

Spring School 2017 “Perspectives on an age-friendly culture: Concepts and Methods”
University of Heidelberg and Jawaharlal Nehru University
Monday, 20th February, 2017, Day 1

The Monday session of the Spring school at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi on ‘Active Ageing: towards an Age Friendly Culture’ marked the beginning of a series of discussions, presentations, film screenings on active ageing in India and Germany. The sessions aimed to get a cultural, sociological, psychological and anthropological understanding of ageing showing the diversity of the Indian and German context.

The Spring School started with a presentation by Mr. Mathieu Morand, co-founder of Care24, a for-profit organization based in Mumbai, India, providing healthcare support at home for the elderly in Mumbai and Delhi. The presentation displayed the changing landscape of elderly care in the metropolitan cities in India. It further showed that the elderly do not always decide about their care, but that their relatives are rather the decision-makers. Discussions dealing with medical assistance to the role of caregivers as providers of emotional and social support took place. It was further discussed how technology plays a role for the elderly in these cities to manage their lives. The fact that deep emotional ambivalences arose from the class and caste differences between the caregivers on the one side and the elderly on the other side was another point for discussion.

Professor Mohan Rao from the department of social medicine at JNU chaired the morning session. This session had two presentations from the faculty, one from Professor Minati Panda, Zakir Husain Centre of Educational Studies, JNU and one from Professor Andreas Kruse, Institute of Gerontology, University of Heidelberg. This was followed by two student presentations, one from Miriam Fehmann, Heidelberg University and one from Meghna Datta Roy, JNU, which opened the floor for discussion of the circulated papers of this session.

Professor Panda gave a presentation on the cultural complexities of defining and engaging the “middle age” in India. Given her expertise in cultural psychology she was able to lucidly comment and connect the threads on how we define middle age in India. This definition is rooted in our understanding of the Indian family. Borrowing from Sudhir Kakar, she commented on how certain practices like withdrawing from household chores or a change in diet marks middle age in the Indian family. Something as basic as food choice and circulation creates a familiar premise of power relationships in the Indian family. Professor Panda’s presentation raised theoretical and cultural points around how we define the middle ages, the complexities of ‘Indian family’ and how active ageing needs a fresh theoretical outlook in the Indian context.

Professor Andreas Kruse gave a lecture with examples of famous artists’ paintings displaying high abstraction and reflection in high age. By introducing Victor Frankl, Erik Erikson and a painting by Rembrandt he showed different understandings of generativity. After explaining the coping strategies and the work of Karl Jaspers he focused on a current study in Heidelberg

in which people in the fourth stage of life (age 85 and higher) were asked about their opportunities for civic engagement. Kruse underlined the importance of intergenerational spaces, where older people are able to participate and share social relationships.

The readings circulated for discussion in this session were “Spirituality and Transcendence” by Andreas Kruse and his colleague Eric Schmitt and “A Life History: Revisitation and Reinvolverment” from Erik H. Erikson’s pivotal work on ageing “Vital Involvement in Old Age” (Co authored by Joan Erikson and Helen Q Kivnick). The student presentations discussed some of the key ideas shared in these papers in the Indian and German context.

Meghna Datta Roy, a student of psychology at Zakir Husain Centre, JNU, presented her ideas on the intergenerational dialogue between children and their grandparents in Indian families. She raised questions on how children in many middle class Indian families develop an intergenerational dialogue to their grandparents, who have a significant position in the children’s’ early years and cited Erikson’s notions of generativity to contextualize her points.

Miriam Fehmann, a student of the Institute of Gerontology in Heidelberg, gave an example for generativity in current projects on education and high age. Erikson himself gave a lecture about Identity in the 1970s. „A sense of identity means a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops; and it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community’s sense of being at one with its future as well as its history– or myth. (1974, p. 27). So for development in high age this means that fulfilment as Erikson explained it as „coherence as wholeness“(1985).

Veelken tried to translate the expression of Erikson’s life cycle and concept of integrity to Indian philosophy. The first 25 years in one’s life are for learning and are called *bramcharia*, followed by a time of engagement for society and family named *grihastha*. By the age of 50 starts a process of searching, releasing and upcoming new questions, which is known as the time of *bhikshu* or *sannyasin*. It means a process of self-expression, self-growing, self-expanding for personal spiritual realization.

Both student presentations created an open dialogue within the group about generativity and self-actualization and how these concepts may have an appropriate or limited meaning in the Indian and German cultural context. This also led to a discussion on the need to look at Erikson’s theory from a macro cultural perspective as the social and cultural premises of both countries are nuanced and complex.

Stephanie Böttner, a student of the Institute of Gerontology in Heidelberg, gave an introduction about Erikson’s theory and its relation to the film “Wild Strawberries” by Ingmar Bergman. The protagonist in the movie “Wild Strawberries” is called Dr. Isak Borg, an old Swedish doctor who is to receive the highest honour of his profession in Lund, a town in the South of Sweden. The viewer follows Dr. Borg’s journey to this event that is attended by his daughter-in-law, some young backpackers and also Dr. Borg’s reappearing dreams. His dreams are an expressions of his process of self-actualization and his memories of his past life as this can be related to the last stages of life in Erikson’s theory.

Erikson himself considered this relation and for this reason he describes in his essay “Reflections on Dr. Borg’s Life”, published in 1976, the last life stages of his theory in detail. Erikson is linking Dr. Borg’s positions and changing points of view in his dreams and makes

clear “how a significant moment in old age reaches back through a man’s unresolved adulthood to the dim awareness as a child” (Erikson, 1976).

The film “Wild Strawberries” by Ingmar Bergman helps with the understanding of the elderly as it highlights Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development, especially the last stages, in a wonderful and authentic way. Furthermore the film was a big contribution as it helped the participants to understand Erikson’s theory and to put it into the German or Indian context of old age. The session ended with a screening of the film “Wild Strawberries” and was followed by a vivid discussion.

Literature

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Stephanie Böttner and Miriam Fehmann

*BA Gerontologie, Gesundheit und Care
Heidelberg University*

Mizaj K.V., Megha Bali, Meghna Datta Roy

*Doctoral Candidates, Zakir Husain Centre for Educational Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi*