

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Faculty of Social Studies

Applicant

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Habilitation thesis

Ageing, Change and Belonging: How older people interpret social, cultural and environmental change in the context of post-socialist transformation

Reviewer

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The submitted habilitation thesis consists of six scholarly publications issued between 2015 and 2025 and an extensive accompanying commentary that places them within contemporary sociology of ageing and social gerontology. The collection covers a notably broad range of themes: ageing in changing urban and rural environments, the construction of identity in the fourth age, the cultural meanings of grandmotherhood, ethical and methodological dilemmas of ageing research during the COVID-19 pandemic, and older people's interpretations of environmental and climate change. The commentary explains the intellectual coherence of the collection, specifies the candidate's contribution to each co-authored publication, and situates the studies in relation to the cultural, postcolonial and 'new' environmental turns in ageing research.

In the following assessment, I first discuss the six submitted publications and then evaluate the accompanying commentary and the habilitation thesis as a whole.

Socio-spatial aspects of ageing in an urban context: an example from three Czech Republic cities

This article makes an important contribution by shifting attention of the sociology of ageing to the wider urban environment as a context in which ageing takes place. It examines older people's relationships to urban space and the consequences of spatial change for their everyday activities, strategies and autonomy. The comparison of Prague, Brno and Ostrava is particularly productive because the three cities represent markedly different trajectories of post-socialist transformation. It enables the authors to identify both shared experiences and city-specific patterns.

In the text, mobility emerges as the central analytical theme. It has an ambivalent meaning: mobility supports autonomy, access to services and self-help strategies, but it also contains an inherent vulnerability because it may diminish with advancing age or be undermined by the deterioration and restructuring of the urban environment. The article shows how the participants with more limited resources and mobility employ strategies of concentrating

activities and narrowing their spatial range - a 'distribution of forces' that allows them to preserve a degree of control over everyday life.

Among other things, the article offers a nuanced account of the housing consequences of the Czech transformation for the elderly. The post-1989 restructuring of housing created a strong divide between owner-occupiers and tenants, yet the study shows that ageing may generate difficulties even for the privileged group of homeowners. Responsibilities for maintenance and repair were transferred from municipalities to individuals, who may find them increasingly difficult to manage because of rising costs, declining physical capacity or both.

In my reading, the contribution of the article is threefold. First, it demonstrates that post-socialist transformation had diverse and sometimes contradictory effects, while older urban residents often display considerable resilience and satisfaction despite substantial changes in their surroundings. Second, it identifies distinct challenges in different urban settings - gentrification and rapid population change in Prague, studentification in Brno, and deindustrialisation in Ostrava - while also showing that these processes may create new opportunities. Third, it highlights the importance of the Czech system of urban public transport in preserving older people's mobility, autonomy and residential satisfaction.

Ageing in the changing countryside: the experience of rural Czechs

This article synthesises findings from a substantial research project on rural ageing and provides a clear application of constructivist grounded theory. Belonging is identified as the central category and is analysed through spatial, social, temporal and cultural dimensions. The article systematically examines how older rural residents interpret changes in politics and the economy, infrastructure and technology, and local population and community life. Its most significant finding is that evaluations of change do not follow directly from the supposedly objective characteristics of those changes. They depend primarily on how participants incorporate them into their life stories and position them in relation to their past and present. On this basis, the authors introduce the concept of 'biographical contextualisation'. This concept captures the way in which current conditions are interpreted through long-term, spatially anchored and culturally shaped experience. It is a theoretically useful contribution that the candidate subsequently uses and develops in further analyses and publications.

'This year, the weather is like it used to be in our times': experiencing climate change in the context of rural ageing in the Czech Republic

This article connects ageing research with the study of environmental change, and climate change in particular. It addresses an important paradox: older people have accumulated decades of direct experience of changing weather and landscapes, yet they are often more climate-sceptical than younger cohorts. Drawing on qualitative research in two Czech rural regions affected in different ways by climatic change, the article provides a convincing explanation of this apparent contradiction.

The analysis reconstructs the processes through which direct and embodied experience of environmental change does not necessarily become recognition of climate change as a global, systemic problem requiring collective action. Participants simplify and localise causal explanations, displace the threat by stressing that conditions are still worse elsewhere, and interpret contemporary events through biographical contextualisation. A long life provides a large repertoire of previous adverse or unusual events, including weather-related ones; contemporary changes may therefore be relativised as something that has 'always happened', even when this interpretation conflicts with scientific evidence.

The article is particularly strong in showing how narratives containing apparent contradictions can nevertheless produce a coherent and ontologically secure world for their narrators. It also demonstrates why direct physical experience alone cannot be assumed to generate climate awareness or support for mitigation. The argument is logically structured, empirically persuasive and relevant not only to climate gerontology but also to wider debates on experiential knowledge, risk perception and environmental communication.

Doing ageing research in pandemic times: a reflexive approach towards research ethics during the COVID-19 pandemic

This rather short text brings an important methodological and ethical contribution. The COVID-19 pandemic required rapid, flexible and reflexive changes in sociological fieldwork, while simultaneously creating an urgent need to continue research and document the effects of the crisis. Many empirical publications from this period merely report that interviews were conducted online, without examining what this transformation meant for access, relationships, data quality, vulnerability or the ethical position of researchers and participants. By contrast, this article offers a concise but conceptually rich reflection on the ethics of ageing research under conditions of “fragmentation, fluidity, ambiguity and uncertainty”. Its use of “ethically important moments” makes visible the situated decisions that cannot be resolved through formal procedural ethics alone. The article therefore contributes to a broader methodological debate about qualitative research during societal crises and demonstrates the need for ethics-in-practice, reflexivity and sensitivity to changing power relations in the field.

‘I am not that type of grandmother’: (non)compliance with the grandmother archetype among contemporary Czech grandmothers

This chapter analyses the cultural figure of the grandmother derived from Božena Němcová’s canonical nineteenth-century novel and proposes that it can be understood as a sociological archetype: a culturally shared ideal type against which people define the content of the grandmother role and construct their own identities. The analysis originated as a secondary, but highly productive, strand of a project on role overload among people in the third age. The chapter convincingly demonstrates the continuing efficacy of a shared cultural image. Participants use the archetype ambivalently: it remains an ideal associated with care, moral guidance, domestic competence and continuity, but it also provides a point of departure from which contemporary grandparents can distance themselves, resist expectations and formulate alternative definitions of self. The study thus documents the transformation of grandparental roles and identities while illustrating how literary and cultural artefacts enter everyday identity work.

The analysis also raises an important question about historical durability. The archetype may have less salience for younger generations for whom Němcová’s novel is no longer as widely read or culturally central. Future cohorts of grandparents will also encounter different institutional conditions, family arrangements and normative demands. The chapter therefore provides both a strong analysis of a specific cultural configuration and a basis for studying its possible decline or transformation.

Self-perception during the transition to the fourth age in the Czech Republic

This is, in my opinion, an exceptionally accomplished study, distinctive within the collection in both form and substance. It examines the construction of identity among people conventionally located in the ‘fourth age’ and asks how this stage of life can be understood from the perspective of the actors themselves. The article presents a differentiated range of ways in which participants construct selfhood and interpret transitions associated with frailty, dependence and institutional or home-based care.

The study persuasively rejects any assumption that the fourth age is necessarily a phase in which subjectivity and agency disappear. Even under conditions of substantial physical or cognitive limitation, participants engage in narrative positioning, comparison, distancing and moral self-construction. The article therefore complicates the dichotomy between the third and fourth ages and problematize the normative power of autonomy and independence as standards against which people evaluate themselves.

The methodology is particularly impressive. Repeated in-depth interviews with a small number of participants are supplemented by interviews and focus groups with carers and institutional staff, observation, field notes and additional elicitation techniques. This

combination of methods and sources produces unusually deep insight into the research problem. The writing has a literary quality without sacrificing empirical grounding or systematic engagement with the relevant scholarship. The article answers a number of questions while opening further fundamental ones: what do dependence and independence mean in later life and in general; what role do the body and embodiment play in the construction of the self; and how should sociological research conceptualise identity under conditions of profound biographical and bodily change?

Assessment of the accompanying commentary and the thesis as a whole

The accompanying commentary gives the candidate an opportunity to engage more explicitly with the theoretical and methodological questions that connect the six publications. It introduces the development of the sociology of ageing and social gerontology through the cultural turn, the postcolonial turn and what the candidate terms the 'new' environmental turn. It then places the submitted studies within these overlapping developments. This framing makes clear that the collection covers a broad field: cultural symbols and identity construction; the relationship between ageing and urban, rural and global environments; and methodological and ethical reflection on research with older people.

All six publications use qualitative methodology and most explicitly draw on Kathy Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory. The level of detail with which methodological procedures are described varies across the publications, partly because of different journal formats and disciplinary conventions. Unstructured or semi-structured interviewing is the principal data-collection technique, in several studies combined with observation, field notes, visual or elicitation methods, and interviews with carers or institutional actors. The study of self-perception in the transition to the fourth age is methodologically the richest, while the article on pandemic research provides the most explicit reflexive discussion of methodology and ethics.

Across the collection, it is evident that the candidate does not treat qualitative methodology as a routine instrument. She adapts and reflects on it in relation to the needs of the field, the characteristics of participants and changing external conditions. The publications demonstrate a broad and sophisticated application of constructivist qualitative methods, including secondary analysis, comparative research, repeated interviewing, reflexive ethics and analysis of narrative positioning.

In my view, the most valuable contribution of the commentary is its discussion of categorisation in sociology. The individual articles necessarily operate with categories such as 'older people', 'later life', 'the third age' and 'the fourth age', but the commentary brings to the foreground the question of who is defined as old, who is included in a research sample and how age boundaries are justified. This is not only a problem for ageing research. It reveals a broader normative dimension of sociology: the discipline relies on culturally constituted categories to define its objects of inquiry and may simultaneously reproduce and strengthen those categories through research practice. The candidate does not offer a simple solution - nor is one readily available - but making the problem visible and subjecting it to reflexive scrutiny is important.

The commentary also successfully explains the intellectual coherence of publications that differ in topic, empirical setting and genre. The concepts of belonging, self-positioning, boundary work, othering, biographical contextualisation and ontological security recur across the studies and connect individual meaning-making with wider social, spatial and historical transformations. The post-socialist context is not treated merely as a geographical label but as a historically sedimented interpretive framework that shapes housing, institutions, communities, memories and environmental understandings.

All submitted publications are products of collaborative research. The candidate's contribution is specified in sufficient detail in the commentary. She is first author on four of the six texts, and in most cases her role in analysis, conceptual framing, writing or the revision process was central. At the same time, the transparent account of co-authorship

appropriately demonstrates that sociological knowledge is rarely an individual endeavour: it depends on shared conceptual work, discussion, fieldwork, feedback and mutual scrutiny within research teams.

Taken together, the submitted work demonstrates sustained theoretical development, methodological competence, empirical originality and an ability to contribute to international scholarly debates. The candidate has established a coherent and recognisable research profile at the intersection of sociology of ageing, environmental gerontology, cultural sociology and qualitative methodology. The publications have appeared in respected international journals and an international scholarly volume, and several make distinct conceptual contributions, most notably the elaboration of biographical contextualisation and the analysis of ageing identities as relational accomplishments under changing social and environmental conditions. The habilitation thesis thus demonstrates that Lucie Galčanová Batista is an established and internationally visible scholar in the sociology of ageing and social gerontology.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence

1. The concept of biographical contextualisation is one of the most distinctive contributions across the submitted studies. How does it differ from established concepts such as life-course perspective, narrative identity, or cohort experience?
2. The commentary identifies categorisation as a central epistemological and normative problem. How would you design an empirical study of ageing without relying primarily on chronological age as the sampling criterion, and what new problems would such a design create?
3. In the climate-change study, direct experience of environmental change does not necessarily produce climate awareness. What implications does this finding have for climate communication and adaptation policies aimed at older populations, and how can such policies avoid ageist assumptions?
4. The post-socialist context is central to several studies. Which findings do you consider specific to the Czech or post-socialist experience, and which processes do you expect to be transferable to other social and historical contexts?
5. The submitted studies span the cultural, postcolonial and environmental turns in ageing research. Do you see these as complementary perspectives, or are there theoretical tensions among them - particularly between human-centred interpretive approaches and posthuman or more-than-human environmental gerontology?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled "Ageing, Change and Belonging: How older people interpret social, cultural and environmental change in the context of post-socialist transformation" by Mgr. Lucie Galčanová Batista, Ph.D., **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Sociology.

Date: 20.7. 2026

Signature: Radka Dudová

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Radka Dudová.