



“I’m too Old for ...” looking into a self-Sabotage rhetoric and its counter-narratives in an Italian setting



Diego Romaioli*, Alberta Contarello

Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padua, Via Venezia, 14, Padua 35139, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Ageing
Ageism
Social construction
Generative research
Episodic interviews
Content analysis
Counter-narrative

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyze a narrative amply shared in the social and cultural spheres that makes people tend to see themselves as ‘too old for ...’ (TOF) making personal life choices or following up their projects. This social construction risks preventing people from taking action to achieve their goals and develop their potential for self-fulfillment, with negative consequences on a personal level. Seventy-eight episodic interviews were conducted with adults of various ages to shed light on the recurrent topics with which the TOF narrative tends to be associated. Taking a pragmatic stance, the counter-narratives available for its deconstruction were also elicited and explored. The results emerging from a content analysis indicate that the TOF narrative is associated with different topics, partly depending on an individual’s age and gender, while the counter-narratives identified by respondents hinge on several ideas and dominant beliefs that can be classified as belonging to three essential types. The implications of the investigation are discussed, also with reference to problems of social relevance such as those relating to the NEET (not in education, employment or training) issue, and to the social isolation of the elderly.

Introduction

The findings of various studies have brought to light how people’s age is frequently used as an explanation for various forms of social withdrawal or self-exclusion and, more importantly, this would have little to do with the real chronological age of a given individual (Bodily, 1995; Grant, 2001). It is common to hear people young and old say “that’s not for people my age”, or “that would be impossible at my age”, or “I’m too old for that”, as if these were self-evident truths. Such expressions have the effect of justifying the perceived gap between something desirable (ambitions, goals, needs, etc.) and the feasibility of seeing it happen in real life. There is a self-sabotaging ‘killer’ narrative (cf. Gergen & Gergen, 2004) that induces people to see themselves as being ‘too old for’ (TOF) something, making them dismiss their chances of taking action to achieve their life goals. They reject the idea of embarking on certain activities, they avoid certain situations, or modify their thoughts, feelings, and wishes. This happens despite recent studies showing that age is not per se an obstacle, neither to people’s productivity, nor to the expression of their intellectual or emotional and relational potential (Andrews, 2009; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009; Randall & McKim, 2008).

Nowadays, one of the challenges for the social sciences consists in acknowledging and mitigating this self-limiting attitude, and helping to

defuse the negative fallout of the idea of having grown ‘too old’ to pursue personal goals or engage in socially relevant or productive activities. The aim of the present study was thus to explore how the TOF narrative develops on the level of shared social discourse, leading people to think of themselves as too old to do something, and consequently promoting deleterious forms of social self-exclusion and negative identity construction. Taking a pragmatic stance (Creswell, 2009), the study also aimed to explore the counter-narratives available for neutralizing this killer narrative (Gergen & Gergen, 2010; Goodall, 2016) or, in other words, the socially accredited and shared rhetorical constructions that people can use as an antidote to the age-related self-limiting influence of the TOF narrative.

Theoretical references

Psychosocial researchers currently need to be aware that we live in an extremely fluid, complex and rapidly-changing society. Processes such as globalization, the arrival on the scene and diffusion of new computer technologies, and the post-industrial economy (to mention just a few) are key elements in how society is becoming reorganized (Giddens, 2000; Romaioli, Faccio, & Salvini, 2008). This makes it urgently necessary to devise psychosocial models that are sensitive to change, pragmatically oriented, and fine-adjusted to contingent and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: diego.romaioli@unipd.it (D. Romaioli), alberta.contarello@unipd.it (A. Contarello).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2018.12.001>

Received 24 September 2018; Received in revised form 29 November 2018; Accepted 6 December 2018

Available online 12 December 2018

0890-4065/ © 2018 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

locally-relevant needs. The world of social psychology is responding with new research methods (Wertz, 2011) that can closely link theory and practice, and prompt a shared approach and understanding that is useful for pursuing established social goals (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). Such novel approaches enable us to embark on paths of social and cultural renewal by triggering creative processes that involve communities in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge (Nikander, 2008), interweaving research activities with people's daily lives (McNamee & Hosking, 2012).

The particular research approach that some have termed 'generative' or 'relational' (Gergen, 2015) derives mainly from the social constructionism movement (Gergen, 2009), and from the social representations perspective (Moscovici, 1984), and from discursive psychology (Nikander, 2009; Potter, 1997). All claimed that society's production of meaning in order to lend meaning to people's experience of the world is founded on a collaborative activity (Shotter, 2003). It relies on the relational and communication processes in which we engage with one another (Faccio, Mininni, & Rocelli, 2018). Simply put, our social world in all its complexity (our beliefs, behavior, etc.) is the product of a coordinated group activity during which meanings, and the actions they prompt are conceived as forms of social construction, not as natural, necessary and permanent entities (Lock & Strong, 2010).

These premises provide the necessary conceptual references for us to see that many difficult realities, including the one forming the object of the present study, are generated by ideas that are shared and taken for granted, and that change can be promoted by involving people in generating, exploring and implementing alternative constructions. The approach that we support thus suggests that the killer narrative related to ageing is socially constructed, and amplified by our own (mis)conceptions about old age and growing old (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011). It is therefore important to clarify how this phenomenon is discussed, what language is used to describe it in our conversations, what echoes it has on how we define our sense of identity and our personal capability for self-fulfillment. In the exchanges with our study participants, it was also especially important to elicit narratives capable of counteracting the influence of the killer TOF narrative, and to activate virtuous reconstructions of the self, and of each individual's potential for self-determination (Gemignani, 2014). This is possible as we assume that "cultural, institutional and situational meanings of age are worked into being in and through our everyday discursive practices and texts" (Nikander, 2000, p. 336) and notions of age appropriateness can be both challenged and re-construct in talk.

On this last point, it is worth mentioning the ever-growing attention being paid in critical social psychology to supporting multiple interpretations of the concept of ageing, adding value to narratives that go against the widespread negative view (Biggs, 2001; Biggs, Estes, & Phillipson, 2003; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). This line of research has amply demonstrated that it is possible to intercept and promote stories that interpret the ageing process in a variety of ways, not just as a period of life associated with decline. Our contribution fits into this broader frame, aiming to shed light on the meanings associated with the idea of ageing, and pinpointing some of the ideologies or basic mindsets that usually colour people's attitude to the phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, one of our objectives was to facilitate the emergence of alternative interpretations that could be exploited to challenge the usual way of perceiving the process of growing old, with a view to avoiding forms of self-limiting behavior and negative expectations.

Research questions

The present contribution is part of a broader research project that aimed to explore the social representations of ageing – and ageing well – among adults of various ages in Italian society during a period characterized largely by the shadow of the economic recession.

To be more specific, the aim of the study described here was to further analyze some of the narratives that emerged during interviews

relating to the idea of being 'too old for ...' something. These narratives were initially developed spontaneously by respondents discussing themselves, their future, and their daily lives. Using a circular process adopted in qualitative research (Flick, 2008) – which involves constantly comparing and adjusting the research questions in the light of the data collected and the interpretation of the material – the role of the TOF narrative in the various interviews became the focus of the study. This enabled us to orient our curiosity toward gaining a better understanding of this specific phenomenon, and consequently formulating more explicit questions for its further analysis.

Moving from a pragmatic rather than a merely descriptive stance (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015), our interest also focused on making the exchange with respondents more generative, both to intercept new perspectives on ageing that might be useful in the respondents' own lives, and to promote their ability to counteract the stereotype of feeling too old to pursue their personal goals and ambitions. Our aim thus included making an effort to elicit, explore and amplify the voices that tended to reject the killer narrative, and highlighting the socially-available discourse that - in our respondents' personal stories - might have served to counteract the TOF narrative (Ledwith, 2017).

Our research questions can be briefly stated as follows.

- o Which age-related narratives risk generating negative expectations that, playing a self-sabotage role, boycott individuals in their everyday life? Can we detect small stories in which age categories are used to prevent individuals from assuming an active role in achieving their life goals? How do these narratives develop and with which topics are they usually associated?
- o How do TOF-related narratives, and the topics with which they are associated differ between adults of different ages?
- o Which narratives protect individuals against forms of self- and hetero-inflicted ageism? Are there any examples of socially-available discourse that enable the idea of feeling 'too old for' a given desirable undertaking to be deconstructed?

Participants

The study was conducted with 78 adult residents of regions in northern, central and eastern Italy (Lombardia, Veneto and Emilia Romagna). As shown in Table 1, the sample was well balanced in terms of the age and gender variables.

Participants were recruited with a snowball sampling technique and mainly consisted of averagely wealthy and educated people who might contribute more readily in developing narratives linked to ageing well. The 74% of the interviewees declared that their health was relatively good and the 84% reported to enjoy relative economic stability. The 32% of them went to primary and secondary school, the 38.4% have a diploma and the 29.6% are graduated.

Method

The episodic interview

The study method adopted was qualitative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and involved the use of episodic interviews for data collection (Flick, 2009). This type of interview enables a dual analysis relating both to a respondent's semantic knowledge of a topic, and to the episodic

Table 1

Composition of the group of participants by gender and age bracket.

	18–24	25–34	35–49	50–64	65–74	75–84	≥85	Tot
Men	6	6	5	5	5	7	5	39
Women	5	5	6	6	7	5	5	39
								78

dimension, which concerns the individual's experiences vis-à-vis the object of interest (Flick, 2000). Its basic assumptions draws from narrative psychology and from episodic and semantic memory studies (Romaioli & Contarello, 2012). An intrinsic advantage of using episodic interview is that it constitutes a strategy of triangulation, and specifically, methodological triangulation (Romaioli & Faccio, 2012). In this kind of interview it is necessary to involve the participant in narrations, focused on specific topics, following the basic principle of combining stories of episodes lived in first person with answers of a more general character (Flick, 2000). Firstly, the participants were explicitly asked to talk about some personal episodes of everyday life. The aim of these questions was to evoke concrete situations in which the participants had an active role, highlighting the specific context of their experience and meanings generated. Secondly, semantic knowledge acquired by the participants with reference to the topic of ageing was explored and a discussion of topics that emerged from the specific interaction was encouraged. Some examples of the questions used in the interviews are listed below.

- o What do you associate with the word 'ageing'? What does ageing mean to you, and in your daily life?
- o Can you tell us briefly about an experience that, in your opinion, illustrates how you or somebody you know is ageing well? How do you think it is possible to age well in times such as ours?
- o Thinking of the present situation, how do you expect your life to develop? Can you imagine a situation that can give us a clear idea of this evolution?
- o Has there ever been a situation in your life when you felt 'too old' for something? Can you tell us about the episode?
- o Have there been other situations, instead, when you sidestepped the idea of feeling 'too old'? Can you tell us about the episode? How did you succeed?

On average, the interviews lasted one hour and were conducted in the presence of two researchers of different ages, at participants' own homes to facilitate a more spontaneous conversation. The textual material collected consists of about 80 h of audiotapes, transcribed verbatim into word documents.

Content analysis

A content analysis was run on the texts of the interviews, transcribed into Microsoft Word® documents with the aid of Nud.1st software (Richards & Richards, 1991). To conduct this analysis, the corpus was divided into documents, each of which corresponded to the full text of a single interview. The analytical unit adopted was a phrase that made sense (a statement), and codes were defined by following a validation process based on statement coding rules negotiated between the two researchers (Charmaz, 2014).

The coding method chosen to analyze the text first involved a top-down analysis, as a function of which a tree was developed with the macro categories TOF and anti-TOF (as parent nodes). The purpose of this first coding step was to identify and separate relevant parts of the texts containing narratives pertinent to the TOF narrative on the one hand, and to ways to neutralize it on the other. TOF and ANTI-TOF narratives were identified selecting both: a) the narratives participants express in responding to specific questions about these themes included in the interview's protocol, and b) by focusing on those fragments in which verbal expressions such as 'too old' or 'too late', and so on, recur in the textual material. This procedure was agreed upon by the authors, each of whom gave an evaluation of the relevance of an identified small story for the TOF and anti-TOF categories. There was 90% agreement rate among researchers¹ when judging how to categorize the texts. The tree was then developed using a bottom-up analysis to construct

specific codes for each parent node by means of an iterative process in order to reach a sufficient degree of theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The purpose of this second coding step was to obtain details (in terms of content) of the above-mentioned two macro categories, i.e. the ways in which the killer narrative, or the discourse produced to avoid or neutralize it, were expressed. A very detailed open coding step was completed first, followed by a focused coding, and a selective coding that enabled us to summarize specific text content by pooling the codes detected into categories identified on the grounds of a commonality of meaning.

Principal results

Too old for...

In the group analyzed, the TOF narrative emerged mainly, but not exclusively, in the accounts of the 35- to 49-year-olds, and in those of the 75- to 84-year-olds. Across all age brackets, and consistently with our expectations, the killer narrative recurred more frequently among participants who expressed particularly negative ideas about ageing, and who - for various reasons - found themselves taking stock of their lives, considering their hopes and expectations, and what they had achieved, in a rather harsh analysis of their level of personal fulfillment.

As shown in Table 2, the TOF theme emerged and was narratively organized around topics peculiar to each age group.

Among the youngest adults, the topics that recurred in their accounts in association with the TOF narrative concerned:

1. A reduction in their ability to enjoy themselves

It's not for me any more ... Maybe some things I used to do when I was a kid ... like playing ... I feel I no longer need things like that. [INT61, 18–24 years old, man].

2. A difficulty in returning to academic studies, especially when respondents reported having interrupted their schooling or university career

I often think that maybe I put off doing so many things that I should have done before... the studies that I didn't finish, for instance ... Now I'd be too old. I still think I'd be too old now to enroll at university ... or even to go on a journey... I'd like to travel... but inside I think I too have... that social dogma that tells you now you're thirty you should have reached a degree of stability... [INT57, 25–34 years old, woman]

It was too late... but more than anything I felt too old ... There was a time last year when I switched university... and there was a time when I reached a point of stalemate when I said, "What am I doing? What aren't I doing?"... I said, "Yes, I'll try moving somewhere else" ... But when I saw the papers I said, "They'll only enroll me on the second-year course", and I already felt too old to start again. I mean, I knew that ... in terms of my age, I could still start all over again, but I already felt a bit too old because I'm already 25 and I'll be together with people who are 21 or 22... I felt I was on the limit, almost at the boundary... [INT70, 25–34 years old, man]

The TOF narrative seems to contribute to explaining some young people's life experiences, especially influencing those who reportedly did not complete their studies and had difficulty getting back on a course of emancipation and personal achievement. This impasse appears to be associated with a loss of conviction regarding their capabilities, a narrower perception of the opportunities available to them, and a limitation of their self-projection onto the future, and consequently of their personal resourcefulness.

I felt a bit stupid... When I enrolled at university I was 22, 23 years old... When I stopped working... I saw kids just out of school, 19-year-olds, and I was already the same age as the ones who had already graduated ... I felt I was late! [INT53, 25–34 years old, man]

¹ We thank Gloria Murarotto for her valuable help at this stage of the analysis.

Table 2
Number of coded interviews for every TOF category by age brackets.

Age	Projects/expectations	Declining activity/energy	Social life	Learning	Occupation	Physical/mental capacity	Having children	Having fun	Studying
18–24	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	3	1
25–34	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	3
35–49	–	–	–	–	3	8	4	–	–
50–64	2	3	–	1	1	–	–	–	–
65–74	4	3	1	1	–	–	–	–	–
75–84	5	7	2	2	–	–	–	–	–
> 85	4	6	1	1	–	–	–	–	–

In the 35- to 64-year-olds, the TOF narrative mainly revolved around three topics, two of which were gender-specific.

1. Women tended to apply the killer narrative to family matters, an inability to have children, or to embark on new sentimental relationships

Mmmh... there was a time when I would have wanted more children, but I realized that my age was escaping me, so I stopped, I was too old ... [INT63, 35–49 years old, woman].

2. Men tend to associate the killer narrative with occupational issues and careers, feeling too old to change their jobs, for instance, or to pursue certain professional goals

Yes, if I wanted to change... I don't like my job... but, given the times ... for some years now, if I had wanted to change my job I would have found it difficult ... [INT52, 35–49 years old, man].

3. Men and women share the rhetoric that associates the TOF narrative with the idea of a decline in physical and mental capabilities. This topic is commonly seen as a justification for important restrictions on the variety of their interests and life experiences. In particular, it is worth mentioning a reduction in physical exercise and capacity to concentrate

Well, yes, definitely too old ... When I was young, I was an athlete. That's a big word, but I always loved playing volleyball. I played for years. I was asked to go back, not on a team, but for the training sessions, and that was when I realized it was no longer for me. I mean I preferred to do something else, go walking maybe ... You know, it's about the sport itself, real sport, I think you have to do that when you're young...

The idea of thinking about still being there at 60, I don't know... No, I don't know because, to my mind, for a start, on a mental level and everything, you need a burst of life ... I'm not saying I don't have it any more, but I can tell that, physically too, things have changed, and I can't see myself still doing this 10 years from now... [INT60, 35–49 years old, woman].

Pain ... in the sense that, physically and in your head as well, you want to grow up, to improve, but you actually have to face reality, that sometimes you have aches and pains that you didn't have before. I'm not a sportswoman, so when I run a bit more I get stiff, not completely seized up, but my daughters laugh at me because I ought to keep fitter, and so yes ... losing your memory when keeping track of what's being said, this is a bit... [INT69, 35–49 years old, woman].

Among the older people, the TOF narrative was mainly associated with:

1. Declining physical energy

I used to volunteer at my church, when they did lunches, so... I'd go and help out ... and sometimes I'd even get home at midnight, or one o'clock... and the next day I still went to work. But it was the inner strength I had more than anything. That was it,... now I'm falling apart! [INT09, 65-74 years old, woman]

We change as we get older. We no longer have the strength that we'd like

to have. We'd like to do things and we can't, and that makes us sad. We strive to succeed in doing things. Why shouldn't we? Like me, I used to do so many things, and now I don't, but why shouldn't I do them? I understand that I can't cope. We want to keep pretending we are the way we used to be a while back, but we can't. We need to stop, but it's hard because ... when they ask me to do something ... I used to do more, now I can't manage it ... [INT16, > 85 years old, woman]

Now, I get tired ... I've lost the will to do things. I have a sedentary life ... I don't want to do anything else... so, well, I just live day by day. [INT22, 75-84 years old, man]

2. The impossibility of making valid plans for the future

How do I feel ... until not long ago, I felt I still had lots of opportunities ahead of me, now it no longer seems that way, and I don't like it. [INT06, 65-74 years old, woman]

3. A lack of initiative to take part in social activities

People who are older are out of the game. I mean, I'm powerless... When I was at school, I made it my own school, I taught my things ... Now what can I do? [INT03, 75-84 years old, woman]

It's not that I go out very often. I go out on my errands, it's not that I go... Once I used to be around people, I'd go to parties. Now it's late ... you get lost, you no longer want to. [INT16, > 85 years old, woman]

4. A perceived limitation of their capacity to learn

Even four or five years ago, I'd been thinking about getting a computer, but not any more ... For someone over 70 to start studying ... it didn't seem to me like a good idea! [INT22, 75-84 years old, man]

On this last aspect, the self-limiting effects of the TOF narrative are particularly accentuated and harmful. Our elderly sample rarely spoke of situations in which they had actually experienced difficulties, when learning something new, for instance. It was more a matter of their expecting to experience difficulties and this inducing them a priori to avoid such situations and opportunities to explore. Simply put, the TOF narrative serves as an alibi for elderly people's self-exclusion and avoidance of learning situations, making them overestimate their perceived difficulties and avoid putting themselves to the test.

Unlike the picture seen in the younger adults, the TOF narrative emerging from the elderly respondents' accounts was more often attributed to outside influences (“other people think I'm too old for ...”), to which they ultimately adapted by interiorizing the stereotype in various ways. As we shall see in the next section concerning the mechanisms that enable people to escape the killer narrative, the elderly respondents who had neutralized the TOF narrative were those who succeeded most effectively in challenging others' opinions projected onto themselves.

When the family sees you as old, they put you in a corner... In the beginning, I was determined not to let it happen ... I don't know why, but I can't do that anymore. [INT09, 65-74 years old, woman]

The idea is that oldies are useless, or someone who's getting old is useless, or the person himself feels useless because he no longer has the qualities

Table 3
Number of coded interviews for every anti-TOF category by age brackets.

Age	Willpower	Consistency	Challenge	Sense of duty	Passion	Eternal youth	Successful ageing
18–24	2	–	1	1	2	1	–
25–34	1	1	4	2	3	2	–
35–49	2	3	4	1	3	4	1
50–64	1	1	2	3	3	1	1
65–74	–	1	1	1	3	–	3
75–84	–	–	–	1	3	–	4
> 85	–	–	1	1	1	–	1

of the past, and he's no longer attributed the abilities of the past, so he's no longer any use, just a piece of junk to throw away, in some rest home maybe ... [INT53, 25-34 years old, man]

Some variants of the TOF narrative and their unexpected effects

For the majority of the topics associated with it, the TOF narrative had a self-limiting effect. It became a rhetoric for justifying a respondent's immobilism, lack of resourcefulness, or negative identity construction. An interesting element emerged among the younger adults, however, who - rather than projecting the TOF narrative onto themselves - tended to apply this rhetoric to the older generations. In other words, the idea of 'being too old for something' was legitimized in the words of several young and middle-aged adults as being applicable to others, so their attitude became a form of prejudice (or ageism). The idea of ageing as being associated with a risk of degeneration tended to vary with the respondent's age: for example, 30-year-olds already saw a person of forty as too old, while 40-year-olds identified those over fifty as old, and so on. Contrary to what we might have expected, this attitude (Sammut & Gaskell, 2010) seemed to be functional to the individual's personal adaptation and self-definition (cf. Romaioli & Contarello, 2017a.): the more the TOF narrative was applied to other social categories, the less the respondents tended to apply it to themselves. This had the effect of protecting their self-esteem and resourcefulness in maintaining a positive definition of their own identity. In fact, the narrative of a hetero-inflicted TOF construct was associated in some cases with respondents tending to be more motivated not to procrastinate, to convince themselves to do now what they will no longer be able to do later on. In these particular cases, the TOF construct was re-interpreted as an alarm bell or message to the self, and the future was used ("I'll be too old for...") (cf. Nelson, 2005).

You have to get cracking... make plans... that, when we're no longer able to do certain things, will be able to save you from getting into difficult situations ...

Well, every now and then, I find myself thinking that now, while I'm still young, I must get some things done, seize the day, as it were ... [INT61, 18-24 years old, man]

In interviews with elderly people, reference to the TOF narrative - inasmuch as concerned the tendency to see themselves as too old for some future project - could also have some positive effects, relating to respondents acquiring a less frenetic lifestyle, and a greater focus on the present (Lamb, 2014; Liang & Luo, 2012). This inclination, which we defined elsewhere as a 'disponibility' (Romaioli and Contarello, 2017b), would enable older people to develop a different relationship with time, and with themselves, enabling them to access more relaxed and serene mental states, accompanied by a greater capacity for self-acceptance and a greater adaptability to changing contingencies.

At 74 years old, in the situation I'm in right now, it suits me not to have any plans because I'm free to grab all the opportunities that come my way ... Having a project makes me feel stressed about completing it, and I prefer to reserve my energies for day-to-day living. [INT34, 65-74 years

old, woman]

At 86 years old, there isn't much to expect... I don't expect anything more. It's not that I want to go places, or do things... because if you content yourself with what you've got, and you have a quiet life, then you live in peace ... [INT10, > 85 years old, woman]

From 'too old for...' to 'never too late for...'

During the interviews, some of the respondents' spontaneous narratives described how, on the rhetorical plane, they deconstructed and subverted the TOF narrative. As mentioned earlier, in other cases such counter-narratives were elicited by specific questions included in the protocol for the purpose of identifying personal resources and intercepting any social discourse that could be used as a TOF antidote. An overall look at the various issues discussed during the interviews led us to classify several types of counter-narrative, each constructed around a dominant belief or topic that served as an organizing principle behind the whole narrative production, and the arguments used by respondents to support it. The main categories describing these types of counter-narrative are outlined below (Table 3).

Willpower - or "It's important to make the effort ...".

For many respondents, the issue of willpower was the rhetorical tool used to cope with the difficulties of life, including the moments of impasse brought on by the TOF narrative. This focus on willpower was associated with personal values such as self-fulfillment or inner strength, and facilitated the construction of a strong identity, with features that enabled the individuals to cope successfully with the adversities of daily life. It was largely the young and middle-aged adults who used this type of narrative.

I tell myself that it's the energy you have inside, and it can even come out when you're 80, and you can do all sorts of things... I mean, there are physical limitations of course, but I keep telling myself that I can still do everything I want, if I want to, and that it's never too late to do things. [INT57, 25-34 years old, woman]

I think it's about having great inner strength. I mean in the sense that ... I see and even speak to lots of young people nowadays who, at the first hurdle, get depressed. But, in a sense, to age well you need inner strength, to say, "No, hang on, let's think about this", I mean we have to keep battling on [INT64, 35-49 years old, man]

Consistency - or "I've always been a person who...".

Another argument used to neutralize the TOF narrative revolves around the 'type of person' you think you are (McLean, 2008). To be more specific, some respondents seemed inclined to distance themselves from the TOF narrative by describing aspects of themselves perceived as contrasting with the weakness implicitly associated with growing old. In some cases, there was an overlap between this category and the previous one (in respondents who tended to describe themselves as 'determined', for instance), but there are much broader shades of meaning here, and the core idea seems to be that of consistency rather than of willpower. It was the more middle-aged adults who

referred most to this particular construction.

I said to myself ... I can't not say this thing, I can't not do it ... because I would be betraying myself. So, to my mind, staying consistent about the things you believe in is something that doesn't age. It also gives you strength when things get difficult ... I have to keep my self-respect, and what makes me do things that are sometimes quite demanding, but I say I've made my choices, and I accept the consequences ... [INT69, 35-49 years old, woman]

Challenge - or "Why shouldn't I succeed?!"

Among the most effective rhetoric strategies for defusing the TOF narrative was a particular use of the concept of competition. Some respondents seemed inclined to construct their opposition to the TOF narrative as a challenge, it motivated them to take action to avoid experiencing the limitations they expected might develop with ageing. This type of narrative was more common among male respondents.

Even if I don't have the physical dynamism that I've always had before... I've always tried to find ... not competition exactly, but to put myself to the test on a physical level. [INT28, 65-74 years old, man]

I mean elderly people are seen like bits of junk ... It's important not to surrender to the idea that you're just a piece of junk ... not to surrender to the idea that life is over as soon as you retire, and not to surrender to the idea that it only takes some physical ailment to make you suffer [INT52, 35-49 years old, man]

Don't let anybody tell you: "What's the point? You're too old now". You can still do so many things... [INT62, 18-24 years old, man]

Sense of duty - or "Never stop trying..."

Another type of anti-TOF narrative leverages a moral argument that envisages the commitment not to succumb to the TOF narrative like a sort of duty, a responsibility, and consequently an obligation that weighs on our conscience. Though not exclusively, it was largely women who used this type of rhetoric.

So I have to obey some rules, which may be about looking after my health, or basically keeping to a lifestyle that cannot harm my well-being, so the rule is to take care of my physical life, let's say, but I also think in general about rules that will help me feel good ... [INT69, 35-49 years old, woman]

Passion - or "I could never stop..."

Some participants described stories that served as an antidote to the TOF narrative, which involved praising activities in which they engaged. In other words, activities that respondents expected might become more limited as they grew older were configured as unwavering passions, thereby neutralizing the self-limiting effect of the TOF narrative. The proposed logic behind this attitude emphasizes the intrinsic value of these people's interests, and of their ability to preserve and renew them, as a useful way of prevailing over the constraints imposed by ageing. Among the various counter-narratives that emerged, this seemed to be the most widely applicable, across generations and genders.

You need to be lucky enough to have some sort of passion, that maybe brings out an elderly person's younger self ... spare time structures ... that help you bring out your young, light-hearted side ... could be useful. [INT41, 25-34 years old, woman]

It's what I want ... at least, I've seen that, given the way I am, the way I think I'm built, if I do things I enjoy I'm ten times more productive. If I do things I don't like, my performance is poor... [INT52, 35-49 years old, man]

People should do something gratifying, something stimulating, interesting, whether its culture, or nature, or friendships, I say again, we need to be able to invent ourselves something every day that can help us cope with

this business of ageing ... [INT01, 50-64 years old, man]

Well, I'd never do something like that because... I go to the theatre, for instance, I go to see other things. If there are trips I take them. If there are exhibitions to see, I go... [INT14, 65-74 years old, woman]

However much experience you've gained, what counts is to preserve, to be able to maintain your critical development, through your interests, books and cinema, culture and things, all those activities that enable you to enrich... your knowledge, your wishes, your curiosity, your things, which are the things that keep you active, that give you satisfaction... You can do thousands of things, learn another language ... [INT17, 50-64 years old, man]

Eternal youth - or "I'm not getting old..."

A particular category of respondents seemed to defeat the TOF narrative simply by denying themselves the awareness of ageing. This type of narrative was more often expressed by the younger and middle-aged, and by women.

I don't feel old, I feel mature, which are two completely different things ... [INT32, 25-34 years old, woman]

I'm not 50 yet. I think after you turn 50 you start to ask yourself some questions, maybe, it will be a turning point. I mean, I often hear this being said by people who are over 50. I'm still of an age in between, in a sense, so I don't wonder yet about whether I'm too old [INT63, 35-49 years old, woman]

Successful ageing - or "Growing old has its advantages..."

A core argument used to weaken the influence of the killer narrative stems from the deconstruction of the basic assumption that ageing is necessarily such a bad thing. The respondents who provided more detailed and varied accounts supporting a positive idea of ageing were also those less affected by the TOF narrative, or better able to sidestep it, rhetorically undermining the very grounds on which it relies. In particular, it was among the elderly participants that a positive, or at least ambivalent representation of ageing emerged, generating this type of counter-narrative.

In my daily life, ageing means having the time of my life – because I consider the years since I retired better than before, although I had nothing to complain about in the past either, quite the opposite! Better in what sense? In the sense that I'm more free, I have more time available to me, so I have some particular hobbies, astronomy and airplane modelling. I often go to the mountains, I attend centers, I teach in schools, giving proper lessons, on request, and so I have a great life! [INT05, 75-84 years old, man]

Discussion

Analyzing our findings showed that the TOF narrative generates forms of discomfort that affect the various age groups differently. In particular, among the younger adults and the middle-aged, ageing was largely cast in a negative light, and associated with a precarious relational and working life. There was evidence of these respondents having a stronger perception of themselves as 'failures' who had not fulfilled their own or others' expectations concerning their role in life ("at my age, I should have already been..."). In this scenario, the killer narrative would reduce their sense of personal responsibility, making it more difficult for them to plan their future, and use their agency to deal with troublesome contingencies, both on a personal and on an academic or occupational level. Among the elderly, the representation of ageing had more ambivalent connotations than younger adults tended to express, and even revealed some positive facets. On the other hand, the concept of ageing well did not seem to be fully shared, and the killer narrative was allowed to curtail the individual's real potential for personal fulfillment. Goals of personal renewal or intellectual improvement were

precluded a priori by the conviction of being ‘too old to learn new things’. As for a broader participation in activities that could nourish their well-being in the psychological and physical, interpersonal and more broadly social spheres, some elderly people tended to exclude themselves due to negative convictions or doubts about their own capabilities.

Fortunately, the research setting also gave us a chance to explore the cultural resources that enabled people to weaken the grip of the killer narrative. These resources helped participants to preserve a positive opinion of themselves, and prevented them from giving up when faced with obstacles, fears, and the impairments and difficulties associated with ageing.

To be more specific, the counter-narratives explored during the interviews can be divided into three main categories: a first category uses particular constructs (willpower, consistency, sense of duty, passion) to produce narratives of the epic-heroic type, in which the protagonist – thanks to certain prerequisites or qualities – manages to deal with the problems unavoidably associated with ageing. Although this type of narrative is functional to the individuals’ well-being and offers substantially propitious scenarios by means of which they can give their lives meaning and direction, it is worth noting that the implicit idea of ageing as a time of loss, limitation and decline remains the same. In fact, this counter-narrative works to the degree in which the individual imagines having sufficient resources to cope with the obvious difficulty of growing old.

A second type of counter-narrative was produced by those who tended to deny that they would grow old. This attitude was seen in participants who continued to classify themselves as ‘young’ despite their age, attributing to others the stigma of being ‘old’, which was intended in a pejorative sense (Jones, 2006). Although the structure of these counter-narratives protected individuals against the negative expectations and other limitations induced by the TOF narrative, it also exacerbated forms of (sometimes extreme) prejudice against others, and against ageing in general (cf. Nelson, 2004), obliging these respondents to make choices and adopt lifestyles on defensive grounds, functional to their supposed ‘eternal youth’.

The third type of counter-narrative revolved around an alternative representation of ageing and succeeded in genuinely deconstructing the killer narrative, in the sense that it undermined the tacit premises on which the TOF construct is founded. It represented ageing (also) as an opportunity for enrichment, renewal, serenity, and the discovery of other potentialities. The most evident consequence, in the accounts falling into this category, was that the fear of ageing, or of being ‘too old’ for something no longer had a distressing and inhibitory effect. These negativities were extinguished on the level of the respondents’ personal life experiences and future expectations. Of the three categories of counter-narrative discussed here, this is the only one to offer both a rhetorical deconstruction of the TOF narrative and a chance to sidestep deleterious forms of ageism, thus preserving not only the individual’s well-being, but also the fabric of his or her social relations.

As regards the counter-narrative accounts, it has to be noted that, during the interviews, specific ‘positive questions’ (i.e. *how did you succeed in challenging the idea of feeling ‘too old’?*) were formulated to direct the attention of the participants toward positive aspects of their experiences and therefore produce narrations characterized by the capability to contrast the TOFs (Watkins & Cooperrider, 2000). Although this invitation for repositioning did not succeed all the times, the fact that many of the interviewees who expressed TOF narratives were also able to challenge it, could lead us to interpret the TOFs and anti-TOFs not as free-standing stories and counter-stories, but as moments of an ongoing dialogue between different possible positions the individual can take up (Romaioli, 2013). In this case, TOFs and anti-TOFs may function as flexible sense-making resources for the participants that become locally and relationally defined and negotiated as the interviews unfold (Nikander, 2000).

Conclusions

Seen through a psychosocial lens, we can find evidence of how the killer narrative on ageing is generated by at least two complementary conditions. The first relates to a widespread cultural construction of ageing as a negative phenomenon, an overall impoverishment of an individual’s resources. The lifestyles of the third and fourth ages depend on cultural beliefs and a shared discourse that today have taken shape in a narrative of decline (Gullette, 1997), burdened with pessimistic expectations, and often depressing outcomes for people’s sense of personal agency, and self-efficacy, and for their ability to plan their lives. The second condition stems from the creation of a social agenda based on scheduled stages and preset age groups, which establishes appropriate obligations and ambitions for individuals as a function of their age. In other words, a socially regulated and individually interiorized construction of normative patterns schedules opportunities for individual expression in precise ‘stages’ in life. Some Authors (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Phillipson, 2013) have underscored how anachronistic this segmentation of the life cycle has become with the advent of liquid societies (Bauman, 2005), communities characterized by various forms of (professional, existential, relational) precariousness, and ever faster changes of context that oblige individuals to strive constantly to get involved, and readjust on a personal level.

The result is that people today are caught up in a ‘double knot’ that takes the form of a genuinely paradoxical communication: on the one hand, they are asked to be flexible and willing to adapt their life plans; on the other, a cultural inertia, permeated by shared values and beliefs, imposes preset goals to be achieved by certain times in their lives. This last aspect combines with a generally negative representation of ageing to risk amplifying a cross-generational malaise (as voiced by our respondents). Though they may express it differently, adults of all ages share a tendency to limit themselves in their effort to achieve self-fulfillment. Simply put, they often see themselves as ‘too old’ to pursue their goals, or follow up their ambitions, desires and needs.

A limitation of the present study that needs to be acknowledged lies in that the group of participants was very heterogeneous and poorly defined in terms of certain variables that might be particularly salient when investigating the TOF narrative. As mentioned earlier, the analysis described here was part of a broader project, the ultimate goals of which were essentially to reconstruct the social representation of ageing among adults of various ages. It was only after starting the study, and thanks to the input from our participants during the interviews, that the significance and core role of the TOF narrative emerged, prompting us to include it among the research goals. While the characteristics of the TOF narrative make it an intriguing phenomenon that it would be well worth further analyzing with some urgency in particular case series (such as the socially isolated elderly), the present study enabled us to focus on its more general and culturally widespread facets. It showed that this narrative does not affect just the ‘unfortunate’ few, but risks subtly permeating and influencing the attribution of sense shared by ample layers of the population.

Given the devious nature of the killer TOF narrative that our study has delineated, theoretically explained and denounced, future lines of research could focus on clarifying its iatrogenic aspects, and their relevance in the production or consolidation of particular problematic situations. An example concerns the phenomenon of the NEET (not in education, employment or training), and the fact that many young people are discouraged from embarking on a course of further education or work because they feel they are ‘too late’ to make certain choices (even if it is only a matter of one year). Then there is the case of older members of the population and a common, catastrophic perception that they are ‘too old’ to learn new things, engage in physical activities, and more generally be involved in socially and economically active lifestyles.

At the same time, again giving priority to a pragmatic and generative approach that also envisages the research material as an

opportunity to re-orient the social and cultural courses being charted, we hope to see plenty of new studies shedding more light on how people succeed in coping with dysfunctional constructs like the TOF in various situations in their daily lives. The present contribution aims to provide a few pointers in this direction by showing how, on the social and cultural plane, some useful counter-narratives are already available for prompting a re-adjustment of the meaning attributed to the matter of growing old, and how people can remain positive and resourceful despite – or even thanks to – their advancing age.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the University of Padova, Italy, through the BIRD163557/16 Project: “Too Old For”. Ageing, Ageism and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies”.

References

- Andrews, M. (2009). The narrative complexity of successful ageing. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 29, 73–83.
- Bauman, Z. (2005). *Liquid life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Biggs, S. (2001). Toward critical narrativity: Stories of aging in contemporary social policy. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 15(4), 303–316.
- Biggs, S., Estes, C., & Phillipson, C. (2003). *Social theory, social policy and ageing: A critical introduction. Critical perspectives*. UK: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Bodily, C. (1995). Ageism and the deployments of ‘age’: A constructionist view. In T. Sarbin, & J. Kitsuse (Eds.). *Constructing the social* (pp. 174–194). London: Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. London: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. London: Sage.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Faccio, E., Mininni, G., & Rocelli, M. (2018). What it is like to be “ex”? Psycho-discursive analysis of a dangling identity. *Culture & Psychology*, 24(2), 233–247.
- Flick, U. (2000). Episodic interviewing. *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound* (pp. 75–92). .
- Flick, U. (2008). *Designing qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Flick, U. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Gemignani, M. (2014). Memory, remembering, and oblivion in active narrative interviewing. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(2), 127–135.
- Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gergen, K. J. (2015). From mirroring to world-making: Research as future forming. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 45(3), 287–310.
- Gergen, K. J., & Gergen, M. (2004). *Social construction: Entering the dialogue*. Taos Institute Publications.
- Gergen, K. J., & Gergen, M. M. (2010). Scanning the landscape of narrative inquiry. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4(9), 728–735.
- Gergen, K. J., Josselson, R., & Freeman, M. (2015). The promises of qualitative inquiry. *American Psychologist*, 70(1), 1.
- Giddens, A. (2000). *Runaway world: How globalization is reshaping our lives*. New York: Routledge.
- Goodall, H. L. (2016). *Counter-narrative: How progressive academics can challenge extremists and promote social justice*. Routledge.
- Grant, B. C. (2001). ‘You’re never too old’: Beliefs about physical activity and playing sport in later life. *Ageing and Society*, 21, 777–798.
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2008). Narrative ethnography. In S. Nagy Hesse-Biber, & P. Leavy (Eds.). *Handbook of emergent methods* (pp. 241–264). .
- Gullette, M. M. (1997). *Declining to decline: Cultural combat and the politics of midlife*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2000). *Constructing the life course*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of constructionist research*. New York: Guilford.
- Jones, R. L. (2006). Older people talking as if they are not older people: Positioning theory as an explanation. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 20(1), 79–91.
- Kenyon, G., Bohlmeijer, E., & Randall, W. (Eds.). (2011). *Storying later life: Issues, investigations, and interventions in narrative gerontology*. Buckinghamshire: Open University Press.
- Lamb, S. (2014). Permanent personhood or meaningful decline? Toward a critical anthropology of successful aging. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 29, 41–52.
- Ledwith, M. (2017). Emancipatory action research as a critical living praxis: From dominant narratives to counternarrative. *The Palgrave international handbook of action research* (pp. 49–62). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Liang, J., & Luo, B. (2012). Toward a discourse shift in social gerontology: From successful aging to harmonious aging. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 26(3), 327–334.
- Lock, A., & Strong, T. (2010). *Social constructionism: Sources and Stirrings in theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- McLean, K. C. (2008). The emergence of narrative identity. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(4), 1685–1702.
- McNamee, S., & Hosking, D. M. (2012). *Research and social change: A relational constructionist approach*. New York: Routledge.
- Moscovici, S. (1984). The phenomenon of social representations. In R. M. Farr, & S. M. Moscovici (Eds.). *Social Representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nelson, T. D. (Ed.). (2004). *Ageism: Stereotyping and prejudice against older persons*. MIT Press.
- Nelson, T. D. (2005). Ageism: Prejudice against our feared future self. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(2), 207–221.
- Nikander, P. (2000). “Old” versus “Little Girl”. A discursive approach to age categorization and morality. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 14, 335–358.
- Nikander, P. (2008). Constructionism and discourse analysis. In J. A. Holstein, & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.). *Handbook of Constructionist Research* (pp. 413–428). New York: Guilford.
- Nikander, P. (2009). Doing change and continuity: Age identity and the micro-macro divide. *Ageing & Society*, 29, 863–881.
- Phillipson, C. (2013). *Ageing*. Malden: Polity Press.
- Phoenix, C., & Sparkes, A. C. (2009). Being Fred: Big stories, small stories and the accomplishment of a positive ageing identity. *Qualitative Research*, 2, 83–99.
- Potter, J. (1997). Discourse analysis as a way of analyzing naturally occurring talk. *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice. Vol. 2. Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice* (pp. 200–222).
- Randall, W. L., & McKim, A. E. (2008). *Reading our lives. The poetics of growing old*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, T., & Richards, L. (1991). The NUDIST qualitative data analysis system. *Qualitative Sociology*, 14(4), 307–324.
- Romaioli, D. (2013). *La terapia multi-being. Una prospettiva relazionale in psicoterapia*. Taos Institute Publications.
- Romaioli, D., & Contarello, A. (2012). How do therapists understand their client's problem and its resolution: Objectification in theories of change. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 42(2), 93–100.
- Romaioli, D., & Contarello, A. (2017a). Invecchiare bene in tempi di crisi. Punti di vista euritmici attraverso i posizionamenti con l’Alter. *Psicologia della Salute*, (1), 26–47.
- Romaioli, D., & Contarello, A. (2017b). Redefining agency in late life. The concept of ‘Disponibility’. *Ageing and Society*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X17000897>.
- Romaioli, D., & Faccio, E. (2012). When therapists do not know what to do: Informal types of eclecticism in psychotherapy. *Research in Psychotherapy*, 15(1), 10–21.
- Romaioli, D., Faccio, E., & Salvini, A. (2008). On acting against one's best judgement: A social constructionist interpretation for the Akrasia problem. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 38(2), 179–192.
- Sammut, G., & Gaskell, G. (2010). Points of view, social positioning and intercultural relations. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 40(1), 47–64.
- Shotter, J. (2003). Real presences: Meaning as living movement in a participatory world. *Theory & Psychology*, 13(4), 435–468.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London: Sage.
- Wertz, F. J. (2011). The qualitative revolution in psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 39, 77–104.