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Are Old People Merited Veterans of Society? Some Notes on a Problematic Claim

Abstract

The article shows how *merit* has been used to highlight pensioners as a special population in the claims-making activities of the senior rights movement in Sweden, as well as in debates about issues concerning old age. Simply put, merit refers to the claim that pensioners have built the society and they are entitled to special treatment – for instance welfare, reverence – for this reason. Merit is concluded to be a rhetorical tool with the potential of countering images of older people as a burden to the young. It portrays seniors as a population worthy of welfare and reverence. Social movements that emphasize merit among seniors will however risk isolation, since such claims to some extent have become associated with populist attacks on immigrants, politicians and other groups labeled as non-merited.

Introduction

This paper aims at investigating the concepts of merit and veteranship as signifying qualities among elders. It is inspired by a 25-year-old suggestion about seniors' activism put forward by Nelson (1982). Nelson argued that the American senior rights movement provided images of older people as frail and needy as well as vital and active, which together appeared as contradictory. He suggested that movements should promote unifying images of seniors as merited *veterans*. In a later article about dignity and the care of the elderly Nordenfelt (2003) has presented a similar argument about "achievement and effort" that should earn older people special status. The aim of this paper does not reflect an attempt to make suggestions about the formal organization of old age policy, but rather to discuss a surrounding *legitimizing moral framework* that relates to conceptions about older people in relation to others. *Public status* is a relevant expression used by Nordenfelt (2003). Using a rhetorical approach (Billig, 1996; et al. 1988) we show that merit is a problematic tool to use by any movement that attempts to enhance the public status of seniors, since claims that older people are veterans constantly develop into accusations against "unworthy" groups that are said to thrive at the expense of the hard working population. The cause of older people has to some extent even been adopted by right-wing claims-makers. Besides being part of a popular moral framework about intergenerational solidarity, claims about merit have become embedded in *ideological and rhetorical frameworks* where they are recognized as populism and xenophobia. Although our discussion to a large extent is grounded in data from the Swedish context, we relate

the findings to the situation in other Western countries.

The significance of images

To change outdated and devaluing images of old age and older people has been described as a crucial task for the senior rights movement as well as researchers and government bureaucracies (Butler, 1989; SOU 2003:91). The reason for this interest in images and identities is not only fears that older people may feel devalued or act in accordance with low societal expectations (Kuypers & Bengtson, 1973; Levin & Levin, 1980). The construction of a category like "pensioners" or "older people" also relates to ideas about rights, needs and obligations that constitute a legitimizing moral framework within aging policies. This framework includes collective norms about reciprocal relations and justice and is sometimes referred to as a *moral economy* (Kohli, 1991). Images of categories are proposed and negotiated by claims-makers that aim at mobilizing members, winning public support for its cause and influencing welfare policies (Mauss, 1975). For instance, claims that seniors are "greedy geezers" and winners of an intergenerational war have underscored demands for a reduction in the costs of old age policies as a case of *justice* between young and old (Butler, 1989; Powell, Williamson & Branco, 1996). Since a category like "older people" does not constitute a majority of society it has also been feared that the success of seniors to compete for welfare may evoke the anger of younger generations (Evers & Wolf, 1999). To anchor welfare morally has therefore appeared as a crucial task for the senior rights movement. Accordingly representatives of this movement have urged its members to strategically approach young people with messages that emphasize solidarity over the life-course through catch-phrases like "Seniors are young people who have grown old" (Jönson, 1998). This example also shows how a moral economy is renegotiated in the symbolic work of social movements. Members display appropriate movement-related behaviors that manifest desirable identities (Johnston, Laraña & Gusfield, 1994; Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

Image and identity problems for seniors

In the competition among social movements, how can the senior rights movement – that is, pensioners' organizations, pensioners' parties, and other activists – successfully establish identities that underscore demands for improvements of the welfare and status of older citizens? There has been some debate relating to this issue of presentation and identity construction among researchers and activists. We will describe two related tensions as a background to Nelson's (1982) suggestion of emphasizing merit as a unifying identity in old age. In doing this, we employ a typology that has been used to describe strategies and development within feminist movements (Berggren, 1987; Hirdman, 1986). The original typology reflects choices to emphasize sameness or difference while acknowledging or denying traditionally *male* values and qualities. In our analysis we have tentatively replaced the idea of male or masculine normality in the feminist model with a suggestion about a *mid-life* normality in aging policies. Mid-life refers to a broad *productive* and *reproductive* middle generation in the three-generation model (compare with Kohli, 1991). The assumption is that reasoning about aging and old age tends to revolve around images of mid-life, and that old age is typically regarded as similar or different from mid-life. As a heuristic tool, this model can be used to discuss images of old age as well as strategies.
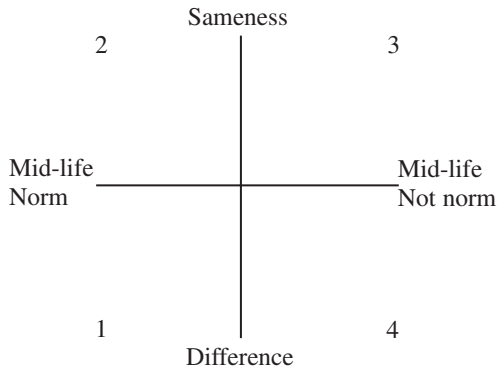
Figure 1

The first position in the typology presents old age as deviant from mid-life, and typically includes images of older people as frail, dependent, and in need of care. This is a position critical gerontologists have associated with disengagement theory and the biomedical interest in decline (Levin & Levin, 1980; Estes & Binney, 1989). The second position reflects attempts to show that old age is to a large extent the same as mid-life. Normal aging is separated from diseases that may occur in old age, and ageist images of frailty are replaced with "true" descriptions of active and independent aging (Palmore, 1990; Wigdor, 1995). The third position represents a humanist view that emphasizes that all people have a unique and equal value as human beings and that frailty and dependency do not challenge that. The dignity of older people rests on a common *Menschenwürde* (Nordenfelt, 2003). This position appears to be the ethical foundation for old age policies in a recent Swedish official government report (SOU 2003:91). The fourth position emphasizes qualities that set old age or old people apart from mid-life, while challenging the normality of mid-life. Apart from veteranship, concepts such as spiritual growth and wisdom could be included in such a strategy (Tornstam, 1996). Nordenfelt (2003) actually labels experience and wisdom

as the second prominent *merit* of older people. In this article we will use a narrower definition of merit that relates to achievement and effort.

In his analysis of the American senior rights movement Nelson (1982) claimed that pensioners' organizations produce contradictory images of old age. On one hand they stress the frailty and dependence of pensioners when fighting cutbacks or arguing for welfare reforms. Researchers in Scandinavia have concluded that such images of misery have played an important role in the improvement of old age policies (Gaunt, 1992). It has even been suggested that the widespread public support for spending on older people's welfare is partially based on misconceptions about the frailty and misery of older people (Tornstam, 2001). On the other hand, pensioners' organizations fight outdated images of frailty and dependence and argue that stereotyped beliefs that older people are frail constitute ageism. Ageism is countered by images of vital seniors.

Nelson stated that both images are valid since old age is such a diverse category. However, when pensioners' organizations produce images of vulnerability, frailty, and dependency in order to gain support for reforms, they may create failure models of aging that repel healthy and well-off members. In gerontology the tendency to portray seniors as miserable is sometimes labeled new ageism or compassionate ageism (Kalish, 1979; Binstock, 1983). When organizations, on the other hand, produce positive counter-images of old age as a period of development and joy, they may repel members that are frail and poor and reduce public support for welfare. Images of self-fulfilling third-age lifestyles show that older people are active and able, but may play into accusations of seniors as greedy geezers. Typically, rhetorical frameworks that provide such accusations have appeared during periods of economic recession, when pensioners have been portrayed as "winners" in comparison to

other categories of society (Jönson 2001). This can be seen as a tension between position one and two within the typology of sameness and difference.

A different approach would be to emphasize the third position, by claiming that all people have a unique and equal value as human beings and to regard age as irrelevant. A problem associated with this strategy is that some essential differences among ages may be denied (Nelson 1982). Also, the very attempt to mobilize seniors in special organizations contradicts ideas of sameness (Hazan 1994). Emphasizing qualities that set seniors apart from others may constitute a more solid basis for social movements and interest groups. Furthermore attempts to develop old age policies on a foundation of humanism have turned out to be problematic. Suggestions that older people should be regarded as contributing resources in society as a way of improving their image as citizens constantly creep into the policy (SOU 2003:91). This can be seen as a tension between position two and three within the typology. Qualities typical of position two tend to invade position three.

This brings us to position four and the concept of *merit*. Emphasizing merit is a solution proposed by Nelson, who suggested that older people could be regarded as *veterans* that have built society. Old age would then be defined as an achieved status. This could include working, raising children, doing military or community service, and paying taxes. Merit is a positive quality that may be used to set pensioners apart from others, while at the same time uniting them regardless of health and frailty, and thereby ensuring welfare in old age. In fact, frailty can even be regarded as evidence of previous hard work and sacrifices, similar to wounds carried by war veterans. The status as veteran would give individuals a choice to participate in work or not, without issues of frailty being raised. Nelson (1982 p.166) states: "Yet, unlike some proposals that

recommend age irrelevance, veteranship's affirmation of choice and earned entitlement allows a liberation of productivity without at the same time stigmatizing or humiliating those older persons who, for reason of disability or disinclination, are less active contributors to society." Old age may thus earn people a special reverence, linked to position 4 within the typology. Alternatively, the achieved status of old age could be linked to sameness if it is regarded as part of "our future selves" (Nelson 1982, p.165). The point is that old age is defined as a positive status that veterans can refer to when making claims about welfare.

Veteranship and citizenship

The success of images and identities proposed by social movements is dependent on how claims-making activities resonate with culturally accepted values and beliefs within a society (Gamson, 1992). The question, then, is how merit and veteranship are recognized within our societies. This question has several answers that reflect the ambiguous character of merit.

The idea of merit has a long history. It is well known from religious texts that prescribe reverence for elderly parents (Hedin, 1999). This is not to say that merit is the sole foundation for the reverence for older people that has been apparent within different religions. For instance, the idea that older people were closer to Good has given old age a unique status in some versions of Christianity, as Cole (1997) notes. Merit has however played an important but sometimes intricate role in several cases. Hedin (1999) comments on an argument within Islam, according to which adult children should pay tribute to their parents since parents have guarded over their unknowing children in a fashion that is similar to the way that God guards over human beings. It may be argued that the kind of merit that religious texts refer to is not in line with the worldly

affairs discussed here. But what references to religion show is the long history of the formal properties of the argument. Even if merit is rarely referred to as a general foundation of old age policies in government writings, suggestions that societies owe something to their elders are well recognized by most citizens. For instance, Anderson (1993) states that the strong support for the welfare of pensioners in Sweden and other industrial countries is a moral societal commitment that has been justified with reference to prior contributions to society. It resonates with a societal norm of reciprocity in human relations (Dowd, 1975; Tornstam, 2001). In his article on dignity, Nordenfelt (2003, p. 109) argues that a feeling of gratitude among younger people does not only belong in the family. Older people are entitled to a general dignity of achievement and effort:

> "As young citizens we ought to thank our forefathers for their achievements in building up the modern society, for their struggle in defense of democracy and other values, and in general for their hard labor in keeping society working. Gratitude, I suggest, is an appropriate attitude that we should display to the elderly. Gratitude is our way of paying respect to a special dignity of merit that the elderly have."

When taking time into account, merit enables individuals to view themselves as contributors in mid-life and creditors in old age. An example of this is the common position in Sweden that the pension is a delayed wage payment. Old age is, as Johnson (2003) concludes, the "classic example of the giver receiving back reciprocal gifts, presented and received over time." This is not to say that people are not contributors in old age. As part of the moral economy of old age policies, merit emphasizes mutual contributions and dependency between different generations of the life-course. The general idea is that older people have made sufficient contributions to society and are

entitled to repayment for this. In this version merit is included into the idea of *citizenship*. For instance, British seniors interviewed by Vincent, Patterson & Wale (2001 p. 128) chose to describe their previous contributions and later welfare as part of their citizenship:

> "Shunning the identity of the 'deserving poor' – suitable cases for charity – older people prefer to be seen as common members of a national community who expect a pension on retirement and care in old age by virtue of having shouldered the duties of citizenship" (Vincent, Patterson & Wale, 2001 p. 128).

This definition of citizenship shows how merit relates to obligations among different generations and to the contractual relations between citizens and the welfare state. In British ageing research claims that older people are merited has to a large extent appeared as a *response* to the threat of a war between generations. According to Johnson (2003), politicians' claims that older people represent a burden to society exhibit a lack of moral responsibility and a disregard for time-honored relationships among middle-aged groups that strive for further privileges. Radical British researchers have emphasized aspects of direct and transferred solidarity among participants of the life-course as part of an intergenerational contract (Phillipson, 1996; Walker, 1996). Within the typology of sameness and difference this framing of merit belongs in a *citizenship approach* that place older people in positions 3-4, along with other citizens who either have or will shoulder the "duties of citizenship". The approach aims at countering attempts to place older people in position 1, where they are either pitied or viewed as a threat to the welfare of younger generations. Among parts of the Swedish senior rights movement, this struggle has been expressed in the catch phrase: the older generation has built society, and that the younger generation keeps on building (Jönson, 2005). It is clear that this defensive construction of

merit is meant to act as a counterargument within a well-known debate. The establishment of a generational contract counters a gap or a war between generations.

There is some ambiguity to be noted in how merit is treated within the citizenship approach. The difference between being *deserving* and demanding welfare "by virtue of having shouldered the duties of citizenship" is not always clear. Even if the seniors interviewed by Vincent, Patterson & Wale (2001) rejected the actual label "deserving poor", many of them did in fact describe older people as deserving veterans who had been forced into poverty.

Below we will proceed in discussing ambiguities of merit, as it has appeared in popular debates about old age policies. In the final part of the article we discuss some important problems that tend to make merit an officially unacceptable rhetorical tool for social movements.

Veteranship in radical claims-making

In a historical account Odén (1993) states that the redistribution of welfare between members of different generations has been pivotal in old age policies in Sweden, first within families and later administrated by the welfare state. The norm of serial reciprocity has been used by claims-makers that accuse society of failing its responsibilities towards its older citizens. This is well illustrated in the early 1940s when pensioners' organizations were formed in Sweden. One of those organizations was quite radical and accused the Social Democratic government of having betrayed the old workers who brought the party into power and built the foundation of the welfare state (Gaunt, 2002). The seniors of the 1940s were thus portrayed as especially merited, similar to a wartime generation. A central concept within the discourse developed by the radical organization's magazine was "debt." Older people

were referred to as "creditors" and their rights said to be founded on merit. Below, we will refer to this radical claims-making in order to show how the concept of merit has been used (1) to establish seniors' rights to welfare as an issue overriding fiscal concerns, and (2) to create moral indignation by contrasting entitlement to poverty. Rhetorically, arguments have aimed at establishing and emphasizing the merit of older people, while at the same time claiming failure of society to honor the norm of reciprocity.

Entitled or untouchable?

In 1943 the famous Swedish author and Nobel Prize winner Eyvind Johnson, who was invited to write in the radical magazine, described older people's status in society as relative to younger ages:

> "As a group within society, younger people always owe a debt of gratitude to their elders; the older group of citizens have built and arranged for them as long as they were able. A society rests upon work, and the bread that is consumed by younger people has literally as well as metaphorically grown on the fields that older people have cultivated."[1]

The words to note in the quotation are "society" and "citizens". A relation is being constructed here, between the young, the old, and society. It is not just younger people within families that owe their old parents something. The debt has been transferred to society, and should be honored with gratitude according to Johnson. Referring to this relation between society and older people, the famous journalist Ludvig Nordström suggested in 1941 that older people should be referred to as "citizens of honor" rather than pensioners. References to the debt of society move the issue of welfare improvements from the context of national economy.

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1 *Pensionären* 1943:7, "Om de gamlas rättigheter" [On the rights of the old], p. 3.

For instance, in an article from 1949 the editor of the radical pensioners' organization's magazine discussed the huge sums needed to improve the housing for elderly people. Anticipating a well-known counter-argument, he referred to this cost as an issue outside the debate on affordable reforms:

> "But many may perhaps ask: Can we afford to solve this issue? My answer is this: it is not an issue of affording. It is a debt that must be paid and the creditors have the power to collect their debt."[2]

The last part of the sentence referred to a vision of the movement, that all pensioners of Sweden should unite in one organization to collect society's debt by exerting voting power, hopefully in alliance with the future pensioners – the workers movement. The argument of the editor questioned a dominant view in old age policies, according to which the living conditions of seniors were in need of improvement, but only as soon as the economy allowed reforms to be implemented. More recently similar debates have occurred when governments have introduced cutbacks in old age policies. Promoting images of life-course redistribution, representatives of pensioners' organizations and pensioners' parties have labeled cutbacks in pension systems as "confiscation" and "theft," and argued that the government has failed to honor a contract (Jönson, 2002; Nilsson, 2005). In Vincent's, Patterson's & Wale's (2001) interviews older peoples' status as war veterans and pioneers of the welfare state provided an "unquestionable" support for welfare. This gave them a special status in comparison to other groups in need of welfare.

An obvious problem associated with merit is that not all seniors are creditors, if actual costs and benefits for society are calculated (SOU 2003:91). Some have cost more than they have contributed. This argument refers to administrative problems rather than the general image of seniors above a certain age (Nordenfelt, 2003). It also reflects an *ambiguity* of merit regarding the link between public status and a commitment to favor a particular age group. On one hand, many politicians flirt with seniors by acknowledging that they are veterans who have built society and that younger people should feel gratitude toward the old. For example Hoffmann (2005), a politician from the Swedish Left party, formulates her critique against the new Swedish pension system from this position. On the other hand, mainstream politicians are reluctant to use veteranship as an argument when specifically distributing welfare among generations. In fact, it is probably because of its capacity to establish an intergenerational contract beyond the issue of affordability that merit has not been accepted as a foundation of aging policies within government writings. Many feel that older people should not be given an "untouchable" status compared to other generations (cf. Parker, 2000; Johnson, 2003). For employers and governments, it is obviously better to emphasize that the welfare of older people should be regarded as a case of redistribution among generations rather than an investment to be claimed in old age. Furthermore, the capacity of merit to decouple support provided for pensioners from the frailty among individuals obstructs governments' endeavor to make healthy seniors work longer in order to improve the economy. In official writings, ideas among seniors to take on a role as non-contributing citizens at the age of 65 have been described as problematic (SOU 2003:91). From a critical perspective, it appears that science and government has done its best to transform the feeling of being entitled to a psychological problem among the old.

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2 *Pensionären* 1949:2, "Allas lika rätt" [The equal rights of all], pp. 3-4.

Merit and injustice

The statement that older people have "built society" frequently occurs when participants in public debates portray seniors as victimized. It usually appears alongside the argument that older people belong in the most vulnerable category in society. Both statements underscore claims about *injustices* committed against the old. Merit has thus been used to evoke moral indignation when contrasted to victimization and other plights among older people.

In the radical pensioners' magazine of the 1940s, the merit of older people was related to the fact that many pensioners had to rely on poverty aid. These worthy people should not have to beg for the welfare that they were entitled to. In one of many similar stories, the editor of the magazine told readers about a personal encounter with an old woman who had raised six children. In doing this, she had contributed to the survival of society. The editor compared her contribution with that of a war hero who had been rewarded a medal. The woman, who had given rather than taken lives, was "rewarded" with a bed in a poorhouse.

Among seniors that Vincent, Patterson & Wale (2001) interviewed, poverty among older people was suggested to be particularly upsetting: "The idea that people who fought in the war and paid contributions all their lives are now forced to live in poverty was abhorrent to most of the older people we interviewed." (p. 108). This way of constructing injustice has appeared in the rhetoric of pensioners' parties of Europe as well as in popular debates on issues concerning older people. This may be illustrated by a viewer's comment on a Swedish television documentary on nursing home neglect in 2003. The viewer identified the respect for the merited elderly as an indicator of the moral state of the country: "How will it end when old people are treated like this? Is this showing respect toward the elderly who have built the entire country of Sweden?"

The way merit has been linked to *injustice* is particularly interesting from a social-movement perspective, since movements tend to form shared identities based on this component (Gamson, 1992). Levin & Levin (1980) have suggested that the diverse category of elderly people could unite in a struggle against ageism. In such a struggle, references to merit may act as a partner to claims about ageism and create identities of a "we" who are worthy but victimized and should therefore unite in collective action. Still it could be debated whether images of older people as veterans counters or enforce the stigma of frailty and dependency when used like this. Vincent, Patterson & Wale (2001) argue that images of older people as *deserving poor* have been used in the claims-making activities of all political parties of Britain. Behaviors as good citizenship and service qualify groups of older people as war veterans, widows and servicemen in general as particularly deserving. This image is, according to Vincent, Patterson & Wale, a stereotype as it fails to differentiate among older people. The entire category is more or less portrayed as poor and deserving of compassion. Such claims legitimate welfare, but simultaneously produce failure models and may thus be described as compassionate ageism (Gaunt, 1992). Nelson (1982) himself touches on the possibility that veteranship could be associated with devaluing images similar to the pedestal idealization of womanhood. In the typology of sameness and difference this ambiguity may be described as a movement between positions 1 and 4.

Merit has implicitly been an essential part of the moral economy of old age policies. It has been used to defend caring and welfare arrangements. It has framed welfare as redistribution between generations over time and provided collective identities of older people as honorary citizens. It has at least partly decoupled demands for welfare from the stigma of frailty and dependency. Despite these

"achievements" many policymakers, governments and even pensioners' organizations seem reluctant to explicitly talk about older people as merited veterans in debates about old age policies. Some reasons for this have already been discussed. In the final part of this paper, we will show that merit has appeared as a politically unacceptable tool within official reasoning on old age policies. Our discussion touches on problems associated with contemporary radical claims-making.

The rhetorical landscape

Swedish sociologist Thomas Knoll (2001) has criticized definitions that equal *populism* to any claims-making that places the people in an antagonistic relationship to the "power-bloc" (cf. Westlind 1996). Due to the anti-populist hegemony within the landscape of media and politics in Sweden, it becomes impossible for left-wing activists to criticize vested interests and globalization in the name of the people. Even Marxism could be dismissed as populism. Knoll suggests that a division between "good" and "bad" populism should be introduced. The former version emphasizes social conflict between classes and community among oppressed populations and in doing so recognizing that conflicting interests is constitutive of society. The latter version emphasizes national, cultural and ethnic unity and is organized around a transcendental view on conflict as something to be eradicated from society. In-groups are therefore pitted against out-groups. This attempt to separate left-wing populism from its right-wing cousin is described as problematic by Knoll himself, but may even so serve an analytical purpose. It appears that merit and veteranship are part of similar tensions within the political landscape of Sweden. Claims that old people are entitled to a special dignity of effort and achievement may enhance the public status of seniors, but in practice this is frequently done at the expense of less merited groups. Would

it be possible to "reclaim" merit and veteranship as tools for left-wing claims-making, by identifying "good" versions of these concepts? Key-concepts within such versions would be dignity, entitlement and solidarity.

Based on the theorizing of social psychologist Michael Billig and colleges we argue that this endeavor will not be an easy task. According to Billig (1996) people are often aware of rhetorical contexts when talking about potentially controversial issues. As members of society we relate our statements to ongoing debates. From this position we will show how right-wing populists have referred to merit in attempts to contrast worthy and unworthy groups of society. Our argument is that this right-wing contamination of merit is well known and for this reason people will be cautious when encountering claims that old people have built the society. Furthermore, the division between worthy and unworthy is not just a result of this specific claims-making. Billig (et al. 1988) have shown that there are similarities between formal ideologies and everyday reasoning in the sense that ideological tensions and dilemmas appear in the ordinary reasoning and thinking of people. Ideological and philosophical dilemmas are not issues that solely belong to professional theoreticians. Ideology appears on every level of reasoning within our society. From this position we argue that the singling out of less merited groups is an inherent aspect of the concept of merit itself, as it has been established within our society. Versions of "bad" merit are likely to surface in almost any kind of elaborate reasoning about the achievements and effort of older people as soon as the issue of injustice is mentioned. Any attempt to reclaim merit from right-wing populists will encounter tendencies to single out populations associated with characteristics adverse to those mentioned as typical of older veterans.

Merited and unmerited groups

It is clear that merit has the capacity to single out and stigmatize unmerited groups. People who demand welfare "by virtue of having shouldered the duties of citizenship" (Vincent, Patterson & Wale, 2001), frequently comment on others that have not fulfilled such duties. When studying the actual use of merit, it turns out that the concept has not just emphasized relations among generations of the life-course, as suggested by Nelson (1982) and Nordenfelt (2003). It has been used to create difference in relation to "especially unmerited" and "especially unworthy" groups and individuals: refugees/immigrants, criminals, to some extent young people, and of course politicians. On one hand, comparisons between merited and unmerited groups have underscored images of injustice in old age policies. On the other hand some claims-makers, such as the Swedish pensioner's party *The Senior's Party*[3], seem to have used the proposed merit of pensioners to specifically attack groups labeled as unworthy but favored (Nilsson 2005; Sutorius 1998). Comparisons usually include the cost for meals in prisons and nursing homes, and are followed by suggestions that older people in nursing homes should switch places with convicts in prisons.

In Sweden, as in countries like Austria, Denmark, France and the United Kingdom claims-makers have developed arguments about merit among seniors into a critique of unworthy groups that are said to thrive at the expense of honest, hard-working people. The above-cited debate about a Swedish television documentary on nursing home neglect provides examples of this rhetoric. One viewer contrasted the efforts of older people and taxpayers with the alleged corruption among politicians: "Old people have built society and now political parasites feather their nests at the expense of taxpayers. How dare they????" Another viewer related the welfare of older people with costs for immigrants and a generous system of social assistance: "Sweden harbors too many social-assistance recipients and immigrants. Clean up the swamp of public assistance, so that our elderly who have built society can get the care they are worthy of." The point is that the occurrence of a comparison that highlights *injustice* actually creates confusion about the aim of the claims-maker. A reader's letter to the editor of a Swedish newspaper may label suggestions to switch places between long-term elder care and prisons "The solution to the problem of old age and crime policy," as if it was one single problem.[4] In this particular comment it was suggested that crime rates would decrease if criminals had to suffer the misery of nursing homes instead of the present luxury of prisons. When such propositions also refer to arrangements and problems that no longer exist in elder care, it appears that the issue is not primarily the welfare of seniors. In a study of an edited Internet debate administered by *The Senior's Party* Nilsson (2005) discovered that problems associated with immigration policy and crooked politicians were the two most prominent features of published articles, besides descriptions of deprived and victimized seniors. These themes were sometimes debated as problems in themselves and sometimes used to explain why older people did not receive the welfare they were entitled to according to party members. In the forum merit was used to establish difference between categories that had and had not made efforts for the good of society. In a well-known manner, pensioners were described as builders of society. Participants of the debate also compared the welfare devoted to immigrants with

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3 Seniorpartiet, formerly known as the *Sweden's Pensioners' Interest Party – SPI* (*Sveriges Pensionärers Intresseparti – SPI*)

4 "Fattig pensionär" [Poor pensioner], Letter to the editor, *Östgöta Correspondenten*, April 17, 2004.

the poverty among "Swedish" pensioners as if this was *one single issue*:

> "I read the other day in SkD [Skånska Dagbladet, a Swedish newspaper] that a group of seven orphans [meaning children arriving in Sweden without parents] in the suburb of Rosengård cost 4.5 millions every year. For two pensioners with 150.000 kronor in gross pension (above average) such a sum will last for pension payments during 15 years."

The commentator stressed the antagonistic relation between pensioners and immigrants through the conclusion that "the government pits immigrants against pensioners." In the pensioner's party's debate, this antagonism also appeared in numerous comments on older immigrants. Older immigrants were excluded from the category of pensioners and described as a group that unlike older Swedes had not paid taxes or contributed to the welfare of society. In particular many commentators found the special allowance for pensioners with low or no pension (Äldreförsörjningsstödet, ÄFS) abhorrent:

> "We have by far paid for our pension and our old age. The government has drained the AP-funds [pension funds] of 314 billions to cover government expenses. Money that was paid to cover our pensions. If we elders are so costly, how is it that you can care for other countries older persons, relatives to immigrants, and give them an allowance exempt from taxation? /…/ How does it add up? We can afford those we give allowances, but not those who pay tax!"[5]

As seen in the quote merit was linked to paying tax, which connects to a national community; the pension is taxed but the allowances are not. Older immigrants receiving such allowance were excluded from any contract among generations and regarded as immigrants rather than pensioners, as parasites on the welfare

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5 Maria Sundberg, 2003, *Hur går det ihop?[How does it add up?]*

state. As in many comments expressions like "we elders" and "we pensioners" were used to describe ethnically Swedish pensioners.

It is interesting to note that the rhetorical context invoked in *the Senior's Party's* debate is rather similar to that of the citizenship-approach mentioned previously. In both cases the claims-making has been presented as a defensive act. Descriptions of pensioners as veterans have been used to counter proposed images of older people as a costly burden and ideas that pension funds are a budget post that governments can manipulate to balance a deficit. But where the citizenship-approach has focused on the intergenerational contract, *the Senior's Party* has placed pensioners in an antagonistic relationship to immigrants and (crooked) politicians, thus making its claims-making activities a case of populism.

Merit and populism

It is clear that merit has become a rhetorical tool of right-wing populist and racist claims-makers in some countries. For instance, before the 2002 election, the youth organization of the "nationalist" party the Sweden-Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) launched a campaign with the catch phrase "Don't touch my grandma." This campaign juxtaposed the plight of the pensioners who were said to have built the country of Sweden with the alleged 235 billion kronor yearly spent on a failed immigration policy. Like claims by French populist Jean-Marie Le Pen and Danish populist Pia Kjærsgaard the campaign also framed fear of crime among elderly people – which was implied to be a result of immigration – as an important issue of old age policies (Jönson 2002). In Great Britain, one of the slogans of the British *National Front* has been: "Pensioners before asylum seekers".

Veteranship has, in the vocabulary of Knoll (2001), been heavily contaminated by "bad" populism, and is indeed one of the prominent

features of this version of populism. Since the creation of contrast between worthy and unworthy groups has become well known, the phrase "we who have built society" may evoke images of xenophobia that many people regard as unsympathetic or dangerous. In many countries blatant attacks on "unworthy" groups evoke strong resistance. Even in countries where populists have not framed old age policies and immigration or crime policy as one single issue, claims that seniors are special since they have built society may still be perceived as attempts to earn status at the expense of marginalized groups. To describe seniors as veterans is thus hazardous even for the senior rights movement. In Sweden the struggling existence of *The Senior's Party* illustrates these hazards. Established political parties and pensioners' organizations have distanced themselves from this small party. In many public debates images of seniors as veterans have been aimed at strengthening the position of the in-group at the expense of different out-groups. In large parts of Europe right-wing populists have aimed at showing that the hard working people is cheated by politicians and people that have not fulfilled their duties as citizens. Populist parties have presented unifying images of "the people" in relation to opposites as the "power-bloc" and different "parasites" who are favored as "pets" by the corrupt power-bloc (Westlind, 1996 p. 164). A typology illustrating this version of veteranship could divide between deserving and non-deserving populations who are either poor or non-poor.

Older people stereotypically appear in two positions of this typology, either as *deserving poor* among low-income workers, single mothers and the non-voluntary unemployed, or as *deserving non-poor* among other people who have paid taxes and earned some wealth through hard work. The *non-deserving poor* typically include groups of immigrants, criminals and other groups who are said to prey on

the welfare system. Politicians and bureaucrats, who are perceived as corrupt, belong in the category of *non-deserving non-poor*, alongside with greedy company executives. This categorizing not only brings together poor and non-poor groups of elderly people. It establishes a difference between "the people" and non-deserving outsiders who are, in the popular debate, regarded as an opposite to citizens. Appearing as merited and therefore possible to use in attacks on supposedly unmerited groups, older people have become "pets" for populist claims-makers. It could even be argued that the class-less status of older people could be used to promote the unity and transcendence of classes typical of fascism.
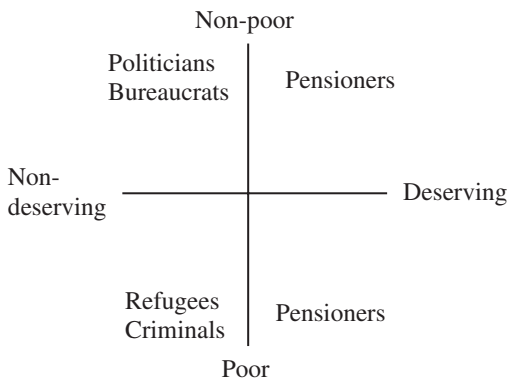

Figure 2

Good merit and bad merit

In this article, we have investigated a suggestion about alternative images for seniors proposed by Nelson in a 1982 article – that the senior rights movement should promote images of older people as merited veterans. Such images seem to resonate well with popular ideas about intergenerational dependency and redistribution and may be used to counter images of older people as a burden to the young or to society as such. It is also clear that many older people feel that they have made sacrifices

for society and should be repaid for this. Merit is one of few trump cards available for senior rights movements. Following Knoll (2001) we tentatively refer to this as "good" merit. If we relate this reasoning to the typology of sameness and difference (Figure 1) it seems that merit works best when older people are compared with people in mid-life and youth, since it highlights previous contributions and contracts between generations. Simply put, the citizens of society are divided in two or three categories: those who have already made sufficient contributions to society and those who are now making or have not yet made such contributions. This "good" merit has the capacity to bridge conflicts between generations and is also a rhetorical tool that unions may use to fight for better pensions and the welfare of the working class. Old people become "our future selves" in the minds of younger generations (Nelson, 1982 p.165). Younger people become "our past selves" in the minds of older generations. The quality of care and service is also likely to increase if care workers feel that older people really deserve the care they receive. As shown by Wreder (2005) care workers do refer to merit as a dignity of older people when talking about their needs.

In practice merit has proved to be an ambiguous and even dangerous trump card as it constantly evokes accusations against "less worthy" groups. This is partly an effect of established ideological contexts similar to those described by Knoll. But to some extent the appearance of "bad" merit seems to be an inherent logic of the concept as it has been developed within our society; the unmerited is a necessary part of this binary opposition between merited and unmerited. The division between worthy and unworthy (voluntary and involuntary, deserving and non-deserving) groups has actually been fundamental to charity and welfare for as long as those institutions have existed. To foster the duties and responsibilities attached to citizenship has been a core task within social work, as well as to divide between those who act according to those goals and those who do not (Villadsen, 2004). The idea that someone is worthy or deserving of welfare is very hard to develop into any claims-making without mentioning others that do not possess these qualities. This is particularly true as soon as any kind of *injustice* is at stake, since injustice derives its meaning from comparisons. As is evident from the discussion above, available populations to single out as less merited also belong outside the debate about a contract between generations. Criminals and immigrants have appeared as competitors and counterparts to pensioners, alongside with greedy politicians. This is exactly what happened in the interviews of Wreder (2005) where care workers developed their reasoning on the dignity of older people into comments about immigration. The idea was that money was spent on less worthy populations. As soon as "good" merit is developed in any elaborate reasoning about injustice, "bad" merit is likely to appear. Even socialist claims-making of the 1940s juxtaposed the achievements of older people to the non-contributing lifestyle of other members of society. When trying to free old people from the humiliating practices used by authorities that administered poverty-aid, the representatives of the radical pensioners' organization presented a division between the veterans of the working class and so called *parasites*. The editor of the radical pensioners' magazine frequently argued that society favored Social Democratic politicians and parasites (i.e. people with antisocial behavior) instead of the pensioners who had built the society. Below follows a typical comparison from 1948: "The yearly cost at the prison of Långholmen runs up to 7,000 kronor per individual. In old age homes, the cost per person per year is 2,250."[6] Many citizens who were

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6 *Pensionären* 1948:3, "Allas lika rätt" [The equal rights of all], pp. 16-17.

sympathetic toward the cause of the movement were repelled by these attacks on vulnerable groups, especially as they reminded them of the vocabulary developed under the Nazi regime in Germany. During the 1940s the editor of the radical magazine even complained about reforms that benefited children, calling such spending a logical summersault: "Should not those who have contributed a lifetime of work be paid before those who, it is hoped, will contribute the same lifetime of work?"

Merit may thus be described as a *dilemmatic* concept (Billig et al. 1988) with an inherent capacity to develop "good" and "bad" versions or themes. When using the typologies outlined in this article, it appears that an attempt to reclaim merit from "bad" populism is dependent on how contexts and comparisons are invoked. Following Knoll (2001) we suggest that "good" merit involves references to the life-course and solidarity among generations where citizens are either already or soon/not yet fully merited. It refers to the responsibility of governments and employers towards the working population beyond their working years. But as shown above, even comparisons between older people and children/youth have the potential to evoke conflict between vulnerable groups and single out less worthy populations. Our overall conclusion is therefore that images of seniors as veterans of society work well as an underlying or defensive moral framework within society, but that attempts to develop these images into claims-making tend to bring forth comparisons and accusations against unworthy categories and citizens. The "contrary themes" (Billig et al. 1988 p. 17) of merit exist side by side in political claims-making as well as ordinary reasoning. To deal with this dilemma is thus a constant challenge in old age policies and in any debate dealing with relations between older people and other members of society.

Acknowledgements

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