

Precarity and ageing: new perspectives for social gerontology

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Introduction

This book examines some of the challenges facing older people, given a context of rising life expectancy, cuts to the welfare state, and widening economic and social inequalities. Although cultural representations and policy discourses depict older people as a group healthier and more prosperous than ever, many older people experience ageing amid insecurities that emerge in later life or are carried forward as a consequence of earlier disadvantage. At the same time, responsibility is now placed upon individuals and/or their families to secure support for many of the vulnerabilities associated with old age. The purpose of this book is to examine the potential of a new approach to thinking about the risks facing older people, drawing on debates in the field of ‘precarity’ and ‘precariousness’.

This book examines precarity and ageing from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, critical perspectives and contexts. The collection of chapters develops a distinctive approach to understanding the changing cultural, economic and social circumstances that create precarity for different groups of older people. This book explores what insights the concept of precarity might bring to an understanding of ageing across the life course, especially in the context of the radical sociopolitical changes affecting the lives of older people. In doing so, it draws attention to altered forms of ageing, but also to changing social and cultural contexts, and to realities that challenge the assumption that older people will be protected by existing social programmes or whatever resources can be marshalled privately.

This chapter sets the foundation for the book, with an exploration of the concept of precarity and its relevance to the field of ageing. It establishes precarity as a lens, or a means, for drawing attention to insecurity and risk in later life. The chapter begins with a discussion of

the concept of precarity and precariousness in fields such as geography and labour studies, and how the concept has been applied to ageing and late life. It then poses a series of questions to guide reflection and ground the debates pursued by authors, followed by a brief overview of the chapters ahead.

What do we mean by precarity?

To date, the concept of precarity has been used to highlight new forms of risk and rising insecurities in the context of global economic and social change (Gallie et al, 2003; Schram, 2015). A number of fields of study have drawn attention to precarity and precariousness, although rarely with regard to ageing or late life. Discussions of precarity are most prominent in labour studies, migration, sociology and geography, and in the context of international social movements (Avant, 2017; Bowe, 2008; Lewchuk, 2017; Lewchuk et al, 2008; Lewis et al, 2015; Oxman-Martinez et al, 2005; Vosko, 2006; Waite, 2009). Although some variations exist in associated meanings, 'precarity' is used most often to refer to the insecurities, unwanted risks and hazards of contemporary life, typically associated with globalization and neoliberal economic and social policies (Standing, 2010; 2012; Waite, 2009).

There are a number of contributions of particular assistance in helping to situate the concept of precarity in relation to ageing, and which extend the analysis beyond the immediate association with labour. First, writing from a geographical perspective, Waite (2009, p 426) refers to precarity as 'life worlds characterised by uncertainty and insecurity', and as a concept that implies 'both a condition and a possible rallying point for resistance'. Second, Millar (2017) delineates three different approaches to precarity: as a condition (as developed by Bourdieu); as a category or class (following Standing); and as an ontological condition (as in, for example, Butler).¹ Third, one of the most widely cited references to precarity, and more specifically precariousness, is that of Butler (2009, p 25), who views it as a 'politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death'.

The research literature draws an important distinction between the terms 'precarity' and 'precariousness'. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) records and guides the use of the English language, providing insight into cultural frames of reference, meaning and experience. Although the concept of precarity has become widely used in labour

and migration studies, and is one we use throughout this volume, it does not appear in the OED. In academic scholarship and research, precarity is often used in ways that combine ‘precarious’ and ‘proletariat’ (Standing, 2010; see also Bodnar, 2006). The definition of ‘precarious’, however, which does appear in the OED, gives insight into more flexible readings of precarity, such as those noted by Millar (2017), and to differences that are important for the various contributors to this book. Accordingly, ‘precarious, adj.’ is defined as both ‘a right, tenancy’ (that is, something held or enjoyed by the favour of and at the pleasure of another person) and a condition whereby one is ‘vulnerable to the will or decision of others’. The uses of the concept ‘precarious’ range from ‘a line of argument, inference, opinion, etc. [that is] insecurely founded or reasoned, doubtful, dubious’, to something ‘dependent on chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable’, to something ‘subject to or fraught with physical danger or insecurity; at risk of falling, collapse, or similar accident; unsound, unsafe, rickety’ (‘precarious, adj.’, nd).

These distinctions in language offer encouraging directions where our assessment of precarity and precariousness with regard to ageing and late life is concerned. Drawing on frames of reference within social sciences, approaches to precarity and precariousness can be considered to include both a structural element, often denoted by the term ‘precarity’, and a philosophical or interpretive strand, which more often employs the language of ‘precariousness’. Although these broad and diverse sets of thought are sometimes viewed as theoretically incompatible, they need not be. Instead, as suggested by a number of authors in this volume, the diverse approaches to precarity and precariousness offer complementary, intersecting and equally necessary windows into insecurity and risk in relation to ageing and late life.²

The exploration of precarity and ageing thus represents an important link to other research that is focused exclusively on earlier segments of the life course but pays little to no attention to later life. Our challenge to these fields is to raise their awareness that processes of disadvantage and inequality must be understood across a much longer time horizon, and that dynamics from earlier periods are carried forward into later decades. That is, experiences related to work, migration or poverty do not end at the point of retirement age. A focus on precarity and precariousness, as will be argued throughout the subsequent chapters, provides an important means to open new discussions with interdisciplinary scholars studying related issues in earlier life periods. As such, the analysis reaches beyond the aim of raising awareness of the lifelong nature and implications of those phenomena,

stretching into how researchers might work together to consider solutions to improve the later well-being of younger populations as they grow older.

The chapters in this volume join with those of a relatively small number of international contributions that are beginning to apply precarity to the topic of ageing. For example, other applications have highlighted precarious historical circumstances such as the ‘Great Recession’ (Craciun et al, 2015; Craciun and Flick, 2016; see also Craciun, 2019), ageing and employment (Bohle et al, 2010; Hum and Simpson, 2010), care work (Baines et al, 2014), financial insecurity and/or exclusion (Craciun and Flick, 2014), disability and citizenship (Knight, 2014) and increasing inequality in the G20 countries (Biggs, 2014; Grundy and Laliberte Rudman, 2018; Porter, 2015). Other research has illuminated how older people get caught in the ‘precarity trap’ of ‘flexible’ and lower-income status positions, as well as highlights the extent to which older people may come to rely upon precarious workers as carers (Baines et al, 2014; Standing, 2010).

Each of the chapters in this volume helps to bring much-needed attention to the question of how precarity and precariousness in late life might differ from that in earlier life periods. In this context, it is experiences such as the increased likelihood of living alone, of managing chronic illness, disability, frailty and dementia, or of needing care, that are likely to become increasingly important (see Grenier et al, 2017; Knight, 2014; Portacolone, 2013). Consistent with observations made by Butler (2009), extending the analysis of precarity to the later years naturally moves into questions of ‘what it means to be human’ and to live a ‘devalued life’ in a variety of contexts, including those relating to health and social care (see Grenier et al, 2017).

Precarity and critical perspectives on ageing populations

An important rationale for the book has been the concern to develop new approaches to understanding ageing, given a context of radical economic and social change. Current approaches to ageing emerged at a time of economic growth in Western economies. As such, the models that presently guide our understandings of change throughout the life course are based on assumptions of economic stability and the continued development of the welfare state (albeit with a mix of private and public funding). Judt (2005; 2012) makes the point that

the chief basis of the support for state-funded welfare and social services lay in the popular sense that these

corresponded to the proper tasks of government. The post-war state across Europe was a 'social' state, with an implicit (and often constitutionally explicit) responsibility for the well-being of its citizens. It had an obligation to provide not only the institutions and services necessary for a well-regulated, safe and prosperous land, but also to *improve* the condition of the population, as measured by a broad and expanding range of indices. (Judt, 2005, p 76)

The outcome, it was hoped, would be a more cohesive society with no category of person excluded or less 'deserving'. But challenges to the 'welfare' or 'social' state, together with the impact of economic recession, have dislodged the main pillars around which approaches to ageing were constructed. This context of rising insecurity, combined with increasing longevity that signals a need for more extended forms of health and social care, raises questions about the relevance of existing paradigms and approaches in social gerontology. At the same time, it suggests that the possibilities for achieving the intended goals of fairness and citizenship may be breaking down under conditions of economic and social crisis. While contemporary conditions are rapidly altering ageing and the realities of late life, there is a gap in the state of knowledge of and approaches to understanding risk and vulnerability during this period of the life course.

Approaching understandings of ageing from the perspective of precarity provides a point of reconnection with critical gerontology. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, critical gerontology emerged to provide a critique both of the type of welfare state that had emerged over the postwar period (Estes, 1979; Townsend, 1981), and of the widening social inequalities that subsequently emerged with the combination of globalization and neoliberalism (Baars et al, 2006). Moving into the 21st century, critical gerontology developed new strands, illustrated by the emergence of cultural gerontology and attention to questions associated with lifestyles, meanings and identity in later life (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000; Twigg and Martin, 2015). But despite the strengths of this approach and the continued contribution from other critical perspectives, critical gerontology struggled to develop effective responses to the various crises introduced by the post-2008 financial recession. The reasons for this are complex but almost certainly reflect the challenge posed by the relatively rapid decline of the welfare state that accompanied austerity (notably in Europe), the influence of new positive perspectives in gerontology (such as ideas associated with 'active' or 'successful' ageing), and intersecting forms of inequality

that affect groups such as women, migrants and older workers (Phillipson, 2013).

This book should be seen as a response to the challenges posed by the combination of changes to the welfare state and the need for new perspectives in critical and social gerontology. The arguments from the various contributors are developed in three main ways. First, the book extends existing research on precarity to consider ageing, the life course and late life. In particular, it expands the discussion of precarity beyond labour and people of working age, and explores a range of experiences that make precarity a particularly relevant feature of ageing and later life. The various chapters illustrate how contemporary conditions – such as threats to pensions, austerity, structural inequalities and flexible labour relations – create trajectories that extend into late life. That is, taking a ‘long view’ of the life course, authors demonstrate how the accumulation of disadvantage may not only widen the inequality gap between groups of older people, but heighten precarity in later life.

Second, the book considers precarity in relation to related concepts of *risk*, *social exclusion*, *inequality*, *disadvantage*, *marginalization* and *vulnerability*. The different chapters highlight the need to critically analyse these concepts in order to increase clarity in their definitions and boundaries and, ultimately, in their measurement. This is a crucial exercise for advancing the concept of precarity in the development of theory and its application to work in the field of ageing. Throughout the detailed examples in the collection, authors explore the potentials and pitfalls of precarity, and assess the extent to which this concept may (or may not) assist with understanding the complex range of changes that affect older people in everyday life (such as living arrangements and family statuses, migration and immigration, illness and disability, and needs related to getting and giving care).

Third, the book adds to the emerging illustrations of perspectives that bridge structural, cultural and interpretive approaches to ageing and late life. The investigation of precarity, itself with structural, philosophical and interpretative strands, provides a conceptual case for testing the boundaries of critical and cultural gerontology. As such, the detailed exploration of precarity simultaneously represents an attempt to extend the theoretical base of critical gerontology and the substantive focus on disadvantage and inequality, and a reconsideration of existing responses. In doing so, it offers insight into the areas that may produce the greatest discrepancies between policy frameworks, institutional or organizational practices, and the lives of older people, thereby underscoring the urgency of addressing insecurities, risks and vulnerabilities carried across the life course and into late life.

Guiding questions and key themes of the book

This collection resulted from ongoing exchanges in the context of research grants and conferences among a group of people studying disadvantage and inequality in late life.³ As we designed the collection, we strategically invited major scholars working in the targeted topic areas that would reveal the sources, consequences and experiences of precarity in different domains of life and sectors of society. To frame our inquiry, we set out a number of guiding questions:

- How might understandings of precarity and precariousness be extended to late life? Does precarity offer a new lens to understand insecurity, risk and vulnerability in late life?
- Is precarity a new form of ageing? To what extent has late life become precarious?
- How does an approach guided by precarity and/or precariousness differ from existing approaches to inequality and ageing? What are the potentials and/or pitfalls of precarity?
- How does precarity and/or precariousness align (or not) with other relevant concepts, such as risk, social exclusion or vulnerability?
- Is precarity a worthwhile concept from which to advance understandings of ageing and the life course, and can it help build a foundation for change?

The contents of the volume, as a whole, emphasize five larger themes. First, precarity often has *spill over* effects – from one period of life, from one domain and from one level to another. Second, precarity often has *social* origins and consequences – which implies human agency, brings about a potential for malleability and implies openness to chance, intervention and/or response. Third, precarity, and particularly precariousness, is often felt acutely in and expressed through social relationships, at particular transitional moments, and in contexts, making it an *interpersonal* phenomenon. Fourth, precarity is often experienced in intersectional ways, and at social locations that include age, ability, gender, ethnicity, migration status, race and socioeconomic status. As such, the analysis that results from precarity and precariousness reveals that there are both different ways that precarity is experienced by older people across a range of social locations and geographic contexts, and an inherent potential to address structures or social trajectories of risk. Finally, because precarity has a natural association with social policies and matters of inequality, it is also an inherently *political* phenomenon – something

that becomes acutely visible in the illustrations throughout the collection as a whole.

The collection is divided into three parts. The first following this chapter, consisting of contributions from Settersten and Katz, focuses on life course perspectives on precarity. These chapters set out a conceptual context for the study of precarity in relation to ageing and the life course. The second part, with chapters by Grenier, Lain et al, Kobayashi and Khan, and Portacolone, provides detailed investigations of precarity across a range of situations, including frailty, employment, migration and living alone. The third and final part, with chapters by Fine, Polivka and Luo, and Phillipson, focuses on the terrain of austerity, care and social relationships, and in particular how changes in social responses experienced in relation to the need for care may deepen precarity. The concluding chapter by Phillipson et al draws together the themes of the book and provides a discussion of the mutually enriching contributions that a focus on precarity makes to ageing, and ageing to understandings of precarity and precariousness.

What's ahead in the book

The collection consists of 11 chapters covering a range of topics and contexts. While topics such as the life course, migration, labour, frailty and care abound within gerontology, they are rarely pursued from a critical perspective, and even less so as an attempt to link them with theory on ageing, inequality and late life. Together, the contributions of each chapter offer new angles and fresh insights into insecurity and risk in late life.

Chapter 2 (Settersten) examines precarity and ageing through the lens of the life course. The chapter begins by describing how precarity in later life is connected to three distinct dimensions: time (experiences in prior life periods), life domains (experiences in education, work, family, health and wealth) and levels (such as individual, relational, institutional and demographic). It also generates specific lessons for assessing how life course dynamics matter for precarity in late life, revealing how the final decades of life are a time of heightened precarity; how precarity stems from life transitions, other people and social environments; how individuals' skills and capacities create precarity or their responses to it; and the significance of subjective evaluations and anticipation in affecting personal experiences with precarity. Because precarity is part of the human condition, some aspects of it are also universal.

Chapter 3 (Katz) draws on a figurative methodology to explore human development and the life course as precarious forms of life. Biopolitical governance and neoliberal policies have produced discourses and interventions organized around individualized risks and health crises that encourage the public to engage in ‘a will to health’ around lifestyle, exercise, diet, sexuality, environment, childrearing and ageing in order to manage issues of life, security and risk associated with various life course transitions. The chapter outlines the critical and ethical issues for ageing populations, and examines the crisis-laden personification of problems through the figures of the obese child, the unstable adolescent, the despairing mid-lifer and the cognitively impaired older adult. The chapter considers and compares the suggested responses of resilience and resistance, highlighting the need for individuals to refuse to be subjugated as precarious subjects, and imagining new future strategies for radical and non-precarious life course trajectories.

Chapter 4 (Grenier), providing the transition into the second part of the book, reconsiders frailty through the lens of precarity. In this chapter, Grenier argues for the need to shift the focus from frailty as an individual biomedical and corporeal risk to the insecurities and vulnerabilities that are produced and sustained in neoliberal contexts of care. The chapter outlines the problems and limitations of existing approaches to frailty, including how approaches currently overlook the political and relational aspects of frailty and vulnerability that are central to older people’s experiences. It examines precarity as a lens for analysing and resituating frailty in the political context of care, and for framing frailty in relation to the construction of devalued subjects. It exposes frailty as a shared experience of vulnerability, as socially, culturally, economically and politically situated, and as a result of political systems that deepen vulnerability.

Chapter 5 (Lain, Airey, Loretto and Vickerstaff) explores and theorizes the notion of ‘ontological precarity’ as a means to extend debates on precarity and older workers. Focusing on the idea that precarity is a lived experience rather than simply a labour outcome, the chapter views precarity as a useful concept for making sense of the position of older workers. Drawing on qualitative research with older workers and, in this case, female workers in a case study of the hospitality industry, it probes the concept of ‘ontological precarity’ as an individual experience of anxiety that stems from being subject to precarious work on a daily basis. The chapter presents a new framework that accounts for the intersections between the three separate domains of precarious employment, precarious welfare and

precarious households, thereby highlighting the relationship between sociopolitical conditions, employment contexts and individual life course trajectories. It points to the especially problematic discrepancies between policy decisions, such as the rising state pension ages, and the concern that 'in-work precarity' will become more widespread.

Chapter 6 (Kobayashi and Khan) provides a discussion of precarity, migration and ageing. The chapter begins by introducing key economic, psychosocial and cultural markers of precarity in older immigrants. Drawing on media stories and qualitative research with stakeholders who work with older immigrants in Canada, it highlights the politics of precarity for this population, including systemic racism and discrimination, immigration policy, and health and social care practices. It builds on existing research to suggest that precarity be conceptualized and analysed as a complex multidimensional construct. Especially important is the need to capture both objective measures and interpretive aspects of the experience, lifestyle behaviours and health in context (including changes between country of birth and country of residence over time), and gender and migration status. The authors conclude by pointing to the need for continued critical reflection on precarity, ageing and migration, and to a number of practical measures that could be used to prevent disadvantage in late life.

Chapter 7 (Portacolone) proposes a framework for identifying and assessing precarity across a range of settings. The chapter begins by setting the context for precarity and the challenges of understanding and measuring precarity. To illustrate these challenges, it turns to two qualitative studies on living alone in old age, emphasizing four specific markers of precarity that could be used to build a framework: uncertainty, limited access to appropriate services, the importance of maintaining independence, and cumulative pressures. The chapter underscores the need to link research-based insights with programmes, policies and practices in an effort to alter the negative experiences of precarity among older people.

Chapter 8 (Fine) provides the entry into the third part of the book. The chapter considers precarity and precariousness in relation to existing scholarship and critical theory on care. Despite improvements in population health and increasing life expectancies over the 20th and 21st centuries, the need for supportive care on an ongoing basis or in critical periods continues to increase with age. Without appropriate social responses, life itself can be curtailed or cease to be viable. Drawing on the work of philosopher Eva Kittay and other scholars, the chapter develops theoretical perspectives on formal and

informal provision of care, exploring how economic and political changes have restructured patterns of dependency for both those in receipt of care and those who provide it. It also comments on how the marketization of care has led to significant increases in precarity, especially for those with life histories of social disadvantage and marginalization. Understanding the care of older people as precarious helps to make visible the otherwise hidden links between the global reach of precarious work and the uncertain and unevenly distributed risks of needing care in late life.

Extending the analysis of care, Chapter 9 (Polivka and Luo) illustrates how precarity has been generated by the spread of corporatization to publicly funded health care programmes and by the emergence of neoliberal health and long-term care, particularly in the United States. Building on the work of Standing, the chapter focuses on the growing 'precariat' of low-wage workers with few if any retirement and health benefits and with no guarantees regarding continuing employment. Anchored in Streeck's theory of the neoliberal consolidation state, the chapter provides an in-depth treatment of how changes in US health care programmes have created precarity, and warns of the effects of similar trends towards neoliberal long-term care in several European countries that seem certain to result in growing precarity among older people in those nations as well.

Chapter 10 (Phillipson) focuses on how economic and social pressures have created precarious environments for growing old in the 21st century. This chapter examines the rise of precarity in the lives of older people, beginning with how experiences of ageing have been isolated from institutions that were once central to the provision of support in later life, and how older people have been affected by changes to the welfare state. The chapter establishes the link between precarity, the impacts of globalization and the financial crisis, and responses that are increasingly organized around austerity politics characterized by declining social supports, as well as a 'decline of the social' more generally. It underscores the problems of making individuals personally responsible for managing life course transitions, of lowering expectations, and of the erosion of public support based on the moral case for welfare. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of collective responses to ageing, consisting of universal basic services, substantive equality and citizenship.

The concluding chapter by Phillipson, Grenier and Settersten provides an overview of the arguments developed throughout the book together with the linkages that exist between the chapters. Drawing on the various perspectives presented, it turns attention to

the lives of older people in the context of austerity and precarious institutions. It then summarizes what ageing can bring to the study of precarity and vice versa, including reaching beyond the insecurities provided by the labour market in early periods of life, developing a deeper understanding of cumulative disadvantages and ontological vulnerabilities, and the importance of drawing upon other frameworks for change such as those associated with maintaining human rights. The chapter concludes with the importance of pushing the boundaries of critical scholarship to gain new insights into our understanding of the nature of precarity and ageing, and the challenges associated with living in a precarious world.

Ageing in new times: understanding risk and insecurity

This book is offered as a response to the tension that has emerged between longevity on the one hand and a more unequal old age on the other. This must itself be linked to the weakening of key institutions undergirding old age, notably in relation to retirement and the welfare state. The stakes are now high in terms of future support for older people. As Gray (2010, p 5) has observed: ‘A roll-back of the state of the magnitude [currently underway] will leave people more exposed to the turbulence of world markets than they have been for generations. Inevitably, they will seek protection.’ Yet such assistance will inevitably be different from that which shaped the lives of older people in the second half of the 20th century. The evidence suggests a more divided old age, with prosperity for some matched by deep poverty for others.

Society is now faced with a different type of ageing, underpinned by changing cultural and economic forces and responses. These are transforming the landscape around which the social construction of ageing has traditionally been built. The purpose of this book is to examine the new risks and insecurities facing older people, but also the potential for new forms of solidarity that need to be built within the context of ageing societies. Social gerontology has been slow to respond to the structural changes facing older people, with the dismantling of the institutions that defined social ageing in the 20th century. Acknowledging ‘precarity’ and the ‘precariousness’ of old age is an initial response to this changed environment, one requiring new theories and policies to be developed within social and critical gerontology.

Notes

- ¹ Millar (2017, pp 7–8) concludes her analysis of these three approaches to precarity by arguing that, despite relevant critique, precarity retains both an analytic and a political value because it can open questions about the relationship between forms of labour and the fragile conditions of life. It is precisely this analysis that becomes extremely relevant for ageing, and in particular the intersections of the impacts of labour (or care) over time and the need for various forms of support in late life.
- ² Most discussions of precarity have tended to focus on labour. Our approach, by linking these with scholarship on care and vulnerability from a range of perspectives, but most notably cultural studies (Butler), aims to extend current understandings of insecurity and risk as applied to the study of ageing and late life (see Butler, 2006; 2009; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013; Standing, 2011; 2012).
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