

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Faculty of Social Studies

Applicant

Mgr. Lucie Galčanová Batista, Ph.D.

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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Evaluation of the Habilitation by Lucie Galčanová Batista entitled: "Ageing, Change and Belonging: How older people interpret social, cultural and environmental change in the context of post-socialist transformation"

Personal statement

I received the habilitation by Lucie Galčanová Batista for external evaluation. I have known the candidate for several years, in particular due to our common involvement with the European Sociological Association's Research Network "Ageing in Europe," where we have met on several occasions. We have also briefly explored the possibility of developing a joint research project, which however never materialised. While I personally know and highly value Lucie Galčanová Batista and her work, I can confirm that this evaluation report is completely impartial.

Summary

This collection explores ageing and later life as processes that unfold within contexts of continuous and multi-dimensional change — from personal transformations associated with growing older, to environmental and ecological shifts, to broader socio-political upheavals, including the experience of a global pandemic. In order to capture how these intersecting changes affect the experience of ageing, the author adopts a constructivist account that foregrounds people's own interpretations and sense-making processes. These explorations are situated within the broader context of post-socialist transformation in the Czech Republic, adding a further layer of change that shapes the lives and narratives of the older people studied.

The habilitation is comprised of a substantial introduction and contextualisation, a framework chapter commenting on the individual contributions and their authorship, and six co-authored papers published in international journals (five) and one collected volume. The journals in which the papers appear, including Ageing & Society, Sociologia Ruralis, Ethnologie Française and Journal of Rural Studies, are well-established and highly regarded outlets in the field. All contributions are co-authored, with Galčanová Batista serving as first author in most cases. This signals not only the candidate's embeddedness in cooperative research networks

and third-party funded projects, but also her capacity to lead collaborative scholarly endeavours. The candidate's own contributions to each paper are transparently discussed in the framework chapter.

The theoretical starting point of the collection is compelling: ageing research is situated within the logic of challenges to people's ontological security. Change is taken seriously in interrelated ways: as an ever-present reality, as particularly linked to the contemporary moment and situation and as definitional of the process of ageing itself. Understanding the threats to ontological security, Lucie argues, requires an interpretive account of ageing: one that foregrounds meaning-making processes, lived experiences, and the ways older people interpret and cope with changes in their social surroundings, built environments and the natural world. This understanding and consideration leads her directly to her research approach: epistemologically, to social-constructivist approaches and, methodologically, to grounded theory, drawing in particular on the work of Kathy Charmaz.

The introduction situates the collection within three theoretical "turns" in the sociology of ageing and social gerontology. The "cultural turn" is most explicitly present in Study III but serves as a theoretical backdrop across almost all contributions, with its focus on the relevance of stories, imaginations, and cultural artefacts (including literature and film). The "postcolonial turn" is explicitly engaged with in one paper, bringing attention to language, othering and related boundary work, for instance through narrative transitions. The "environmental turn", framed as "new" in order to separate from earlier, rather narrowly defined developments, runs through three papers in different ways, always linked to lived environments, whether urban or rural, and to ecological changes. The human-nature relationship is central here. These three strands are presented as representing not only theoretical perspectives but also new directions in ageing research more broadly. Throughout the collection, the empirical work relies on qualitative approaches. Utilised are most frequently interview data, but also focus groups and innovative, often ethnography-inspired elements within the interview process, such as photo elicitation. The methods are carried out with care and sensitivity, and Lucie demonstrates strong reflections on the research process itself, including, for example, on how sampling strategies may inadvertently reproduce boundaries and categories that merit critical scrutiny.

Short Description of the Collection

In the following sections I will briefly discuss the individual contributions.

Introduction and Contextualisation

The introduction effectively sets the scene by situating the collection's contributions within the theoretical landscape of the sociology of ageing. The framing around ontological security and change provides a coherent thread that connects the otherwise diverse empirical foci. The discussion of the three "turns" is an insightful way to organise the theoretical perspectives, although one might ask (and I will return to this below) whether these three turns sufficiently represent the field as a whole, or whether they are primarily driven by the candidate's own research interests. The introduction also includes highly thoughtful reflections on terminology and concepts, for example the use of "post-socialist" and the heterogeneous nature of belonging. The concept of "biographical contextualisation," which grasps the temporal horizon of meaning-making with regard to contemporary changes, emerges as particularly important for the collection as a whole.

The framework chapter, in which the candidate comments on the individual contributions and her own role within them, is a welcome and necessary addition given the co-authored nature of all papers. It provides transparency and allows the reader to assess the candidate's specific intellectual contribution.

Study I: Socio-spatial aspects of ageing in an urban context: An example from three Czech Republic cities (Ageing & Society, 2015)

This paper examines how older people make sense of their changing urban environment, their everyday interaction with its materiality, as well as their social ties, networks and relations. Based on focus groups and in-depth interviews with older residents of three Czech cities, the study shows how older people seek to maintain a sense of continuity through their activities. Autonomy and independence within the limits of their personal resources are particularly interesting here. Active relating to and within a changing urban environment and within the post-socialist context is seen as process of meaning making for older people. For me, the most insightful aspect of this paper was the process of locally situating the research within the post-socialist urban context, including a careful reflection on the challenges related to deploying such a concept.

Study II: Self-perception during the Transition to the Fourth Age in the Czech Republic (Ethnologie Française, 2018)

This paper engages with the theoretical and widely discussed concept of the fourth. Differencing themselves from research that associates the fourth age with "social death" and a related impossibility of empirical research, the authors utilise oral narratives of fourth-age research participants. Reflections on this transitional period (from third age to fourth age and beyond) identify differing degrees of agency, belonging and identity. In line with the overall interest in sense-making processes the focus lies on older people's self-perceptions and their own sense of identity. What I particularly appreciate is the insightful debate on agency, here most strongly employing a postcolonial lens. Agency is understood in its complexity and in a non-binary fashion: agency in disengagement, in reflection, in refusal. This nuanced treatment is a significant contribution.

Study III: 'I am not that type of grandmother': (Non)compliance with the grandmother archetype among contemporary Czech grandmothers. (Collected volume, Polity Press, 2019)

This paper discusses and analyses the figure of the Grandmother, a literary character from a Czech novel written in 1855. The authors argue that this character has become so deeply embedded in Czech culture that it has transformed from a fictional figure into an archetype or ideal type that influences and shapes everyday understandings of this social role in society. This ideal is then employed when discussing the performance of the right ways to employ this role. The authors here demonstrate how one important cultural artefact can shape narratives about grandmotherhood and how they may be used to position one's own social role. While the analysis is specific to the Czech cultural context, it is remarkable how narrative ideas or images can shape national imaginations and ideal types. I would be particularly interested in how such images can also shape resistance to cultural norms, a dimension that could be explored further.

Study IV: Ageing in the Changing Countryside: The Experience of Rural Czechs. (Sociologia Ruralis, 2020)

Rural ageing plays a particular role in research on place-based understandings of ageing. Limited literature on this (and even more so in post-socialist contexts) has led the authors to focus on the countryside and its changes. Drawing on qualitative interviews with older Czech

rural residents, the authors focus on how people interpret and make sense of changes around them and to their surroundings. The concept of "biographical contextualisation" is developed and applied in this context. This concept is, in my view, one of the most productive contributions of the collection as a whole: it captures how meaning can be made in the light of multi-dimensional change.

Study V: Doing ageing research in pandemic times: A reflexive approach towards research ethics during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Ageing & Society, 2024)

The paper discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on empirical ageing research, and utilises the concept of "ethically important moments." The pandemic increased (the focus on) vulnerability of potential research subjects and affected research methods based on direct person-to-person contact. The authors discuss two research projects and identify key dimensions and challenges for research during this period. Here, I particularly appreciated the focus on and discussion of "micro-ethics," which takes seriously the unpredictability of ethical challenges in the research process. This is a valuable methodological contribution that extends well beyond the specific context of pandemic research.

Study VI: '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. (Journal of Rural Studies, 2025)

This most recent paper investigates the intersection of rural ageing and the experience of climate change, thereby focusing most explicitly on the third strand identified in the introduction. Based on a qualitative analysis of a large number of in-depth interviews the authors discuss how older people, living in a rather climate-critical societal context, interpret their environmental experiences in the context of continuous climate change. What I particularly value in this paper is the sensitivity not to jump to easy conclusions. For instance, that participants simply lacked knowledge about the complexity of climate change. Instead, the authors take ambivalences, tensions and paradoxes seriously, treating them as instruments through which participants negotiate beliefs, experiences and cultural framings. This is qualitative research at its most careful and respectful and, once again, demonstrates Lucies highly reflective, sensitive and culturally informed approach to research.

Final Evaluation

My overall evaluation of this habilitation is very positive. The collection demonstrates a coherent and theoretically rich research programme that makes significant contributions to the sociology of ageing, social gerontology, and, through its engagement with environmental and rural questions, to neighbouring fields as well. Several strengths deserve particular emphasis. First, the collection is rich in theoretical reflection and development. The framing around ontological security, change and belonging provides coherence, while the engagement with the three "turns" demonstrates breadth and an awareness of the evolving theoretical landscape. Second, the qualitative empirical work is consistently carried out with care, methodological rigour and ethical sensitivity. The innovative use of methods (including ethnography-inspired elements) enriches the data and the analysis. Third, the candidate demonstrates strong reflexivity throughout, whether regarding research processes, terminology, the implications of sampling strategies, or the complexities of concepts such as "post-socialist." The footnotes throughout the collection contain many interesting considerations and ideas that would deserve further exploration in their own right.

The concept of "biographical contextualisation" stands out as a particularly productive theoretical contribution, offering a way to understand how stability and change are negotiated within the process of ageing. More broadly, the collection foregrounds the role of meanings

and the process of meaning-making, as well as the significance of narrating — of course with important epistemological and methodological consequences.

A few observations might point towards additional questions that could be explored during the committee meeting (see below). These are, however, invitations for discussion rather than shortcomings of the present submission. The submitted habilitation thesis meets high international standards regarding both the quality and coherence of the work. All contributions are embedded in externally funded research projects, reflecting the candidate's active participation in a productive academic culture of collaborative, internationally oriented research. The candidate has made a substantial and growing impact within the field, and the work presented here demonstrates both depth and originality. Thank you very much for the opportunity to evaluate the application of Lucie Galčánová Batista. I wish you all the best for the decision.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence

- 1) While the three "turns" provide an effective organising framework, I would be curious to hear more about the relationship between these theoretical perspectives and the empirical work: to what extent did the turns emerge from the research itself, and to what extent did they shape the design and direction of the studies?
- 2) The collection's contributions clearly speak to sociology as a discipline, yet it would be interesting to hear the candidate reflect on what constitutes the distinctly "sociological" perspective here, as opposed to, say, a social-gerontological or geographical one. In this context, I would ask which role the insights from this work can have for the broader discipline of sociology (beyond ageing research).
- 3) Questions of ontology are occasionally hinted at but not discussed in detail. Given the constructivist epistemological commitment and the simultaneous engagement with materiality, environments and embodied experience, it would be interesting to hear some reflections on how an explicit ontological positioning might strengthen the already strong theoretical framework further.

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 Galčánová Batista, Ph.D., **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Sociology.

Date: 04.08.2026

Signature:

