1 INTRODUCTION

In 2007, I went on holiday to Morocco. One day I sat in Ouarzazate, a town at the border of the Sahara desert, reading a national newspaper. This newspaper featured an article about the ageing populations in Europe. A Moroccan friend of mine saw me reading the article and started discussing it with me. Ageing populations were a problem for European welfare states, so he argued. This problem was so obvious, he continued, that it was even known in the Sahara. I countered that such an argumentation was over-simplistic. Ageing populations can have positive effects on welfare states, due to the growing number of young old persons. This objection is the starting point of the dissertation at hand.

Who are the young old?

The young old entered the scientific discourse more than 30 years ago. In 1974, Neugarten described an emerging group of healthy retirees without family obligations, whom she labelled “the young old”. Their paradoxical name captures their specificity. Like young persons, they are physically capable of activity. Like old persons, on the other hand, they are not obliged to participate in paid work or to care for children (Komp, Van Tilburg, & Broese van Groenou, 2009; Laslett, 1991). This situation enables the young old to pursue activities of their choice. Some see this as a possibility for self-fulfilment, others see it as a chance to engage in socially meaningful activities and to give back to the community (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007; Laslett, 1991; Minkler & Holstein, 2008; Neugarten, 1974). By now, the young old have become an integral part of the scientific discourse. Their situation and characteristics have been the topic of several studies (e.g. Broese van Groenou & Deeg, 2010; Karisto, 2007; Midwinter, 2005). Moreover, the division of older persons into a group of the young old and a group of the old old affects the reasoning in gerontological studies (for an overview see Carr & Komp, forthcoming). It represents a new kind of social inequality to be considered. Additionally, it raises the question how this kind of inequality relates to other inequalities, for example across countries, gender and levels of socio-economic status.

As the young old attracted more and more attention, nuances in the discussion around them became visible. Those nuances concern how the young old are understood, as well as the way they are referred to. In addition to the activity-oriented understanding Neugarten (1974) introduced, there also is a generational understanding that is sometimes drawn upon. The latter understanding stresses generational differences in old age. It describes the persons now experiencing the first years of old age as devoted to consumerist values and idealizing youth (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007; Gilleard & Higgs, forthcoming). Their striving to maintain a youthful outward appearance and life-style makes them youthful older persons, in other words “young old”. This characteristic separates them from previous and probably also future generations of older persons. While the generational understanding raises an important issue, this dissertation solely uses the activity-based understanding of the young old. This under-
standing seems more suitable, because the present dissertation focuses on the young old's activities. However, it seems important to keep in mind that the young old's activities might indeed vary between generations.

In scientific and political discussions, the young old are sometimes also referred to as “third agers” (Laslett, 1991). This term is synonymous with “young old”, referring to the life-phase the young old are in. Nowadays, the life-course is usually split into four life-phases. Those life-phases stand for longer lasting situations that correspond to social roles and activities (O’Rand, 2003; Mayer, 2004). The first life-phase is youth, standing for the time of socialization and education. The second life-phase is middle age, which covers the years of paid work and caring for children. The third life-phase (synonymously: the third age) stands for the healthy life years after retirement and after caring for children. The fourth age, finally, covers the last years of life spent in poor health (Neugarten, 1974; Settersten & Mayer, 1997).

In the dissertation at hand, I use the term “the young old” and the activity-based understanding introduced by Neugarten. I prefer the term “the young old” over “third agers” for two reasons. First, it gives the reader an instant understanding of the characteristics of those persons. Second, this term does not run the risk of becoming outdated in the near future. The term “the third age” is based on the idea that the current life-course holds four life-phases. Recent studies, however, suggested that youth be split in two different life-phases (e.g. Maier, De Graaf, & Frericks, 2007). Such a split would place the young old in the fourth of five life-phases. The term “third ager” would, consequently, not be to the point anymore.

The young old and welfare states

The emergence of the young old population created tensions in society. When the number of young old persons was still low, old age was perceived as a time of frailty and of the need for support. With the increasing number of young old persons, however, the character of later life has changed. It has become more heterogeneous, because the young old developed needs that were until then considered atypical for older persons. Examples are the need for meaningful activities and for community participation (Laslett, 1991; Neugarten, 1974). The young old, thus, find themselves in a situation where social norms and institutions often expect them to be frail and passive, while they themselves are looking for activity. This mismatch of needs and possibilities means that society has not yet accommodated the emergence of the young old population. Where society has not yet created productive and meaningful role opportunities, the mismatch is called a structural lag (Riley & Riley, 1994). Where perceptions and stereotypes have not yet been adapted, the mismatch might be called a lag of perspective.

Although the structural lag and the lag of perspective have not yet been overcome, we can already witness some adaptations. For example, learning possibilities in old age increase, inter alia in Universities of the Third Age. Moreover, senior markets put a focus on travelling and leisure activities (Gilleard & Higgs, forthcoming; Laslett, 1991; Sellick & Muller, 2004). Also, governments recently raised the mandatory
pension age in several European countries with reference to the healthy life-years after retirement (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006). Of all the adaptations occurring, the ones made by governments in welfare states seem particularly important for two reasons. First, they impact upon social cohesion. Second, they have a strong influence on the future of welfare states.

Ageing populations have long been considered a burden on welfare states. From the mid-1970s until the late 1980s, older persons were often portrayed as mere beneficiaries of the welfare state. This assessment was based on the pension benefits they received and the social and health care services they used. Ageing populations, so was the reasoning, would increase the amount of pension benefits and care services welfare states need to provide. It would, therefore, put a burden on welfare states (Walker, 2000). This burden would have to be carried by middle-aged persons, who contribute to the welfare state through paid work. In this sense, ageing populations put a burden on younger generations. Some reasoned that this fact endangers intergenerational justice, provoking a conflict between age groups (Walker, 1996). An influential book publication from that time illustrates this fear: it is entitled “Workers versus pensioners: Intergenerational justice in an ageing world” (Johnson, Conrad, & Thomson, 1989). Moreover, policy makers feared that the burden of ageing populations could only be carried through welfare state retrenchment, meaning a cutback in the overall level of welfare. Such a step seemed particularly urgent, because population ageing coincided with global financial crises (Pierson, 2006; Walker, 2000). When the young old population attracted attention, however, the reasoning started to change.

From the late 1980s on, governments took on a more differentiated perspective on older persons. On the one hand, they continued to fear that ageing populations threaten existing welfare states. On the other hand, they did not consider welfare state retrenchment the only possible solution any more. Instead, the possibility of welfare state restructuring started to be reflected. This means that alternative ways to ensure the welfare in a country were sought, which would work even in times of economic crises and population ageing (Esping-Andersen, Gallie, Hemerijck, & Myles, 2002; Pierson, 2006). One of these new ways of achieving welfare became obvious when governments started to look at the young old in terms of a resource. The young old seem a resource, because they can increase the welfare in a country by engaging in productive activities such as paid work, volunteering and informal care-giving (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sherraden, 2001). This engagement does not necessarily cost the welfare state anything, which means that it is also feasible in times of economic crises.

Today, many European governments recognize the potential the young old present to welfare states. They usually try to tap into this potential by strengthening older persons' workforce participation, either by preventing early retirement or by raising the mandatory retirement age (OECD, 2006; Walker, 2000). Those reforms help to overcome the structural lag in the labour market. In their efforts they consider the young old a resource to the labour market which still needs to be activated (Esping-
Introduction

Andersen et al., 2002; Walker, 2006). Social scientists, however, object that the young old do not need to be activated – they already are active. They support their families, inter alia by caring for their spouses and looking after their grandchildren. They, moreover, contribute to society, for example through volunteering and neighbourly help (Hank & Stuck, 2008; Morrow-Howell et al., 2001). This makes them a resource which fulfils tasks which otherwise might have to be fulfilled by the welfare state, for example through an increased provision of long-term care and child care services. From this perspective, governments need to react to the emergence of a young old population in two ways. First, they need to overcome the lag of perspective. This includes recognizing the productive value of activities other than paid work. So far, productive activities such as volunteering and informal care-giving have received little recognition, because they are usually unpaid and sometimes take place in the “invisible” private sphere (Jegermalm & Jeppsson Grassman, 2009; Philip, 2001). In a second step, the structural lag in all productive activities needs to be overcome. This means that governments will, for example, also have to consider programmes specifically supporting older volunteers.

The dissertation at hand aims to expand our knowledge on how welfare states handle the young old population. For this purpose, it considers governmental attempts to deal with the structural lag as well as the lag of perception caused by the emergence of the young old population. The information collected is combined to answer one overarching question: What is the young olds’ role in European welfare states? The answer to this question is relevant for several parties. First, it is relevant for scientists, in that it enhances the scientific debate about the effect of demographic change and about possibilities for welfare state reforms. Second, it is relevant for governments, because it discusses one approach to welfare state restructuring that is available in times of economic crises and population ageing. Finally, it is relevant for intermediary organizations such as voluntary associations and labour unions, because it helps them to get a better understanding of their older clientele. To answer the guiding question of this dissertation, I take a closer look at three central topics in the discussion around the young old and welfare states.

The first topic is the identification of the young old. Previous quantitative studies struggled to separate the young old from the old old and from middle-aged persons. The reason is that the identification of the young old is not based on the most common indicator for age, namely chronological age (Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Instead, it is based on a combination of characteristics. It, therefore, requires a fundamental rethinking of the way older persons are grouped. Qualitative and conceptual studies accommodated this rethink by changing the description of old age they give. Quantitative studies, in contrast, did not yet complete this rethink. So far, they mainly relied on age when identifying the young old (e.g. Gilteard & Higgs, 2007; Karisto, 2007; Laslett, 1996). The age group chosen to represent the young old differs between studies (Morris & Caro, 1997; Neugarten, 1974; Sorensen, 2006). While this
approach is parsimonious, it does not allow for directly identifying the young old. The results of previous quantitative studies of the young old might, consequently, be imprecise or misleading. The first part of this dissertation tries to correct this shortcoming. It starts with an exploration of possibilities for identifying the young old in quantitative cross-country comparisons (chapter 2). Then, I test whether one can indeed set the young old on a par with an age group. I use the activity of volunteering as an example for a productive activity in this test (chapter 3).

The second topic is the connection between the young old and paid work. This connection is established through pension schemes. The introduction of mandatory pension schemes in the first half of the 20th century was a prerequisite for the emergence of a young old population (Laslett, 1991). Those pension schemes tied retirement to chronological age, making it partly independent from health status. Retirement in good health, thus, became possible for the average person in a country (Kohli, 2007). Over the following decades, the life-expectancy and the healthy life-expectancy increased. Simultaneously, early retirement became more common. This led to an increasing number of retirees and of young old persons (Ebbinghaus, 2000; Laslett, 1991). Governments consider the increasing number of retirees a challenge to pension schemes. At the same time, they consider the increasing number of young old persons an opportunity for delaying retirement (Ebbinghaus, 2000; OECD, 2006). The main means for reforms delaying retirement is the manipulation of retirement regulations. This is the starting point for the second part of this dissertation. First, it asks whether the manipulation of retirement regulations is a suitable means for influencing the number of young old persons (chapter 4). Then, it investigates whether paid work found a place in old age again. It studies this question in connection with socio-economic status and the prevalence of private pension schemes in a country. The promotion of private pension schemes is one of the strategies adapted in recent pension reforms (chapter 5).

The third topic is the connection between the young old, volunteering and informal care-giving. Volunteering and informal care-giving are the two main activities through which European young old persons contribute to their families, society and the welfare state (Morrow-Howell et al., 2001). They are, therewith, the main productive activities other than paid work that governments could focus on when restructuring welfare states. The third part of this dissertation focuses on the recognition of these activities by governments. It starts by explaining how the argumentation of policy-makers would change, if those activities were recognizes as productive (chapter 6). Then, it studies the reservations policy-makers have concerning intervention in these activities (chapter 7).

Each chapter takes a different approach to study the topics described above. The approach chosen depends on the topic and on the data available. The identification of young old persons, for example, differs between chapters. They are sometimes identified by their age, sometimes by their activities and sometimes by their overall situation, as suggested by e.g. Laslett (1991). Another example, the methods applied differ between chapters. Some chapters are based on conceptual considerations,
Introduction

others on quantitative or qualitative analyses. This approach allows for comparisons between the different ways of identifying the young old. It reveals the advantages and disadvantages of each way of identification. It, therewith, develops a guideline for future studies on the young old. Apart from those differences, there also is one constant in the approach all chapters take: they all adopt a country-comparative perspective. I chose this perspective, because the young olds’ role in welfare states probably varies across countries. After all, demographic structure and welfare state provision differ across countries. Moreover, the attention governments pay to older persons also differs across countries (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lynch, 2006; Mayer, 2001; Vellekoop Baldock, 1999). Comparing countries, therefore, helps us in two ways. First, it shows the range of roles older persons play in welfare states. Second, it shows which part of older persons’ roles in welfare states is typical for the young old and which part depends on the country.

References


