Gendered Ageism and Employment Agency Practises: Older Women’s post redundancy experiences in the Auckland Labour Market

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This study investigated the relationship between mature female job-seekers and private employment agencies in the Auckland region. Twelve women made redundant after age 40 were interviewed about their experiences of using agencies to find clerical work. Five agency staff were also interviewed to discover their views on placing such women in work. Although the two groups occupy contrasting positions within the employment relationship several complementary themes emerged from the two sets of interviews.

Both groups described gendered ageism as a key issue for older women seeking office work and identified a range of strategies employers use to avoid employing them in permanent positions. In contrast to most previous research, which emphasizes older workers’ perceived skills deficits, both groups saw problems of appearance and ‘team fit’ as more formidable barriers to permanent re-employment. These findings are discussed in relation to the expanding role of employment agencies and policy approaches to combating gendered ageism in employment.

Key Words: gendered ageism, redundancy, clerical occupations, employment agencies
Introduction

Ageism is increasingly recognized as an important workplace and social issue with a growing amount of empirical evidence suggesting that older workers may experience discrimination (Hirsch, Macpherson and Hardy, 2000; Walker, 1998). Older workers who have been made redundant are a particularly vulnerable group who often face longer periods of unemployment than similarly skilled younger workers (Davey and Cornwall, 2003). Until recently, research into the redundancy and job search experiences of older workers focused primarily on the early retirement and exit of male workers and neglected the experiences of older women (Duncan, 2003). However, as many feminist researchers have pointed out, the social construction of ageing is a gendered phenomenon which affects different occupations in diverse ways (Ainsworth, 2002; Onyx, 1998).

Women who have chosen clerical, secretarial or reception work may be especially liable to discrimination during the later part of their working lives as they work within female-dominated occupations where ageism and sexism frequently combine to create the ‘double jeopardy’ of ‘gendered ageism’ (Onyx, 1998). A British study by Wallace (1999) found that employers saw the ideal age for secretarial and administrative positions as around 25 years with women in their mid 30’s and beyond experiencing considerable discrimination. Similar findings were reported in an Australian study by Steinberg et al., (1998). Mature female clerical workers who are made redundant may therefore face considerable problems finding new employment within the same occupational category.
Recent research suggests that private employment agencies are becoming increasingly important intermediaries between workers and employers. Data from Australia, the United States and Europe shows that employers are increasingly contracting out the recruitment of permanent staff to agencies and using them to conduct the initial screening of candidates (Forde, 2001). There is also an increasing use of temporary clerical labour and growth in long-term contractual arrangements between employment agencies and organizations (Dasborough and Sue-Chan, 2002; Gray, 2002). This trend is particularly likely to affect women as clerical, reception and secretarial workers are the largest single group within the agency labour force (Hotopp, 2000).

Druker and Stanworth (2004) argue that the increasing prominence of private employment agencies within the selection process creates a triangular set of employment relationships in which the three parties may have conflicting or ambiguous expectations of each other. Whilst the Druker and Stanworth article provides a careful analysis of the effects of private employment agencies on the lives of temporary workers it is not primarily concerned with either age or gender discrimination within the workplace. Research on gendered ageism within the workplace suggests that the interactions between older female job-seekers and agencies may have different characteristics to those of younger women and agencies (Dipboye and Colella, 2005). The interactions between mature female job-seekers and private employment agency staff thus constitute one emerging and under explored site where the reproduction of gendered ageism can be observed.
Methodology

This research was designed as a small-scale, exploratory, investigation of mature female job-seekers’ interactions with private employment agencies. The interactions between mature female job-seekers and employment agencies were explored from two contrasting perspectives; firstly, from the perspective of job seekers themselves and secondly, from the perspective of recruitment agency consultants. The views expressed by job-seekers and consultants provide clear insights into the way these two groups perceive employer preferences and behaviours.

Job-seekers were recruited through advertisements in two Auckland newspapers. These sought women of 45 years or more who had worked in clerical occupations in the Auckland area for at least 20 hours per week and had experienced redundancy during the previous four years.

Twelve women meeting these criteria responded. Their ages ranged from mid 40’s to early 60’s with a median age in the 50 to 55 year age band. Eight women were divorced, widowed or separated. Four were married or partnered. All women had children though only two still had children living at home. Paid employment was an economic necessity for all women in the sample with the four women in relationships having partners who were unemployed, disabled or in insecure employment themselves.

The women’s redundancies had occurred between two months and four years before their interviews. Prior to redundancy six women had worked as receptionists, two as
secretaries and four as office administrators. At the time of interviewing 11 had regained employment with one working as a receptionist, two as secretaries, four as call-centre staff and four as home care providers. Although the majority of the positions were long-term, all women saw their current jobs as less secure and lower status than their previous employment and all described themselves as significantly worse off financially.

Five recruitment consultants were interviewed, all of whom had several years experience in this role. The four female consultants were in their late20’s or early 30’s and employees of different agencies. The male consultant was in his mid 40’s and the owner of a large, up-market Auckland agency.

Women were interviewed in their own homes. Interviews lasted between an hour and 90 minutes and covered a wide range of topics including previous career history, reactions to redundancy and unemployment, coping methods, job-search techniques and current attitudes towards work.

Consultants were interviewed in their offices. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and asked about their own perceptions of mature candidates, employer perceptions of older women, employers’ ideal candidates for office work and issues they encountered when placing older job-seekers in temporary and permanent employment.

Interviews with all 17 participants were taped and transcribed. The transcripts were then analysed for key themes using a grounded theory framework. The key themes
from each group were then compared and interpreted in relation to each set of respondents’ structural positions within the labour market.

**Findings**

Three key themes emerged from the interview data: firstly, the difficult relationship between female job-seekers and consultants; secondly, the importance of appearance and ‘team fit’; and thirdly, the role of agencies as providers of temporary employment.

**A difficult relationship**

The mature-aged women in this study all described their interactions with female consultants as difficult. Most respondents had initially approached agencies fairly confidently, believing their solid work record, experience and computer literacy would enable them to regain permanent employment relatively easily. Most respondents also believed agency staff were there to help them and expected consultants to advocate on their behalf with employees. To their surprise, many women experienced consultants as disinterested and found their interactions with them difficult. These difficulties were usually interpreted as resulting from generational differences between women which encapsulated the problems they were experiencing within the wider employment context.

A former receptionist in her mid 50’s explained:

*On the telephone I can sound animated and I would often get called in for jobs, and then they would see me, and not that I looked bad, but I looked my age, and they*
instantly weren’t interested. There were so many incidents (pause) they’re run by young, upwardly mobile, stunning young women. They wanted a younger person that looked like them.

The female consultants took a more nuanced view of their relationship with older job-seekers, although it was clear from their comments that the relationship could also be difficult for them. All consultants highlighted the fact that the primary function of agencies is to assist employers rather than job-seekers. As one consultant in her late 20’s explained:

You’ll appreciate that we’re basically driven by what the client wants, so we’re usually looking for what they are looking for.

Despite this, several consultants expressed sympathy for older women and shock at the attitudes of some employers towards them. At a more personal level, the comments of several consultants suggest that their interactions with older women may have aroused their own fears of ageing. A consultant in her late 20’s, who was discussing employer prejudices, remarked ‘Oh, my god, I’ll be turning 30 this year’ as though this was a self evidently alarming event. Similarly, another consultant in her early 30’s extolled the virtues of mature women but when asked how she could improve her own job prospects if she were over 40 replied:

If I were in that age bracket, and thanks for knowing that I’m not, but if I were looking old I’d make sure my skills were as high as possible.
Such advice contrasts sharply with the more cynical advice of a former secretary in her mid 50’s who commented that the best thing older women could do to improve their job prospects was to lose weight, invest in high heeled shoes and become as glamorous as possible.

The consultants’ comments seem compatible with Pearlman’s (1993) suggestion that younger women may experience ambivalent feelings towards mature women because such women personify their own fears of ageing within a youth oriented culture. The relationship between the two groups of women is further complicated by their different structural positions within a gendered labour market. The older women constitute an underpowered and vulnerable group who were often reluctant to challenge perceived discrimination for fear of damaging their relationships with consultants and prospective employers. In contrast, the short term interests of consultants employed on a commission basis are clearly best served by meeting discriminatory employer demands, even when these militate against the longer-term interests of all women.

**Looking good and fitting in.**

Much of the literature on age discrimination within the workplace has investigated negative stereotypes held by employers. Amongst the most commonly identified stereotypes are older workers perceived lack of relevant skills, resistance to change and new technology, slower pace of work and increased risk of ill-health (Murray and Syed, 2005; Tempest, Barnatt and Coupland, 2002). Negative stereotypes concerning appearance and ability to interact with younger workers have received less attention within the literature (Brooke and Taylor, 2005). The findings of this study suggest
that, at least for older women in some clerical occupations, negative stereotypes concerning appearance and lack of ‘team fit’ may be equally important.

The job-seekers in this study all had office computing qualifications which they had updated throughout their careers. Despite this, all women had difficulty obtaining permanent employment. Most women perceived rejections on the basis of appearance or lack of ‘team fit’ as a more intractable problem than skills deficits and most experienced a rapid decline in self-esteem as a result. A fairly typical experience was recounted by a 61 year old former secretary who was told by a young female consultant that she was unsuitable for a secretarial position because the manager was a young man and she would remind him of his mother. In her words:

*I was never aware of my age … but suddenly your age comes to the fore and you think “Oh my god, it does count now, nobody wants me because I’m too old”.* (pause) *I lost my confidence in lots of ways, not just for jobs.*

The women’s descriptions of employer requirements were corroborated by the interviews with agency staff. All consultants placed great emphasis on physical presentation, especially for ‘front of house’ receptionist positions. As one consultant rather cynically commented, ‘*they always want good looking at reception.*’ The male agency owner repudiated the notion that women become less effective employees as they age but stated that physical presentation can be a problem for older female candidates:

*I think the physical presentation is probably the key thing. Some people have the perception that you’re clapped out when you reach a certain mileage on the clock.*
The importance of ‘team fit’ was also highlighted by consultants. This was defined as fitting the personality of the candidate to the characteristics of the existing team. Whilst all consultants stressed that ‘team fit’ was not necessarily about age it clearly functioned as a mechanism for screening out older candidates. As one consultant explained:

*Obviously nobody’s meant to discriminate based on age or that sort of thing, but I think what people say is ‘team fit’ because if they’ve got a young team then they don’t necessarily want an older person.*

This consultant also noted that during the last decade the age of the typical management team the agency dealt with had shifted from the mid 50’s to the mid 30’s. This observation is compatible with overseas studies which have also found that employees are being promoted to middle management positions at younger ages and that this trend may contributing to gendered ageism within the labour market (Brooke and Taylor, 2005).

**Being a temp**

Although none of the women in this study had obtained permanent employment through agencies, they had all obtained temporary clerical work from this source. Whilst all women were grateful to the agencies for providing employment most disliked temping describing it as insecure, lonely and badly paid. As a divorced
clerical worker in her mid 50’s, who had recently been made redundant for the fourth time, explained:

*It can be hard going into strange places, you feel like everyone’s looking at you, and you’ve got all these different systems and five minutes later you have to know it all. It’s a bit daunting, but what’s the choice? I have to go temping because the dole money’s only $164 a week.*

Several women compared the relative ease with which they obtained temporary positions with the difficulty of obtaining permanent employment. A secretary in her late 50’s remarked:

*‘I find it disconcerting when people say temp jobs turn into permanent jobs because that’s never happened in my case. At least with temp work people don’t look at who you are, they only look at what you are doing.*

The women’s perceptions of temporary work were validated by the consultants, all of whom described temporary work as requiring both technical and interpersonal skills and high energy. As one consultant explained:

*Temping requires very hard work, a lot of flexibility, a lot of energy because you’re going into new environments all the time and that’s tiring.*

The consultants’ descriptions of the ideal temporary worker are congruent with other descriptions of temporary work within the literature (Druker and Stanworth, 2004).
However, they contradict traditional stereotypes of the older worker. The consultants’ willingness to place older workers in temporary positions and employers’ willingness to accept them suggests that the reasons why mature women experience difficulty finding permanent employment are not simply related to perceived skills deficits but also to more intangible manifestations of gendered ageism.

**Discussion**

Personnel selection inevitably involves choosing between job-seekers with different characteristics. Various strategies have been used to try and ensure that problems such as ageism and sexism are minimised and candidates are selected on rational, job related, criteria. Policy approaches often utilise a legislative framework and assume that the appropriate legal context will persuade employers to act legally and provide job-seekers with suitable redress where employers fail to act within the law. From a sociological perspective, this approach is limited because it fails to examine the social processes through which discrimination is enacted. A social constructionist perspective, which examines the ways in which inequalities in society are reproduced through daily interactions, can increase our understanding of discrimination and highlight some of the unintended consequences of legislative interventions.

The findings of this research suggest that gendered ageism can be a serious problem for New Zealand women seeking permanent clerical work after late career redundancy. The research suggests that, at least in the occupations studied here, technical competence alone will not necessarily result in permanent re-employment. The gendered ageism respondents’ experienced seemed to be based as much upon
their appearance and the perception that they might not relate well to younger staff as
upon perceived deficiencies in their technical skills.

All women in the study had solid work histories and had heeded the traditional
advice to update their technical skills on a regular basis. The technical competence of
many of the women is illustrated both by stories several women told of being asked to
train up their younger replacements, and by the consultants’ acknowledgement that
many employers were prepared to accept mature women for temporary positions
because of their technical competence but were unwilling to appoint them
permanently because of their appearance and perceived lack of ‘team fit’. Clearly, the
gendered ageism affecting mature-aged female clerical workers will not be solved
simply by counteracting common stereotypes concerning older workers’ outdated
skills and necessitates paying greater attention to combating issues surrounding inter-
age dynamics within the workplace.

All consultants in this study emphasized the importance of acting within the law and
avoiding overt age or gender discrimination. They nevertheless described a range of
indirect tactics consultants sometimes used to screen out older candidates. These
included estimating women’s ages by asking about their schooling or early careers or
explaining that ‘team fit’ was a key requirement of a job. The concept of ‘team fit’
was used by all consultants and currently seems to function as an acceptable,
psychologically mandated, rationalization for discrimination which can be
legitimated with reference to academic research on the importance of teams in
organizational life.
The actions of consultants need to be interpreted within the wider context of the agency labour market within the Auckland region at the time this research took place. Official unemployment rates were low during this research, hovering around the four to five percent level. However, the local employers and recruitment consultants spoken to during the research noted that there were always several suitable applicants for each permanent clerical position. As Gray (2002) points out, when agencies are short of job applicants it is in their own interests to resist discrimination and encourage employers to accept a wider range of candidates. However, when agencies have adequate numbers of job-seekers to choose from they are likely to reject hard-to-place candidates in favour of job-seekers who more nearly meet employer specifications.

The tendency to reject hard-to-place candidates is strengthened when, as in Auckland, an increasing number of private employment agencies are in competition with each other to supply staff. Under such circumstances, the requirement to gain regular or repeat business may enable discriminatory employers to more easily condition agencies into accepting covert age discrimination as a business norm. A survey of Australian Human Resource managers by Dasborough and Sue-Chan (2002) suggested that the initial stages of the business relationship between private employment agencies and employers are often characterised by a degree of mutual wariness. The costs of early mistakes are particularly high for agencies, as clients tend to withdraw their custom permanently after negative experiences early in the relationship. Over time, the relationship between agencies and client organizations tends to become more trusting with both sides gaining greater understanding of the other’s business norms. It is therefore possible that the increasing propensity for agencies and employers to enter into long-term contractual relationships will
eventually make agency staff more willing to advocate on behalf of a wider range of job-seekers.

New Zealand government policy emphasises the importance of retaining older workers within the workforce (Dalziel, 2001) and both human rights legislation and employment law prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of either age or gender. This means that there is currently no statutory retirement age in New Zealand and employers have no grounds for terminating employment on age related grounds. Several other fairly recent policy changes have been aimed at encouraging older workers to remain within the labour force. Chief amongst these has been the raising of the state superannuation age from 60 to 65. In addition, people in the 55 to 59 age group are no longer exempt from work testing when claiming state benefits and must accept any suitable employment they are offered by either government or private employment agencies. These changes have dramatically increased the proportion of 60 to 64 year olds in employment from 24 percent to 45 percent. However, there is some evidence that New Zealand employers are becoming more reluctant to recruit older workers in the absence of clear retirement criteria (Murray, 2002). Within this study, all the consultants highlighted this issue, with several suggesting that some employers fear being saddled with increasingly unproductive staff who they cannot retire easily. For many mature female clerical workers government initiatives aimed at combating age discrimination may have had the unintended consequence of worsening the problems they face and forcing them into a series of increasingly low-paid, low skilled and insecure jobs.
The ‘business case’ argument for employing older workers has been made by many politicians, business leaders and researchers (e.g. Davey and Cornwall, 2003; Duncan, 2003). This approach highlights the positive attributes of older workers and exhorts employers to enhance their own best interests by cultivating a mixed age workforce which maximizes the potential of older workers. Whilst there is some evidence that a few New Zealand employers are deliberately seeking a mixed age workforce which matches their customer profiles (Walker, 2004) other research suggests that many New Zealand employers remain reluctant to employ older workers. The findings of this study suggest that the negative impact of gendered ageism on mature women seeking clerical work may be exacerbated by the increasing casualisation of the clerical labour force and complicated by the growing tendency to outsource the recruitment of both permanent and temporary clerical staff to private employment agencies.
REFERENCES


