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NAVIGATING HARDSHIP: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH POVERTY IN OLD AGE

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the practical strategies used by older people living in poverty to navigate their social worlds, which, applying Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, are framed by 'positional suffering' due to low social status. Qualitative data gathered from biographical interviews reveal strategies that include adjusting one's aspirations to what is attainable, adapting one's needs to match necessities, learned self-sufficiency, relentless prioritisation, an emphasis on cost-consciousness and stringent conservation, prioritisation by sacrifice and dispositions to 'make something out of nothing'. Crucially, these strategies emphasise that older people living in poverty are active agents navigating through hardship.

Keywords: old age, poverty, practical strategies, habitus, habitus of necessity

AFFRONTARE LE AVVERSITÀ: STRATEGIE PRATICHE PER GESTIRE L'INDIGENZA IN ETÀ AVANZATA

SINTESI

Il presente articolo analizza le strategie pratiche messe in atto dagli anziani che vivono in povertà per muoversi nel proprio mondo sociale, che, applicando il quadro teorico di Pierre Bourdieu, sono inquadrate entro la "sofferenza di posizione" dovuta al basso status sociale. I dati qualitativi raccolti dalle interviste biografiche rivelano strategie che includono l'orientamento delle aspirazioni a ciò che è raggiungibile, l'adattamento dei bisogni alle necessità, l'apprendimento dell'autosufficienza, la continua assegnazione di priorità, l'enfasi sull'attenzione ai costi, la propensione al sacrificio e la disposizione a 'creare qualcosa dal nulla'. Fondamentalmente, si tratta di strategie da cui gli anziani in povertà emergono come soggetti attivi che navigano attraverso le difficoltà.

Parole chiave: vecchiaia, povertà, strategie pratiche, habitus, habitus della necessità

INTRODUCTION[1]

Population ageing is a global phenomenon in the 21st century, and it is forecast that the number of people aged 65 and over will exceed the number of young people by 2050. The world's population is also expected to continue to grow over the next 50 or 60 years, reaching a peak of around 10.3 billion people in the mid-2080s, up from 8.2 billion in 2024 (UN, 2024). One in 11 people is now 65 or older, and the UN predicts that one in six will reach 65 by 2050 and one in three by 2150 (UN, 2019). The proportion of people aged over 80 is increasing the most, and this trend is also expected to continue. As life expectancy increases, so do the inequalities and risks related to old age, including poverty, which is the focus of our research and this paper. Considering that the population of older people is very heterogeneous, that the inequalities that manifest themselves in poverty are rooted in historical socio-political developments and that they cannot be explained solely in the context of an individual's current situation, life-course research is important for the study of poverty.

Old age poverty in Slovenia remains an underexplored research area. Existing studies in the social sciences have primarily focused on specific groups of older people – such as single, widowed women – their health challenges, the accessibility of services and certain strategies for coping with poverty in old age (Stropnik et al., 2010; Hlebec et al., 2010; 2016). Building on this body of work, this study seeks to further explore the strategies employed by older people living in poverty to navigate the hardships of everyday life by answering two research questions: Considering the formative power of 'ordinary suffering', how do such experiences shape an individual's orientation towards the world in terms of their expectations, aspirations and needs? What practical strategies do older people employ to engage with and navigate the hardships of everyday life?

This study seeks to complement existing research by viewing older people as active and knowledgeable agents who strive to navigate the constraining conditions of the world. To achieve this, we begin with an overview of studies examining the strategies they use to cope with hardship, followed by an introduction to the Bourdieusian theoretical framework that underpins our analysis. We then outline the study's methodology, present the empirical findings and conclude with a discussion embedded within the Bourdieusian framework.

NAVIGATING HARDSHIP

Old age is commonly perceived as a vulnerable stage of life characterised by, amongst other factors, reduced income and limited opportunities for consumption (Filipovič Hrast & Hlebec, 2015). Many people enter old age in poor health, often as a consequence of lifelong deprivation, and poverty becomes a significant determinant of health for older adults because it affects the conditions in which they live, what kind of food they can afford to eat, where they can shop, what health care they can access and so on (cf. Ostwald & Dyer, 2011, 71). Older people are also generally more susceptible to social isolation, but this is even more pronounced amongst those in poverty, who often find themselves living on the margins of society (Randel et al., 1999). For many, poverty has been a defining condition throughout their lives, preventing them from saving for retirement, covering the costs of daily living and especially maintaining social relationships.

Older people develop various life strategies and coping mechanisms to manage poverty. In an extensive qualitative study of older adults in Slovenia, Hlebec et al. (2010, 43–85) conceptualised coping as a range of behaviours and actions that enable older people to function more effectively within their circumstances. They classified such strategies along three dimensions: (1) the level of activity (passive or active), (2) the type of actor (individual, family or community) and (3) the direction of action (inward- or outward-oriented).

Active strategies involve engagement and the use of available resources to mitigate social and financial deprivation and can include seeking additional sources of income and goods, achieving food self-sufficiency and sharing expenses amongst family members. However, as people age and their health deteriorates, the effectiveness of such strategies diminishes, leading to their gradual replacement by what Hlebec et al. (2010, 43–85) refer to as 'passive' strategies. These strategies primarily focus on restricting expenditures – reducing essential needs, limiting discretionary spending on treats and leisure activities and relying on support from organisations and associations. Older people who adopt passive strategies often face significant challenges in covering unexpected expenses and affording necessities, such as meat or adequate heating (Filipovič Hrast & Hlebec, 2015).

The second dimension considers strategies employed by socially isolated individuals with dysfunctional or limited social networks; family coping strategies used by those residing with family members in the same household; and community coping strategies, which can

1 The study received financial support from the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (research core funding No. P5-0183; research project *Everyday life and life course of old people living in poverty*, funding No. J5-4587). The funder played no role in study design, collection, analysis, and interpretation of data neither in the decision to submit the article for publication. They accept no responsibility for contents.

include both formal (institutional care and social engagement) and informal (neighbourhood and community-based) social support. Both formal and informal support mechanisms have been found to play a crucial role in mitigating social exclusion (Filipovič Hrast & Hlebec, 2015). The third dimension distinguishes between inward-oriented actions, which focus on self-sufficiency as a means of managing poverty, and outward-oriented actions, which involve engaging with external support systems, including family and community networks, to alleviate financial and social hardship.

Intergenerational poverty is also a significant risk factor. The provision of care in old age is predominantly regarded as a family responsibility, particularly in countries in which formal care systems are less developed. Even in many developed countries, family care often occurs within extended families, with multiple generations cohabiting; such arrangements facilitate ageing in the community and outside institutions. In many developing countries, family also serves as the primary source of subsistence for older people (Randel et al., 1999), but in poor families, the capacity of younger generations to provide care for elderly family members is often constrained. The long-term consequences of poverty and economic insecurity can thus extend across multiple generations and, in extreme cases, both the younger and older generations can be at significant risk (Randel et al., 1999). Therefore, it is essential to examine poverty in old age and the coping strategies employed from a life-course perspective (Milne, 2022, 19–20).

INTRODUCING A BOURDIEUSIAN FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that underpins our empirical analysis is grounded in Bourdieusian theory. To understand the power of living in poverty to structure a person's orientation to the world and the practical logic of navigating hardship, we will rely predominantly on two concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu throughout his work: *habitus* and *symbolic violence*. In the Bourdieusian sense, a habitus is a system of dispositions or inclinations and practical knowledge that is structured by objective social conditions and that, in turn, structures an agent's way of moving through the world (Atkinson, 2015; 2016; Bourdieu, 2020; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Wacquant, 2016; cf. Perger, 2023). Habitus formation is grounded in symbolic violence, which is predominantly invisible and subtle, imposing a dominant vision of the social world and its divisions (Bourdieu, 1992; 1996–1997; 2001) and acting as a structuring force for an agent's habitus. It is considered violent because it enforces an agent's 'social destiny' as emerging through their social position – and, in so doing, creates what Bourdieu calls *ontological correspondence*. This a correspondence between objective conditions and subjective dispositions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which tend to result in *ontological complicity* (Bourdieu, 1996–1997) and a fairly unquestioned social order.

This complicity manifests in an agent's view of the world as *taken for granted* – the practical *sense of one's place* and its tacit acceptance, including the limits it imposes. In short, precisely because the agent's dispositions to act and to engage with the world in particular ways are the product of the social world, the world itself tends to be taken for granted just as it is. This 'taken-for-granted-ness' tends to ensure that the social world – regardless of its hierarchies and dominations – *remains* just as it is by shaping an agent's dispositions towards the existing objective conditions, thus securing the ontological correspondence and complicity of dominated groups. In this sense, one's orientation to the world and practical strategies of engaging with it need to be understood as being *structured* by objective conditions – as being actualised by those conditions – but also as *structuring*, through the person's orientation and practices, those very same conditions.

We find this Bourdieusian framework particularly useful for studying older people's practical strategies for three main reasons. Firstly, Bourdieu's work, as evident in his seminal book on social suffering in contemporary society, *The Weight of the World* (1999, 4), enables us to approach poverty in its doubly captivating sense: to grasp the effects or 'real' suffering of *material* poverty (*la grande misère*), which are usually considered and problematised as *material* effects, and the effects of *ordinary* suffering (*la petite misère*) – the side of material poverty that is usually hidden and overlooked but at least as dark and which takes many *non-material* forms.[2] Put differently, with the help of Bourdieu, we approach material poverty as a phenomenon whose effects and consequences are not limited to the material but which reach 'deeper' by forming agents' orientation both to themselves and to the social world. Being exposed to 'positional suffering' – the suffering stemming from one's low social position and poverty (Bourdieu et al., 1999, 4; cf. Sayer, 2002) – shapes and moulds an agent; thus, the Bourdieusian approach to poverty enables us to grasp the symbolic violence of poverty and its many – including non-material – 'faces'.

Secondly, the Bourdieusian framework – particularly its concepts of symbolic power, violence and domination – encourages an examination of the effects of power and the reach of objective conditions in contexts in which individuality and individual responsibility are usually emphasised – in both everyday perceptions and socio-political discourse. Given the extensive intergenerational transmission of poverty – a reproductive logic in which people born into poverty are likely to remain

2 As thematised by Reid (2002, 348), Bourdieu's approach refrains from approaching the social suffering in contemporary society purely in terms of *poverty* but rather aims to elucidate both poverty *and* the misery that poverty produces.

poor – a Bourdieusian approach urges us to 'discover [symbolic power] where it is least visible, where it is most completely misrecognised …' (Bourdieu, 1992, 163) and where it is most often misinterpreted as the responsibility and choices of the individual, blaming them for their own poverty. We therefore conceptualise poverty as a matter of symbolic violence, operating through mechanisms of symbolic domination that shape an agent's past, present and future, which enables us to distance ourselves from what *appears* to be individual malaise and to instead see that what appears "most dramatically intimate" is in fact "the most impersonal" (Bourdieu et al., 1999, 213, 391). It enables us to account for peoples' subjective dispositions – to be 'attuned to the structure of domination of which they are the product' (Bourdieu, 2001, 41) – by accounting for objective social conditions (Bourdieu et al., 1999, 213, 391). In other words, an individual may indeed carry the weight, but the weight itself is that of the *world*.

Thirdly, the Bourdieusian approach seeks to transcend the prevalent – but ultimately false – antinomies of subjectivism and objectivism and of voluntarism and determinism (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It encourages us to approach people as *knowing* and *knowledgeable*, and although that knowledge is not (necessarily) theoretical or explicable – the kind easily put into a discourse, which reaches the level of consciousness and has a 'reasoning reason' (Bourdieu, 2000, 50) – people nonetheless possesses *practical knowledge*. Put differently, an agent possesses and embodies 'reasonable reason' (Bourdieu, 2000, 50) – a feel for the game or a practical comprehension and understanding of how the world is and how one should act within its social spaces. Thus, when we refer to the 'strategies' of older people living in poverty, we refer to them in this Bourdieusian sense: as practical actions and ways of engaging with the world and the conditions in which they live – as an 'ordinary order of ordinary existence' (Bourdieu, 2020, 68) – rather than as a matter of a 'calculating subject' who is strategising to improve their stakes, interests or profits (Bourdieu, 2000, 145).

METHODOLOGY

Methods

This article is based on a research project entitled *Everyday Life and Life Course of Old People Living in Poverty* and draws on qualitative empirical data collected through narrative biographical interviews. Qualitative research methods are suitable for gaining in-depth insight into experiential dimensions, and following Harding (2006), we approach narrative biographical interviews not as a method of reproducing an objective and factitious life course but rather as creating space for an interpretatively rich understanding and for the interviewee's reflections upon the past, which are unavoidably shaped by the present. However, looking back to the past from – and accounting for – the perspective of the present does not diminish the significance of the method. On the contrary, recounting one's biography is treated as a process of interpreting and representing one's life course and as an active process of *making* memories even while narrating them (Harding, 2006, 2). In this sense, we understand the biographical narrative interview as a method that – under certain conditions that are in no way simply *given* – enables a particular way of understanding the interviewee. It enables them to 'explain themselves in the fullest sense of the term, that is, to construct their own point of view both about themselves and about the world' and, significantly, to construct this viewpoint as 'justified, not least for themselves' (Bourdieu et al., 1999, 614–615).

For the interviews, a protocol based on an in-depth literature review was created. Following Van Regenmortel et al. (2019), this sought to go beyond the usual three-milestone structure of biographical interview: education, work and retirement. Instead, the protocol was semi-structured to explicitly provide space for the variety of building blocks of everyday life, including both the relational aspect of life and the interviewee's narrative of the present and their imagined – and sometimes feared – future.

Sample

The sampling criteria were aligned with the research aims and questions – specifically, people at least 65 years of age who were below the official poverty threshold in Slovenia for 2024. We sought a high degree of heterogeneity, so purposive sampling was used, considering gender, nationality, marital status and the urban/rural divide. Participants were solicited by region along an axis from the Prekmurje region to the Coastal Karst region, enabling us to sample from areas with different GDPs per capita.[3] We also had the help of institutional gatekeepers, which is an established procedure for reaching marginalised groups (Braun & Clarke, 2013) – specifically, the Centres for Social Work and the Red Cross, whose agents could reach older people living in poverty who might be willing to participate. To ensure transparency, those agents were informed of the research aims and sampling criteria and received instructions to secure consent from the potential interviewees for their personal data

3 According to the SURS data on regional gross domestic products per capita (GDP) in 2022, the Mura region and Central Sava Valley have the lowest GDPs while Central Slovenia and the Coastal-Karst region have the highest.

Table 1: Sample characteristics – aggregated sample.

Age	65–95 years, average 75.4
Gender	13 men, 20 women
Nationality at birth	Slovenian (21), Bosnian (5), Croatian (4), Serbian (2), Polish (1)
Regions	Central Slovenia (6), Coastal Karst (12), Littoral-Inner Carniola (5), Upper Carniola (2), Savinja (2), Mura (2), Drava (2), Central Sava (2)
Level of urbanisation[4]	Densely-populated areas (cities, larger urban centres) (6); intermediate density areas (smaller cities, suburban areas, smaller urban centres) (16); thinly-populated areas (rural areas) (11)
Educational attainment	Unfinished primary school (6), Primary school (18), Vocational school (6), Secondary school (1), University degree (2)
Marital status	Single (6), Married (8), Divorced (9), Widow-er (10)
Household type	One person (23), Two persons (8), Three persons (2)

(names and contact information) to be forwarded to the research team. Five additional participants were enrolled with the help of personal connections and local informants.

The interviews varied in duration from 38 minutes to 238 minutes, with an average of 95 minutes, and were conducted by six interviewers. For six of the participants, two interviews were conducted, meaning a total of 39 interviews with 33 participants. All the participants provided written informed consent, which clearly stated the research aims and procedures and the researchers' obligations. Each received a 20 euros voucher for their participation. All the interviews were audio recorded and anonymised during verbatim transcription. To secure anonymity, each participant received a pseudonym, and the participants' personal data are stored separately from the anonymised empirical data, with access available only to the project team leadership. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana on December 4, 2023 (decision no. 033-3/2023-23).

Analysis

The data were analysed using MAXQDA 22 qualitative data analysis software following a combined deductive-inductive approach.[5] Initially, a broad set of categories was deductively identified based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature. After thoroughly rereading the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the data, the researchers then inductively identified additional categories from the participants' narratives, establishing more detailed coding levels, with each category and code clearly defined. The coding was conducted by two researchers, who independently analysed and coded the same ten transcripts, allowing for cross-validation and reliability in the interpretation of the data. The researchers then discussed the coding process and refined the coding scheme using an inductive approach. Any remaining issues and coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion, which is an established procedure to ensure intercoder reliability (Saldaña, 2009). The remaining 23 transcripts were divided between the two researchers, who each analysed and coded their respective portions of the remaining data. Intercoder reliability was ensured in regular meetings and discussions between the researchers to address and resolve any issues until the data analysis was complete.

RESULTS

We present data on the practical strategies employed by older people to navigate life in poverty, which are organised into three broad categories, each representing a key distinction between the coping strategies. Keeping in mind the research questions, which relate to one's orientation to the world in terms of expectations, aspirations and needs and the practical strategies used to navigate daily hardships, the first category captures the participants' narratives of becoming accustomed to

4 This classification is based on Settlements by level of urbanisation 2017 by the Statistical Office, Republic of Slovenia (STAT, n.d.). In densely-populated areas at least 50% of the population lives in high-density clusters, while in intermediate density areas less than 50% of the population lives in rural grid cells and less than 50% lives in high-density clusters. Thinly-populated areas have more than 50% of the population living in rural grid cells.

5 The empirical data supporting this study are securely stored by the project team and are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

poverty, mostly from childhood onward, and thus developing a form of 'skilfulness' in navigating hardship out of necessity. The second category focuses on one's broader orientation towards the world, while the third examines the practical aspects of navigating hardship, as evidenced by the participants' particular dispositions or inclinations to act. We focus on analysing and discussing those strategies that are subjective and focused on individual agentic potential to act rather than those that incorporate other individuals and institutions in the sense of relying on help and support from other actors.

Primary formation of the habitus of necessity

Bourdieu approached his main conceptual building block – the habitus – as a matter of embodied social necessity (Bourdieu, 2008; 2010) – that is, the social world and its tendencies become embodied in the agent thus ensuring position-specific practices. In *Distinctions* (2010), Bourdieu elaborated on two main types of this embodiment: a taste for luxury and a taste for necessity. While each is a product of social conditions, the former is marked by a distance *from* necessity, which stems from an agent's possession of capitals, whereas the latter is burdened by urgencies and necessities stemming from a lack of capitals, which, by extension, results in the 'inescapable deprivation of necessary goods' (Bourdieu, 2010, 373).

The relevance of the primary habitus – whose dispositions are the most durable and which is formed in early childhood, within the family setting and the social conditions surrounding it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 133) under conditions of necessity – is evident from the participants' narratives on being used to living in poverty. More explicitly, it is clear from those that recall childhood as the beginning of a long process of embodying the necessary skills to navigate hardship. Because they acquired those skills early by growing up in poverty, they can skilfully navigate through the same conditions of hardship now. We can therefore speak of a *hardened habitus of necessity* – of being used to living in poverty when younger and thus used to living in poverty when older: the past blurs into the present in an all-too-familiar guise. It is early exposure that equips an agent with the necessary dispositions to navigate hardship when older:

> *No, I just save* [money]. *Because my mother was also strict, because she worked for families that were frugal.*[6] (Majda, F, 83)[7]

This hardened habitus of necessity also encompasses a particular disposition of *necessitated self-sufficiency*, which is a skill mastered early that persists into one's old age. Because the world is unreliable, unpredictable and unsupportive of one's life, one feels the need to rely – by necessity – on oneself:

> *Everything we struggled through in life, we* [struggled] *on our own. We didn't turn to anyone, not to the union, not to the social workers … We just knew this is how much salary we have, this is how much money we have – and we got by. We lived in such a way that … that we didn't run out. Somehow, we always had just enough*. (Enis, M, 73)

Most of the participants were, in fact, born into poverty and were living in poverty in their old age.[8] The primary structure of the habitus of necessity thus tends to extend into one's old age and does so precisely because today's social conditions remain the same as yesterday's and thus call into action the same dispositions that were formed when young. Their practical sense – 'a feel for the game' – has been mastered such that 'we got by' precisely because of continuous exposure to the same conditions that condemn a person to 'just get by'.

The *amor fati* and 'it is what it is' orientation to the world

The hardened habitus of necessity also encompasses what Bourdieu called a 'form of adaptation to and consequent[ly] acceptance of the necessary' (Bourdieu, 2010, 373). In his book *In Other Words*, Bourdieu (1990a, 11) referred to the 'acceptance of the necessary' as a 'sour grapes' factor, representing the adjustments of an agent's dispositions to their social position – to what is available and reachable for them given their social standing. Motivated by 'sour grapes', an agent forgoes any hopes of flying high; instead, their hopes, expectations and orientation to the present and future are firmly grounded in the necessities of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

6 The quotes were translated from Slovene to English by the authors.

7 Every quote is accompanied by a name, gender designation and age at the time of the interview.

8 The space limit does not allow us to compare in detail two different groups of older people living in poverty, those who were born in poverty and who continue to live in poverty in older age on one hand, and those who were not born in poverty, but fell into poverty later in life, on the other. However, data implies that the second group, which experienced downward social mobility, navigates through the hardship in older age with greater difficulties in terms of affects as well as of adjusting dispositions to now changed conditions. This is aligned with other studies on cleft habitus, of habitus being formed in one set of social conditions, but later being realised in a different set of conditions (Bourdieu, 2008; cf. Perger, 2023).

Rather than this 'acceptance of the necessary' being understood as a matter for the individual alone, we approach it in relational terms as a product of the harmonised relationship between social conditions on one hand and the agent's dispositions on the other, which are themselves a product of the same conditions. The alignment of conditions and dispositions creates an acceptance of one's social destiny as a given – almost unchangeable, barring some sort of a miracle – and not amenable to questioning. Bourdieu (2000, 143) calls this *amor fati* – the phenomenon of making a virtue out of necessity, of loving and accepting what is given. This orientation to the world and one's place in it forms a foundation for one's practical strategies: taking a social destiny of poverty as a necessity, one can only develop practical strategies to carry that weight. This is evident in the participants' narratives of shaping their expectations, aspirations and needs to the realisable and achievable. Put differently, their expectations and needs are framed within the path of their social destiny and the limits of their social position – in short, their poverty.

> *I don't have any special needs; I don't need … Well, I don't want to borrow* [from others]*, and I don't want to ask* [others] *… Well, you see I have food; I'm clothed – I'm more than clothed.* (Peter, M, 73)

> *No. I've already become used to it.*
> Interviewer: *So, could you say that, at this moment … with the life you have now, you are satisfied?*
> *Yes. I have to be, in the end, right?* [pause] (Bine, M, 68)

> *I have been happy my whole life; I have no complaints … Well, I don't know, that's just how I am. And even if I live to be a hundred, I can't say otherwise;* [life] *has been good to me, and [I hope] it will continue to be good.* (Majda, F, 83)

This adjustment, which was evident amongst the participants, is not necessarily accompanied by sighs of resignation or desperation because that would imply a desire for something else that must be abandoned – a drive to live one's life otherwise. On the contrary, the adjustment is experienced as a matter of fact – 'it is what it is' and 'that's just how I am' – or as a matter of *pragmata,* as something one simply needs to get used to. In that sense, *amor fati* represents a guiding principle of practical strategies skillfully developed to navigate the world of hardship 'as it is', to which we turn in the next section.

Practical knowledge: Subjective dispositions to manoeuvre through necessities

In terms of practical strategies – framed by the *amor fati* orientation towards and relationship with the world – we identified six distinctive, practical strategies for navigating hardship from the participants' narratives. These strategies are interrelated – all forged by necessity, urgency and lack of capitals – yet each has a particular focus. The first two practical strategies focus on *prioritisation*, and we begin with *prioritisation by sacrifice*. This strategy encompasses giving up something – an object or practice – to be able to satisfy needs that are more pressing. What one gives up varies and may be something small, such as buying coffee[9] or postponing the purchase of a necessary household appliance. The key point of this strategy is that one gives up something deemed less necessary to have something else deemed more necessary. This prioritisation, effectively necessitated by social conditions, is thus always accompanied by a sacrifice, and the potential scope of such upfront losses – all that an agent might give up to satisfy basic needs – is vast.

> *My wife says, 'Do you have a euro to go* [get a coffee]*?' I said, 'I'll use that euro to buy half a loaf of bread, the cheap one!' And then … what do I see? English bread – €7.99 per kilo of English bread!* [with indignation and bitter sarcasm] (Zoran, M, 73)

> Interviewer: *Has it ever happened, for example, that you needed to buy something big but simply didn't have the means?*
> *Yes,* [the money] *just wasn't there, you know. We had to wait a long time for it to come.* (Anica, F, 73)

> *And then he said, 'Are you going to take the stove now too?' I said, 'No, no, no, let's leave it! The washing machine will be more important if it breaks down!' That will need to be taken care of first.* (Sonja, F, 65)

This practical strategy of prioritisation by sacrifice is closely related to the second prioritisation strategy: *relentless prioritisation*, based on the idea of 'never falling behind'. In this context, paying monthly expenses takes absolute precedence, and all other expenses are subordinate.

> *Because the bills need to be paid … but you also need to eat! And if you don't pay one* [bill]*, the next month it's even worse. The first thing I do is pay everything. Because if you pile them up…* (Sonja, F, 65)

9 Despite appearing innocent, such small practices predominantly serve as the anchoring rituals of everyday life, whose accessibility tend to be taken for granted. However, the data show that the ability to take these micro rituals for granted is unequally distributed.

Interviewer: *Did you always do it this way, paying the bills first and then everything else? Regardless of how little money there was?*
I first paid the bills, like for [health insurance] *and such*. (Majda, F, 83)

Practical sense guided by this prioritisation strategy reflects an ominous reality: 'because if you pile them up…'. This warning highlights the consequences of what happens if one 'falls behind', which can be particularly dire because one's space for manoeuvre is already narrow and confined to necessities, which is reflected in Majda's narrative of having once 'fallen behind':

Once, one year, things got so bad because I had to pay for what-not, and [after paying the bills]*, I couldn't even buy a litre of oil for a month. But I got through that … but this* [was a lesson] *– when I couldn't even buy a litre of oil. But I survived; I told myself I needed to, and that's it.* (Majda, F, 83)

The next two practical strategies reflect dispositions towards *cost-consciousness* and *stringent conservation* and encompass practices that aim to lower the costs of everyday life as much as possible, either in everyday consumption or by lowering monthly costs – which may already be absolutely prioritised, as described above. Both strategies – the first implying a cognitive approach to the world that entails constant calculations of what is affordable for 'the likes of them' and the second being a practical realisation of that approach – show how the practical sense of people in poverty is burdened with the sense of necessities and urgencies. The need to 'get by' exerts cognitive and affective pressure on how one navigates everyday life, which does not reflect spontaneity but rather constant and almost subconscious calculations.[10] This is illustrated by the following quotes, which highlight the extent of the cost-consciousness one can be forced to develop by social conditions:

Interviewer: *What about stores? Do you pay attention to where things cost less?*
Yes, we go from store to store and calculate where things cost less. Then we go back to where it's cheaper. You know exactly where you need to go. (Admir, M, 81, and his son)

I know exactly what I will buy and where … Otherwise, I keep an eye on sales, for example, for laundry detergent. I check everything, all the ads … So, for bigger things … we calculate how much toilet paper we use, just so you know! We have to buy enough to last the entire month. (Sonja, F, 65)

This disposition towards stringent conservation entails practical efforts to lower monthly costs and is thus closely related to prioritisation by sacrifice because one may give up an object or practice, such as a heated room, to lower costs and thus be able to pay monthly bills. However, while prioritisation by sacrifice emphasises the practical sacrifices themselves, stringent conservation highlights one's orientation to the world with applies 'tightening the belt' being an all-encompassing principle that grounds every action.

Well … 70 euros. I have two water heaters – this small one and that one over there, for the shower. But I've turned that one off now because … why would you shower now? Yeah … once, twice per month, just to get a little wet … That's it. That one – that one consumes … it's a 60-litre one! (Zdenko, M, 72)

Then the hallway that … I would go down to see the janitor [to turn off the heating in the common corridors] *… I'm saving; I have closed radiators … and I sit in the dark. I've let myself have the TV. I'm stringent with washing – only when I gather enough* [clothes]. *And the bill came to 45 euros*.

Interviewer: *Despite saving, right?*
I have nothing. The light – this, this little light – I bought it for a few euros; it doesn't consume anything … I have dark in here; no point in lighting everything, right, if I'm not afraid of anyone or anything, right? (Sabina, F, 75)

Now that you're at home, yes, it's cold; you can't afford to turn it on to the maximum, right? If I turn it on to the maximum, then goodbye money, then everything goes for electricity, right? You have to be very careful with money; that's what I've learned now. (Janez, M, 75)

These four practical strategies – relentless prioritisation, including by sacrifice, and the dispositions towards cost-consciousness and stringent conservation – are all accompanied by the fifth: the need to *work with what you have*. This broad disposition engages a person's skilfulness in persisting despite social conditions that create an unstable and insecure everyday life. Considering

10 This gives a particular twist to 'personal enterprise' as the ideal form of a contemporary neoliberal person who 'calculate[s] his gains and loses' (Dardot & Laval, 2017, 265). Older people living in poverty calculate costs quite literally, down to minor details, with the goal – most importantly – of achieving net-zero value rather than accumulating profit. Ironically, these calculating practices resemble and approximate more the 'old economic man' rather than the neoliberal entrepreneurial self, who not only calculates but also projects himself into the future and 'works on himself' to maximize his 'human capital' (Dardot & Laval, 2017, 265).

their position, an agent can be forced to 'make something out of nothing' – to seek sources of stability amidst inherent social instability, to find resources to ensure one's persistence and to identify ways to satisfy basic needs. Rather than glorifying practical resourcefulness, this disposition should be understood as being forced by social conditions. This can be seen in the example of Sabina, below, who reported various practices to 'make something' from food that was destined for waste but was nonetheless useable and edible – but only 'if you have nothing'. It can also be seen in the narrative of Ivo, who reported seeking additional income from temporary jobs or casual work, yet because such income was inherently unstable, the promise of those attempts was just as unstable and unpredictable as his living conditions. Thus, at best, the successful pursuit of additional income is a welcome addition to the state of poverty rather than a source of stability. In other words, rather than a *solution* to the urgencies of everyday life, 'making something out of nothing' is simply an urgent response to those same urgencies.

> *He called me and said, 'listen, if by any chance* [you need food]*' – this is not fresh food, right? But if you have nothing, it's good and all, right? Well, … I peel everything, everything, right? Whatever, and then I fry it; you have it for that; you have it for risotto; you have it for making some vegetable pizza; you can use it for everything, right?* (Sabina, F, 75)

> *If I earned 20 euros every day, I would … live well! But … you can't; it's hard … you can get these jobs, but to be able to say every day that you'll get money … you get to work here, there … but these aren't regular jobs.* (Ivo, M, 66)

Finally, the participants described *anticipating and preparing for additional adversities* – the sixth practical strategy. For some, such preparation was unachievable due to their minimal resources, yet for others, anticipation of adversities significantly shaped their orientation to the future. In *Pascalian Meditation* (2000), Bourdieu emphasised how one's relationship with time is a matter of symbolic power and domination as well as social position. For marginalised people – 'people without a future, living at the mercy of what each day brings' (Bourdieu, 2000, 221; for a Bourdieusian discussion on time, cf. Atkinson, 2019) – the relationship with time is burdened by a lack of control over what the future may bring.

Anticipating and preparing for additional adversities mostly comprises hoarding, which Bourdieu (1990b) contrasted with saving. Whereas the latter implies capitalistic accumulation that is available for future investment, the first predominantly implies 'deferred and potential consumption to ensure [an agent's] security' (Bourdieu, 1990b, 227). In this sense, the future is awaited and anticipated fearfully because foresight stems from past and present adversities, making one view any minor or major future adversity as potentially fatal.

> Interviewer: *Are you saving for any particular reason or just to have something on the side? Just to have something on the side. You never know what might come. Death can come quickly, you know.* (Anica, F, 73)

> *There was a loaf of bread on the ground … I put it in the basket and took it with me. Yes, I wouldn't [leave bread on the ground]. Bread is our divine gift, you know. It might not always be available. If there's another harvest like this, with hail, it can destroy everything, you know.* (Majda, F, 83)

The adversities that are anticipated and feared include, as is evident from the participants' narratives, the deaths of significant others, which are feared not only for the deaths themselves but also for the burial costs or the loss of an income stream. Adversities are even envisioned from natural disasters, which may severely hinder one's self-sufficiency practices, such as those related to food production.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Studies of poverty amongst older people predominantly discuss and analyse their everyday lives in broad, generalised terms, and their specific strategies to cope with hardship thus remain underexplored. A notable exception is a qualitative study by Hlebec et al. (2010), which provides an in-depth examination of the life strategies of older adults living in poverty. In that study, the authors categorised these strategies by their focus on activity, actor and direction of action, but we diverge from that typology (Hlebec et al., 2010) to focus on subjective dispositions and practical strategies. We deliberately set aside the relational aspects of practical strategies for navigating hardship, such as reliance on primary social ties, community networks and social institutions, not because they are insignificant but to allow for a more detailed examination of subjective strategies. This approach has enabled us to more thoroughly explore affective adjustments in people's orientations towards the present and future and their practical knowledge and dispositions.

The empirical data show that the participants predominantly rely on what Hlebec et al. (2010) characterised as passive strategies, which is somewhat in line with their finding that such strategies come to dominate as people age and their health deteriorates.

Approaching the question of practical strategies within a Bourdieusian framework presents an older

person as a knowledgeable agent who embodies and is endowed with agentic potentialities. Thus, rather than distinguishing practical strategies by their activity or passivity, we seek to transcend this antinomy and view strategies as *always active* and *agentic* because they inherently manifest an person's *agency to cope* with hardship. However, we do distinguish between various dispositions in considering their main element of practical reason. We thus distinguish practical strategies or dispositions in terms of their affective orientation to living conditions – that is, the *amor fati*. Such an orientation could easily be misunderstood as resignation and passivity, but we argue that it is an active adaptation to past and present living conditions – an adaptation that actively stems from an agent's immersion in social conditions of poverty – and to their conditioning effects, which actualise the disposition to accept the conditions as a given (Bourdieu et al., 1999). If social conditions are experienced as simply given – 'it is what it is', 'that's just how I am' – one must practically learn to carry the weight of that social destiny and thus develop strategies to navigate the hardship.

These strategies can be distinguished by aspects of the agent's *practical* reason or their dispositions – that is, of habitus. We thus identified dispositions of prioritisation – urgently needing to avoid 'falling behind' by relentlessly prioritising what is deemed most necessary and sacrificing what is deemed less urgent in a world full of urgencies; of cost-consciousness and of stringent conservation of the resources at one's disposal; of 'working with what you have' and 'making something out of nothing'; and of anticipating and preparing for additional adversities.

These strategies, we argue, should be understood in the broader context of the everyday lives of older people living in poverty being burdened with constant necessities – what needs to be done to 'get by' – and urgencies – what needs to be done to avoid 'falling behind' – necessitated by the social conditions of hardship. More importantly, these strategies demonstrate an active orientation to the lifeworld of poverty – an active taking of matters into one's own hands, despite the undoubtedly diminished tools and practical resources at one's disposal. Thus, the main factor determining the practical orientation of these strategies is the search for control over what has already happened and what is to come in the near future. However, because 'the real power to control that future' is founded on 'having a grasp on the present itself' (Bourdieu, 2000, 221), the near future is experienced as threatening and unpredictable – and thus accompanied by anticipating and preparing for adversities – and is experienced as such precisely because one's options to control the present are diminished.

With people socially encouraged to take the world for granted, to naturalise and, by extension, to depoliticise it – an easy task given the proliferation and intensification of dominant neoliberal discourses (cf. Dardot & Laval, 2017; Brown, 2019) and the marginalisation of discourses seeking to collectivise contemporary sufferings – the world tends to deliver on its threat of remaining just as it is. For those carrying the weight of the world, the taken-for-granted attitude of 'it is what it is' appears as a Pyrrhic victory. Indeed, this taken-for-granted attitude smooths out and refines the skills for navigating the world of hardship, but it does so at a high price that tends to remain invisible and unaccounted for. This price includes the world and its conditions that remain unchallenged, but perhaps the most of all the ontological complicity of the dominated people themselves with the rules of the social game – the very rules that create their suffering and hardship. In other words, the greatest cost appears to be the effect of symbolic domination par excellence.[11]

11 We thank the reviewer for encouraging us to elaborate on this point.

SPOPRIJEMANJE S STISKAMI VSAKDANA: PRAKTIČNE STRATEGIJE ŽIVLJENJA Z REVŠČINO V STAROSTI

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POVZETEK

V članku analiziramo praktične strategije navigiranja skozi življenje v revščini med starejšimi. Analiza temelji na kvalitativnih podatkih, pridobljenih z metodo narativnih biografskih intervjujev, ki je še posebej primerna metoda za pridobivanje poglobljenega vpogleda v pojavnost življenja v revščini, ki jo lahko celoviteje razumemo le v kontekstu življenjskega trajektorija kot takega. Vzorec predstavlja 33 starejših oseb, ki živijo pod pragom revščine, s katerimi je bilo skupno opravljenih 39 intervjujev. Podatke analiziramo s pomočjo teoretskega okvira Pierra Bourdieuja, ki spodbuja razumevanje revščine z ozirom na njene materialne in simbolne učinke in ki pojavnost revščine neposredno umešča v kontekst razmerij moči. Bourdieujevski pristop obenem spodbuja razumevanje praktičnega delovanja starejših oseb onkraj antinomije subjektivizma in objektivizma. V tem oziru omogoča in spodbuja razumevanje praktičnega delovanja vedočih agentov kot načinov njihovega spoprijemanja s svetom, s pogoji življenja, ki jih oblikuje ta družbeni svet, ter z lastno pozicioniranostjo v njem. Na podlagi tega v prispevku analiziramo praktične strategije, tudi z ozirom na formiranje primarnega habitusa, zaznamovanega s pogoji nujnosti, in privzemanja realnosti revščine kot samoumevne. Z analizo podatkov ločujemo med strategijami prioritizacije – tako nenehne prioritizacije kot tudi prioritizacije, ki terja žrtvovanje in odpovedi; med strategijami nenehnega ozaveščanja stroškov in stroge varčnosti; ter dispoziciji »ustvarjanja nečesa iz ničesar« in anticipiranja dodatnih stisk Podatki razkrivajo ključno tendenco na strani starejših oseb, ki živijo v revščini, tj. privzemanje realnosti revščine kot samoumevne, ki je tudi tista ključna dispozicija, ki agente preusmerja stran od prevpraševanja in problematiziranja same realnosti revščine.

Ključne besede: starost, revščina, praktične strategije, habitus, habitus nuje

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