisis into the media spotlight and, in some cases, the way in which neoliberalism undermines the welfare state has been sharply criticised. However, the inclusion of ageing people as equals has been widely absent.

By adopting an intersectional perspective, we identified two striking patterns of this (in)visibility: We first reflected on the fourth age as a period of intersectional entanglement of age and disability. Our argument—

using approaches from disability studies—is that the emphasis on pre-existing conditions in the media discourse moves the disabled fourth age close to death, or even renders it already dead; this practice dehumanises older individuals, excludes their voices from the public debate, and obscures their deaths from the public view. Secondly, age is gendered and can be examined from a feminist perspective, revealing sexist representations and reproductions. Traditional narratives of the strong, able, masculine saviour and the grateful, disabled woman in need of protection and help are highlighted in the discourse to morally appeal to a shared social responsibility. In the process, neoliberal conditions that limit the life chances of ageing people in care are symbolically annihilated and concealed. Ageing people who are portrayed as others are not able to raise their voices. Through homogenisation and dehumanisation, they do not have full cultural citizenship and participate in the journalistic discourse only to a limited extent. Emphasising one’s own ability and thus adapting to the midlife years seems to be the only form of precarious inclusion in the discourse.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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