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On Coping with Dynamics of Passivation/Activation in the Everyday Practice of Older Adults

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Contemporary Western discourses on ageing imply contradictory invocations: the demand to age successfully by remaining healthy and productive vs. being 'a threat' to productivity and social flexibility. Ageing is characterized by changes in life, changes in the body and the health condition of the home environment. Against this backdrop the paper explores the everyday practice of older adults in different living contexts. Based on three group discussions we identified three mechanisms of coping potentially passivating conditions: (1) performative happiness – distinguishing oneself from complaining others by showing contentment with the circumstances, (2) solitary agency – retreating from institutional frameworks and focusing on the possibilities of individual agency, and (3) the development of ressentiment – collectivising by devaluating others and thereby regaining agency as part of a group.

KEYWORDS
discourses of ageing, passivation, activation, ressentiment, agency

1 | INTRODUCTION

In Western neoliberal societies, individual agency, self-reliance, and the constant negotiation of one's own life choices are important expectations towards the ageing subject. While ageing processes in fact are very diversified, in much of today´s scientific and political discourse on ageing, older adults involve the normative expectation to age successfully (see for the concept of successful ageing Baltes & Baltes, 1990). This implies maintaining a high level of physical and mental functionality, avoiding (or being able to compensate for) disease and disability and staying socially engaged (e.g. Rowe & Kahn, 1987; WHO, 1987). Also in later stages of adulthood and old age and according to this paradigm, successful ageing means to stay active and productive. Silke van Dyk discusses this phenomenon critically and posits it as an "active ageing paradigm" (van Dyk, 2014), a discourse emerging in Western societies over the last 20 years that responds to the ageing of societies in the global North. This "active ageing paradigm" is different from often negative perspectives on ageing societies that consider the ageing of populations as a "crisis" (World Bank, 1994) or an ongoing "key challenge" in the 21st century (United Nations, 2002), resulting in collapsing retirement schemes and health care systems (for a critical discussion see Backes, 1997). By putting 'active ageing' and "discovering the new elderly" as "active and productive citizens" (van Dyk, 2014, p. 93) on their agendas, national and international organisations try to counteract this development. However, the paradigmatic discourse on successful and active aging itself silently underpins the idea that there exists 'unsuccessful or passive ageing' as a negative downside. While the 'new elderly' represent activity, autonomy, health and productivity, the 'old aged' represent a negative contrast foil. It is them who are discursively construed as needing external care, suffering from physical and mental decline and thus as being 'a threat' to productivity, economic power and social flexibility of late modern societies (van Dyk, 2014, p. 93). This portrayal of older adults as a 'threat' mirrors in what Laceulle and Baars (2014) call the "cultural master narrative" of ageing in neoliberal societies. This master narrative represents older adults as victims of their ageing process (Laceulle & Baars, 2014, p. 36), rather than as agents of their own life course. Furthermore, it pictures retirement as a phase of life characterised by mental and physical passivation: the TV set, the sofa, housework, and gardening are constructed as central concerns in this stage of life, representing the living space of the older population as shrinking and them as disengaging from social life (van Dyk et al., 2013, par. 21).

What the above-mentioned debates on ageing show is that public discourses on older adults are dichotomous, conveying two diverging – but discursively interrelated – images: on the one hand the active, healthy and (socially) productive subject and on the other hand the passive subject that represents a threat to societal productivity. The critical debate regarding the "active aging paradigm" primarily focus on how specific narratives or discourses on 'old age' interplay with structural changes in welfare states. Additionally, they shed light on the hurdles which "stereotyping and demeaning" narratives on being old imply for being recognized as self-reliable and autonomous (Laceulle & Baars, 2014, p. 34). However, and importantly for our own endeavour, they state that these diverging and contradictory discursive images of 'active' and 'passive' ageing also find representation in "objects, body practices and institutional setting[s]" (van Dyk et al., 2013, par. 21) – thus pointing at the importance of focusing on how subject positions provided by these narratives and discourses might be embodied and experienced in concrete, social contexts and everyday practices.

Against this background of current studies, the following can be deduced for studying concrete everyday experiences: (1) the stereotype of 'being passive' and not productive (enough) associated with the threat of being perceived as a burden to society, (2) the invocation to be 'active' and 'productive' that comes with normative demands that need to be met in everyday contexts and, (3) the 'experiential reality' of passivation itself that is, the day to day struggle of coping with troublesome side effects of unwelcome physiological an mental aging (e.g. by health impairment). Consequently, older people´s daily experience and activities are embedded in this complex socio-discursive

context.

In order to look at aspects of this empirically, this article aims at exploring older people´s concrete everyday experiences and practices that are on the one hand framed by the structural and discursive conditions but on the other hand not determined by them in a uniform way. Therefore, we analyse whether and how older adults address topics of passivation/activation as relevant for their everyday life, how they 'work their way through' contradictory invocations and correspondingly how they cope with them. We propose that such an analysis must shed light on both – the everyday experiences and the discursive framing they refer to – that means, it must address how social conditions intersect with psychological modes of processing. Such a perspective is inherently psychosocial. Regarding our initial topic of experiencing passivation/activation in the context of a hegemonic active aging paradigm, we conducted an empirical in-depth analysis of three group discussions, aiming to (1) reconstruct different potentially passivating experiences and (2) identify coping strategies with these dynamics.

2 | ACCESSING EVERYDAY LIVES: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH AND PSYCHOLOGY

Empirically, we aimed at understanding not only how our participants address discursive invocations and normative ascriptions in the context of explicit reflections, but we wanted to take an in-depth look at the everyday situated practices of older people to find out about participants' practical orientations and habitualised ways of dealing with this context. We addressed the complex field of the subjective experiences and coping with potentially passivating experiences in the context of an active ageing paradigm by open qualitative group discussions (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2010) that were subsequently analysed by means of Documentary Method (e.g. Bohnsack, 2014).

The group discussants were recruited by students of a teaching research project that explored the daily experiences of living together in Europe, between resentful demarcation and solidarity. The students recruited natural groups that share concrete experiences (e.g. a group of people living in the same retirement home). After a verbal information about the focus of the project and about data privacy as well as the usage of the data, participants gave their informed consent in a written form (this empirical study design was approved by the Sigmund Freud University's ethics committee). The discussions started with an open stimulus that focused on common experiences in the living contexts that evoke a self-structured discussion. Subsequently to the phase of self-structured discussion without intervention, follow-up questions were posed that touched on the topics already mentioned by the interviewees. In the final phase of the discussion, interviewers turned to pre-formulated questions focussing specifically on topics of group cohesion and demarcation. The discussions were transcribed and pseudonymised by the students under supervision in the teaching context.

The analysis – conducted by the authors of the paper – employed the Documentary Method which was initially developed by Karl Mannheim (1980). Specifically, we draw on Bohnsack's phenomenologically and ethnomethodologically informed advancement of the approach which has fostered a growing body of qualitative empirical research but also continues to contribute to the methodological debates mostly in the German speaking countries and is just now beginning to gain some recognition in English speaking countries (Bohnsack et al., 2010). Building on Mannheim (1980), Bohnsack (2010) claims that actors' routinized, skilful engagement with their specific everyday context of life grounds on implicit, habitualised knowledge for which Bohnsack also uses the term 'practical orientation'. These frameworks of orientation can neither be reduced to the content of explicit subjective theories, which are seen as post-hoc rationalisations that represent the content related aspects of common-sense constructions of the world. Nor can they be regarded as mere effects of external 'objective' conditions of life. Instead, it roots in collective prac-

tices of appropriating the structural conditions of life, which Mannheim conceptualises as conjunctive experience (Mannheim, 1980). Importantly, this kind of orientation-framework on which actors rely in their everyday life is pre-reflective in the sense of being acquired and passed on by imitation and mimicry instead of explicit tradition. Thus, actors need not be reflectively aware of the practical knowledge informing their habitual practice. Methodologically this means that the knowledge informing routine action and practice is a-theoretical and thus cannot be accessed directly (e.g. in the context of reflective self-theorisation on the part of interviewees). To access these habitualised and a-theoretical frameworks of orientation, the Documentary Method employs an analytical distinction between two levels of knowledge: (1) 'communicative' knowledge and (2) a-theoretical knowledge. Communicative knowledge refers to the common-sense knowledge that we can explicitly talk about. Oftentimes, the analysis will show that communicative knowledge expresses the stereotypical topics and subjects that 'one' would mention in regard to a certain subject matter. In our case, we might expect that we find explicit references to being active or being confronted with specific stereotypes. Communicative knowledge expresses the retrospective reflection of a participant on WHAT a certain experience is *about*. A-theoretical knowledge, on the other hand, is the form of knowledge that implicitly informs HOW (that is by which implicit practical orientation) a certain form of practice emerges as a way of coping with the structural determinants of a given environment. Documentary Method suggests accounting for the distinction between these two knowledge forms by employing two distinct steps of analysis, namely the formulating and reflecting interpretation (Bohnsack, 2014, p. 225). The formulating interpretation thematically summarises the research participant's explicit utterances, the reflecting interpretation then shifts the analytic perspective regarding the formal composition of the account as a document of lived experience. Thus, the reflective interpretation focuses on how a specific account of the everyday is produced in the interview or group discussion. Specifically in group discussions with natural groups the Documentary Method assumes that the mode of interaction employed by participants in negotiating the development of the open and self-structured discussion is informative of the orientation-framework (and conjunctive experience) that the group´s habitus is founded on. The performative and formal organisation of discourse is thus regarded as indexical of the implicit orientation-knowledge of the everyday. In the context of this paper, we cannot explicate the interpretational techniques used in the reflective interpretation. However, we refer to Bohnsack (2014) for a detailed description.

With regard to our initial research question the two-step approach of the Documentary method allows us to examine (by way of the formulating interpretation) how older adults positions explicitly refer to their position within the context of an active aging paradigm while at the same time being able to understand the orientation-knowledge that allows older people to practically cope with the structural demands of our society. We are also able to see whether the reflective self-theorisations presented in the discussions are congruent with the practical frameworks of orientation that guide everyday life.

3 | POTENTIALLY PASSIVATING EXPERIENCES AND MODES OF COPING

This section will provide a first insight in preliminary outcome of the teaching research project shortly sketched above and that was conducted at Sigmund Freud University Vienna and Berlin[1]. Specifically, we will present the in-depth analysis of two group discussions of residents in retirement homes and a group living in a social housing project[2].

[1]The teaching research projects is part of a collaborative research cluster "Ressentiment and Change Potential in Europe (RECHANGE)" at Sigmund Freud University of Vienna (https://psychologie.sfu.ac.at/de/forschung/forschungsprojekte/forschungscluster-rechange/).

[2]Originally, all group discussions were conducted in German speaking countries (Vienna and Berlin). Thus, we translated all direct quotes that we will present below from German to English, adapted the text to the grammatical rules of the English target language, but kept the exact wording as close as possible to the original German texts. However, we simplified the presented interview quotes in some places to facilitate their reading whenever the translation from German to English did not easily come to the fore.

We conducted the first group discussion – 'the Meals' – in a municipal Viennese retirement home. This retirement home is located near a large green belt in Vienna and has a cafeteria, a large garden and two living quarters: one for persons who can still care for themselves and one for persons in need of (various levels of) care. The group was composed of four research participants – all experiencing health impairment (impaired mobility, hearing difficulty) – and one male and one female student who conducted the discussion. Additionally, a nurse was also present during the group discussion. The second group discussion – 'The Floors' – was conducted in a Berlin retirement home for persons who are (financially) well situated. However, differences in the financial background played a major role in the institution, as the infrastructure (e.g. furnishing, service) differed between 'the floors' (the first floor is more 'luxurious' and expensive). The group consisted of five research participants, four women and a man, but not all of the participants where continuously present during the discussion. Four of the participants were born before the outbreak of the Second World War and all of them used to live in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). A nurse was also present during the discussion. We will contrast these two cases of retirement homes with one additional group discussion – 'The Circle' – with a community of older adults living in a social housing project in Berlin that was originally built from 1963 to 1975 and was long considered a socially deprived area until it was modernised by a public German housing association from 2008 to 2015. In 2017, 37.333 citizens lived there. Although the area was modernised and nowadays offers attractive affordable living, it is still discursively represented as a location of social decline. The group consisted of eight women in the age of 70 to 85 who regularly meet in (more or less) this constellation. All women have been living in the social housing project for at least 20 years (some of them up to 50 years).

3.1 | Potentially Passivating Experiences in/by Institutions

Against the backdrop of the above-mentioned ambivalence of the active ageing paradigm and its entanglement with the 'reality' of passivation itself, we explored potentially passivating experiences in all three groups. We identify institutional procedures as well as institutional decisions that cannot be controlled as one source of experiencing passivation and subjection. This becomes visible, for instance, in the discussion with the group living in the Berlin retirement home. They describe the institution's procedures as something that never changes and that centrally structures their daily lives as passive individuals:

> ***Franziska:***[3] *It's always the same basically. Well, as mentioned earlier […] one has one's supper, one is undressed, one sleeps. Then the next morning comes and one is woken up, washed and dressed. Basically always the same. (The Floors, lines 40-43)*

In this quote, it is not just always the same procedures that are constantly repeating and thus bringing nothing new, it is also the fact that even the simplest of acts of caring for 'one'-self are not actively done on one's own anymore. In the way the research participant speaks about herself in the neutral third person, it is not the 'I' who can actively participate (e.g. "one is undressed" and not "I undress"), but the institutional structure to which the 'I' is at the mercy. Additionally, passivation is also apparent in the fact that she uses passive voice ("one is woken up" and not "I wake up"). Although [Franziska] expresses that she can be more active than others in the retirement home ("But I am still the one who can go out a bit, many cannot", The Floors, lines 47-48), which indicates a practice of showing individual agency, the experience of the rigidly recurring structures within the institution are shared and thus important in the

[3] All names, locations and other person-related data have been pseudonymised. We present the pseudonyms in brackets.

group's orientation (lines 61-68):

> ***[Franziska]****: one wouldn't Christmas - well Christmas is different, but you wouldn't know it's Easter, although they made some Easter coffee last time, you could tell a little by that.*
>
> ***[Interviewer]****: Good.*
>
> ***[Franziska]****: But basically aside from that every day*
>
> ***[Agnes]****: the same*
>
> ***[Franziska]****: Same.*

In this quote, two research participants complete and validate their sentences, as [Agnes] anticipates how the sentence will end before [Franziska] finishes her statement. [Franziska] confirms this completion by repeating the term and thus again emphasises 'the sameness' of the procedures they are subjected to.

That there are institutional procedures that majorly structure the individual scope of activity and thus are potentially passivating, is also evident in a group of people living in a Viennese retirement home who describe (The Meals, lines 13-16):

> ***[Alfred]****: well the daily experiences are, well, that the meals, well, are always at the same time of the day yes, and that one sits at different tables for breakfast and lunch. Yes, that one does not always sit with the same people with whom one had breakfast with.*

The daily experience shared by [Alfred] is majorly structured by an externally given timeframe ("meals well, are always at the same time of the day yes"). Strikingly, the research participant proposes this again in distant third person, as "one sits at different tables". Again, it is not the active 'I' who chooses to sit with different people. Above that, it is not the 'I' who makes the experience, the daily experiences "are" – as if even these indeed private instances were pre-given. Although there is more variation – "one does not always sit with the same people" – his own agency is little, as the subjective experience is located between the poles continuity (meals are always at the same time) and discontinuity (changing seats and tables) in which the 'I' cannot act in a self-determined way.

Beside the routines embedded in the institutional structures of retirement homes, financial restrictions resulting from living in a retirement home limit the agency of our interviewees:

> ***[Alfred]****: yes it's unpleasant that only twenty per cent of one's salary, from everything which one earns by the pension and, uh, now I have for example each day only 12 euro at my disposal. Now I have to buy myself a new hearing aid that costs approximately thousand Schillings, ah, Euro, how long might I be able to afford nothing else, but the hearing aid (The meals, lines 282-287)*

The Austrian welfare system counter-finances the costs of retirement institutions through the inhabitant's pension, resulting in diminishing financial autonomy for those whose funds are limited. To be cared for properly, older adults need to comply with the institutional framework they are subjected to, leaving them with only small spaces to be active and independent. These quotes show that in both discussions participants experience passivation as something that they are subjected to by institutional practices and procedures. However, in discussing the matter of increasing heteronomy [Alfred] and [Boris] indicate the importance of gaining power over certain aspects of every-day procedures:

***[Boris]**: I don't need anything*

***[Alfred]**: don't you go to the barber?*

***[Boris]**: yes I do*

***[Alfred]**: there you go*

***[Boris]**: fortunately I can still afford that. I also go to the pedicure (The Meals, lines 305-311)*

In accordance with cultural narratives concerning ageing, [Boris] withdraws from personal needs and preferences only to be reminded by [Alfred] that he still goes to the barber as well as to the pedicure. On levels of content, [Boris] can engage as an individual actor who is able to afford the services he desires. However, the specific way they talk about this topic reveals a certain ambivalence: on the one hand, another person has to remind him of one of the activities, on the other hand this reveals a possibility for the second person to actively remind someone and as such to be active. In this way, the group enacts a certain degree of collective autonomy by overseeing things that (still) matter to them.

However, potentially passivating experiences are not confined to the institutional context of a retirement home. In a group discussion comprised of research participants living together in social housing buildings in Berlin (The Circle, lines 344-349), experiences of being subjected to institutional procedures come to the fore as well:

***[Antonia]**: and your only daughter also went to school here*

***[Gertrude]**: yes also lived here for some time until it was renovated*

***[Antonia]**: Modernised*

***[Gertrude]**: Oh*

***[Claudia]**: tyrannising that was not modernising that was tyrannising*

***[Dagmar]**: yes you could say it like that*

What these women collectively enfold and describe here is a shared experience they made when an external agency – a social project company – came to re-install the area where they lived. Originally established as a project to make the city's periphery more attractive, the area was badly neglected over the years and finally became a deprived area. At a certain point, it was an external, new social project company that invested in renewing the building complex. However – and as is collectively enfolded – the research participants do not experience this as something that broadens people's range of activity, but rather as something they cannot control and that they are at the mercy of: They refer to the experience, that many people could not decide when renovation works were done, how long they would take or generally which kind of materials were installed.. The feeling of being subjected to institutional conditions that cannot be controlled also finds expression in the collectively used term 'tyrannised' in replacement of the word modernised. Interestingly, this is something they share even though not all women actually had the same experiences while the renovation works were done: Some were fortunate and their apartment got refurbished while there was enough money; others had the problem that after some time, the social project company suffered from financial issues which subsequently led to construction delays. Some got what they wanted, others didn't. In the group's narrative however, it is most important that what you got was induced by institutional decisions in which group members had little say. Therefore, despite their different individual experiences, they collectively enfold the metaphor of being tyrannised instead of modernised. Furthermore, the process of modernisation doesn't only refer to the reconstruction of the building complexes themselves, but also to the transformation processes regarding

the socio-demographic composition of the residency that came along with or are collectively being associated with change in the neighbourhood.

> ***[Claudia]**: yes it was very different uh the tenants were also different it was so everyone held the door open at the elevator and everyone said good bye*
>
> ***[Dagmar]**: said hello*
>
> ***[Claudia]**: and everybody was asking "do you want to come with me" uh or "do you want to take out the mail first" it was more polite. I really have to say that yes it has decreased a lot. And back then the boxes were squeezed a little before you threw them in the garbage and there was not so much*
>
> ***[Dagmar]**: Well, we had a garbage disposal*
>
> ***[Claudia]**: yes, but there was no cardboard box and oh you didn't throw your handkerchief on the ground in the elevator it was very clean*
>
> ***[Dagmar]**: other residents, other people, other generations (The Circle, lines 25-37)*

The residents experience themselves exposed to demographic changes in the building that directly impacted the lives of those 'original' tenants. Before the shifts began to result in a change of social composition, people were perceived being friendlier, more helpful and the housing community less anonymous as [Friederike] points out: "I don't know my neighbour at all, you don't see each other, you don't hear each other, so it's, uh, pretty much anonymous, yes" (The Circle, lines 113-114). Albeit being relatively pleased with the general living conditions provided in the housing complex, they express feelings of alienation from the other inhabitants. With demographic change, there is a force at work that exceeds individual agency and leaves the older women with a feeling of losing what once belonged to them: the area they are living in. Interestingly, and we will elaborate this further below, the women use this potentially passivating conditions to regain their agency via actively grumbling about the experienced changes.

The analysis of the group discussions allowed us to gain insight different potentially passivating experiences ranging from institutional procedures in the retirement and physical impairment to financial limitations and the experience of being subjected to uncontrollable change in the living area. The results presented in the following subchapters show ways in which group discussants cope with the before elaborated potentially passivating experiences by (1) performative happiness and resigned expectations (2) solitary agency, and (3) development of ressentiment as collectivising practice. We reconstructed these strategies of coping based on our data and now present exemplary quotes to show its relevance for discussing the second aim of this article presented under 'introduction'.

3.1.1 | Performative happiness and resigned expectations

The first way of coping with potentially passivating experiences we found in our empirical data is an affective orientation to performative happiness. The research participants use a mode of relativisation to reframe the situation as normality. They do so by stressing that 'one' is happy in any case, that 'one' is resigned to the fact that 'this' is the 'course of things' and still can be happy (The Meals, lines 72-86):

> ***[Boris]**: Yes well I have a big TV ( ) this is life now isn't it, I came here in May with my wife, we had an apartment on the fifth floor my wife fell and suffered from a hip fracture*
>
> ***[Interviewer]**: oh no*
>
> ***[Boris]**: she had she died on [December 22nd]*

[Interviewer]: *I am sorry*

[Boris]: *Well that's the way things go that's no good but one has to expect that*

[Interviewer]: *I am still sorry*

[Boris]: *And now I moved into a smaller apartment on the third floor but I am good and I am happy in this house*

[Interviewer]: *That's good OK*

[Boris]: *Yes there are no negative things on the house here I am very happy in contrast to many people that well yes that complain*

Here, [Boris] relativises the potentially burdensome experience of losing his wife and expresses a positive evaluation of his current life in the retirement home. By doing so he also distinguishes himself from the "many" who are complaining. Constructing himself as someone who does not complain is in line with a discursive norm that compels ageing persons not to trouble societies as ageing itself is constructed as problematic and limiting for societies (for instance, Backes, 1997, pp. 20). Against the backdrop of this discursive framework, he positions himself as someone compliant with the discursive invocation of the 'content old'. Similarly, [Alfred] stresses:

Well, there are talks with my breakfast partner for instance he is very always seeing the doctor or going to the hospital he is not always here, but he always complains about everything about the whole situation here he always has something to gripe about. No matter what he is talking about he always has something to gripe about quite opposite to me I am very happy that I am here and that because there are many activities but I don't really participate. I am a bit of a strange person well I am mostly at home (The Meals, lines 29-35)

[Alfred] highlights that he is "happy" in contrast to other housemates who seem to "complain" about "everything". Thus, he does not only comply with the discursive demands to age 'silently' and not cause further problems; he emphasises that this is a personal feature that distinguishes him from others. In the German original transcript, he uses the attribute "eigen" to describe that he is "a bit of a strange person". In German, the attribute "eigen" has a double meaning: It means, that on the one hand, someone is not like others – 'strange' in some sense; but simultaneously, it also has a possessive connotation (similar to the word "own"), meaning that someone is 'one's own person. Thus, emphasising his contentment with "the whole situation here" does not only relativise potentially burdensome circumstances and comply with discursive demands on how to age; it also highlights – and this leads us to the second coping strategy (we will discuss this further in the next section) – stressing one's own autonomy in the retreat from institutional frameworks (solitary agency). However, in applying the coping mechanism of 'performative happiness' the passivated role the residents find themselves in is constantly perpetuated: By complying with the cultural narratives concerning ageing, they engage in an ambiguous process of (re-)gaining agency. The inhabitants do so by remaining in a passive state of 'being content' despite concurrently suffering from physical as well as institutional constraints. The active 'I' aims to detach from those limitations by complying with normative criteria on the one hand and by distinction from fellow residents on the other hand. A way out seems to be a form of retreat to one's own activities, which we will discuss in more detail in the following section.

3.1.2 | Solitary agency

A second strategy of coping with potentially passivating experiences, we identify in our data, is withdrawing from pre-given settings and focussing on what 'I' can 'still' do – and importantly – alone. There is a certain form of individual autonomy performed, but only by retreating to one's own alone activities. As we can see in [Franziska's] quote, the 'I' becomes visible and active when describing that [Franziska] is still able to do something outside the retirement home: "But I am, I am still the one, who can go out a bit, many cannot" (The Floors, lines 47-48). First, there is a switch from passive voice to first person (a few lines above she says: "Then the next morning comes and one is woken up, washed and dressed", The Floors, lines 40-43). Second and by using a comparison, she distances herself from others who are less active, and positions herself as one of those who can go out by herself though "many cannot". What is essential here is that by this way of focussing on what the 'I' can do, she talks about her experience in an individualised way (The Floors, lines 88-115):

> ***[Interviewer]**: Are there any events?*
>
> ***[Franziska]**: There are leisure activities and all, but these are*
>
> ***[Interviewer]**: What kind of activities?*
>
> ***[Agnes]**: Guessing game.*
>
> ***[Franziska]**: Guessing game.*
>
> ***[…]***
>
> ***[Franziska]**: I don't want to play along with things I find silly.*
>
> ***[Interviewer]**: Those activities, are they always at the same time? Monday or Tuesday or so?*
>
> ***[Franziska]**: I rather do things alone.*
>
> ***[Interviewer]**: Yes?*
>
> ***[Franziska]**: As I said I go grocery shopping alone, I go to the cinema, I go to the theatre.*
>
> ***[Interviewer]**: If that works for you*
>
> ***[Franziska]**: Yes.*
>
> ***[Interviewer]**: ((turning to [Agnes])) Do you go out alone?*
>
> ***[Agnes]**: well I can't really move*

Here, institutional offers that are done as a group are actively denied and repudiated. This simultaneously represents an act of autonomous individuality and self-activity by being on one's own: Where resistance to a pre-determined structure is (physically) still possible, the 'self' individualises from the institutional contexts by going to the theatre or shopping alone and nearly rebelliously devaluates the institutions collective offer as something an 'I' would never do ("I don't want to play along with things I find silly"). In this rhetoric, playing the guessing game is something indeed undesirable, something left to those who "can't really move" and escape. Thus, by emphasising doing things alone [Franziska's] enhances her autonomous self-position: First, she distinguishes herself from the institution, because she refuses to talk about playing the guessing game by ignoring the Interviewer's question and by further orienting to the thematically other focus on doing things alone. Second, she distances herself from those who cannot be active anymore and age more obviously, as she just wants to do things that are linked to physical activity and demand a better physical condition.

That the personal sphere in the institution is something strongly linked to one's physical scope of activity is also evident in the Viennese retirement home. For instance, there is a strong focus on moving alone although being physically impaired:

> ***[Boris]**: well actually I'm more autonomous I spend much time in my room, or go for a walk with my rollator. I can, I go to the stadium and I was at the boat show and at the motor show and so on. I am a bit - because I can't walk, I have PD, so I can't move freely it works a bit if I lean on my rollator (lines 60-63)*

To [Boris], being autonomous means to be physically active on his own. Again, this implies that he is capable of doing certain things – mostly outside of the institution – independently although suffering from physical impairment by Parkinson's disease (PD). This even accentuates his striving for individual agency. Similar to [Boris], his group discussion colleague [Alfred] talks about doing things alone:

> ***[Alfred]**: yes in my apartment yes and ehm minding my own business, yes, whether I am doing some body care, I do from noon to bedtime. I do ehm, I wash everything and twist [my beard] and so on, yes (The Meals, lines 38-41)*

To [Alfred], minding his own business is expressed in caring for his body. Although remaining inside the institution (namely in his apartment) he retreats from institutional structures and procedures imposed on him by focussing on his own activities.

Central for this second form of coping with possibly passivating experiences is a focus on what the 'I' can *physically* still do independently. The group discussion material thus indicates that retreat from the rigid structures in retirement homes is mainly facilitated by individual actions that constitute the active self in distinction from the more passive others and the institution. The individual retreat thus appears as a counterpoint to passivating institutional structures. Conversely, it seems to lie beyond the scope of action to collectively oppose the restrictive structures. The degree to which residents are enabled to act as individuals withdrawing from the institutionalised framework is fundamentally determined by physical condition. Those who are still capable of engaging in activities outside of the institution do so with ostentation in order to differentiate themselves from those, whose bodily impairments are more evident. Thus, they correspond to the cultural narrative of 'active ageing' not only by their own actions, but also by distinction from passive others. In contrast to those who cannot leave the institution at all, going to the cinema or theatre allows the (self-)image of someone who is independent and thus an active actor in a society that considers this as a prerequisite of being old.

3.1.3 | Development of ressentiment as collectivising practice

The third coping strategy we conceptualise by drawing on ressentiment theory (departing from Scheler's (1994) early moral philosophical approach, see for example Demertzis, 2020; Salmela & Capelos, 2021). In this sense, we conceive ressentiment a "complex affective disposition characterised by a "recollection of past bad treatments" (Aeschbach, 2017, p. 41) that cannot be acted out and has to be repressed. The associated experience of powerlessness leads to a nebulous process of "self-poisoning" (Scheler 1994), and ultimately manifests itself in an overt, hostile holding of a grudge against persons, groups or objects" (cited as Rodax et al., 2020, p. 2). Against this backdrop, the third coping strategy is characterised by a habitual practice of devaluating others, shifting quickly from one target to the next, and simultaneously strengthening the inner cohesion of the group. Regarding psychological wounds (see Scheler, 1994) –

such as the experiences of passivation shared by the groups we discuss here – ressentiment can be seen as a coping mechanism leading to a distinct psychic disposition that can be shared in a group. In our sample it is specifically the "Circle" in Berlin (lines 278-281) that is prone to negative attitudes against others. We take the following sequence as an example, where group members refer not only to the change of their residential area, but also identify the ones to blame:

> ***[Dagmar]**: Well it was a bit better in the old days this whole bunch this area if one looks out of the window to the playground one wouldn't see the German kids only the foreigner's kids only they shout that is so loud you can't even open the window*

A few lines later, they keep on discussing that the people who now live at the social housing complex are not the same anymore, as people do not know each other well anymore:

> ***[Dagmar]**: if someone is entering the elevator I always ask "from which floor are you? Are you living here?" "Yes I am with my girlfriend, I live on the eighth." Then I say "ah now I know [Name]". Yes just ask. Or if somebody is coming in and is slamming the door then I say "thank you"*
>
> ***[Friederike]**: but that can happen that you don't get an answer as I the others do it just the same*
>
> ***[Dagmar]**: that didn't to me*
>
> ***[Antonia]**: I don't know in which strange house you live*
>
> ***[Friederike]**: but that are Germans she is a businesswoman*
>
> ***[Dagmar]**: well I know it differently*
>
> ***[Antonia]**: and now there is also Miss [Name] who also lives in such a strange house*
>
> ***[Gertrude]**: what do you mean by strange*
>
> ***[Dagmar]**: it's strange*

It can be seen, first, that there is a conflict that cannot become acted out. As we discussed in chapter "Potentially passivating experiences in/by institutions", the participants collectively enfold that they are being at the mercy of uncontrollable processes of modernisation and change (e. g. pushed by the social housing project's company as well as by demographical changes); however, in the paragraphs above, this conflict seems to shift towards various other topics - here migrant children, unfriendly neighbours, a businesswoman or the reference to the house as a strange one, in other sequences against "migrants", "everything like that", "not always very nice people" and "criminals" (The Circle, lines, 206-215), while the devaluating affective stance and grumbling presentation style is kept up by the group. In this manner, anger but also a certain cynical humour become expressible. Thus, ressentiment fosters the discharge of emotional conflicts. While the research participants' agency is inhibited on a factual level – they cannot have a determining influence on change in the neighbourhood – shared ressentiment (manifesting as continuous grumbling) becomes a source of agency.

We find a similar ressentiment dynamic expressed in the Viennese case "The Meals" (496-507), where the research participants collectively enfold a stereotypical anti-migrant ressentiment:

> ***[Alfred]**: nobody wants to believe it. Yes they should only see how it is in foreign countries how people feel there, yes, of course it is eh that we have so many unemployed has again been a mistake that we that the*

foreigners are allowed to work here that was a mistake. The foreigners come here. Work here, and eh and take away our jobs.

***[Boris]**: yes but the situation is for instance that we ha- (.) they need technicians well good labourers*

***[Alfred]**: well this is yes*

***[Boris]**: but sometimes the big companies have they have cancelled all apprentice positions instead of training themselves no, they shut down these apprenticeship workshops an rather take in foreign workers*

Here, the research participants actualise and affirm right-wing discursive-political positions invoking the fear of being left behind by society and, more specifically, the political establishment, as has already been proposed by Cramer (2016) and Hochschild (2016). Congruent to this prior research, we argue that our research participants use devaluation to deal with their own experiences of passivating institutional structures as well as economic debasement. By shifting the emotional target to migrants, they can express anger regarding social dislocations ("that was a mistake; the foreigners come here; work here; and eh and take away our jobs").

The second group from Berlin (The Floors, lines 1009-1021) actualises an anti-migrant ressentiment in a similar way:

***[Dominic]**: well in the old days you could go out in the evening. Because the people felt safe to go out in the evenings, yes*

***[Interviewer]**: OK*

***[Dominic]**: because of the criminals (like) those refugees who get their hands on everything that is all so back in the days one could go out one could go out in the evening, late in the evening, there were no attacks or things like that yes*

***[Brigitte]**: back in the old day we also had an emperor*

***[Dominic]**: yes I was also an emperor but of China*

***[Agnes]**: ((laughs))*

***[Brigitte]**: no but one has to resign oneself to this and so on*

In this sequence we explicitly see the conflict deferral that Scheler (1994) stresses as important to ressentiment development: Talking about the inability to go out on the streets – something that is in the beginning of the group discussion developed as a topic of being physically constrained and limited by the structures of a retirement home (see above) – is deferred to refugees that are imagined to be dangerous. They actualise a topic that is highly important to their everyday practice – namely moving freely and limits of moving freely but the conflict is not presented as an immanent conflict between personal desire for mobility and (physical) limitation, but rather as a social conflict, between them and "refugees who get their hands on everything". In the Viennese group discussion 'The meals' we observed a similar mode of conflict deferral:

***[Alfred]**: It is not right that all the others were given how many million did we give to the Greek*

***[Boris]**: yes a as well as in Austria where people receive social provisions, people who didn't pay into the social system at all receive more money than women earn in pensions*

***[Alfred]**: yes yes exactly*

***[Boris]**: with the guaranteed minimum income*

***[Alfred]**: yes yes, my wife for example receives just about thirty five Euro more than the*

***[Boris]**: yes like the guaranteed minimum income*

***[Alfred]**: than the guaranteed minimum income yes (The Meals, lines 821-833)*

We already referred to [Boris] and [Alfred] discussing their own financial limitations in a text passage presented above. However, in the ensuing elaboration they attribute the problem to the state giving financial aid for Greece and for migrants who "didn't pay into the social system at all". Again, personal experiences of debasement reoccur in negotiations of problems associated with migration. Ressentiment thus operates as a tool to regain agency amidst a context of diminished financial autonomy that is resulting in experiences of passivation.

Additionally, in this short sequence, the research participants do not simply talk about anti-migrant ressentiment, but they also collectively evolve the topic – in contrast to other times in this group discussion, when talk is dominated by one person, they can collectively use ressentiment for distancing themselves to from their own marginalised position. As we can also see in The Circle's sequence above, the group discussion becomes very densely interactive when ressentiment enfolds. Compared to the orientation-frameworks of resigned happiness and limited autonomy by activities on one's own, this is something they can use as a group to collectively discharge emotional conflicts. In this way, ressentiment has a collectivising potential. Additionally, it is of major importance that ressentiment gives authority and agency to research participants. Be it in the metaphor of the emperor – by which they can use humour to laugh away the feeling of being passivated (one cannot go out on the streets anymore) – or in devaluating German "businesswomen" or migrants' kids: by collectively sharing an outward differentiation they can distinct themselves as a group.

Importantly, the development of ressentiment is by no means the *typical* form of older adults in dealing with passivation, but rather one amongst two others we identified in our data. Also, ressentiment is not confined to the social group of older adults, as political conditions all over the globe indicate. However, it is one coping mechanism that especially allowed for collective practice and agency in passivated institutional settings and in the cases our analysis is grounded on.

4 | CONCLUSION

By the empirical reconstruction of everyday practices of older adults in different living contexts we aimed to explore (1) different potentially passivating experiences and (2) reconstruct how people of old age are coping with these. In our introduction, we addressed that ageing implies contradictory invocations of being 'active' or being 'passive', imposed by the so-called active ageing paradigm (van Dyk, 2014). As we argued, these contradictory invocations are not confined to discursive phenomena, but imply everyday experiences and practices, shaped by the constraints of institutional frameworks and the physical impairment. By our qualitative analysis of three exemplary cases, we showed that the older adults we interviewed are confronted with different potentially passivating conditions: institutional procedures, financial restrictions, physical impairment and/or processes of modernisation which they are not able to shape or participate in. We identified three coping mechanisms with these experiences: performative happiness, solitary autonomy and the development of ressentiment. Regarding these coping strategies, we thus contribute to understanding how people respond to the contradictory invocations of the active ageing paradigm but also – psychologically and emotionally – 'work their way through' everyday (institutional) practices of passivation/activation.

Referring to the first coping mechanism performative happiness, there is an ambiguity: Our research subjects

comply with the cultural master narrative of 'being old' by not being demanding. However, by this they also regain agency by personal distinction from the ever so complaining others. The second mechanism – solitary agency – reveals an ambivalence between retaining activity by withdrawing from the institutional framework and routines, while at the same time it entails retreating from others and risking isolation. Interestingly, especially the coping mechanism of developing ressentiment is complex in nature: on the one hand, it reassures a person of commonalities shared with a group and being recognised as part of a group. On the other hand, this can at the same time be a moment of 'backfire', because it seems to confirm the stereotype of older adults being resentful and prone to devaluate others (Laceulle & Baars, 2014; van Dyk et al., 2013, par. 6). Therefore, our analysis showed that ressentiment facilitates collectivisation and thus counteracts the risk of retreat and isolation, but at the cost of devaluating others.

However, our interviews also indicate forms of collectivising beyond developing ressentiment. Such a way of coping with potentially passivating experiences is evident in the Viennese case "The Meals" (lines 126-135):

> *[Constanze]: Now it's my turn. So, we anyways have breakfast at a table in the mornings and for lunch at [1] pm and during the day I don't withdraw. I am together with nice women, we are chatting and we make each other little birthday presents or some flowers and we celebrate together and we spend time together from [2] to [5] pm.*
>
> *[Interviewer]: alright and where,*
>
> *[Constanze]: in the hallways*
>
> *[Interviewer]: OK here in the foyer or where*
>
> *[Constanze]: yes here in the hallways*

They're spending the day with others, trying to collectively develop daily activities (e.g. celebrating birthdays) and not withdrawing from company is characterised by reciprocity: it enables relating to and with each other without engaging in hostile demarcations, but by establishing their own collective structure. Moreover, these situations of reciprocity are a possibility to (re)gain recognition of one's own autonomy and activity in a collective setting. In conclusion, our analysis revealed a first insight into coping with potentially passivating experiences based on our sample of three cases. Nevertheless, the complex interplay of autonomy and agency in the context of these three mechanisms needs further analysis.

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