

## **Precarious Retirement Work and the Conduct of Life of Women in their Pension Age**

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This exploratory study is dedicated to a vehement societal problem: the experience of precariousness of elderly women. On the one hand, it is well-known that in particular women are not sufficiently secured against poverty by old-age pensions due to gaps in their work biography and their traditional family orientation. On the other hand, elderly women's strategies of coping with poverty have not yet been subjected to detailed research. Based upon biographic case studies, this project will explore (1) in how far biographic backgrounds and social environments as well as sociopolitical dispositions enforce and shape poverty among elderly women and (2) what kind of practices and strategies they develop to cope with their everyday struggles against the threat of social descent.

Social data suggest that gender-specific differences that last during life time increase and strengthen in the retirement age. Another hypothesis that informs this project is based on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of different types of capital (economic, social and cultural capital).

The project aims to conduct biographic interviews with elderly women in Munich and will be supplemented by participant observation in their daily life worlds and social networks. One group of interviewees who are threatened by social descent in retirement age will be found in the urban middle class milieus of the city of Munich; another group will come from a more underprivileged milieu in this city. The main question of this qualitative investigation will be in how far and how the specific combination of the different types of capital in the middle-class neighborhood on the one hand and in the underprivileged milieu on the other hand entails different conditions to cope with poverty and insecurity. The interviews will be interpreted in thickly described case studies bringing together the individual experiences and self-images and the macro-contextual societal problems and discourses by which the narratives and practices are supposedly informed. Thus, the general target of the project is to replace the often conflictive images of old age in our society, ranging from novel scenes of "active ageing" to scenarios of the elderly as a threat of social welfare in times of demographic change, by more differentiated and realistic views. This project wants to contribute to a deeper understanding of the various skills,



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tactics and strategies of women in their retirement age developing creative sources of livelihood and finding ways of making their own living and/or seeking support by relatives, neighbors and social institutions.

In particular, work ethnography can provide a praxeological approach to widen the perspective, supplementing a mere analysis of social structures and backgrounds of old age poverty by investigating into forms of agency in everyday life worlds.

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