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**IMAGES OF AGEING IN THE THIRD AGE**  
**A paper presented at the Session**  
**“Images of ageing”**

**Introduction**

The ever-increasing life expectancy is one of the basic features of the ageing societies. In Finland, for instance a 60 year old person can with good reasons anticipate that he or she will yet live for approximately 20 more years, and in many cases even more. The increase in older age groups – including people over 75 and 85 years of age - is growing more rapidly than the entire population over the age 65 year. In Finland the majority of people will retire before reaching the official age of retirement which is 65. As such, in this society and in societies like it the vast majority of population will live for an extended period between retirement and the end of the life course. Historically speaking, this is a new social and cultural phenomenon, and this is also the topic of my presentation here today.

There are, of course, many new conceptions concerning this new situation. There has been quite a bit of positive discussion surrounding the topic of “the new aging” (Torres-Gil 1992). The situation and changes has also been seen as extremely complex and inconsistent. Chris Phillipson (1998) for instance, has described the new developments of ageing by applying the expression “the crisis of social ageing”. The most well-known conception of this phenomenon of the increasing period of old age although is - I think - Peter Laslett’s theory of the third age (1989). Let me describe it here briefly.

**What is the third age?**

The term “third age” is in fact older than Laslett’s theory. Its roots are already in the fifties in the so-called movement of the third age universities (see Jyrkämä 2001). However, in this context I will concentrate only to the theory and its evaluation.

In this theory Laslett speaks about third age in two dimensions. In one hand it is possible to see it as a demographical phenomenon, as a structural feature of societies. Laslett develops a specific index of third age. It describes the probability by which the 25 year old individuals will get the age of 70 year in a society. If this index is over 0.5 it is possible to speak about the third age in this society. Another demographical precondition is that although 10 percent of population is over 65 year old in a given situation. Both conditions have fulfilled in the most of the western societies.

More interesting is another dimension of Laslett's theory. Laslett gives form a new model of life stages. He thinks that the human life consists of four life stages: first, second, third and fourth age. With the first age Laslett refers approximately to childhood and with the second age to adulthood as period of different responsibilities. The fourth age in Laslett's terminology is very alike as the old age understood in a very traditional way. But what is this third age?

To Laslett the third age described briefly means a period where an individual can fulfil all his/her personal goal, dreams and life plans. An individual hasn't any responsibilities or ties to everything: the world is open. Of course, this requires something, somewhat wealth and health but especially the right attitude and the strong-mindedness to do right "third age" choices.

Laslett's theory has got a very strong criticism. For instance, it has been said that it is voluntaristic and normative (Bury 1995). After Mike Bury the theory displays also elitistic, middle-class values. All individual are not wealthy and healthy. It is also said that the theory hasn't any fruitful connections in one hand to the general theorizing concerning ageing, in other hand to empirical research work. This is quite true.

### **Attitudes and the third age**

However, there are some studies connecting third age. For instance we have done a small-scale study about these attitudes and images towards ageing. In the spring 2000 we collected a little questionnaire among the participants of the so called University of Third Age at the University Tampere. The group was quite small, only 143 respondents with the age between 57 and 85 year. The most of them – 85 percent – were women. However, it is essential that one can think that this

group of respondents, the participants of this activity, University of Third Age, are third agers *par excellence*.

So, is it possible to find some attitudes and images what are common to this group? In the questionnaire were a lot of various claims and the respondents might agree or disagree them. In the Table 1 are the claims about which the respondents were most unanimous.

**Table 1: The most unanimous conceptions of ageing among the respondents (N=143)**

Claims	Agree	Can't say	Disagree	%
It is a duty of the aged to take care of their physical condition	98	1	1	100
As retired you can use your time as you like	97	2	1	100
As retired you don't need learn anything new	6	0	94	100
As retired you must keep up your own activities	93	6	1	100
As retired you have time to think different things in new ways	90	6	4	100
Ageing is not a hindrance of learning	89	4	5	100
You are as old as you feel	87	8	5	100
As aged many spiritual things are more and more important	86	9	5	100
The retired don't get enough esteem in the society	84	10	6	100

The vast majority of the respondents are thinking that you must take care of your physical condition, you can do what you want to do, you must keep you as active, you can think freshly about various things, you can learn new things, it is essential how old you feel to be and so on. But are these attitudes and conceptions connected especially to the third age.

There are also some conceptions about which the respondents were not unanimous. Some of them are described in the Table 2.

**Table 2: The least unanimous conceptions of ageing among the respondents (N=143)**

Claims	Agree	Can't say	Disagree	%
The older you are the more you have duties toward the other people	45	13	42	100
No personal thing goes over the grandparenthood	34	26	40	100
Behaviour of the old aged is controlled too much	32	34	34	100
The younger ones feel very positively toward the old people	39	19	42	100
It is not the duty of children to take care of their parents when they are becoming older	43	21	36	100
The retired who spend their wintertime in Spain are with good reasons happy	21	59	20	100

These answers of the respondents are almost more interesting than the answers in the Table 1. Is it in some way connected to the developing third age attitudes that almost a half of respondents are thinking that you haven't more duties toward the others when you become older. Also the attitude toward grandparenthood is very interesting: 40 percent of the respondents are thinking that it doesn't go over any personal things. Is this a small signal of changing relations and interaction between family generations which is also perhaps a consequence of the possible shape taking of the third age in the minds of old age people? Our study is too small for giving complete answers to this kind of questions. It is also disputable how well it is possible to study this kind of new phenomenon in quantitative way. It could be better to approach it seeking qualitatively for reshaping meanings and images of ageing.

### Conclusions

But it seems quite sure that the conceptions and images of ageing are changing to the direction which one can in some way describe as a shaping of third age. The ageing people emphasize activity, self-fulfilment and responsibility of their own to take care on themselves. It can perhaps

insist that the third age is becoming a common way to speak about ageing. It is a discourse which has an increasing cultural and normative power to effect what will be seen as a good ageing.

As a discourse the third age is also becoming a part of common discussion on the old age. It can be seen, for instance, in various EU-texts. Perhaps these discussions will be in future acting more and more some kind of self-fulfilling prophecy of old age, as a normative source of “modern” ageing and being old. To us it means that we must remember the critic that is with good reason directed to the third age as a theory of ageing process in ageing societies.

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