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Graduation at age 50 +: Contested efforts to construct “third age” identities and negotiate cultural age stereotypes[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The cultural and social contexts of aging have changed a great deal during the last two decades and aging experiences have become more differentiated. However, pervasive age stereotypes still exist that limit the agency and self-perception of older people, and part of the experience of new aging is to actively combat such negative stereotypes. The purpose of this study is to explore how lifelong learning and a degree attainment in midlife become embedded into new aging practices. The study will focus on a specific group of aging workers who attained a Master's degree from Finnish universities in their fifties. In order to better understand the aging experiences of these older graduates, this study seeks to address how they construct the meaning of aging in relation to their own educational and professional status. The data consist of 14 life-history interviews, which were analyzed as narrative identity performances. Differentiating oneself from the stereotype of physical and mental decline and positioning oneself in a favorable way in inter-generational relations were common ways of approaching aging. Age-negotiation and ambivalence about aging were expressed by structuring narratives around clear oppositions and contradictions. University studies at age 50 + became a talking point in countering cultural age-stereotypes, because it showed that aging workers could still accomplish significant goals and “renew” oneself intellectually. University studies also enabled collaboration with the younger generation and the breaking of narrow age boundaries.

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The cultural and social contexts of aging have changed a great deal over the last two decades. There is now more fluidity and complexity in the way people understand and interpret aging processes, and aging experiences have become more differentiated (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013). People who are now in their 60s have reached middle age in ways that are quite unlike those of their parents or grandparents. For them aging is no longer defined only by normative and standardized life course trajectories. Rather, much of the cultural fabric that makes the new aging, or so-called “third age,” as Gilleard and Higgs (2002; 2009) define it, can be traced to the ferment of the

identity politics of the 1960s and its emphasis upon choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure. Those people who were born in the 1940s and were young in the 60s extend the earlier embodiments of youth culture into mid- and later life. For them, aging is caught up in various forms of social practices by which meaningful identities and lifestyles are realized (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013). Aging can be described in positive terms as a time of increased freedom, prioritization, increased acceptance of self and others, decreasing concerns about the opinions of others and a time for reaping the benefits of experience (Trehewey, 2001).

Even though “old age” as a distinct social category has collapsed (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013), prevailing age stereotypes still exist. Thus, part of the experience of the new aging is to actively ignore or combat such negative stereotypes. Here the focus will be on age negotiations within the context of work. The workplace provides an arena in which age and aging are

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interpreted within economic agenda, and “old age” is a marker of a worker who is at risk of not being productive anymore. However, chronological age as such or alone does not determine the positioning of workers in the workplace. Rather, age is part of a complex web of social distinctions such as gender and class that all intersect in the construction of an employee's relative status and opportunities at work (Irni, 2010). Age and aging are intertwined with personal qualities and skills gained through formal qualifications and work experience as well as the supply and demand of the labor market (Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret, 2014). With the right kinds of social resources, aging workers have better chances to negotiate the meaning of their age and their social positions at work.

The purpose of this study¹ is to explore how lifelong learning and especially a degree attainment in midlife become embedded into the new aging practices. A “third age” identity requires constant performativity and effort – mostly by working on lifestyle, leisure and consumption (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013). Moreover, in line with the ideals of active aging, individuals are expected to remain socially active, and maintain intellectual curiosity and continuing learning activities until later life (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2014). This study will focus on a specific group of midlife professionals who attained a Master's degree from Finnish universities in their fifties. In order to better understand the aging experiences of these older graduates, this study seeks to address how they construct the meaning of aging in relation to their own educational and professional status. In earlier studies regarding education and aging identities, students of the University of the Third Age, who are already beyond the retirement age, used lifelong learning as a practice to battle against old age (Ojala, 2010; Wilinska, 2012). This study moves beyond the construction of aging identities within educational settings, and explores how older graduates, who are still actively involved in working life, use educational attainment in negotiating pervasive age stereotypes.

Prolonging careers is an especially relevant and highly debated issue in Finland. The population is aging faster in Finland than in most European countries owing to a larger baby-boom cohort, successful health care, decreasing birth rate, and nearly the lowest immigration rate in the world. Moreover, among European Union (EU) countries, Finland has the largest shares of those aged 50 to 64; they are 14.7% of the total population (Eurostat, 2012a). As of the beginning of 2005, the Finnish pension scheme was renewed and nowadays it is possible to have the option of retiring between the ages of 63 and 68. In Finland the share of people aged 50 to 64 who are active in the labor market was also the highest in the EU, 30.5% (Eurostat, 2012a). An important strategy to tackle an aging workforce has been to promote lifelong learning. The national strategy of lifelong learning was first introduced by the Ministry of Education in 1997. Later in 2003 the Noste Programme was launched to raise the level of education and training among the 25–59-year-old adult population who did not have an upper secondary school degree. Moreover, in Finnish universities a relatively large proportion of graduates

are older students (OECD, 2012). Education has also traditionally had a high status in Finland, and in 2010 about 23% of adults aged 25 to 64 were taking part in education and training (Eurostat, 2012b).

Age stereotypes at work

During the process of aging, the changes in the body and self are interpreted in relation to the social structures and cultural practices that constitute the meaning of age in society. How old one feels (i.e., subjective age), how people represent their age and how others interpret their age are related to social and cultural norms and expectations (Aapola, 2002; Arber & Ginn, 1995). Whenever people act in different social contexts, such as workplaces, they become located in normative age systems in which they are obliged, expected, or allowed to do so something because of their chronological or presumed age (Arber & Ginn, 1995). The point when people are considered old is marked by interpersonal practices, such as birthday rituals, and institutional rights and duties (Vincent, 2003), but the significance of these markers differs from one situation to another. Thus, even though the process of aging is influenced by cultural and social age constructions and age categorizations, people do exercise agency in negotiating new meanings for aging.

Everyone experiences aging in his or her own unique way, and yet people are always “aged by culture” in a sense that powerful cultural aging discourses delimit experiences (Gullette, 2003, 2004). According to a pervasive “decline narrative,” old age is defined by weakening physical and mental capacity; dependence; decline in social status and appearance; loss of a good position in the workforce; loss of power and influence; the loss of partners; and loss of looks and youthfulness (Kamler, 1999; see also Vincent, 2003; Gullette, 2003; Degnen, 2007). Age constructions and age categories (young vs. old; middle age vs. old age) are always hierarchical and create differences and inequalities (Gullette, 2004; Ojala, 2010). Some of the cultural constructions of old age can harden and become agist stereotypes, which portray old people as senile, incompetent, and unattractive (Hurd, 1999; Vincent, 2003; Weiss, Sassenberg, & Freund, 2013).

In the context of new aging, the negative stereotypes of decline, loss and frailty have been located only in the social imaginary of a “fourth age” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013). However, in work settings even relatively young people can be targets of agist stereotypes that limit the number of possible positions they can occupy (Riach, 2007). At the workplace, according to a “poor performance” stereotype, aging workers' work performance is expected to reduce due to lower ability and motivation (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). It is also common to assume that aging workers experience greater fatigue and cannot bring the necessary levels of energy to work to keep up with younger workers (Stark, 2009). Moreover, “lower ability to learn” and “resistance to change” stereotypes define aging workers as less adaptable and flexible, and therefore more difficult to train; they are taken as having less potential for and enthusiasm about learning and development (Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Stark, 2009). Aging workers are also expected to be less knowledgeable than younger workers regarding the technical aspects of their jobs (Stark, 2009).

Agist representations can affect institutional policies and practices, and lead to age discrimination that impact the recruitment, promotion, and retention of aging workforce

¹ This study is part of a larger research project (whose name will be added after the review) in which the purpose was to investigate how aging and expertise intertwine and why experienced professionals enroll in degree-oriented university programs in midlife (citation will be added after the review).

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