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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):

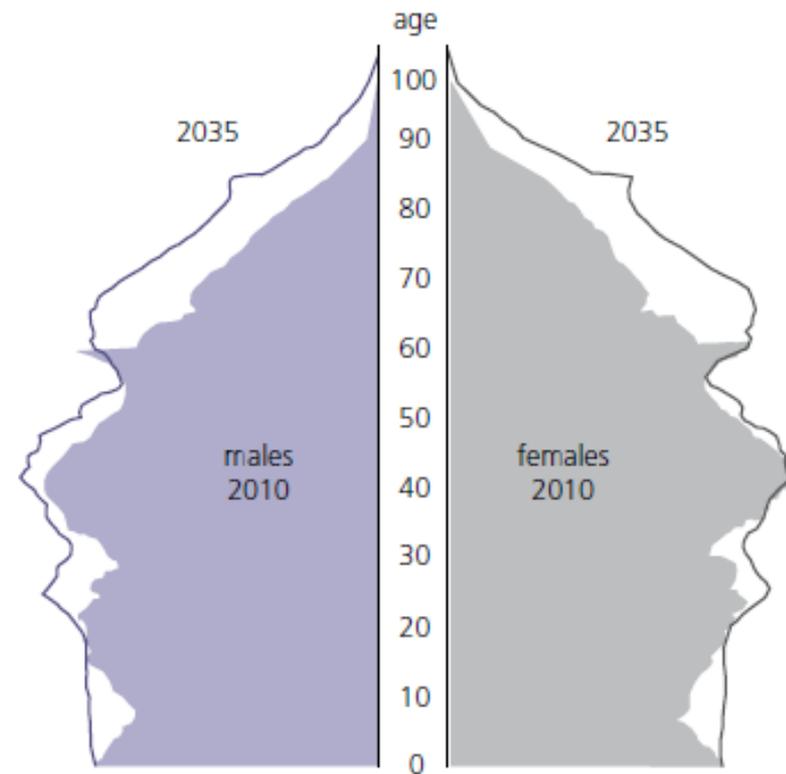
2012: 20%

2020: 30%

- Dependency ratio:

2011: 4:1

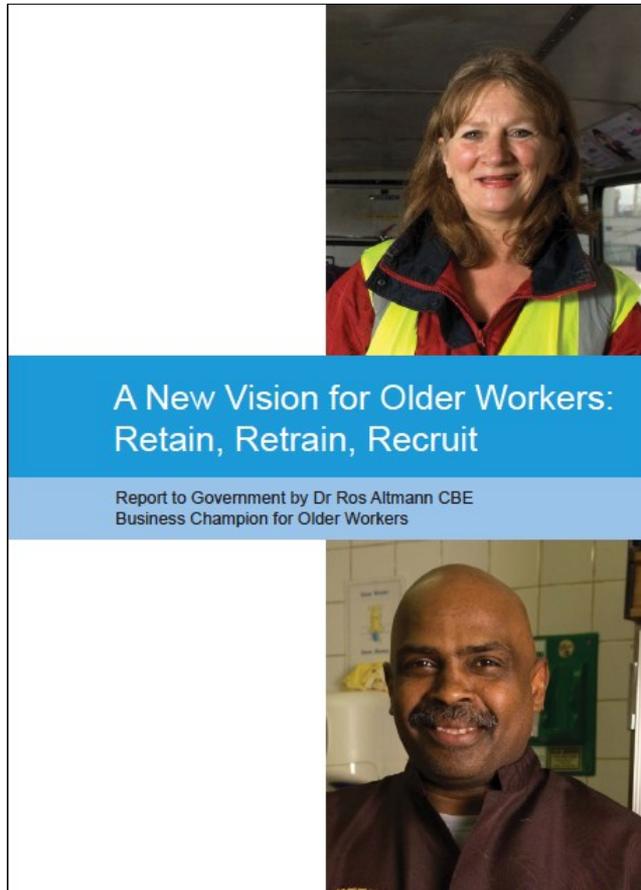
2060: 2:1





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”*
- Fleischmann *et al.* (2015): pervasive negative stereotypes of age: *“inflexible”, “change averse”, “less productive”, “dependent”*



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."

ART.

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’)

Final thoughts

- What does this mean for identity and learning researchers for 'finding' identity within narratives