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# Shifting responsibility in governing aging: municipal active aging discourses in Turkey

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates active aging as a tool of governing the aging population at the municipal level. Using Foucault's framework of governmentality, it explores the techniques of governing aging via the construction of the desirable older subjectivity, reflecting upon the role of the family in caregiving. Conducting in-depth interviews with municipal officials in charge of aging programs, we illustrated that, despite regional differences in socio-economic development levels connected to urban/modernized and rural/traditional cultural frames, all municipalities in our study embrace active aging in which older people are responsabilized for leading an active life to avoid being a burden on the family. We argue that neoliberal active aging discourses are mobilized to substitute the decreasing welfare function of conservative familism in Turkey and the individualistic self-technologies are instrumentalized for familist conducts. This reveals that the coexistence of multiple rationalities in the governing process can unsettle habitual consistencies between problematizations, conducts and self-technologies.

## KEYWORDS

Active aging; desirable older subjectivity; municipal policies; governmentality; Turkey

## Introduction

Turkey is experiencing rapid increase in the aging population, placing Turkey in the category of 'old countries' (Çuhadar 2020). Aging population has increased by 24% in the last five years, reaching 9,7% of the population in 2021 (Turkstat 2022a). The Turkish state has been caught unprepared; finding it difficult to govern the aging population by 'outdated' care services and under the global policy transfer of active aging, it has reformulated its eldercare regime. Taking the Madrid International Aging Action Plan of 2002 as its basis, the National Action Plan on Aging was prepared in 2013 by the Ministry of Family and Social Services. The objective of this action plan was to formulate policies that would render the older population autonomous and productive through active labor force participation and voluntary work (Aybars, Beşpınar, and Kalaycıoğlu 2018).

The Turkish state defined active aging as a solution to what it looked to be aging as a crisis. To primarily avoid the expenses of direct provision of institutional eldercare, it began responsabilizing local governments by initiating YADES, *Yaşlı Destek Programı*

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(The Elderly Support Program) in 2016. This trend is in line with the state's delegation of service provision for disadvantaged populations to local governments (Municipal Law 2005, no. 5393). Despite these localizing initiatives, Turkey's centralized state tradition continues (Tan 2020); with its persisting surveillance of municipalities, it strengthens in today's governmental regime.<sup>1</sup> Turkish municipalities as the new actors in governing aging take cost-effective approaches, providing at-home care services for the *old old* and sick older people, and active aging programs for the healthy *young old*.

This article aims to contribute to critical policy studies by introducing qualitative research from Turkey, a case that bears the unique combination of two governing rationalities: neo-conservatism and neoliberalism (Acar and Altunok 2013). Governmentality studies are criticized for narrowly focusing on neoliberalism (Brady 2014). Our analysis, on the other hand, aims to uncover how neoliberal governmentality cooperates with conservative familialism, affecting the rationalization of governing aging in Turkey. It investigates how active aging, which developed in the West in response to the shrinking welfare state in the neoliberal system, has been reproduced in the Turkish case where the family has been the informal welfare institution. In-depth interviews with 13 municipal officials from different regions are conducted to address the following questions: (1) How do municipal governments with different regional backgrounds and diverse socio-economic development levels problematize aging? (2) In what ways and with what outcomes has active aging entered the agenda of the municipal governments?

This article premises on the argument that in Turkey the self-reliant neoliberal desirable older subjectivity is mobilized to substitute the decreasing welfare function of familialist conservatism, familialist conducts being enabled by the individualistic self-technologies of neoliberalism. This reveals how the coexistence of multiple rationalities within the governing process reconfigures the habitual consistency between various problematizations, conducts and self-technologies.

## Theoretical framework

In this study, we draw upon post-structuralist critical policy analysis, specifically Foucault's governmentality paradigm, which enables going beyond normative policy evaluations on active aging.<sup>2</sup> In Foucault's governmentality perspective, the state does not directly interfere with the free will of its subjects, but rather acts indirectly and 'from a distance' over their conducts (Rose and Miller 1992). Using techniques of governing that include discursive practices promoting the ideal subject and knowledge formation via experts and institutions (Foucault 1988), the truth regime dictates the ideal way of being through self-technologies internalized by the subjects. However, technologies of governmentality may also be the sites of agonism and struggle (Ball and Olmedo 2013), producing what Foucault (2007) calls 'counter conduct' as a mode of resistance, which is important to discover for a policy design beyond neoliberalism (Reininger and Castro-Serrano 2021). Political rationalities are multiple as they produce peculiar self-technologies (Rudman 2006), promoting the autonomous and the enterprising self in Foucault's theorization.

We mainly focus on the 'problematization of problems' (Howarth 2010) to better contextualize municipalities' involvement with active aging discourses in Turkey. To overcome Foucault's affirmation of power as a 'productive network' (Foucault 1980;

Howarth 2010), we supplement his approach with Glynos and Howarth's (2007) 'fantasmatic logics' and 'fantasy' that for propose a critical analysis of 'the way subjects are gripped by discourses' (326) and the ideological aspects in governing which 'normalize domination relations' (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Howarth 2010).

Critical aging studies consider active aging as a tool of neoliberal governmentality promoting a new desirable subjectivity to counteract the shrinking welfare state, which is discussed in the following section.

### **Governing aging: active aging and neoliberal governmentality**

The discussions about active aging evolved from activity theory that gained popularity in the 1990s, which is promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Walker 2006). Activity theory's popularity in today's aging policies is associated with its idealization in the 'wider political context of a neoliberal "active society"' (Katz 2000, 135) as well as its conformist (John 1984) and normative (Marshall 1999) nature, which demands individual responsibility for the aging process.

The revival of active aging and the promotion of active older subjectivity are not independent from the problematization of the aging population as a crisis. The steady increase in the number of older people and longer life expectancy make it harder to govern the aging process. Katz (2000) states that the problematization of the aging population in Foucauldian sense rationalizes governmental and professional interventions for disciplining everyday life. The emergence of gerontology as a discipline, often cited as a major actor in coining active aging (Lassen and Moreira 2014), also indicates the inherent connection between the problematization of aging with the knowledge production process (Katz 1996). Defining aging as a problem legitimizes disciplinary interventions, and redefines the responsible older subjectivity in a way that reduces state's social security and health spending (Biggs and Powell 2001; Pike 2011).

This shift of responsibility from the state to the older individual resonates with the promotion of a desirable older subjectivity (Biggs and Powell 2001; Rudman 2006; Lassen and Moreira 2014; Marhánková 2011; Moulaert and Biggs 2013) who is responsible for managing social risks by acting upon oneself via the self-technologies promoted by active aging discourses. Accordingly, the view of the older people as individuals who can control and delay their aging (Ervik 2006; Rudman 2006) and hence who are responsible for their health (Van Dyk et al. 2013; Moulaert and Biggs 2013) and aging processes (Ervik 2006; Marhánková 2011) is at the center of active aging, promoting an autonomous, independent, and productive older subjectivity (Rudman 2006; Ranzijn 2010).

Active aging as a tool of neoliberal governmentality is criticized for promoting the 'right' way (Ervik 2006; Marhánková 2011) that is imposed on older people's lives as a disciplinary tool (Ervik 2006; Ranzijn 2010). As a technology of governmentality, universally promoted active aging activities (Katz 2000; Marhánková 2011) mainly draw on middle-class values (Katz 2000) and Western way of life built upon autonomy and independence (Ranzijn 2010). Thus, active aging policies are criticized for not being culturally sensitive, becoming problematic especially in collectivist cultures (Ranzijn 2010).

## Governing aging in Turkey: neoliberalism, neoconservatism and the family

As a response to reductions in state expenditure, in neoliberal governmentality, state power works through responsabilizing both the individual and the family in eldercare. The family as the backbone of society in Turkey has been a major actor in caregiving prior to the neoliberal transformation of the welfare regime (İzdeş Terkoğlu and Memiş 2022), which is facing challenges under recent socio-economic transformations.

According to Acar and Altunok (2013), neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism are intertwined as different governing rationalities in Turkey. Neoconservatism is defined as a moral-political rationality which repositions the government with a moral duty embedded within nationalist, religious and traditional discourses (Acar and Altunok 2013), fostering citizens' spiritual morality through religious affiliations (Nadesan 2008).

Although neoconservatism and neoliberalism hold different rationalities, in Turkey they collaborate in instrumentalizing family as the common tool of governing (Acar and Altunok 2013). Both are opposed to 'social welfarism' and instrumentalize family for preventing 'state dependency' (Larner 2000). Similarly, Acar and Altunok (2013) argue that although the family is intervened for a 'desired moral order' in a neoconservative context, it also operates as a welfare and social security mechanism, substituting the government's decreased welfare duties as a result of the neoliberal rationality in Turkey.

Under the neoliberal policy-making during the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – Justice and Development Party) period, social policies such as health and pension systems underwent strict transformations (Buğra 2012), which also reshaped aging policies. The AKP, which came to office in 2002 and holds power since then, positioned itself as a conservative democratic party (Şen 2010). Scholars define it as socially conservative and economically liberal (Buğra 2012), associating it with neoliberalism and Islamic affiliations (Şen 2010; Akça, Bekmen, and Özden 2014).

The party's socially conservative position reflects upon its discourses and practices on family and aging. As it celebrates the extended family via the neo-conservative discourse of the sacred family (Yazıcı 2012; Akkan 2017), it opens space for older people to live with their adult children (Yazıcı 2012; Duben 2013). However, state mechanisms that support the family are weak in Turkey (Aybars, Beşpınar, and Kalaycıoğlu 2018), and the burden of care rests mainly on women in the family (Akkan 2017; Aybars, Beşpınar, and Kalaycıoğlu 2018). In 2007, the system of conditional cash transfer was put into force under the Ministry of Family and Social Policy (Akkan 2017). In this system a standard amount of money is paid to poorer families where an individual gives care to older, sick, or disabled family members. This family-based care through cash-for-care policy reflects the AKP's emphasis on the care function of the family (Akkan 2017); which is recognized as 'the return of the family,' responsabilizing family for caregiving (Yazıcı 2012). This enhances the image of older people as dependent on the family (Con Wright 2020, 2022) and women's gendered duties in caregiving (Atasü Topçuoğlu 2022).

In his discussion of the techniques of mobilizing the family as an agent of governmentality, Donzelot (1979) makes the distinction between 'governing families' and 'governing through families' (Pestaña 2012). The conservative discourse of the sacred family and the cash-for-care program are examples of governing aging through the family in Turkey. However, Turkey must confront the fact that younger people are

moving away from traditional filial obligations (Duben 2013), demonstrated by rates of extended families dropping from 16.7% in 2014 to 14% in 2020 (Turkstat 2022b).

In brief, as the traditional family structure weakens under the socio-economic and demographic transformations, the central government's responsabilization of the family for eldercare faces significant challenges.

## Methodology

In response to the criticisms of governmentality studies of aging for their focus on the macro level state documents (Van Dyk et al. 2013), this study focuses on municipalities as the institutions that would enable us to understand the governmentality process with its local embeddedness. The peculiarities of governing aging in Turkey cannot be uncovered only through an analysis of policy documents, which are typically translated from the international organizations' publications. Therefore, our study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 13 municipal officials in 10 metropolitan municipalities from different regions and with different socio-economic development levels in Turkey<sup>3</sup> to analyze the social realm beyond texts that would reveal inequities and the resistance it bears (McKee 2009). Governmentality studies in general rely on discourse analysis to uncover the alignment of individual choices with the discursively constructed desired outcomes (Teghtsoonian 2016). Accordingly, we used discourse analysis to identify governing technologies promoted for older people to become desirable subjects.

Municipal officials for the study were selected because of the fact that they are in close contact with families, paying regular visits to homes and directly observing family problems, and hence carrying the potential for actively intervening in older people's lived experiences of subjectivation. We used purposive sampling method (Patton 2002) to discover multiple rationalities of governing aging at the local level in Turkey. Since not all 81 municipalities in Turkey are committed to active aging policies, we particularly focused on metropolitan municipalities since they are the ones most interested in developing policies on aging. For instance, while Izmir, Antalya, Mersin and Gaziantep municipalities have active aging centers, others occasionally organize activities.

As the problematization of aging is a recent phenomenon in Turkey, the departments of municipalities for aging are newly established with limited human resources. This increases participants' concerns about their confidentiality, which we addressed very strictly throughout our research. Personal and professional networks of the authors were utilized to gain contact information, consent and trust. Some potential respondents were reached through the contact information listed on their website. While some agreed to participate, others were hesitant and skeptical at the beginning, refusing tape recording due to confidentiality concerns. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and detailed demographic information was avoided.

Out of 30 metropolitan municipalities in Turkey, 10 were selected based on their location in different regions of the country with different socio-economic development levels. The chosen cities were: Diyarbakır, Gaziantep and Erzurum (in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia); Antalya and Mersin (in the Mediterranean region of Southern Anatolia); Izmir and Bursa (in the Aegean and Marmara regions of Western Anatolia); Samsun (in Northern Anatolia, which is also called the Black Sea region); and Eskişehir and Konya (in Central Anatolia). (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Cities in the project.

Regional differences make the country's West-East divide as the level of development decreases as one goes from western to eastern parts of the country (see Gümüş and Chudgar 2016). The coastal provinces of the West and the South are the most prosperous provinces, whereas most of the provinces on the Northern coast as well as the Eastern and Central Anatolian regions remain rather underdeveloped (Gezici and Hewings 2007). (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Socio-economic development levels of municipalities

Region	Metropolitan municipality	Socio-economic development level (1–6)
Western Anatolia	Bursa	1
	İzmir	1
Mediterranean Region	Antalya	1
	Mersin	3
Central Anatolia	Eskişehir	1
	Konya	2
Eastern Anatolia	Gaziantep	3
	Erzurum	5
	Diyarbakır	6
Black Sea Region	Samsun	3

### ***The Republic of Turkey, Ministry of industry and technology 2019***

The level of urbanization and modernization also shows variation across the country. In particular, Western Anatolia is more urbanized than Eastern Anatolia (Tekeli 2011; Erman 2021). Accordingly, the municipalities in our study are differentiated by the socio-economic development level of the cities in which they are located, which coincide with their level of urbanization and modernization. The cultural and political stance of the municipalities further shape their differences. In Diyarbakır, oppositional Kurdish politics seeks to represent the interests of its ethnic minority population, but the municipality is governed today by the central government's trustee instead of an elected mayor. Gaziantep's mayor formerly held office as the Minister of the Family and Social Services

during the AKP government. Erzurum, a traditional city has an elected mayor from the governing party. Antalya and Mersin – the favored destinations for retirees because of the region’s warm weather are governed by the mayors from the main opposition party CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* – Republican People’s Party). Bursa receives mass migration from the countryside, including those from Eastern Anatolia and its mayor is from the governing party. Izmir, the third largest metropolitan city in Turkey, is known for its secular identity where the mayor is from the opposition party CHP. Samsun, a city of attraction for the aging population of the Black Sea region, is governed by a mayor from the governing party. Konya is widely known for its conservative religious identity (Joppien 2018) and its mayor gives political support for the governing party. Eskişehir is known for its secular identity and its branding by its secularist mayor as a ‘European city in Anatolia’ (Joppien 2018).

The interviews with municipal officials were conducted between July and October in 2021. Out of 16 metropolitan municipalities we contacted, ten accepted to participate in our research. We interviewed 13 respondents, eight of which were social workers and others were officials in charge of the aging programs in the social service departments of the municipalities. Seven of the officials were men and six were women. Their ages ranged between 25 and 60. The interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted by the second author either in the offices of the respondents or online. Additional visits or phone calls were made when new information was needed. The interviews were tape-recorded upon consent and transcribed. Written informed consent was obtained from participants in line with the Ethics Committee approval obtained in 2021.

## **Active aging and shifting responsabilization as a governing technology**

### ***Active aging and challenges to traditional family relations***

Different from the active aging policies in Western societies that developed in response to the shrinking welfare state in neoliberalism, the relationship of older people with their family, the informal welfare institution, has been the subject of the active aging discourses of metropolitan municipalities in Turkey. Except for two municipal officials from Erzurum (AKP, Eastern Anatolia) and Samsun (AKP, Northern Anatolia), all agreed that the changing conditions of urban life are disabling the family institution to carry out its traditional caregiving role – nuclear families living in apartments, women joining the labor force, and children spending their time in educational institutions. The respondent from Antalya (Southern Anatolia) reflects upon it as follows:

In traditional society, older parents are unconditionally part of the family. All their needs are met by the other family members until they die, they are looked after, they are paid great respect, they are consulted. But this cannot happen today in the city. The wife and the husband have their own problems to solve, they cannot carry an extra burden. Working outside the home and taking care of the parents can be too much, producing fights in the family (Kayra, Antalya, CHP).

The challenges to the traditional responsabilization of the family as a governing technique of eldercare in an urbanizing society constitutes the framework of the autonomous older subjectivity rationalized through active aging discourses. Active aging as a tool of

governmentality intervenes in older people's relationship with their families via challenging the traditional norms of filial piety and living arrangements.

Respondents differed in their position of being for or against filial piety; therefore, their perspectives on the traditional role of family in eldercare showed variation. Filial piety refers to traditional respect for parental authority and involves financial and emotional support mechanisms for the good care of parents (Lai 2010). Located on the axes of *hizmet* (serving) and *hürmet* (respect), in traditional cities like Konya (AKP, Central Anatolia) and Erzurum (AKP, Eastern Anatolia) respondents regarded it as an essential part of Turkish society. AKP municipalities in general praised the family as the foundation of Turkish culture and older people as the building block of the family. On the other hand, CHP municipalities acknowledged the ties of older people with their families as a traditional feature of Turkish society, distancing themselves from religious explanations. Under the conservative policies in Turkey, the respondent from Samsun (Northern Anatolia) praised the family from an Islamic perspective, claiming that it protects people against the negative influences of the Western culture:

We are a Muslim society. We have proverbs such as 'paradise lies at the feet of the mother' or 'the father's blessing is above everything else.' If our society is not morally degenerated and if we are not assimilated into the European or American way of life, this is because of the family structure that brings its members under one roof. The unity of the family, that matters the most (Zahir, Samsun, AKP).

On the other hand, in the cities located geographically and culturally closer to the West, mainly Izmir (CHP), Bursa (AKP), Mersin (CHP), and Eskişehir (CHP), respondents expressed filial piety to be an obstacle to older people's active and autonomous life by curbing their capacity to satisfy their own needs. Self-care is given a new moral value in the active aging discourses of the officials in these municipalities. In this sense, self-care transfers the responsibility of eldercare from the family to the individual older subject, challenging the traditional way of governing older people's relationships with their family in Turkey. Accordingly, a 'fantasmatic' autonomous and self-reliant older subjectivity is presented as desirable, and the technology of self-care is promoted by active aging discourses. Thus, they have a critical attitude toward customs that fully connect older people to the family.

According to respondents in Western regions of Turkey mainly from the CHP municipalities, traditions such as serving older people, bringing everything including a glass of water or food to their feet is a problem keeping the elderly from being active in everyday life. The official from Bursa (Western Anatolia, AKP) also criticizes filial piety as follows:

Our culture dictates to serve family members. Adult children feel obliged to serve their older mother and father. In our culture, you show your respect to your parents by offering them your service. We have the habit of not letting our parents do their own errands because of our respect for them. They are not allowed to go shopping, to carry out their daily routine duties. Then they lose their competence and age quickly (Mebruke, Bursa, AKP).

The traditional living arrangements also clash with the ideal of the self-reliant older individual who should live in their own place. The officials from Konya (Central Anatolia) and Mersin (Southern Anatolia) justify the expectation from older individuals to be independent as:

If s/he has a house and can meet his/her personal needs, if s/he can go to the toilet, if s/he can eat by him/herself, it is more comfortable for him/her to live alone. Why? Because s/he can sleep whenever s/he wants, s/he can get up whenever s/he wants, his/her movement in the house will be freer. S/he will live for him/herself, not a life for his/her children (Melahat, Konya, AKP).

Our society is experiencing rapid changes. There is the shift towards the nuclear family. So, older people should be self-sufficient, able to take care of their own needs (Kutay, Mersin, CHP).

Traditional cities from Northern and Eastern Anatolia, which are governed mainly by the AKP municipalities, in their emphasis of the significance of support provided by adult children for their elderly parents, differ from the above positions. A respondent from Erzurum (Eastern Anatolia) puts as follows:

We always say, ‘you don’t have to take care of your parents in your home. But at least you should visit them every week, asking if they need anything. ‘Let me give you a bath, let me shave you’. [...] There are older people who raised seven children, and now none of the children visits them even during a religious fest day. I ask you if it is okay to abandon them? Definitely no. If your parents do not live with you, even if they might be ill-tempered, you should visit them at least once a month. If you don’t, they fall into depression because of loneliness (Mecit, Erzurum, AKP).

An older person living independently becomes the new model promoted by the municipalities, albeit the conflicts it creates with the traditional family understanding. Different from a Western individualistic rationalization, the autonomous older subjectivity who is responsabilized for self-care and self-sufficiency is instrumentalized for substituting the shrinking care functions of the family. The respondent from Antalya, who worked for the AKP municipality before the 2019 local elections, differentiated between ‘*being self-sufficient within the family*’ and ‘*being independent from the family*’. Like many other respondents, he also promoted the conduct of ‘not to become burden on the family’:

Self-sufficiency does not mean independence. It means easing the functioning of the family while living with the family. Self-sufficiency and being independent from the family are two different things. In other words, self-sufficiency eases the family system. As long as an older person can meet his/her own basic needs, s/he eases the relationship in the family. So, s/he will not be a burden on the family. As a result, there will be peace in the family. Our municipality would prefer a self-sufficient older person living with his/her family (Kayra, Antalya, CHP).

In sum, neoliberal active aging discourses and the technology of self-care are instrumentalized in Turkey for substituting the care function of the family and the government’s weak family support mechanisms. Older people’s relations with their families transform into a sphere where two different governing rationalities – neoliberalism and conservative familialism – intertwine. As the discourse of neoconservatism promoting sacred extended family loses its significance, active aging discourses are rationalized for facilitating and maintaining the relationship between the family and the individual elderly through the new neoliberal discursive technologies. Consequently, to assist the family, a desirable older subjectivity that is not a burden on his/her family is responsabilized for his/her own welfare. Although the individual self-sufficiency of older people is promoted,

familialism is still the basic rationality in governing aging that instrumentalizes neoliberal active aging discourses for the welfare of the family.

### ***Active aging and challenges to the traditional construction of older subjectivity***

In Western cities such as Izmir, Antalya, Eskişehir and Mersin (the cities that are often preferred by retirees) run by CHP municipalities, active aging services are demanded by the local population. On the other hand, in Central and Eastern Anatolian cities such as Konya, Erzurum, Gaziantep, Diyarbakir (Trustee) run by AKP municipalities, active aging is introduced through the central government's YADES financial support program.

As municipalities adopt active aging policies, they bring a new understanding of what aging is about. They aim to intervene in problems of aging via activity, challenging the traditional cultural production of the older subjectivity. This intervention shows similarities across the municipalities. As they fight against the view of the older people defined by passivity, dependency and being cut off from life, they bring their own definition of the desired older subjectivity via problematizing dependency. The respondent from Izmir (Western Anatolia) put it as follows:

In my view, those who need the help of others qualify for the definition of the older person. On the other hand, those who are above the age of 65 yet take long walks, I cannot think of them as old (Kunter, Izmir, CHP).

All respondents believe in individual self-intervention, leading a healthy lifestyle built in self-technologies such as regular exercise, regular diet and regular sleep that would delay aging; it promotes a desirable older subjectivity acting upon themselves for an ideal later life. Thus, respondents regarded the responsibility of managing the aging process lying with the older individual. However, the respondent from Eskişehir (CHP) mentioned that delaying aging via an active life also depends on the opportunities provided by the state and the person's economic conditions. He stated:

Delaying aging is very related to individual's consciousness, it is directly related, but the older individual is not the only one responsible. It is also about the opportunities provided by the social state. Today there are countries where access to clean water is restricted. In those countries you can see the decrease of the active life expectancy (Zahir, Eskişehir, CHP).

This conduct of delaying aging, which is neoliberal in its responsabilization of the individual, is against the fatalistic world view of traditional society, which is seen more in cities governed by AKP municipalities such as Konya (Central Anatolia) and Samsun (Northern Anatolia) than CHP municipalities such as Izmir (Western Anatolia), Antalya (Southern Anatolia), and Eskişehir (Central Anatolia); it creates tension between active aging and traditional values. Attempts to bridge the two are also important, as mentioned by the respondent in Samsun:

Of course, in the end it is Allah who decides, we have nothing to say against it. However, it is the individual who has influence over the conditions of their aging (Tardu, Samsun, AKP).

The rapid integration of active aging policies into municipal agendas is not independent of its construction as a 'truth regime.' As the interview with the municipal official in Eskişehir (Central Anatolia) suggested:

I can say that being the metropolitan municipality, we're not working independent of the academic community here. We consult them every time. Because of this, the lectures of our university professors on aging inform us directly about how we should structure our own discourses. [...] For example, when we organize a sports event for older people, we use the term active aging on billboards and posters. Our main aim here is to make this term popular in the city, and our goal is to integrate this scientific concept to the city's terminology (Zahir, Eskişehir, CHP).

Thus, universities and social workers' professional gaze function as instruments for the transmission of Western middle-class active aging discourses as a *truth* in municipalities.

### ***Active aging and municipal urban-middle class bias***

Space and time are the basic components of disciplinary middle-class activities in the municipalities' active aging discourses; and active aging centers are the spaces where activities are structured and promoted. These centers combine functions of several other institutions such as schools, hospitals, sports facilities and psychiatry clinics, which transform them into a disciplinary surveillance instrument intervening in people's lives and bodies. The respondent from Gaziantep (Southeastern Anatolia) explained it as:

Our dietitians regularly check the weight of our members. They provide consultancy services. Professors from the geriatric departments provide seminars for 1,5 hours every day, each week on a different subject. In addition, we routinely take our members to the municipality-run hospital for health screenings (Ataberk, Gaziantep, AKP).

In traditional societies home is the place for older people to retire and spend the rest of their time. Municipal active aging discourses, however, in the belief that spending time outdoors would bring healthy aging, push older people out into the public sphere. Similar to the negativity attributed to staying home, spending unstructured or idle time is seen as pathways leading to pessimism or depression. The respondent from Samsun (Northern Anatolia) draws an ideal of 'disciplinary time' that keeps older people 'busy' (Katz 2000) to cope with loneliness:

After they reach a certain age, they start thinking, 'Let me go to the mosque and wait to die.' We should change this. Not to fall into this, they should be kept busy. We try to bring them a life full of people and quality time. By our activities, we do not allow them to be alone; we prevent them from pushing themselves into despair, into pessimism. This is why we are planning to open active aging centers (Tardu, Samsun, AKP).

Municipalities' structured activities are inspired by the urban middle-class culture. More traditional activities such as men attending coffee houses and women attending the *gün* (women's home gatherings) are not seen as part of active aging activities. The respondent in Izmir (Western Anatolia), in his belief that activity should bring self-improvement, was particularly critical of the coffee houses. He said:

Going to coffee houses, no, it is not an active aging activity. To me, it is not even an activity, it is about men escaping the home. It does not contribute to the development of the individual, physical or mental; it does not add value to the older people's life. But if they exercise, they will maintain a healthy cardiovascular system and keep their muscles strong; if they paint, it will enhance their productivity (Kunter, Izmir, CHP).

In Konya (Central Anatolia), the same idea was expressed:

Men going to coffee houses and women meeting in each other's homes, they are not the active aging activities we see in Europe. But in our country, an old person taking a walk in the park or going on a tour, these make an active life. We should see more of them (Melahat, Konya, AKP).

Activities such as traveling, visiting places, going for a walk, joining painting, acting and chorus classes, reading, solving puzzles, playing chess, riding a bicycle, and swimming, were defined as proper activities for active aging which would help older people to remain socially active and in good health. The respondents from Izmir (Western Anatolia) and Gaziantep (Southeastern Anatolia) express active aging as an opportunity for self-actualization:

Active aging is not about sitting in a couch watching television all day long or talking with friends in a coffee house. Older people should think of being part of life at this stage of their lives, going to see a movie or joining a trip or picnic if possible, participating in various programs and activities. Active aging should be about the chance of realizing one's dreams (Ataberk, Gaziantep, AKP).

Active aging is not about what our grandparents did, stepping aside and waiting in one corner to die. Active aging is about enjoying life to the fullest, to be able to do something with your life (Kunter, Izmir, AKP).

The urban middle-class bias in the active aging activities of municipalities produces a differentiated involvement of older people based on their geographical location and class. While middle-class older people in the cities of Western Anatolia gladly and easily engage with the active aging practices, older people from rural areas in Western cities and those in Eastern Anatolia face challenges.

Municipalities from Western regions of the country, which are mainly from the oppositional party CHP (Mersin, Eskişehir, and Izmir), acknowledge the structural obstacles to the active aging goals they promote. However, AKP municipalities do not adopt such a critical approach. The CHP municipalities mentioned low-income levels and the lack of accessible urban infrastructure as preventing older people from participating in activities. Thus, their views contain two actors – the state and the older individual – for the responsibility of active aging. In this vein, the respondent from Eskişehir (Central Anatolia) criticized structural inequalities:

Active aging depends on the country, the geography you were born in. Today, an older person who was alive during the second world war can drink his beer and play table tennis in Antalya (*a popular destination for foreign tourists in Turkey*), while our own older people can become bedridden. Or vice versa, while an older person in our country cannot go on a vacation due to high inflation, in other countries older people can socialize and get away from stress as their money is more valuable. These are independent of the older individual. Active aging depends on many factors such as the income level and access to health opportunities. (Zahir, Eskişehir, CHP).

Against the claim of the municipalities that their active aging centers have become an institutional mechanism for governing aging in Turkey, this may not work especially in rural contexts. Although AKP municipalities such as Gaziantep, Erzurum and Samsun attempted to adapt activities to the local culture, organizing Quran courses or religious activities, older people rejected participating in these structured activities and bargained with officials for gains from activities. The respondent from Gaziantep (Southeastern

Anatolia, AKP), a city that receives mass migration from rural areas, expressed his frustration about the lack of interest of older people in the events they organized. He explained:

We have a center we call ‘Second Spring’ (*İkinci Bahar*).<sup>4</sup> It is in that part of the city where mostly families migrated from Siirt, Cizre, Hakkari and Van (*cities with lowest socio-economic development level in Eastern Anatolia*) live. They only come if there is a trip or free food. They say, ‘let us know if there is food served in the event, otherwise we won’t come.’ When we offer them literacy, crafts or Quran courses, they are not interested (Ataberk, Gaziantep, AKP).

The lack of interest of rural people in structured activities is also criticized by the respondent from Konya:

In the village, an aunty would never say, let’s go on a tour and see a new place, travel and have fun. Her wish is to have her grandchildren around, to have her daughters-in-law and daughters around. It will take time to move beyond this profile of older people. In rural areas, even those with good economic conditions do not participate in any social activity (Melahat, Konya, AKP).

Although most officials acknowledged active aging as a ‘truth’ for later life, this is with the exception of the municipality in Southeastern Anatolia. The respondent in Diyarbakir (Southeastern Anatolia), in her oppositional politics, approaches the Western-centric active aging discourses with reservations, questioning to what extent this model can be integrated into the local culture. She abandoned the normativity of the active aging discourses and recognized the conflict between the urban middle-class activities promoted by municipalities and the ethnic local culture embedded in religious conservatism:

We want to include into our YADES project activities similar to those in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, and also in Bursa and Samsun. But we are not sure if our older people would be interested in them. There are local differences. Older people here like listening to *dengbej* (Kurdish folk songs) and not Turkish classical music popular in Ankara. There is the tradition of the older people singing in their Kurdish language about their experiences, it is like a branch of art here. [...] They are more conservative than the older people in Western cities. A religious older woman does not want to be in the same environment with a lot of old men, they do not want to be in the same activity. If a *halay* (folk dance) is to be performed, they do not want to be hand in hand with men. This is intense in Diyarbakir (Şermin, Diyarbakir, Trustee).

In sum, the findings illustrated local governments’ aim for a new cultural production of older subjectivity that challenges the traditional image of older people, celebrating older individual’s engagement with modern, middle-class structured activities. Municipalities promote structured activities as a form of self-technology guided by neoliberal conducts such as self-improvement, self-actualization and self-management to shape the desirable older subjectivity. These are presented as ways to overcome the health risks of excessive stay at home and spending idle time, which are prompted by retirement.

## Conclusion

Using Foucault’s theory of governmentality, this article explored the techniques of governing older people through municipalities’ discourses and policies. Discursively,

an independent and active older person who is not a burden on the family is promoted by constructing the desirable older subjectivity as autonomous and responsible for self-care. This corresponds to the responsabilization of the individual for their life chances in neoliberalism. In active aging, the life of the older people is envisioned as a terrain defined by healthy aging as the desired goal, dictating how they should live their lives to keep them in a positive emotional and physical state, delaying aging. While active aging functions like an ideology in all municipalities, municipalities from Western Anatolia, who are mainly from the oppositional party CHP, are more critical of class-based inequalities and structural obstacles to being active. Municipalities in Central and Eastern Anatolia mainly from AKP, whose active aging programs are generally financed by the central government's YADES program, adopt active aging discourses even more prominently than their Western CHP counterparts, despite the disinterest of the local population. YADES programs' top-down diffusion of active aging discourses, through targeted funding in Central and Eastern Anatolian AKP municipalities, enhances the ideological functioning of active aging obscuring class-based inequalities, rural-urban and ethnic differences, and even municipalities' Islamic religious affiliations.

As one of the main solutions for an aging population proposed both by Turkish government and municipalities is active aging, its urban-middle class bias risks to exclude older people in its heterogeneity. As the freedom and demands of older people is essential for governing older subjectivities 'from a distance', space is opened for older people's counter conducts. The interview responses point out to the possibility of older people developing counter conducts especially depending on their ethnic and rural positionality, which is beyond just their class. Thus, the article suggests that the middle class-biased, structured and disciplinary activities of municipalities can transform into a space of a more intensive agonism in the future.

Our theoretical frame engages with shifting responsibility as a governing technique. In line with the redefinition of the desirable older subjectivity, the role of the family in caregiving is redefined, aiming toward its de-responsibilization under the social challenges it faces, yet keeping the responsibility of emotional support intact. However, we argue that the rationalization behind the redefinition of older autonomous subjectivity also has familialist concerns. While municipal discourses partially de-responsibilize families for eldercare, they mobilize an active, self-reliant older subjectivity as a means to alleviate families' care burden. The responsabilization of older individuals for self-care and self-reliance emerges as a mechanism that eases relations between family members, sustaining happy families. Hence, neoliberal active aging discourses are instrumentalized for substituting decreasing welfare function of conservative familialism; the relations between the family and older people transform into a space where conservative familialism and neoliberalism intertwine.

Our study illustrates that the coexistence of different rationalities in the governing process affects habitual consistencies between problematizations, conducts and self-technologies. As a result, self-technologies associated with a specific governing rationality can be mobilized to carry out the conducts of another rationality. As our findings demonstrate, a neoliberal individualistic self-technology such as self-care can be led by a familialist conduct of 'not being a burden on the family'.

This article makes its contribution to studies of aging by focusing on the active aging policies at the local level in the Turkish context. It enhances our theoretical

understanding of active aging and governmentality by engaging with social structures beyond the market, that is, the family. In this vein, three actors in relation to active aging in the Turkish context – the older individual, the family, and the local government are identified and their role in governing aging is discussed. We aimed to find out how active aging policies unfold in different geographies by conducting in-depth interviews with municipal officials in charge of aging programs in ten cities from different regions of the country. We illustrated that, despite regional differences based on development levels linked to urban/modernized and rural/traditional cultural features, all of the municipalities in our study embraced active aging. Since it was perceived as a health issue and hence ‘apolitical’ increased its chance of incorporation into the policies of municipalities.

Three potential reasons might be behind the convergence of discourses of AKP and CHP on active aging. First, global active aging discourses have been legitimized by local universities’ knowledge production and transfer, which may have homogenized municipalities’ discourses on active aging. Second, as we could only interview municipal officials working in the field – most of whom were social workers – and not the mayors, their discourses might not have fully reflected the political ideologies of municipalities. Additionally, regardless of their party’s political position, CHP municipal officials may have internalized family values inherent to Turkish society, that is familialism. Finally, recent studies indicate CHP’s discursive shift addressing social cleavages, including its move to the center-right after the 2010s (Çınar, Uğur-Çınar, and Açıkgöz 2022; Ciddi and Esen 2014). This may be the source of CHP’s familialist discourses on aging, which may have caused a convergence in their approach closer to the AKP’s.

In the policy transfer of active aging, local governments promote a way of life that responds more to the Westernized urban middle-class older subjectivity than their rural and lower-class counterparts. As the urban middle-class culture frames what the older subjectivity should do with their lives, culture becomes the measuring stick of those who are successful in active aging, which is also a class issue. We argue that active aging acts as an ideological ‘fantasy’ that homogenizes the aging population, rendering invisible local cultural and political differences and class inequalities. We further suggest that the ideological position of municipalities in active aging policies carries the potential for counter conduct of the older people who are left out due to their ethnic or rural positions, and lead to oppose active aging discourses and practices. We consider the possibility that in the future the structured form of middle-class activities promoted for older people transform into a space of agonism stimulated by counter conducts, more in Eastern cities than Western ones as the tensions between the middle-class bias and the local culture become more intense.

Future studies on the subjectivation experiences and counter-conducts of older people will be crucial for unveiling the ideological underpinnings of active aging and developing a more inclusive policy framework. Based on Con Wright’s study (2022) that municipal policy documents such as strategic plans place little emphasis on aging, we suggest to move the focus beyond strategic plans and programs to intra-party events and informal communication channels through which party policy discourses are formulated. The articulation of governmentality studies and institutional ethnography (Teghtsoonian 2016) can potentially overcome these constraints of the field.

## Notes

1. Several elected mayors from the HDP (People's Democratic Party) in Eastern Anatolia have been replaced by trustees (*kayyum*) by the government. Moreover, YADES beneficiaries are generally AKP municipalities (The Ministry of Family and Social Services Website 2022) thus equal access to state resources may be limited for municipalities. For instance, Eskişehir (CHP) municipality mentioned that their applications for YADES program were rejected several times.
2. Active aging is often studied quantitatively in Turkey from a normative perspective. (Çuhadar 2020; Karabulut 2022)
3. The data were collected for a Ph.D. thesis (Yazar 2022).
4. In Turkish, *ikinci bahar* means living a youthful life after middle age.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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