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Making meaning of financial scarcity in old age

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, we explore how older people (aged 69 to 85 years) living on the edge of relative poverty experience their everyday lives, and second, we investigate how they cope with their financial situation. We examine these aspects through 16 life story interviews to understand which paths these older people believe have led them to where they are today. First, we show how the older people highlight events or decisions in their life that mainly have an individual origin placing the responsibility of their current financial situation on themselves. We argue that these accounts reflect a change in the discourse on poverty; a transformation from poverty as collective destiny to poverty as the result of individual failure. Second, we show how these older people's control strategies vary across their life spans. In earlier phases of their lives, these older people attempted actively to improve their financial situation; however, in their old age, they focus more on adapting to and accepting the situation because their advanced age makes it difficult for them to use active coping strategies to overcome financial scarcity. Third, we argue that the imprints the interviewees received growing up in financial scarcity during the Second World War and the postwar years may have instilled them with silence and modesty, thus they are likely to adjust stoically.

Introduction

About one in six older Danish people live almost entirely on first pillar pensions.[2] These citizens at the bottom of the income distribution have disposable incomes close to the 60% threshold of the median income in Denmark, making them objectively at risk of experiencing relative poverty, according to the EU definition.[3] Additionally, quantitative studies have linked low income to a series of poor outcomes such as lower life expectancy (Baadsgaard & Brønnum-Hansen, 2012), a lower general well-being (Golden et al., 2009), social exclusion (Mood & Jonsson, 2016), and psychological distress and worrying (Keith, 1993; Litwin & Meir, 2013; Litwin & Sapir, 2009).

Focusing on objective or material relative poverty is important because it informs researchers and society about a population group's consumption power and economic well-being. However, if researchers focus solely on objective or material aspects, we risk painting a one-sided picture of the life circumstances and life satisfaction of the older people. Although consumption power impacts life quality and other important outcomes, so does the individual's life experiences and defining choices—something which could be particularly important among older people who have more experiences than younger people. We need more knowledge about how older people experience restricted financial conditions since increasing longevity and demographic changes mean that more older people are expected to take greater personal responsibility for their retirement resources. Additionally, because managing old age finances is often a demanding task in a complex economic world, there is a risk that social stratification among older people will increase further in the future (Litwin & Meir, 2013).

In this paper, we focus on how older Danes living on first pillar pensions experience and deal with life on the margins of relative poverty. To do so, we apply life story interviews to understand what these older people define as relevant biographically events in relation to their current financial situation. Further we use life story interviews to understand how these people deal with relative poverty in old age, and how they dealt with financial strain in earlier phases of their lives. Overall, we find that the older people experience control of their current financial situation, and reject being poor, while also describing deprivations, and feelings of shame related to not being able to meet cultural norms. Thus, one guiding question in our analysis is how and why the older people integrate these seemingly conflicting elements of

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[2] Defined as disposable income, in addition to the social state pension, at max 100 Euro per person/month.
[3] 60% of the median income in Denmark is 18.422 US Dollars (2014). Exchange rate 697.

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deprivation and meaning in their life stories. Our analysis illustrate how the interviewees' stories shape and are shaped by wider societal transformations such as discourses of the individualization of poverty and old age as equal to a life phase of retirement, and by the historical imprints of growing in financial scarcity during and after the Second World War.

Background

Scholars apply life course theory to inequality in old age in many ways; however, empirical research on this important topic has primarily been limited to investigations into the factors leading to old-age poverty (e.g., (Avila-Funes et al., 2016; Gabriel, Oris, Studer, & Baeriswyl, 2015; Litwin & Meir, 2013; OECD, 2013, 2015; Peeters & Wouter, 2015). For example, older women have a higher poverty risk than do older men (OECD, 2015), and unmarried, divorced, separated, or never married women have the highest poverty risk (Haider, Jacknowitz, & Schoeni, 2003; Peeters & Wouter, 2015).

Empirical research on implications of living in relative poverty in old age has primarily been investigated through quantitative studies that, for example, link financial strain in old age to psychological distress and worrying. Litwin and Meir (2013) showed that financial worry is negatively related to perceived income adequacy and age, with the main financial worry being that the pension funds will not suffice for one's entire life. Additionally, Keith (1993) found that, compared to men, women are more likely to feel distress in relation to financial strain. Another study among older adults shows that the individual's net wealth is the main predictor of perceived income adequacy (Litwin & Sapir, 2009). However, the same study also suggested that the oldest-old (80+ years) worry less than younger old, and that they might overestimate their financial capabilities, which the authors point out practitioners should keep in mind when older clients tell them that they have no problems making ends meet (Litwin & Sapir, 2009).

However, an empirical study on welfare, living conditions, and life satisfaction in the Nordic countries suggested that a direct link does not necessarily exist between the objective living conditions on the one hand and the subjective life satisfaction on the other (Allardt, 1975), and this underlines the importance of qualitative studies on the experience of living in relative poverty. Thus, we need to obtain knowledge that will close the gap between objective life circumstances and subjective interpretations thereof; knowledge about how the statistical correlations are experienced by the older people in their everyday life, and which individual meanings are hidden behind the numbers. The aim of this study, therefore, is to gain knowledge on how low-income state pensioners interpret and cope with their current financial situation with reference to the lives they have lived. To reach this goal, we employ life story interviews with 16 older people to identify what they define as relevant biographically events in relation to their current financial situation (Gubrium, 2012; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000).

It is worth mentioning that in relatively rich modern welfare states, such as Denmark, absolute poverty is limited; rather, the type of poverty that exists is relative poverty. We rely on Townsend's definition of relative poverty, where an individual can be defined as living in (relative) poverty when he or she has so much less than other individuals of that society that it causes an exclusion from the life style that is considered normal (Townsend, 1979: 31). Human beings are social creatures with needs beyond those of food, housing and clothes, and our needs are thus also defined by the social and historical context of which we are part. In this study, the question is whether the older people interviewed have the resources to meet social roles and cultural norms and to take part in the activities in which other older people participate or whether they experience deprivations in their daily lives.

The Danish pension system – from universal to neoliberal

The Danish pension system consists, like in most other Western countries, of a multi-pillar system built on a combination of performance-dependent employer pensions and a more liberal state pension (which, however, is characterized by comparatively high benefits).

The first pillar was initiated in 1956 with the introduction of a tax financed social state pension with the aim of preventing poverty. In 1964, this social state pension was made universal (with full implementation from 1970) for individuals above the age of 67. However, the universality failed to provide all individuals with satisfactory coverage compared to their former earnings from employment. This inadequacy was resolved by placing the responsibility of securing an additional income on the individual. To encourage people to make private pension savings, several arrangements were created, including capital pension, installment pension and annuities. In 1994, the social state pension was made dependent on income from work, a neoliberal turn that brought the former principle of universalism and equal pension to all citizens to a close (Andersen & Jensen, 2011).

The largest reforms of the pension system took place in the 1990s, when an employment pension was established for most workers, creating a second pillar of the pension system that aimed to replace income in old age. In the beginning, contributions were very small. However, from 2009, the minimum contribution was set to 12%, and most schemes currently have a contribution rate between 12 and 17%. The employment pension covers approximately 90% of full-time employees in Denmark today (OECD, 2015), and in 2040, it will be fully matured (forsikringogpension.dk). The introduction of the employment pension has been an important change and compromise to the universal welfare state for securing the sustainability of the pension system in the years to come (Andersen & Jensen, 2011). The third pillar of the pension system consists of voluntary private savings. These reforms of the pension system have transformed it by decreasing the universality of the pension benefits and increasing the means-tested pension benefits, placing a larger financial responsibility on the individual to save toward their pension.

Table 1 describes the three pillars of the Danish pension system. The benefits from first pillar pensions (after taxes) for pensioners without an additional income are approximately 1350 US Dollars per month for pensioners living alone and 850 US Dollars per month for pensioners living with a partner.[4] On top of these benefits, state pensioners in Denmark without an additional income and no/limited fortune or pensions from other pillars receive a supplementary pension, i.e. a lump sum of approximately 1400 US Dollars per year (known as the older people's check), which is paid out once a year.

In sum, the Danish pension system has developed from being universal to partly means-tested, thus placing greater emphasis on performance-dependent employment pensions in the second and third pillar. In other words, the principle of solidarity of the Danish pension system has undergone remarkable changes, and like all other welfare states, Denmark is silently moving towards a more neoliberal welfare state model (Gilbert, 2002). This neoliberal turn in the Danish pension system emphasizes individual performances, and thus enforces public discourses where poverty is reduced to a matter of individual failure rather than structures of society.

Methods and data

This article builds on life story interviews with 16 Danish state pensioners, all living on the margins of relative poverty. The recruitment strategy was guided by two criteria: 1) the participants had to be state pensioners, and 2) the participant's income had to be limited to benefits from the first pillar of the pension system (i.e. the state pension, supplements and allowances). The participants were recruited through the first author's personal and professional networks, and the interviewer had not met any of the participants before the interview.

[4] 2018 numbers. Exchange rate 697.

Table 1
Pillars and levels of the Danish pension system 2014.

<table>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2">First pillar
Public pensions</td><td>Second pillar
Pensions linked to employment</td><td>Third pillar
Private pensions</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 3
Supplementary pension</td><td colspan="2"></td><td></td><td>Capital pension
Installment pension
Annuity</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="10">Level 2
Income replacement

Level 1
Protection against poverty</td><td colspan="2"></td><td rowspan="10">Employment pension (initiated in the 1990's, will be fully matured in 2040).
Covers approximately 90 pct. of full-time employees.</td><td rowspan="10"></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">SP: Special Pension Savings (initiated in 1998/1999, phased out in 2009)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">ATP (savings) (initiated in 1964)</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Social state pension (created in 1956, universal from 1964)</td><td>Basic amount</td></tr>
<tr><td>Supplementary amount</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Supplementary pension benefit "the older people's check" (initiated in 2003)</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Allowance (initiated between 1981-2001)</td><td>health allowance</td></tr>
<tr><td>personal allowance</td></tr>
<tr><td>heat allowance</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Housing allowance (initiated in 1978)</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2">Special discounts for state pensioners</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Light gray: based on savings.
Dark gray: means tested, dependent on income and fortune (supplements are dependent on income).
Source: (Andersen & Jensen, 2016, p 332).

The participants included three men and 13 women from rural and urban areas in Denmark, and at the time of the interview, they were aged between 69 and 85 years. The participants all grew up in financial scarcity during the Second World War. Three interviewees had been disability pensioners for most or all of their adult lives, six interviewees had held skilled positions (office assistant, dental technician, glazier, art school teacher, yoga teacher, and hairdresser), and the remaining seven had primarily held unskilled positions of employment (e.g., bus driver, cashier at a grocery shop, factory worker, cleaner, and bar lady). All of the participants lived in private homes at the time of the interviews, except for one who lived at a nursing home, and only four cohabited with a partner.

All of the interviews were conducted and digitally recorded by the first author in the homes of the interviewees. The interviews were semi-structured and centered on issues such as the subjective experience of the financial situation, the budget, deprivations, health, life story, everyday life, and social relations. During the interviews, the first author avoided using the term *poverty* to let the participants define their own situations. All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, including pauses, laughs, and particles, and the interviews were coded in NVivo.

Life stories

Our use of life story interviews serves two purposes. First, through life stories, we gain a more nuanced and detailed insight into how older people at the margins of poverty describe their everyday life. Life stories represent a lifetime of accumulated experiences, values, and norms, and they therefore provide an explanatory framework through which we can understand the meaning making (Hoff, 2006). The point is that we get a better understanding of how older people experience the present by paying close attention to how they present the past e.g. we get a better understanding of how individuals cope with poverty in old age by understanding how they coped with poverty in the younger years.

Second, though each life story is unique, it may reflect some shared understandings e.g. the life stories in our study are personal accounts, but they also reflect societal changes such as the rise of the welfare state, discourses on poverty and old age. Such an approach to narrative analysis is shared by others in the field of narrative context analysis. For example, Gubrium and Holstein (2009) argues that no item of experience is meaningful in itself; the meaning is reached when linking the experience to other contexts as people situate their stories within contexts. Meaning making is an active practice in which the individual draws from available resources in order to construct a meaningful story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). De Fina argues in the same way that storytelling at a local (micro) level is connected to a broader societal (macro) level. Therefore an analysis of life stories requires attention to the macro context since none of them is independent of the other (De Fina, 2008, see also Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach, & Lieblich, 2008; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Further, when we use the term "experience" we rely on what Caine, Estefan & Clandinin named a "narrative view of experience" (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013:575). This entails an understanding of experience as constantly unfolding over time, in different contexts, places and in relation with others (see also Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

Following this perspective on individual life stories and how these

are linked to broader societal stories and discourses, a central question we ask in our analysis is: Why are the stories told in the way they are? Answering this requires paying close attention to *what* the interviewees tell, but also to the tellership (see also Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). *How* people choose to compose their stories, what they choose to include or leave out,[5] and how they present themselves in those stories provide us with important insights into the wider macro contexts that these micro stories are part of. Therefore the analysis focuses on *what* is said, and in particular *how* it is said.

In the following analysis, we present the empirical findings primarily from two cases, those of Ruth and Mary. We present the empirical findings from these two interviewees particularly because their life stories differ substantially at first sight. However, a closer examination of the two life stories reveals the similarities between the stories. Before introducing the two cases, we begin by presenting the analytical findings that motivated our analysis; namely that all of the interviewees experienced deprivations, and consequently feelings of shame, but at the same time they presented themselves as being in control and as experiencing a general satisfaction with life. Our analysis was motivated and guided by an ambition to understand how and why the interviewees integrated these seemingly conflicting elements into their stories.

Results

Experiences of living in poverty in old age

Deprivations

Almost all of the 16 interviewees rejected the idea that they are poor, but they revealed that they experience varying degrees of material and social deprivations, and that they feel shame about their financial situation. Some cannot afford to buy specific groceries and other things for the household, such as fresh fruit, roast beef, psyllium (to counteract negative effect medicine has on the stomach), new clothes, footwear, and new stronger glasses. A 74-year old female interviewee worries that she might receive an extra bill for electricity and heat; therefore, at night, she often only has one small electric light turned on and she wraps herself in a blanket rather than turning on the heater in the apartment. She states that her visitors feel cold. A 79-year old man with a kidney failure goes to dialysis at the hospital three times a week, however as he cannot afford to buy an electric scooter or the like the trip to the hospital is causing him lots of time, energy and stress. Another deprivation mentioned by the majority of the interviewees is that they cannot afford to invite guests for meals at their home or take vacations. A 74-year old female interviewee has a group of friends she sees regularly; however, she cannot afford to join them when they go to restaurants or invite them home for dinner. Instead, she only invites them for a cup of coffee. Buying presents for grandchildren and other family members is also challenging; some interviewees have been forced to cut down on birthday and Christmas presents, others have stopped giving presents at all.

Further, as a reaction to the experience of deprivations, the majority of the interviewees pointed out situations in which they have felt shame because they could not afford to do the same things as other people, or they required financial help to make ends meet. Ruth explained (at the very end of the interview, when the confidence between her and the interviewer was stronger than at the beginning) that, when she turned 80 years, she could not afford to celebrate it with a birthday party. Her friends and family came by to wish her a happy birthday, but she could not afford an actual party, which made her feel shame. Mary explained that, when she visits her daughter, her daughter usually fills Mary's suitcase with presents, and she recounted several occasions in which her family has provided her with cash when she needed it. However, this made her feel shame. Likewise, Gubrium (2013) shows that the feeling of shame is an emotional experience of poverty. Shame and stigma are so strongly connected, that they can almost be treated as synonymous (Walker, 2014), thus these feelings of shame may indicate the stigma attached to poverty. These shared experiences of deprivations and shame indicate the severity of the interviewees' financial situation; it reveals that the interviewees' general satisfaction cannot be explained simply by arguing that their financial situation is actually quite good. Thus, in order to understand why the interviewees tell this story, we turn to the analytical questions of *what* they more particularly tell, and *how* they tell it. We illustrate this through the two case stories of Mary and Ruth.

The stories of Ruth and Mary

Despite deprivations, Mary does not think she lacks money, and Ruth questions whether a life with little money is worse than a life with a lot of money.

Mary. Mary is 82 years old and twice widowed. She lived most of her life in Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, but moved to an apartment in the countryside when she retired because she could no longer climb the stairs to her previous apartment due to her fragile health. Before she retired, she managed her own hairdressing salon and worked as a cleaning lady. She now lives exclusively on first pillar pension. When all fixed expenses are paid, she has around 433 US Dollars (3000 DKK) per month, which she believes is sufficient. She has four children and a few siblings with whom she is in regular contact. She also has quite a few friends with whom she meets on a weekly basis, and she also attends social meetings at associations organized by local communities. In general, she seems to have a solid social network, but her health is not good. She has problems with her heart, and she has had several surgeries, including a new heart valve. She has also had breast, skin, and melanoma cancer. She is currently fighting three cysts in her jaw, which cause her considerable pain.

Her first husband died from cancer when she was in her early sixties. He was a dental technician and earned a reasonable salary. She met her second husband a few years later when she was out dancing. He was an engineer and had what she describes as a “good salary.” However, despite this good salary, they did not save up any money. Her husband did suggest that they put aside some money for their retirement, but Mary rejected this suggestion because she preferred to spend it on traveling and enjoying life while they still could, and she does not regret this decision.

Ruth. Ruth is 81 years old. She lives alone in a private apartment in central Copenhagen. She lives exclusively on first pillar pension, and she spends around half of her income on rent. After fixed expenses have been paid, her monthly disposal income is around 361 US Dollars (2500 DKK), which has to cover non-fixed expenses such as food, clothes, medicine, and gifts. She married when she was 22 years old, and she had two sons. One of her sons passed away recently, which she describes as the most difficult experience of her life. The children's father left her when the youngest son was an infant, so she raised the two children alone. She lost contact with the children's father; he suffered from mental illness and was hospitalized before passing away. After her husband left her, at first she worked in a factory, and later on she obtained a commercial degree and worked for an insurance company.

When she was 61 years old, she was accidentally hit by a car and was unable to continue working. As most of her friends have now passed away, her social network is limited, comprising mainly her son, her two daughters-in-law, her grandchildren, and some of her deceased friends' children. She does not participate in any regular activities (except hospital visits). Her health is troubled, and she still deals with

[5] De Medeiros and Rubinstein (2015) highlight the importance of focusing on “shadow stories” since such untold stories may reveal an underlying complexity of narrative composition.

the injuries from the car accident. Her heart is in bad shape, and she regularly goes to the hospital. She does not, however, experience her financial situation as troublesome, but she regrets that she could not afford to celebrate her 80th birthday.

Two different narratives with the same plot

In this section we focus on *what* Ruth and Mary tell and *how* they tell it.

What Ruth and Mary tell us is that they did not save up for their old age and they pointed out different life events when they explained why they refrained from creating private pension savings (and thus have restricted finances today). The following sequence shows that Mary highlighted how she actively chose not to save up:

> *Mary: No, I don't have any savings.*
> *Interviewer: But is it something you have thought about – saving up?*
> *Mary: Well, my husband did, that is my last husband, Paul, the one I married the second time, because he earned quite a lot of money, but I'd rather travel.*

Later in the interview, Mary reflected more on this matter:

> *He [Paul] thought it was wrong to spend money all the time; we should remember our old age, [he said].*
> *Then I said, "but have you thought about how we might not want to travel when we grow old"? But this is one big lie, since one does want to travel!*

Mary wanted to travel and see the world while she was still in good health, and she encouraged her husband to do so, even though he thought it was a bad idea. By contrast, Ruth's involvement in a car accident forced her to retire, although she wanted to keep working because she had a large debt to pay off. Ruth also explained how she decided to take up a loan in order to support her sons' education, thus underlining how she placed more importance on being a good mother than having a financially secure old age.

Now let us take a closer look at *how* Ruth and Mary construct their individual stories. Although Mary and Ruth's stories highlight different events to justify their restricted financial situation today, the two stories follow a similar pattern. In both these events, the narrator presents herself as a rational actor being in control of the course of her life, and both stories present accounts that have an individual origin. Neither Mary nor Ruth refers to *collective accounts* to justify their current restricted financial situation. Their stories do not blame employers, society, politicians, economic conjunctions, or structural conditions for the course of their lives. Thus, when Ruth and Mary present themselves as actors in their lives, they also hold themselves and their individual life stories responsible for their current financial situation. Mary explained how she once had enough money to establish private pension savings, but she decided not to put the money aside for her older days. Ruth explained how she decided to support her children's education, and later on to spend all of her savings on paying off debt.

However, the parallel of the narratives ends there because Mary and Ruth ascribed quite different roles to themselves in their stories. Mary repeatedly underlined how lucky she is. For example, when asked about her childhood, she explained that both of her parents were deaf. The presentation of this fact could very well have been followed by several episodes about the struggles and downsides of having not only one but two parents with a handicap. However, Mary turned this piece of information into a positive and humoristic story about how, even today, she and her siblings speak loudly because their parents never taught them to keep quiet. She also underlined how lucky she and her siblings were not to inherit their parents' handicap (even though the parents' hearing impairment was not inheritable, as it was brought on by illness): *"Had one of my parents been born deaf, we would have risked inheriting it. But we talk loud [laughing]."*

Even in her very detailed description of the last minutes of her second husband's life, she concluded that *"he had the best death one could have,"* and she wrapped up an important chapter in her life story by highlighting the positive sides of a tragic episode. In addition, like several other events in her life, she talked about this event in a humoristic manner; she laughed and imitated the tragicomically funny sound her husband made when he took his final breath, and she laughed again when she explained how paralyzed she and the home nurse, who coincidentally was there, became when they realized that he had actually just died. Mary's story unfolded in the tragic-humoristic genre; the evident plotline in her story is thus luck, love, and humor, and her story is structured according to these overall organizing principles.

We now take a closer look at the role Ruth ascribed to herself in her life story. Ruth's story contains descriptions of luck too, but unlike Mary she dealt with *bad* luck. Her husband and son became seriously ill and they both passed away. She was hit by a car and injured for life. The following sequence shows how Ruth also linked her lack of money in old age to bad luck:

> *I was in a car accident at Thor's Street. I was on my way to a meeting at the hospital and was heading for the bus at Thor's Street, and then one car drove up and the driver said that I could cross the street, and then another car came and threw me over the roof. I broke both legs, and my back, and this arm, and it took some time [to recover]. That is why I don't have any money, because a lot of things happened with my job and I had to change and I wasn't really well.*

According to Lyman and Schott (1970), accounts claiming accidents as the source of conduct is a way for the individual to mitigate responsibility, since accidents are generally recognized as hazards and their randomness falls beyond individual control. Therefore, unlike Mary, Ruth did not take full responsibility for her current situation (which is quite understandable given the degree of difficulties she has experienced). It is noteworthy, however, that she does not directly blame any external cause for her situation. She could have blamed her former employer that he or she did not offer her enough recovery time to rehabilitate from the accident and return to work. She could also have told a story about how the hospital failed to help her, or she could have blamed the driver of the car that hit her. However, her story did not contain such blame, thus responsibility disclaiming explanations was omitted from her story. Instead, Ruth blamed bad luck, which is a random event that could have happened to anyone. So here Ruth's destiny of being poor has an individual (random) origin rather than a collective one. But Ruth's story does contain some inherent contradictions at this point, as she notes towards the end of the extract that "a lot of things happened with my job". This may point to how Ruth is not ignorant of structural constraints and their consequences for how her life turned out, however she does not elaborate this story any further; perhaps because the interviewer does not follow up, or because she did not want to disclaim responsibility. Yet, it is our general impression from the interviewees that individual accounts prevail.

Few people would object to Ruth presenting herself as the victim in her story; however, that is *not* how she presented herself. Instead, she reframed her story, presenting herself as a hero who, *despite* all of her bad luck, overcame these challenges because of actions she took. For example, when Ruth's husband left her, she and her children had to move to what she described as a barracks village. However, instead of remaining passive and accepting this decline in housing quality, Ruth took agency and wrote a letter to the mayor, among other people, to let him know about her and her children's bad living conditions. She also decided to receive an education as a way out of the poverty. Ruth therefore took pride in how she actively dealt with these bad conditions of her life and highlighted how she actively *chose* to be a responsible mother, underlining her position as an actor in her own life. Despite objective obstacles, she did not become a passive recipient of bad luck or structural circumstances.

Individualization of poverty – blaming one self

Ruth's and Mary's stories differ considerably. Their stories are presented and constructed in different ways; they include different accounts (happenings, events, and choices); they are structured according to different plotlines; and they even represent different genres. Although Ruth and Mary also ascribed themselves different roles in their stories, both women created a sense of meaning through their stories despite their restricted financial situations. However, they did so in very different ways. In Ruth's story, meaning is reached through her self-presentation as a responsible mother who takes action and deals with the outer circumstances that life brings. Mary emphasizes elements such as, luck, love, and a general pursuit of pleasure and joyful experiences in her story. And these elements create a sense of coherence and meaning. While Mary appears to be the "chosen one" in her narration, Ruth comes across as the hero of her story.

Despite these differences the two stories are quite similar. Both women highlight events that have an individual origin, thus placing the responsibility of their restricted economy on themselves, and not, for example, on society. When Mary says that she decided not to save up any money, she presents herself as a responsible individual in control. When Ruth justifies her situation with the accidents, she does not take responsibility but she refers to a general acceptable (and reasonable) excuse for why she does not have any savings. In the next section we illustrate that these aspects of Ruth and Mary's little stories reflect societal macro stories (broad societal changes).

During the early years of capitalism, poverty was primarily experienced and viewed as a collective destiny, i.e., a destiny for specific classes in society. Poverty was a shared destiny for many individuals in the working class; therefore, the individuals living in poverty could, to some degree, share their destiny and the view that poverty was caused by injustices in the welfare system, and they could collectively fight against it. However, in the postindustrial society of today, the affiliation to the traditional classes is weakened and neoliberal values dominate society, which makes a collective fight against poverty much harder. Further, poverty today is often not a permanent condition because many individuals experience poverty at some point in their life course (Andersen & Larsen, 2011; Beck, 1992). The individualism accompanying this societal development frees the individual from traditional affiliations, thus leaving the individual with many choices. Along with this growing individual freedom comes a larger insecurity and risk because this freedom requires that the individual is capable of controlling his or her own life. Therefore, today, the responsibility for one's social position is individualized, and poverty is primarily seen as the result of the individual's failure and lack of ability to control and handle the conditions of life (Bak, 2004; Beck, 1992; Gubrium, 2013).

Applying the perspective of neoliberalism and individualization of poverty to the individual stories told by Ruth and Mary, we reach an understanding of why their contrasting ways of telling their life stories and different outlooks on life in general nevertheless end up with the same conclusion: That their current financial conditions cannot be blamed on society or other collective aspects, and that mainly they and individual events linked to them are to blame. Further, the discourse of individualization of poverty may actually be reinforced in later life phases since a potential decline in income due to retirement is often something individuals know will come at some point (if he or she relies only on the first pillar pension). Thus, a decline in income due to retirement is, for many individuals, an *expected event*, which means that one can prepare for a financial decline mentally and practically. While this seems as a good thing, the down side is that it places the responsibility on the individual, since if he or she cannot afford to live on only first pillar pension, she should have made better preparations.

In sum, Mary and Ruth have been living two different lives in terms of their financial conditions, employment, and family life; and their ways of ascribing meaning to their current financial situation also differ. Despite the overall differences, *how* they choose to tell their stories nevertheless reveal that the two stories are quite similar because both women act according to life phase specific expectations, expectations shaped by and reflecting neoliberal discourses, and individualization of poverty.

Coping with poverty in old age

In this section, the focus shifts from how Mary and Ruth experience their situation to how they more specifically cope with their current financial situation, and how their individual coping strategies have varied across their life spans. Wrosch, Heckhausen, & Lachman distinguished between primary and secondary control behavior (Wrosch, Heckhausen, & Lachman, 2000). Whereas primary control striving refers to an individual's attempts to actively change the *external* world to make it fit their personal needs and desires, secondary control striving has to do with the *inner* world, and it refers to the individual's efforts to influence his or her own motivation, emotion, and mental representation (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982; Wrosch et al., 2000).[6]

Ruth has been living under rather restricted financial conditions her entire adult life, and it is remarkable how her coping strategies have changed over the years. Ruth explained how hard she has worked to make ends meet; when she first moved in with her husband in her youth she took a job at a bakery; however, because her husband was unable to work much (because of mental illness), she also worked at a factory. As mentioned, when her husband left her, she could not afford to live anywhere but a barracks village, but rather than accepting or adjusting to the situation she took action by writing to people that she thought might help her and give her some advice and by working long hours and receiving an education to improve her financial situation.

Ruth's strategies of dealing with the financial situation today in old age differ from the strategies she used when she was younger. Her current strategies are more focused on acceptance and adjustment and less focused on actively changing the overall conditions.

> *Ruth: …But money, I simply don't want to discuss that [pauses] because it has caused me so many sleepless nights.*
> *Interviewer: When your children were small?*
> *Ruth: Well… until now actually.*

> *Interviewer: You don't do that anymore, you stopped doing that?*
> *Ruth: Well, it's a waste of time. I might as well stop, as I am not going to work anymore. But you see how little money is left [she points at a document on the table showing her monthly amount of pension benefits]. But I don't miss anything. Clothes and things like that I don't miss, as I often buy clothes secondhand and when they are cheap—on sale and the like; I never buy clothes for several hundred DKK (30–40 US Dollars).*

In this extract, Ruth explained how she tries to convince herself to stop worrying about the money because she cannot improve her financial situation by taking on a job. Instead of actively trying to change the situation, she actively attempts to manage her emotions, accept the situation, and adapt to it by saving money on items such as clothes.

Mary explained how, in her younger adult life, she did not experience a shortage of money. Nevertheless, she gave one example of how she handled a situation where she and her husband wanted to earn extra money for a car: She was a stay-at-home mom taking care of the two youngest of their four children, but in order to earn the extra money, she got an early morning job as a cleaning lady. Mary's strategies today differ from this because she does not try to change the financial conditions; instead, her strategies are, in line with Ruth's, more focused on accepting and adjusting to the situation. For example, she explained that she cannot afford to buy Christmas presents for her family, and that she does not feel comfortable receiving presents without being able to give anything in return, even though her family insists on giving her presents. To accept that she cannot afford to buy

[6] See also Kaul and Kvande (1991). They differentiated between coping and adaption: coping refers to a problem-solving behavior, whereas, adaption refers to those actions that are not directly aimed at finding a solution to the problem.

presents, she reminds herself how she always used to provide for them when they needed anything, and she has started knitting dishcloths for one of the grandchildren so that she has something to give in return. Another example of Mary trying to adapt to the situation is when she explained that, even though she still has the desire to travel and buy new fancy clothes, it does not really bother her that she cannot afford to because her aging body makes traveling more difficult and the clothes do not fit her aging body well: "*It isn't the same, getting new clothes today, when they don't fit perfectly, is it!?*"

These personalized accounts are located within a wider societal context. Mary and Ruth accept and adapt to their financial situation since they have no other choice. That old age leaves no other opportunities than to adapt to financial restrictions is an understanding linked to the social discourses on old age. Phillipson (2013) argues that the societal perspective of old age changed with the introduction of mandatory retirement and the movement of old people out of the workplace. In this way chronological age became essential in relation to the individual's entitlement to receive pension, thus age became a factor of social stratification (Phillipson, 2013). Therefore the social construction of old age as a life phase outside the labor market represents a central discourse of aging, and the stories told by Ruth and Mary are in some ways shaped by (and shaping) this societal context.

In their earlier life stages, Mary and Ruth used primary control strategies to improve their financial conditions. However, their current possibilities of actively improving their financial situation are practically non-existing, which we argue is linked with two explanations: 1) they have entered a phase of life that in the welfare state is constructed as a period outside the labor market. This societal story about the unchangeable character of the financial situation in old age is reflected in Ruth's and Mary's individual stories, e.g. when Ruth explains that she might as well stop worrying about her finances, because she is not going to work anymore, because she has retired, underlining how she believes that changing her financial situation is not an option. And 2) their possibilities of improving the situation is further limited due to their age related health decline: Health stress is more frequent in older ages, when the individual typically faces more illnesses than in younger ages, and serious health problems can directly affect other ongoing goal pursuits (Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). Both Ruth and Mary struggle with a troubled health. Ruth goes to the hospital on a regular basis, and she still deals with the injuries from the car accident. Mary was diagnosed with no less than three types of cancer. When health is significantly poor, the individual's focus on and strategies for coping with poor health might dominate the everyday life, thus leaving no room for coping with the financial situation (Ejrnæs, Larsen, & Müller, 2015). Thus primary control strategies are out of their reach for Ruth and Mary, and they have to use secondary compensatory strategies, which involve settling with accepting and adapting to the conditions that they cannot change. Wrosch et al. (2000) showed similar results to ours in their quantitative study of control strategies across the life span. Managing financial stress might become more difficult when individuals retire and they have fewer opportunities to deal with financial problems. In situations where the individual finds that there is little they can do to change the external world, he or she invests in secondary compensatory control strategies to adapt to the external world (Wrosch et al., 2000). Further, the financial scarcity that some individuals face in old age is rarely a temporary life situation; it is rather permanent as nature limits the scope of strategies available for older individuals (Gabriel et al., 2015).

To sum up, *what* Ruth and Mary tell is that they cannot change their external financial conditions. *How* they tell it shows that in earlier life phases they applied external coping strategies in order to actively improve their financial conditions, however today in old age their coping strategies have changed into internal strategies with focus on accepting and adapting to their financial situation. Thus we see how their individual stories of the unchangeable character of financial conditions in old age reflects broader societal discourses of the social construction of old age as a period of dependency due to forced retirement. Further is the aspect of the age related health decline, which however hardly is a social construction.

Discussion

Mary and Ruth's life stories differ substantially at first sight, but their stories also share some similarities. Both stories are constructed according to a shared pattern where the women position themselves as main responsible for their current (restricted) financial situation. When it comes to coping with the financial situation, we see how they both adapt to and accept their restricted financial situation. However, comparing their current coping strategies to how they coped with poverty in earlier life phases showed how they in their younger years more actively used strategies to improve their financial conditions. We argue that the social construction of old age as a period outside the labor market is reflected in the big stories about how old people are able to cope with financial scarcity, and that this big story, plus the actual age related health decline, limits the scope of possibilities for actively changing the situation, thus the only real opportunity is to adjust and accept: Mary and Ruth have is to use secondary control strategies.

Growing up during the Second World War

Also relevant in understanding how the state pensioners experience their current financial situation is the historical context and socio-economic class in which they grew up. The term *generations* is a common way of understanding differences between age groups and as a means of locating individuals and groups within historical time. Individuals are socialized in relation to the historical and cultural time period in which they grew up, and these similar conditions and possibilities and shared experiences of individuals born in the same time period give rise to social generations. Studies focusing on generations show that each generation receives an imprint from the social and political events of its youth; events in childhood and early adolescence have shown to be of especially great importance in relation to the construction of specific generational characters (Corning & Schuman, 2015; Schuman & Corning, 2017; Schuman & Scott, 1989). The interviewees in this study were born between 1932 and 1947, which means that their childhood and early adolescence took place in the historical context of the Second World War and the postwar period in Denmark, and these circumstances might have had an impact on their socialization. The generation born between 1925 and 1945 is called The Silent Generation; they were born or were children during the Second World War, but (most of them) were too young to fight. They spent their formative years in a historical period with financial scarcity and a more modest degree of wealth, and without a welfare state. Growing up during the Second World War and the following years of recovery is likely to influence how they experience their financial situation today. While it is difficult for the narrator to change historical facts or event, he or she may choose to pay less attention to them, frame them or integrate in different ways into their stories. Thus, people from the same generation may respond, present or integrate those generational impacts in different ways in their stories.

Growing up in scarcity during the Second World War likely taught them how to make ends meet, keep quiet, and go by unnoticed. For example, when Mary explained that buying secondhand clothes is not a problem for her today, this should be understood in the context of when and how she grew up as she also explains how her parents had rather restricted finances and had to buy secondhand stuff to make ends meet. These lessons from childhood might have instilled this generation with a modesty and satisfaction different from later generations. Thus, when both Mary and Ruth keep reminding us that they "have nothing to complain about," we have to remember that they grew up in financial scarcity in a historical period where modesty was not only a virtue but

also an important coping strategy. These lessons from childhood are crucial to consider when persons from that generation express gratitude or say that they have nothing to complain about.

Limitations

Some limitations do apply to this study. First, due to the small number of cases included in the study the results cannot be generalized (Small, 2009), however, the aim of this paper is not to produce generalizable results. Rather the aim is to reach a more saturated understanding of some of those mechanisms that the 16 cases experience in regard to their everyday life on state pension.

Second, the results must also be understood in relation to the immediate interview context since life stories are constructed within a specific intersubjective context (Zilber et al., 2008, see also De Medeiros & Rubinstein, 2015 & Blix, Hamran, & Norman, 2015). In our study this may be especially pertinent since the narrator and audience (interviewer) in many ways represent an inverse life situation. Ruth and Mary's stories are situated in an interview context in which they (old women with poor health and restricted finances) are interviewed by a young(er) woman in good health, with a job and thus a higher financial capacity. This interview context is likely to have shaped the stories in various ways e.g. it may create a distance between the interviewer and the interviewee. For example Ruth started the interview out by showing the interviewer some documents on how much she received in state pension and pointing at the document, she stated that *"I've got nothing to hide"* as if she felt that she needed to consolidate her words to convince the interviewer. This example indicates how she emphasizes that she stands up for herself and that she is proud about being who she is, and that she manages to make ends meet. The example may also underline how Ruth perceives the interview as a formal situation and the interviewer as some sort of authority (although the interview took place in the unformal setting of Ruth's own home). Further, in the beginning of the interview Ruth rejected that she lacked money, however, at the very end of the interview, when the confidence between her and the interviewer had become stronger, she revealed that, when she turned 80 years, she could not afford a birthday party. The fact that the interviewees (at first) rejected being poor might reflect the stigma attached to poverty (Lister, 2004). And again, the examples underline how Ruth seemed a bit skeptical about the very purpose of the interview and the role of the interviewer. To sum up, the obvious differences between the interviewer and the interviewees did in some cases create a distance in the interview, at least in the very beginning of the interview and it may have elicited specific narrations e.g. the interviewees might have downplayed the severity of their situation or they may have felt that they needed to defend themselves and their position.

Concluding remarks

What Ruth and Mary tell about their everyday life, how they ascribe meaning to their financial situation, and the fact that they *do* ascribe meaning to it despite deprivations and shame illustrates important aspects about the subjective experience of living in poverty in general and more specifically of how persons from this generation who grew up in financial scarcity experience a life of poverty in old age.

Our findings suggest that the stories of Ruth and Mary must be understood in the context of various societal and discursive transformations as well as historical events. First we show how the interviewees highlight events in their life that have an individual origin, placing the responsibility of their financial situation on themselves. These individual stories reflect wider societal discourses on individualization of poverty. Such discourses entail the perspective that the individual holds the responsibility for ending up in poverty to begin with and for moving out of poverty again. We argue that these neoliberal discourses may actually be reinforced in old age because an income decline due to retirement is an expected event for individuals with only first pillar pension, and poverty is, thus, regarded as a result of poor life choices. However, this claim is of cause a hypothesis in need of future exploration.

Second, we show how Ruth and Mary ascribe meaning to their stories because, essentially, they have little choice, because of their advanced age and their belonging to a specific phase of life. They both exemplified how, when they were younger, they more actively used strategies to improve their financial conditions and move beyond poverty. But now, being outside the labor market and in poor health, their only option of dealing with poverty is to accept and adjust to the situation. Poverty in old age is rarely a momentary life situation, rather it is permanent; thus, the potential of changing the situation is somewhat non-existent, and their only option is to use secondary inner control, e.g., adapting and accepting. In other words, advanced age makes active coping more challenging.

Third, we argue that the interviewees share the conditions of growing up in financial scarcity during the Second World War. This might have taught them to be modest, to not draw attention, and to adjust to their life conditions, thus they might fail to speak up or ask for help when necessary. This point is important to keep in mind when individuals belonging to this generation tell that us they have no problems making ends meet.

Finally, the stories told by Ruth and Mary are told to an audience that in many ways represent an inverse life situation (the interviewer was young, in good health, she had a job and was not poor) this could imply that the interviewees downplayed their daily struggles, or the consequences of living in poverty. This immediate context is important to take into consideration when interpreting our empirical results.

The state pensioners living on the margins of relative poverty in a Danish context ascribe meaning to the situation, accept it, and adjust to it because it is their only real option; they cannot change the situation. Their advanced age and poor health make it difficult for them to cope with and overcome their poverty; however, owing to the specific generational imprints and their scarce upbringing, they do not complain or ask for help. This empirical knowledge on the subjective experience of living on the margins of poverty in old age is an important contribution to the existing, primarily quantitative, research on poverty in old age because it informs us of not only the subjective experience that hides behind the many statistics on relative poverty and financial strain in old age but also the differentiated coping strategies available in old age.

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