

Gendered ageism in older Australians' experiences of labour market exclusion

Lifting mature age employment and extending working lives are now central policy concerns in countries such as Australia with ageing populations. Yet the proportion of older workers who are unemployed or do not get as much work as they would like has increased considerably in recent years.¹ Ageism is often identified as a key contributor to the labour market exclusion experienced by many older workers (Australian Human Rights Commission 2010; National Seniors Australia Productive Ageing Centre 2012). However, beyond survey studies of the incidence of perceived age discrimination in employment, how ageism operates to differentially exclude older men and women remains relatively under-examined.

With some notable exceptions (Encel & Studencki 1997; Weller 2007), discussions of ageism in Australia often characterise ageism as a de-gendered phenomenon involving the systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against older workers 'simply because they are older' (Australian Human Rights Commission 2010: 2). The stereotyping of older workers as 'past it' or as less productive and more inflexible than younger workers is represented as a universal phenomenon motivated by a contemporary culture that teaches us to read our bodies anxiously for signs of decay and decline (Twigg 2004). But as intersectionality approaches emphasise 'people's bodies are not marked or experienced as "old" in a universal manner...rather the perception varies by gender, race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation' (Calasanti 2005: 10). For example, a UK study shows that women are stereotyped as suffering an age-related decline in performance from a younger age than their same-aged male colleagues (Duncan & Loretto 2004). Indeed, another study found that managers saw women's careers peaking at the age of 35, a full ten years earlier than men's (Itzin &

¹ In May 2014, the under-employment rate for persons aged 45+ was 6 per cent compared with 4.5-4.8 per cent in November 2007. Unemployment also rose by around 1 per cent among jobseekers aged 45-59 between November 2007 and November 2012 (when latest age-separated figures were available) and by almost half a per cent among jobseekers aged 60-64 years. Figures based on data extracted from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Surveys.

Phillipson 1995). Calasanti (2005: 10) suggests that this relates to the importance that bodily appearance carries for women's social capital. As Lois McNay (1999: 98) comments in a different context, 'gender is deeply inscribed upon our bodies.' Hence women are subject to a "double standard" of ageing' in that they are harshly judged 'on the basis of their ability to achieve and maintain the cultural ideal of female beauty' (Clarke & Griffin 2008: 655). But the "double jeopardy" of ageism and sexism in excluding older women from employment also extends to how their labour force participation is shaped by gendered roles in the domestic sphere (Moore 2009). As Handy and Davy (2007: 86) observe in their study of older New Zealand women's experiences, women who withdraw from paid work while their children are young often return to 'low-skill and precarious employment which provides little economic security.' Citing evidence that employers prefer clerical staff to be in their mid-20s and rarely recruit women over 45, they point to the situation of women in clerical and secretarial work 'who may be especially liable to discrimination during the later part of their working lives.'

Method

This paper explores the intersection between age and gender in shaping older workers' experiences of labour market discrimination, drawing on the experiences of 80 older men and women interviewed as part of a broader study into the life-course trajectories and circumstances that lead to labour market exclusion in mid-to-later life. The men (43) and women (37) who participated in this study were all between 45 and 73 years of age and were either under-employed or unable to find paid work. They were recruited from three main areas—Western Sydney, the Gold Coast, and South Eastern Melbourne—via advertisements placed in local libraries, employment services, and online jobsites targeted at older workers. Several unions and older people's advocacy groups also advertised the study to their members. Prospective participants were then screened by age (45-54 years; 55-64 years; 65+ years) and gender to capture a cross-section of under-employed and non-employed older workers. There were, however, a number of significant differences between the

male and female participants. In particular, less than 40 per cent of women were partnered compared with more than 6 in 10 men. The proportion of partnered women also declined with age. Consistent with other studies on gendered ageism (Handy & Davy 2007; Moore 2009), a high proportion of women worked in clerical and administrative work whereas men were more concentrated in managerial or professional occupations.

[Table 1 here]

The data reported in this paper are taken from semi-structured phone interviews carried out between May and December 2013. These interviews explored the intersection between participants' age-identity (the age they felt, were perceived to be and would prefer to be) and their experience of work. Questions also focused on building a narrative history from participants' experiences of growing up, to their early career experiences, to their current experience of joblessness or underemployment. The interviews thus adopted a life-course lens (McDaniel & Bernard 2011) to understanding the anchoring of older men and women's labour force participation in the sequence of earlier opportunity structures and the constraints and opportunities from their past (O'Rand 1996).

NVivo software was used to organise the coding and analysis of interview data using a coding scheme developed collaboratively by the authors after a close reading of a sample of (20) interview transcripts. Remaining transcripts were then coded in detail until saturation point, the 'point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook' (Guest *et al.* 2006: 65), was reached after 38 transcripts. A further eight interviews were coded to confirm saturation and the sample of coded transcripts was also checked for stratification across age, gender and occupation to ensure that saturation had not been prematurely achieved through 'spurious homogeneity of the sample' (Francis *et al.* 2010). In the excerpts reported below, names and other identifying characteristics have been changed.

Gender differences in experiences of discrimination

Both older men and women described being subject to typical negative stereotypes associated with older workers such as that they were: 'more or less gone'; less capable of adapting to new technologies; 'decrepit' and forgetful; and had 'nothing left to offer.' Nevertheless, there were subtle differences in the way that men and women related to their age identity and in *how* they described being discriminated against that pointed to the fundamentally gendered construction of ageing (Ainsworth 2002).

There was some evidence that women experienced their age as a major disadvantage in the context of employment at younger ages than men. When responding to questions about the main disadvantages associated with their chronological age, more than 60 percent of women in the youngest cohort (45-54 years) cited the difficulties they were experiencing in finding work compared with only half of men. Moreover, men in this age cohort who cited employment difficulties as the main disadvantage of their age were all in their 50s whereas a number of the women were in their 40s.

Men and women also responded differently to questions about the age they would prefer to be, suggesting 'the deeply entrenched bodily basis' (McNay 1999: 98) of women's identities. The overwhelming preference among women across age groups was to be no more than 40 years of age, with around 65 percent saying they would like to be 40 years of age or younger. Men gave more varied responses, with close to a third giving a preferred age in their 50s or 60s (compared to less than 1 in 5 women). These differences in response may reflect the particularly corrosive effect of ageing on women's traditional source of power which, according to Twigg (2004: 62), is grounded in 'their sexual attractiveness seen to reside in youth.' Hence whereas early signs of aging such as gray hair are seen as marks of authority for men, women can become socially invisible if they lose their youthful appearance. Elements of this sense of being sidelined as a consequence of 'losing their looks or figure' were evident in how women talked about ageing and wanting to be younger.

Lisa described how coming into her 50s 'and how you're perceived by people' could be very confronting: 'I don't like losing, you know, my looks or my figure or whatever... But as far as I present and as society views you, you can feel quite invisible at this age and particularly as a woman.' Brenda felt that it had all been 'downhill appearance-wise from 35', which is why she would prefer to still be 30 rather than in her late 40s. Miriam, now in her mid 50s, also cited her mid-30s as the peak years of physical appearance, stating: 'I wouldn't mind having my 35-year-old body back...I'd like to give back that extra 10 pounds.' Veronica, a clerical worker, drew a direct link between wanting to look 30 and the employment difficulties she was experiencing as a 60-year old, commenting that, at 30, 'you wouldn't look too old to work but you have enough experience to compete.' Interestingly, men who reported wanting to be younger almost never focused on the benefits of looking young but instead described a sense of wanting to start over again on their careers, which hadn't panned out as expected. Explaining why he would prefer to be in his 30s rather than mid-50s, an IT worker described a 'sense of regret that I didn't pursue other avenues which might have been [better] me...as far as careers and things like that.' Likewise for Dan, a laboratory technician, who 'wouldn't mind sort of starting out [his] career over again.'

The primacy of the body as 'a key hinge' (Ainsworth 2002: 580) in the construction of women's age-identity was also evident in women's descriptions of encountering ageism. Explaining that her age 'seems to be a problem if you have to go for an interview', Eileen described how 'they take one look at my grey hair, and just completely dismiss you.' She gave an example from a recent job packing supermarket shelves:

there was these other women there who were—one of them was the same age as me [53] but dyes her hair all the time...[these younger night-supervisors] were standing in the aisle—and they must think because you're grey you're deaf—and I heard them say, "we've got two out of this lot who are oldies, you can tell that. So we won't be getting them back in."

Michelle, who had worked mainly in secretarial roles, similarly focused on how she was 'sort of overweight' and did 'present a little bit differently than perhaps a younger person would look when applying for the same sort of role.' Rita, who was looking for administrative work, described how she had got an interview for 'just about every job' but was always 'just pipped at the post.' She felt this was because of how old she looked, which she described as 'the biggest disadvantage' of being in her mid-50s. Hence she 'would prefer to look 25.'

The ageism that men experienced, by contrast, was rarely bound up with their embodiment. Rather, the 'deficit' of ageing for men involved a perceived loss of intellectual capital, as typified in the comment of a 64-year old IT professional that 'once you're over mid-40s...[there's a perception] that you're rigid and not flexible enough for the roles.' An advertising worker described how his industry 'puts a stamp of ages among you even earlier than 40' because of a perception 'that good ideas only come from young, fresh *minds*' (emphasis added). The experiences of the men interviewed suggested that employers and recruiters primarily judged their age according to the roles that they had had in the workforce and the timing of their entry into employment. Dan explained how recruiters 'look at what I've done and [say], you know, "This person is not going to stick around" or "This person is not going to be happy in this job."' Another man in his 60s described how 'by the time they look at the time you started work and things like that, they can figure roughly how old you are.' These men's descriptions of being aged by what they had *done* or the *time* they had started work differed from the more corporeal descriptions given by some women of how 'employers would *look at you* and say oh no you're too old' (emphases added). It denotes greater potential for men to seem younger by adjusting their résumés whereas women may have to work more on their bodies (Clarke & Griffin 2008). Indeed, men were more likely to report that they adopted this strategy of concealing aspects of their work history on their résumés. Although some women also did this, there was awareness that changing how they looked *on paper* could only achieve so much. 'We can do that on our paper résumé,' explained Diane about 'trying to look younger.' 'But then when we front up at the interview, even though...I don't think I look like Mrs Doubtfire...'

Ageism and the care penalty

The interview data reported here would seem to confirm the insights of intersectionality studies that sexism intensifies the ageism experienced by older women to place them in 'double jeopardy as they grow older' (Chait Barnett 2005: 25). But the experiences of several women in the study also highlighted how their participation in employment can additionally be shaped by the intersection between ageism and sexism in magnifying the penalty of women's domestic contract.

As is well established in the broader care penalty literature, women pay a high price for interrupting their careers to care for young children. Not only do they forestall their careers resulting in a heavy wage penalty over the life-course and few savings for retirement, which Ginn & Arber (1996: 31) describe as a major reason why they 'are more vulnerable to personal poverty in later life than men.' Women who return to the workforce frequently shift to more "feminized" occupations and lower-status jobs due to the clustering of part-time work 'towards the bottom of the organisational and occupational hierarchies' (Tomlinson et al. 2009: 351). However, as Taniguchi (1999: 1008) argues, the age-related timing of childbearing 'influences the extent to which this event shapes women's life chances.' She hypothesises that women who delay childbearing suffer a lower penalty than those who give birth at younger ages whose 'career interruptions occur during the critical period of career building.' But as Encel and Studencki (1997: 3) found in their study of older Australian women jobseekers, if women who interrupt their careers try to make the return 'as mature would-be workers' they can find that their age becomes a barrier. This was evident in the experiences of several women we interviewed, who were trying to return to paid work following several years out of employment after having children in their late 30s or early 40s.

'It's hard to go look for work at this age and stage of life,' explained Lisa (49) who had given up her administration job at a university when she had her third child at 42: 'the workforce isn't really hospitable to older people. And maybe that is because we're a bit more opinionated or not as malleable...' Natalie (52) likewise commented on how when people hear how old you are they 'make

a lot of assumptions and generalisations about that number which are often negative.' Natalie had given up her teaching job to look after her young son in her early 40's as her husband earned more money, although if she had had her way she would 'be earning the money that [her] husband could and he'd stay home and look after the baby.' She recognised how the penalty of several years out of the workforce was adding to the age barriers she was now experiencing as 'when you're out of the workforce for 10 years or more, it's going to be difficult to go back to it.' Jacinta (46), who was looking for clerical work, similarly reflected on how her age was part of the reason why she was struggling to find work but it was also that she'd 'had children and...sort of work gaps,' which 'they don't like' in agencies.

Other women in the study who disrupted their careers managed to return to employment but, significantly, these women generally made the return at a younger age. Katherine (52) worked as a nurse until she had her first child at the age of 30. She returned to the workforce seven years later as a part-time aged care nurse, which she still does two-days per week. Rita, who is now working part-time in community work, also returned to the workforce in her 30s after several years out while her children were young. She retrained as a driving instructor when she was 35 before moving onto a more permanent government job at the age of 40 which she held for 15 years. Yvonne, unlike the other returning mothers, successfully returned to her career as a paralegal secretary at the age of 44. However, she explained that at that stage she could get away with putting her age 'down five years', which she did because employers would say 'oh no you're too old, we want somebody to be younger...'

Conclusion

Ageism shapes both older men and women's labour market participation in important ways. However, as highlighted by the experiences of those reported here, older women are not discriminated against simply because they are "old". Rather the discrimination they encounter is heavily bound up with broader gender inequalities that make women liable to experience ageism

sooner than men, and for different reasons. Measures to combat ageism must therefore go beyond the deconstruction of “universal” negative stereotypes of disembodied older workers. This is particularly critical if we are to avoid aggravating the impact of other sources of sexism on older women’s labour market participation, such as the heavy wage penalty paid by women for their long-run domestic contract and their occupational segregation into lower status and poorer paid jobs. For the “double jeopardy” faced by women as they grow older is not simply that sexism intensifies their vulnerability to ageism. It is also that ageism can compound the cost of gender inequality in the domestic sphere in the context of women having children at later ages.

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Table 1: Characteristics of participants

	<i>Women (43)</i>	<i>Men (37)</i>	<i>Total (80)</i>
Age Group			
<i>45-54</i>	21	14	35
<i>55-64</i>	16	15	31
<i>65+</i>	6	8	14
Total	43	37	80
Marital Status			
<i>Single</i>	11	9	20
<i>Married or living with partner</i>	16	24	40
<i>Separated or divorced</i>	13	4	17
<i>Widowed</i>	3	0	3
Total	43	37	80
Occupation			
<i>Managers or professionals</i>	14	17	31
<i>Trades workers and technicians</i>	4	8	12
<i>Community and personal services workers</i>	6	3	9
<i>Clerical and administrative workers</i>	18	6	24
<i>Labourers and machinery operators</i>	0	2	2
<i>Sales workers</i>	1	1	2
Total	43	37	80