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“Strategy and struggle: discourses of learning, change and influence in later-career middle-managers’ identity-work”

Russell Warhurst and Kate Black
Ageing workforce

• EU workforce over the age of fifty (OECD, 2006):
  2012: 20%
  2020: 30%

• Dependency ratio:
  2011: 4:1
  2060: 2:1
YET ANOTHER REMINDER OF OUR AGING WORKFORCE...
The Big Issue of Age at Work

Tomlinson and Colgan (2014): neo-liberal policy agenda of active ageing

“Landscape of our workforce is changing as we are living longer” (p.3)

“The over 50s are a major untapped resource – a hidden talent pool that can boost output, employment and living standards now and in the future” (p.5)

“Employers should focus upon the 3Rs ... Retain, Retrain and Recruit older workers ... training stops at age 50” (pp.7, 9)

“Age should not be a barrier to training” (p.12)
Age, employment and detriment

- Ainsworth and Hardy (2009): “These demographics have been construed primarily as a ‘problem’”
- Thomas et al. (2014): the young are lauded and “youth is often taken to be the norm”
Age as a matter of identity

- **Defining** age in employment:
  - Social; economic; cultural; industrial; political
  - Some consensus on 50+
- Age as a personal, subjective construction ... as a matter of identity
- **Gaps** in understanding
  - Fineman (2014): need for “fine grained” and “critical” research on the interplay of age and identity
  - Tomlinson and Colgan (2014): need to examine “dialectic” between pessimistic and optimistic constructions of later-career identities
Research question

• To what extent and how do middle-managers use discursive tactics in constructing and sustaining positive identities in later-career?
Identity paradigms

• Alvesson’s (2010) Seven images of identity theorising: “self-doubter”; “struggler”; “storyteller”; “surfer”; “strategist”; “stencil” and “soldier”
  • (see also Brown, 2015)

• Multiple identities?
  • an individual may “articulate one or more identities for themselves” (McKenna 2010, p.10) ... tensions or conflicts
Identity-work …..

• “People being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003, p.1165; Snow and Anderson, 1987)

• Transitions prompt intense identity-work (Vough et al., 2015) to achieve a “consistent and genuine” self (Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014, p.1660)

• “Self narratives are both expressive and constitutive of identity” (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010, p.135) through stories individuals “make sense” of themselves (Brown and Toyoki, 2013)
Age as a discourse regulating identity?

• “Discourses serve to regulate – to set limits on – the identity-work of individual older workers” (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009, p.1200)

• However:
  • Managers (Warhurst, 2011) and lawyers (Brown and Lewis, 2011) have been seen to reflexively “appropriate discursive resources for their own purposes” (p.884)
  • Age can be used as a positive identity resource and “discourses of resistance” deployed (Fenwick, 2013; Corlett, 2015)
Methods

• Interpretivist, inductive study

• Cross-section of later-career middle-managers
  • Purposive sample (n=19)
    • yielding category saturation
    • diversity of experience and organisations
  • Middle-managers as an exemplifying case

• Visual-informed interviews, using pre-developed visual tools

• “let informants tell their ... stories on their own terms” (Vough, et al, 2015, np)
Method of analysis

• “Discursive tactics” (Ashcraft, 2005, p.75) in identity construction

• Coding tools (Gee, 2011):
  - “identity building”
  - “positioning and othering” (eg. Riessman, 2008)
  - “doing and not just saying”
  - “emplotment” (eg. Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010)
  - “character”
  - “framing” or “figured worlds”
  - “what was not said” (eg. Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014)

• “Cycled back and forth between data and concepts” (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009, p.881)

• Inter-coder reliability
“I am an older worker”

• Four of nineteen - diversity of roles and contrasting organisations
• “I found doing the visuals thought provoking although doing these and reviewing my career did suddenly make me feel old”.

• Tensions (table 1)
  • Self as vulnerable
  • Stability: benefits of later-career
  • Ongoing progression with established career trajectory
Identity positioning: Counter discourses of age

Counter-discourses of influences (*table 2*)

- “problem-solvers”
- “strategists” (“policy-maker”)
- “change-agents”
- “challenge-seekers”
- “learners”
Conclusions: vulnerabilities or possibilities?

• Identities are “not unified” but contain “dualities” (Clarke et al., 2009, p.324).

• Envisioning desired “possible” or “provisional” selves (Coupland and Brown, 2012, p.2) within work roles

• “Temporality of power” (Costas and Grey, 2014) distorting managers’ possible future selves:
  • conscious identity-work becomes unconscious identity-regulation as possible future selves are conceived within the constraints of dominant organisational discourses and more radical, liberated, identity positions fail to be discerned
Conclusions: struggle or strategy?

- Individuals are not “passive receptacles or carriers of discourse but, instead, more or less actively and critically interpret and enact them” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p.628)

- Contrary to ageing being “discursively constructed as a limiting condition with resistance being ‘precarious’” (Thomas et al., 2014, p.1570) managers can successfully sustain counter-discourses of successful ageing

- Later-career managers’ identity-work can be seen less in terms of “struggle” and more in terms of “strategy”
"I'm fifty-three, but I have the résumé of a much younger man."
Activity: Working with identity

“Self-narratives are both expressive and constitutive of identity” (Ibarra and Barbalescu, 2010, p.135)

Discern identity narratives in the short transcript provided (e.g. ‘self as a learner’)

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Final thoughts ..... 

• What does this mean for identity and learning researchers for ‘finding’ identity within narratives