

**I received from the Head of Academic Advancement Board of the Poznan University of Economics and Business via post official documentation about PhD dissertation of Halina Nadobnik on May 17 2022**

### **Relevance of the thesis**

This thesis examines issues relating to promoting activity amongst older people, within the context of urban ageing. The idea of social activity is a significant theme in policy responses to ageing populations, linked in particular both to initiatives from the World Health Organisation (WHO), and theories associated with productive and successful ageing developed by researchers in the USA. This approach – as the thesis makes clear – may also be linked to pressures on public expenditure and moves to ensure greater independence amongst older people. Although there has been considerable work at international and national levels investigating active ageing policies, this thesis takes a distinctive approach by examining how social activity is interpreted at a local level, and especially within urban neighbourhoods. The thesis formulates two research questions: (1) What is the idea of social activity for older people implemented in Poznan? (2) How is the idea of social activity implemented by urban policies?

The thesis draws upon the theoretical perspective of Actor Network Theory (hereafter ANT), drawing on the inductive perspective of discursive institutionalism. The other main framework drawn upon is glocalisation, an approach which recognises the shift both towards decentralising policies on the one side, but the continuing influence of global forces on the other. The core interests of the thesis are highly relevant both in the context of ageing societies, and in respect of the way this is interacting within urban communities. This has been recognised in developments such as the WHO's Global Network of Age Friendly Cities and Communities, and in policies designed to support older people to remain in their homes and neighbourhoods for as long as they wish. The thesis develops insights on all of these

themes and hence must be judged as highly relevant to current debates in the field of ageing policy.

### **Content and structure of the thesis**

The thesis is divided into the following sections: conceptual framework, ageing in cities, theoretical framework, data collection and analysis, empirical data on social activity, and conclusion. The conceptual overview provides a detailed examination of key theoretical perspectives in social gerontology, from functionalism to critical theory (e.g., page 16). There is an excellent section on urban ageing (p.33 onwards) which helps ground the thesis in the context within which social activity is enacted. There are good links to foundational figures, notably Park, Burgess, Lefebvre, and Marx, as well as later theorists such as Harvey and Castells. The thesis provides a useful survey of the emergence of activity theory (p.38-39), and some of the factors behind influencing the development of this approach. The thesis provides an interesting discussion on ‘research perspectives within social policy’ (p.53), giving emphasis to the institutional school and the role of formal and informal institutions in policy formation.

There is an elaborate discussion of the importance of ‘discursive institutionalism and the role of ideas’ which forms an importance influence on the presentation of the empirical data. A key section of the chapter is definition of ANT and its relevance to the subject of the thesis. This is discussed in considerable detail (pp. 72-86) and makes a good case for its adoption although a more critical approach to any limitations of ANT might have been justified. The thesis is especially interesting on the application of ANT to urban studies (p.81) and I would have been interested to learn more about how it linked to other perspectives (e.g., the political economy approach of theorists such as Harvey). The conceptual framework concludes with a review of glocalisation and its relevance to the thesis.

Section 11.3 provides a review of data collection and analysis, with particular emphasis on the role of the case study method, different

types of observational techniques, the interview, and documentary methods. I wondered how far these different approaches – all of which were used in the study – were in reality a form of ‘triangulation’ and whether recognising this would have added an additional dimension to the study. There was an excellent presentation of the research design (pp.117-125) and the approach to coding adopted by the study.

Section 11.2 starts the discussion about how social activity happens in Poznan, highlighting ‘four phases of social activity enactment’, applied from ANT (p.127). The empirical base is derived from attendance at wide range of events organised by different groups in civil society. It might have been helpful to have more detail at the beginning of this section about the nature of these groups before looking more closely at how interaction and relationships developed through their activities. The application of ANT certainly provided some valuable insights about social activity at a local level, for example: the importance of physical spaces as providing foundations for action; methods adopted to keep people engaged in activity; how networks are mobilised to implement activity; the way networks can proliferate across urban space; and the relations between local and national factors in influencing social activity.

The concluding section (pp.211-220) sets out the key themes and issues to emerge from the thesis, highlighting in particular: the way for some organisations social activity can be viewed as a kind of commodity; the diversity of urban ageing policies; the importance of projects as activities which bind actants; the idea of urban policies materialising through space; and difficulties of realising the ‘bottom-up’ influence of older people.

### **Evaluation of the merits of the thesis**

This is an original piece of work which is almost certainly the first of its kind to apply ANT to issues relating to older people in local urban contexts. The thesis provides important insights into the way policies are shaped by different actors within the context of urban space, and

the relationship of this to the promotion of social activity. There were some weaknesses in terms of the content and structure of the thesis:

1. Some of the discussion of ANT and discursive institutionalism could have been edited down to give more space to the empirical section.
2. The conclusion needed more linking back to the conceptual framework, with a discussion about how the empirical findings illuminated the theories which were used in the research (and vice versa).
3. There was some discussion about the role of age-friendly cities (of which Poznan is a member) but this could have brought together and the implications of this approach reviewed in more detail.
4. The position of those with physical and mental health issues needed clearer discussion about how they could be incorporated into the social activity approach. The treatment of those defined as 'socially excluded' needed more consideration in the study.
5. The 'limitations' section needed development, in particular: were there any drawbacks to using ANT? Could triangulation of data have added value to the analysis? Were there alternatives to a case study approach?

Despite these limitations, the thesis overall makes an important and original contribution to debates within social gerontology on social activity as applied to local urban contexts.

### **Concluding remarks**

**I hereby declare that the doctoral dissertation entitled 'The implementation of social activity idea for older people. The local aging policy in the city of Poznan' written by Halina Nadobnik does meet the requirements for doctoral dissertations according**

**to the paragraph 187.2 of the Act of 20 July 2018 – The Law on Higher**

**Education and Science (Journals of Laws of 2018, item 1669 as amended) and I recommend that the Academic Advancement Board of the Poznan University of Economics and Business approves Halina Nadobnik public defence of the dissertation.**



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