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Seductive Solutions, Inspiration, Easy-to-Remember Phrases, and Ambiguity: Why Is the Idea of Active Ageing so Successful?

Abstract: The idea of active ageing has become one of the most influential perspectives in modern gerontology, social work, and social policy. This paper discusses factors that helped to establish active ageing as a successful theoretical concept that has significantly influenced contemporary social representations of ageing and has a practical impact on social work and policy. The perspective of the philosophy of social science is employed to explain what makes the idea of active ageing so attractive despite the remaining confusions concerning what “activity” and “ageing actively” means. The paper aims to answer the following question: What makes the concept of active ageing so successful? It draws upon the work of Murray Davis (1986) and her insight into the key aspects that make sociological theory “seductive.” The paper analyzes in what ways the concept of active ageing fulfills the specific features that, according to Davis, determine the success of social theories. Simultaneously, the paper critically evaluates the ways the idea of active ageing is translated into ageing policy. The case of Czech Republic is used to illustrate the problematic aspect

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of active ageing policies as well as the specific rhetoric that makes the idea of active ageing so attractive for a broad spectrum of disciplines as well as for social policy.

Key words: Active Ageing, Policy Ideas, Sociological Theory

Introduction

Very few such influential concepts as active ageing are likely to be found in current social gerontology and other related fields. The term “active ageing” has earned its strong position as the basis for the vast spectrum of issues related to the lives of an older generation. At the same time, it has become an important slogan predominant in the social policies of (not only) ageing Europe. Significant attention is paid to the idea of active ageing in the social science, whether in theoretical studies discussing the numerous definitions and limits (for example, Boudiny, 2012; Moulart & Biggs, 2012; Walker, 2002, 2008) or empirical studies mapping the diverse dimensions of active ageing in the lives of seniors (e.g., Kuchařová, 2002, Petrová Kafková, 2013; Vidovičová, 2005). The combination of the noun “senior” and the adjective “active” is becoming a (post)modern incantation for representations of ageing. It is also becoming an increasingly visible expression of an idealized lifestyle in older age deserving support and value. The European Union (EU) declared 2012 to be European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. In the report on the decision, the year was highlighted as being the culmination of long-term (and still ongoing) efforts to support active ageing at all levels of social life (European Commission, 2010, p. 3). In a similar vein, the Czech National Program of Preparation for Ageing for the period 2003–2007, defines active ageing as the main priority (in the current version of the document the term has been replaced by “positive ageing,” which, however, rather synonymously refers to the original concept).

These examples represent some of many indicators of a successful campaign for the concept of active ageing in gerontology, social policy, and media representations. The roots of the popularity of the idea of active ageing go back to the 1990s

when the World Health Organization (WHO) began to use the term in their policies systematically. Active ageing takes up the idea of successful ageing (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), and later also the idea of productive ageing (Bass, Caro & Chen, 1993), which were previously developed mainly in the United States. Similarly, to the idea of active ageing, these concepts are also based on the idea of a “suitable” form of ageing, where its stages can be identified and the subsequent desirable ones supported. Although these concepts can emphasize different aspects, their use always includes certain common principles associated with the social significance of ageing. The effort to cast doubt about the myth of non-productive ageing is becoming a compelling motive. In this regard, active ageing follows the tradition of all the concepts mentioned above. Although terms successful ageing, healthy ageing or positive ageing usually do not act as synonyms in gerontological discussions, and differing adjectives before the word “ageing” are, to a significant extent, also a response to the insufficiency and implicit exclusivity of any efforts to define a “suitable” vision of ageing, they, such as the concept of active ageing itself, work on the presumption of a relationship between activity and satisfactory ageing, and are based on similar principles (Daatland, 2005).

In this chapter, the phrase “idea of active ageing” is used to refer to a specific way of seizing ageing which follows the activity theory (e.g., Havighurst, 1961) that urge to newly re-define social significances associated with ageing and the place of older people in society. Within such approach, various forms of activity are established as the path to healthy and satisfying ageing. This conceptualization is closely related to an active lifestyle and is presented as universally suitable for everybody. The phrase “active ageing policies” refers to political strategies or social programs which, through arrangements, endeavor to put the idea of active ageing into practice.

It is striking that, despite its current popularity, it is surprisingly difficult to find a clear and comprehensive interpretation of the term “active ageing.” A rather wide range of possible definitions hides behind the term “active ageing” (or “active old age”). In fact, the WHO presents active ageing as a lifelong project that does not primarily refer to physical activity as

such, rather to ensure the possibility of participation in social affairs in all phases of life (WHO, 2002). In this conception, active ageing does not concern only individual lifestyles of older people and their physical or work activities but also emphasizes other dimensions of active engagement of older persons in the family, the community, and public activities. Thus, “activity” as perceived by the WHO is a much wider term mainly associated with efforts to improve the conditions of the lives of older citizens. In a similar vein, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provides a broad definition of active ageing that refers to “the capacity of people, as they grow older, to lead productive lives in society and economy. This means that people can make flexible choices in the way they spend time over life—in learning, in work, in leisure, in care-giving” (OECD, 1998, p. 84). In practice, and primarily in political agendas, however, the term “active ageing” acquires rather narrower meanings. For example, a paper with the title “New Paradigm in Ageing Policy” published on the web page of European Commission states that: “in practice means adopting healthy lifestyles, working longer, retiring later and being active after retirement” (European Commission, 1999).

Similar variability in approaches to active ageing can also be found in the social sciences; Avramov & Mašková (2003, p. 24) define active ageing as the “realization of the active lives of older people in the diverse domains of their personal, family, social and professional lives.” According to them, active ageing especially refers to maintaining work activity in old age, active engagement in family life (in the form of helping family members or housework), the active engagement in community life (especially in the form of volunteering) and active use of free time. Alan Walker (2006), one of the most significant propagators of active ageing, perceives it as a multi-dimensional strategy that interconnects individual and social levels. At the social level, active ageing includes challenges in the fields of employment, health, social inclusion, education, and transportation accessibility. On the individual level, people have, according to Walker, “a duty to take advantage of lifelong learning and continuous training opportunities and to promote their own health and well-being throughout the life course” (Walker, 2006, p. 86). As is apparent

from the previous definition, active ageing is, in many ways, a normative vision exhorting a specific lifestyle and approach to health. It is based on the assumption that “active life is positively associated with other ethically highly appreciated values such as personal autonomy, enhanced health, life satisfaction and quality of life in general” (Avramov & Mašková, 2003, p. 24). All definitions of the concept of active ageing (as well as other terms) work with the notion of individuals who are actively striving to direct their ageing conditions towards the least possible dependence on the social system or other people (Neilson, 2006).

The recapitulation of various conceptualizations and definitions of active ageing could continue for a long time. The goal of this paper, however, is not to discuss the various modifications of active ageing or the limitations of these different approaches. This paper strives to explain the popularity of this concept and its related variations in the form of positive ageing, successful ageing and healthy ageing in the social sciences, and in social policy (despite the remaining confusions concerning what age actively means). The aim is, therefore, to provide some possible answers to the question of which factors are behind the success of active ageing as a theoretical concept and form of the social policy strategy. The following analysis is inspired by the work of Murray Davis (1986), who analyzed the roots of the success of classical social theories. This paper discusses how and to what extent the idea of active ageing meets the criteria which, according to Davis, ensure public interest and the long-term popularity of “classic” social theories.

Active Ageing as a Successful Social Theory

The works of Murray Davis (1986), focusing on the identification of the common features of successful social theories that have gained a place in social sciences canon, represent one of the main inspirations for this paper. In her work, Davis neither assess the quality of these theories, nor does she strive to map the criteria of “good” social theory, but she reflects on what distinguished theories that have gained significant attention from theories that have not.

The second main inspiration represents the paper by Kathy Davis (2008), who applies to the arguments of her namesake onto the analysis of the success of the concept of intersectionality which, particularly in gender studies, represents one of the most influential approaches to the study of experiences of exclusion. Her analysis shows that the work of Murray Davis has the potential to bring understanding to the success of not just classical sociological theories, but also current influential concepts. This paper follows their argument and map if and how the idea of active ageing meets the criteria of a successful theory as defined by Davis (1986) and, therefore, also tries to answer the question of where the roots of its success in (not only) social sciences lie.

Changes, Risks, and Seductive Solutions

The success of a social theory is, according to Davis (1986), to a significant extent based on its attractiveness. A social theory's ability to adequately reflect the world around us is not enough to ensure its success and long-lasting popularity. It is primarily their seductiveness that, according to Davis, elevates the classical theories above those that wither away. In her analysis, she shows that all these canonical theories follow a specific form of rhetoric. Their first characteristic is that they begin their argument with reference to something that appeals to the wider audience. The success of a theory, according to Davis, however, does not only lie in the identification of an interesting topic. A theory is mainly becoming interesting to a wider audience at the moment when a fear associated with a threat to something precious and close to the audience is addressed. Such a presentation of a problem provides a context that becomes crucial for managing public concern when addressing the given question. It shows how far-reaching changes and significant processes are seen and how these interfere with the organization of society and the individual lives of people. At the same time, a successful theory offers hope in the form of reasonable proposals on how to deal with these changes and processes or, at least, how to learn to live with them (Davis, 1986).

What is it that is precious and close to everybody that is addressed by the idea of active ageing; which fears does it emphasize and simultaneously offer solutions to? The answer is

obvious. The idea of active ageing concerns something that is a part of life for everyone of us. It addresses issues dealing with ageing and preserving dignity and independence in old age. In its simplified interpretations, the theory of active ageing provides answers to the question of how to reach healthy and satisfactory old age. A particular (and identical) rhetoric can be identified in the majority of documents formulating the vision of active ageing policies. The formulation of such policies starts with the references to statistical data on an increasing proportion of older adults in the population (e.g., WHO, 2002, pp. 6–11; European Commission, 1999). These data represent a necessary prelude showing a vision of a society which will, at least in some respects, never be the same as today. A document published by WHO (2002, p. 6) points out that this change is “one of the humanity’s greatest triumphs. It is also one of our greatest challenges.” Even though this challenge is also formulated in positive terms, such as opportunity, it remains a risk for society. Opportunity can be achieved, but also missed—the idea of risk is, therefore, an integral part of the formulation of active ageing policies.

Projections of population growth, which are part of the discussion on active ageing represent a symbolic risk horizon which does not necessarily have to be threatening if managed correctly. The concept of risk is associated with the modern concept of believing in the possibility of controlling one’s own future, or at least the ability to change it by one’s own actions (Zinn, 2008, pp. 3–4). So, the foundation of the risk is not what is happening, rather what could happen. The threat is not contained in a moment or process itself, but more likely in its poor management. As WHO argues (2002, p. 6): “countries can afford to get old if governments, international organizations and civil society enact ‘active ageing’ policies and programs that enhance the health, participation, and security of older citizens. The time to plan and to act is now.” The idea of active ageing is becoming a tool to manage these risks and problems. The discussion on active ageing does not present population ageing as a threat as such, but as a process that can be controllable and manageable. Dangers materialize in the idea of some form of future which, however, in principle can be prevented. The population ageing is presented as

an inherent problem which, however, can be minimized using clearly defined politics. Risks must be controlled while active ageing is presented as a preventive strategy with a universal solution.

The seductive solution that the idea of active ageing offers while dealing with the risks of population ageing is based on the production of specific subjectivities “colonized” by activity and an emphasis on productivity (Moulaert & Biggs, 2012). As the Declaration on the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations published by the Council of the European Union (2012, p. 3) states: “Demographic change can, among other things, be successfully tackled through a positive life-course approach that focuses on the potential of all generations and particularly of older age groups. The action is needed to enable both women and men to remain active as workers, consumers, careers, volunteers, and citizens and to preserve the solidarity between generations.” Active ageing is presented as a lifelong project, within which individuals systematically work by themselves towards minimal dependence on the social system and others.² The state does, in this regard, have an empowering role rather—its task is to provide the conditions for active ageing, but the responsibility for its individual fulfillment remains in the hands of the individual (e.g., Hasmanová Marhánková, 2013, pp. 57-62). For example, Active Ageing Manual (2012) and the Active Ageing Guide (2013) have been published in the Czech Republic, which, even by their titles, can be in many ways considered as an incarnation of the of manuals or guides on how to produce actively ageing subjects. The Active Ageing Manual (2012), for example, appeals to its

² The emphasis on the lifelong character of the active ageing project can be perceived as another pillar of its success. The philosophy of active ageing is actually not only aimed at older adults, but presents active ageing as the result of a lifelong effort. Every individual at every stage of life should, through their lifestyle and choices, strive to age actively. Disciplinary practices associated with active ageing policies are, therefore, becoming a tool to manage the whole population.

readers in the section Active Approach using chapters with titles such as “Move,” “Train Your Brain,” and “Meet People.” The active approach to life is also presented as a way to happy ageing, because “active people live longer, are healthier, and are more satisfied” (The Active Ageing Manual, 2012, p. 47).

Active ageing call on individuals to be active with the promise of a healthier and more satisfied life. At the same time, this lifestyle becomes the key to the response to the challenges associated with population ageing. As stated, for example, by the Czech National Strategy for Positive Ageing for the period 2012–2017 (2012, p. 21), “the improvement of public health is closely related to economic growth and an increase in competitiveness.” Management of population through active ageing, therefore, mostly occurs through the effort to gain the potential from an increasing number of older adults. Healthier, less dependent, longer working, and helpful seniors symbolizing the vision of active ageing are, in the framework of this rhetoric, also becoming the key to the solution to the economic problems associated with population ageing.

Active ageing with its vision of active seniors who continuously participate in social, economical, cultural, spiritual and civic affair (WHO, 2002, p. 12), adopt healthy lifestyle, work longer, retire later and are active after retirement (European Commission, 1999) and are aware of their responsibility for preparation for their own ageing through their whole life (National Program for Preparation for Old Age for the Period 2003-2007, 2003) represents a political response to demographic trends, as well as answers to the questions of how a satisfactory and happy old age should look. Such vision addresses not only the fears associated with individual ageing but also the fears associated with population ageing. In the same breath, it also offers guidance on how to deal with both processes.

Active Ageing as an Inspiration for Specialized Research and a Reservoir of Easy-to-Remember Phrases

The ability to open a space for specialized research and provide easy-to-remember points and phrases enabling understanding, even for those who are only marginally involved in the subject,

represent according to Davis (1986) another key characteristic of successful social theories. She further suggests that: “an ambiguous theory can appeal to different—even hostile audience, allowing each subgroup to interpret the theory in congenial, if mutually incompatible, ways.” Successful theories then, on the one hand, enable specialized academic research, where a whole career can be devoted to detailed research on just one theory. On the other hand, it is possible to simplify them into easy-to-understand and memorable phrases or clichés (Davis, 1986).

The idea of active ageing meets this criterion fully. In the framework of social sciences, active ageing opens a space for a wide range of debates. There are studies striving to cope with former concepts of active, healthy, positive and successful ageing (e.g., Bass & Caro, 2001; Moody, 2001), which critically assess the limits of earlier approaches and bring progressively more concepts (and thus open space for reflection on the limitations of these new approaches for other researchers). The idea of active ageing is becoming a starting point for a growing number of empirical research testing the relationship between activity in old age and life satisfaction and/or health (e.g., Nimrod & Adoni, 2006; Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006), or mapping out various dimensions of senior lifestyles (e.g., Bútorová et al., 2013; Petrová Kafková, 2013). The concept of active ageing is becoming a part of a broad myriad of disciplines. It has given rise to specialized analytical tools, such as the Active Ageing Index established by the European Commission and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), the aim of which is to “identify areas in which different policies and programs can promote the contribution and potential of older people” and “help in identifying priority areas of policy development in the near future” (Zaidi & Stanton, 2015, p. 4). The Active Ageing Index is a foundation for the comparison of individuals (i.e., the higher the index, the higher the level of active ageing) and individual countries (for example, in 2014 the Czech Republic was in eleventh place among the EU countries in the rankings of active ageing). The index aims to enable the comparison and identification of areas in which countries can work better on active ageing in their own populations.

The narrative connecting activity with the path to satisfying and healthy ageing has also played a significant role in the expansion of the field of gerontology, and in strengthening the position of social work in relation to older adults (Green, 2009; Katz, 2000). This narrative established “activity” as an important intellectual and professional capital. Active ageing does not only offer ethical frameworks for contemplating ageing but also becomes a source of specific instructions on how to fulfill this positive vision. Activity “administration,” “management,” and “mediation” have become expert capital (also compare Katz, 1996, 2000) and one of the most important frameworks referred to by the institutions and actors providing social services for older people when defining their roles and importance. As Katz (2000) points out, management by activity became an important way how to measure the resourcefulness and productivity of professionals working with older persons. Reference to activity became the vital part of professional vocabularies and a way how to embed the everyday life in old age into “a measurable behavior whose significance connect the worlds of older people to the largest expertise” (Katz, 2000). For example, in the Czech Republic, the relatively recently enacted Social Services Act (108/2006) institute the “process of activation” as an essential part of the work of all institutions providing services for older adults. This Act established “Strengthening life activation” as one of the crucial criteria for the definition of a social worker’s job (Social Services Act 108/2006, § 116). Within this approach, activity becomes a measurable (and reportable) aspect and, at the same time, a tool connecting professional experts with the everyday lives of older persons. In this regard, discussions on active ageing also play a major role in the process of construction of the professional identity of the social services and to a significant extent help to delimit the purpose and content of institutional programs for older people.

“Active ageing” is also becoming a simple motto or slogan which easily attracts attention. The phrase “active ageing” evokes vision and dynamics. It is easily translatable into catchy phrases. In the Czech Republic, the phrase “active ageing” is currently becoming a necessary context to which almost all projects aimed

at older people must somehow relate. So, on the one hand, active ageing opens space for detailed academic research. At the same time, however, it offers easily understandable phrases which extend its popularity well beyond the academic sphere. The use of these phrases often becomes a mantra, repeated without the need to define its meaning further. For that matter, even the National Program of Preparation for Ageing for the period 2008–2012 for the Czech Republic, which defines active ageing as its priority, does not provide a definition of the phrase anywhere in the document. It is not an exaggeration to say that a reference to active ageing is currently working almost as a compulsory pass into the arena of grant procedures for projects aimed at the older generation.

The Power of Ambiguity

According to Davis (1986), ambiguity is paradoxically the third crucial characteristic of social theory that ensures its success. In social sciences, according to Davis, ambiguity is not a sign of failure but can lay the foundations for the future popularity of a theory (Davis 1986, p. 296). Successful social theories are, therefore, successful due to the fact that they do not offer clear answers but, on the contrary, open space for further debate and research (Davis, 2008). Active ageing materializes this ambiguity in many ways. One of the characteristic features of the idea of active ageing is paradoxically an absence of the universally agreed definition of what ageing actively means. Not only is there no clear definition of active ageing, but there is also no agreement on whether active ageing represents a theory, or an approach, or even something completely different. “Active ageing” has been described as a process (WHO, 2002), an ability (OECD, 1998, p. 84), a strategy (Walker, 2002), a concept (Avramov & Mašková, 2003; Ranzijn, 2010; Walker, 2002), a form of social politics (Ney, 2005), and a discourse (Hasmanová Marhánková, 2011). Boudiny (2013) even describes active ageing as “empty rhetoric.” Alan Walker (2002), who, to a significant extent, contributed to the establishment of this concept in social sciences, also talks about the fact that active ageing “is sometimes just a slogan used

to cover anything that seems to fit under it” (Walker, 2002, p. 124).

Boudiny (2013) recognizes three basic approaches to the definition of active ageing. One-dimensional approaches dominate the social politics of European countries and are distinguished by the reductionism described above. They frame active ageing mainly in economic terms and equates it with the participation of older citizens in the labor market. The multi-dimensional approach works with more levels of active ageing and puts the emphasis on activities beyond the labor market—mostly on actively spent free time. However, as pointed out by Boudiny, this approach also often slips towards similar reductionism, with its tendency to distinguish between passively and actively spent free time. Such a distinction not only ignores the plurality of the subjective interpretation of what activity means, but also largely excludes certain groups from being described as actively ageing (for example, due to worsening health condition, which can prevent individuals from carrying out those activities which are, in the framework of this rhetoric, considered “truly” active). The third approach does not assess active ageing only through activities and the behavior of individuals but approaches it mainly as a life situation enabling people to continue to be independent and providing sufficient conditions for personal development. This approach, however, makes active ageing inaccessible to that already facing dependence and deteriorating health (Boudiny, 2013). Despite these problems with various conceptualizations of active ageing and its criticism, many authors remain optimistic as to its potential and benefit for the politics of ageing.

The ambiguity of the definition of active ageing is, to a significant extent, based on the various definitions of the word “activity.” While, in the framework of the active ageing policy, activity is mainly perceived as a tool to preserve economic productivity and independence (remaining in the labor market for as long as possible, lifelong education, maintaining an active lifestyle and, therefore, minimizing the risk of dependence on others), older persons themselves often perceive activity as the goal itself (Hasmanová Marhánková, 2011) or, in a much broader sense, as a tool for structuring leisure time and a means of relating

to the world around them (Dyk et al., 2013). Bowling's (2008) study shows that older people most often perceive active ageing as a synonym for maintaining physical health, leisure, and social activities.

The ambivalence of active ageing and its openness to various translations is also illustrated by the way it is approached within different disciplines and institutions. While in the framework of social policy promoted by international organizations and by national strategies, active ageing is presented as an individual lifelong reflexive project where individuals take responsibility for their own ageing through their lifestyles (see above), approaches dominating in the field of social work present activity as a tool (mostly) in the hands of professionals. This approach to activity is apparent in the "process of activation" that represents a crucial aspect of the revised Social Services Act (108/2006) in the Czech Republic. The idea that one of the tasks of social workers should be to activate older clients implicitly ascribe the actor role to social workers—those who activate—while the clients are those being activated. As stated in, for example, the Czech guide to Activation Approaches to Older People, "older people's activity can be perceived as a certain final product of the activation of older persons" (Müller, 2006, p. 37). From this perspective, being active is mostly presented as the result of the actions of social workers and specialized institutions.

An unclear definition of what active ageing means does not necessarily have to be perceived as a weakness of this perspective. On the contrary, ambiguity has become its strength and the key to its unprecedented success, especially in the context of social policies. Active ageing is becoming a framework that is easy to mobilize for various ranges of social politics. The secret of the success of active ageing paradoxically lies in the fact that, thanks to its ambiguity, it can be translated to suit the needs of diverse individuals and institutions.

Conclusion

The phrase "active ageing" (or healthy ageing, positive ageing or successful ageing) currently represent an essential framework of ageing policies and discourses on suitable forms of individual life

in old age. As stated by Walker (2008), active ageing is currently becoming the leading global strategy in response to population ageing. In this regard, it is appropriate to ask what lies behind the success of this concept, and what are the reasons for its current leading position. This paper has attempted to outline some possible answers to these questions. The idea of active ageing undoubtedly brings fundamental and, above all, welcome changes to the ways ageing and the role of older people have traditionally been viewed. However, the popularity of the idea of active ageing throughout various disciplines and its penetration into various levels of social life cannot be explained simply by the reference to its superior ability to capture the experience of ageing. Its privileged position is also based on its specific rhetorical program, carrying those criteria identified by Davis (1986) as a foundation for the “attractiveness” and, therefore, the success of theories that have entered the history of the social sciences. Similarly, to these theories, the idea of active ageing is also framed by the discourse of a fundamental change in society and the resulting uncertainty and risks. The positive representations of ageing, which also include the image of active old age, form hand in hand with discussions pointing out the increasing number of older adults in the population as a negative phenomenon. According to Walker (2010), it was the very criticism of the welfare state fueled by notions of population ageing as a threat that gave rise to the “new ageing politics,” with active ageing as its flagship concept. Demographic trends associated with population ageing draw attention to older people as a group with a specific social position and role. Active ageing is to a significant extent the product of the effort to use the potential of the growing number of older citizens (mainly at the labor market), which today’s society cannot afford to “waste.”

At the same time, active ageing represents a theory that is multi-layered enough to enable different disciplines and actors with different professional degrees to work with this idea. It opens space for extremely specialized research, and simultaneously is becoming a tool for practical social politics. Active ageing is becoming a buzzword—a concept that is unprecedentedly popular, even though there is very little agreement on its actual definition

(Davis, 2008). As I have tried to outline above, the ambiguity of the idea of active ageing is one of the keys to its success. Its openness to various, often contradictory, interpretations paradoxically strengthens the privileged position of active ageing in different social spheres. Moreover, it is the very fact that different actors and institutions can use different translations of active ageing for various purposes that should be perceived as the foundation for its unprecedented success.

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