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# “Once an entrepreneur, always an entrepreneur”

## Positioning analysis of written narratives

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The negative stereotypes concerning late career workers are found to prevail and lead to negative circulation of narratives and actions between individuals and societies. We used the context of late career entrepreneurs, to find an alternative and a more positive narrative concerning late career work by focusing on entrepreneurs, and the narrative positioning related to them.

**Design/methodology/approach:** We used a narrative positioning analysis, cycling through three levels of analysis and then returning to level two, in order to study our sample of seven narratives written by Finnish late career entrepreneurs. We present in detail one story-telling narrative, by Matthew, and then layer the remaining six narratives to present themes, positioning and actions surrounding being a late career entrepreneur.

**Findings:** A more positive narrative circulation was found, which related to the master narrative of entrepreneurs as continuing “until the end” and taking care of themselves, their enterprises and different stakeholder groups even after exiting the enterprise into so-called “retirement”. The entrepreneurs were found to actively use this positive narrative to position themselves both in the story-telling world and in their local interactions. By positioning themselves as “never ending caretakers”, the entrepreneurs gave a strong account that their reasons to continue working centered on the factors social.

**Research limitations/implications:** These research findings and analysis should be interpreted in the context of the Nordic Countries and especially Finland.

**Practical implications:** The results of this study can inform the ways in which these “never ending caretakers” can transition into retirement and adjust to life spent in retirement.

**Originality/value:** In the study, entrepreneurs’ written answers were analyzed with narrative positioning analyses. An alternative story of people at work was found, and a more positive narrative circulation was constructed based on their narratives.

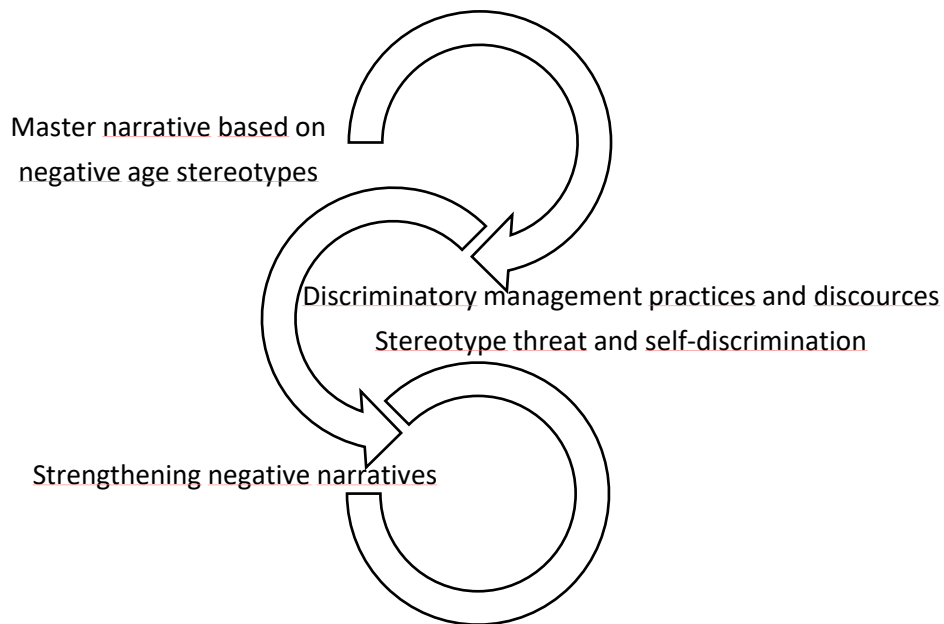
## Introduction

One crucial concern for researchers interested in aging is that the value and productivity of “older workers” is often questioned in the literature and media. Furthermore, these “older workers” are often portrayed as unwell, less mentally capable, and reluctant to change and develop themselves (Byens *et al.*, 2009; Taylor and Earl, 2016). These negative narratives of ageing employees may even result in situations where late career workers are the main target of downsizing or restructuring. (Byens *et al.*, 2009.)

As early as the 1950s, researchers maintained that aging did not automatically mean a trajectory characterized by decline, but one that allows individuals to participate in society and to maintain relatively high levels of activity (Havighurst, 1961). This idea would eventually be known as successful aging (Zacher, 2015). Although research has offered a more balanced story of late career workers during these decades, the negative images and narratives of late career workers are still perceived to prevail in working life and society in general (Byens *et al.*, 2009).

One reason behind the persistent negative image of late career workers has been suggested to be a so-called self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, that negative age stereotypes influence management decisions and result in limited opportunities for promotion, training, and development for late career workers, which in turn reduce their skills, motivation and their employability, thereby validating the managers’ age norms and stereotypes. (Kooij *et al.*, 2008.) Further, the self-fulfilling prophecy has been declared to be caused by the mechanisms of stereotype threat, or the fear of confirming others’ negative stereotypes (Buyens *et al.*, 2009). That threat may make it difficult for late career workers to perform up to their potential and may even make them reject the tasks that society expects them to accomplish, which in turn strengthens these negative stereotypes surrounding these late career workers. (Buyens *et al.*, 2009.)

In terms of narrative research, which is the research methodology used in this article (see Bamberg, 2006), the situation experienced by late career workers could be described as a negative narrative circulation. This negative circulation could emanate from the society level to the levels of managers and late career workers themselves and along with influences from different communities and societies. Due to this circulation, which combines narratives of actions and practices, the negative story of late career workers prevails and even strengthens as is demonstrated in figure 1.



*Figure 1. Negative circulation of narratives about late career workers.*

Breaking this negative circulation has been found to be difficult. For example, Buyens et al. (2009) highlight that before any management practices targeted to empower and support the late career workers can work, peoples' perception of late career workers needs to be changed and for that, more research on the area is needed. Correspondingly, Schalk et al. (2010) state that the advantages and positive age stereotypes of ageing employees should be promoted and that increased attention should be paid to the potential of older workers. There is also a need for alternative, more positive stories and narratives of late career workers to circulate, leading to the fostering of positive circulation stories.

However, the situation at hand forms a difficult methodological challenge: how to study and promote the potential of late career workers in an institutional setting and social environment that generates and even strengthens negative discourses, narratives and stereotypes. In this study, we suggest that one methodological possibility for research is to alter the traditional context of aging and of late career workers beyond paid work and workplaces, and find alternative narratives there. We focus then on narratives of Finnish late career entrepreneurs and those that are self-employed, who have considered leaving work, or what we commonly consider retirement. The institutional environments, social expectations, age stereotypes and responsive discourses and narratives are different concerning entrepreneurs, at least in Finland (Kautonen, Tornikoski and Kibler, 2011). This opens up possibilities to construct alternative stories concerning late career individuals, and to reveal positive circulation of narratives.

Notably, entrepreneurs' institutional setting and social environment differ from the contexts often surrounding salaried workers. Here, ageism and the accompanying stereotypes reflect the structures of working people in the intersectionality of older chronological age and salaried status. Late career entrepreneurs, on the other hand, may be categorized as chronologically "older" but they may have freedom from these institutional and, in some instances, oppressive structures. We suggest that the negative age stereotypes and narratives are at least partly generated in the intersectionality of ageing and wage worker status, and that the narratives concerning late career entrepreneurs are different.

Contrary to salaried workers, Finnish entrepreneurs and those that are self-employed, for example, do not have a mandatory, statutory or otherwise institutionally defined chronological retirement age. This implies that the retirement processes of entrepreneurs are not as institutionalized and bound to chronological age as the retirement processes of employees. Much like in other OECD (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, entrepreneurs are mainly responsible for organizing their own pensions along with other forms of income they may need as they age (OECD, 2015). Furthermore, social security systems in many OECD countries do not offer disability or unemployment benefits to the self-employed (OECD, 2015). In that context, entrepreneurs may have longer careers than paid workers (Salonen & Lampi, 2014).

Interestingly, previous studies (Hytti, 2010; Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014) have indicated that entrepreneurship may help individuals reconcile society's negative age attitudes and stereotypes, and their desire to continue working in their late career. In addition, it has been found that entrepreneurship at older ages can be viewed as an alternative model of retirement, as it enables individuals to balance caring responsibilities and avoid employers' age discrimination (Wainwright and Kibler, 2014). Further, entrepreneurship and self-employment are found to be identities that can be enacted to resist the unattractive and negative identity of the "older worker" (Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014). For women especially, the boundaries faced in salaried work have been noticed to facilitate the move into a career as an entrepreneur (Hytti, 2010). These results encourage us to find different kinds of narratives that surround late career entrepreneurs.

Unfortunately, research of entrepreneurial careers is scarce (Hytti, 2010; Burton, *Sörensen and Dobrev*, 2016). In particular, the late career phase has received less attention as compared to studies focused on the process of entering an entrepreneurial career or that of self-employment (DeTienne, 2010; Wennberg and DeTienne, 2014). Several factors, such as prior experience in entrepreneurship, higher education, and financial resources, can facilitate entry into an entrepreneurial career (Tervo, 2014). This entry can even occur at older chronological ages, as part of the process of exiting working life (Kautonen et al. 2011). However, the late career of those retiring from an entrepreneurial career or simply growing

older while at the same time continuing to pursue an entrepreneurial career is a rather understudied topic.

The aim of our study is to explore late career entrepreneurs' narratives concerning retirement in order to find positive circulations of narratives between individuals, their communities and societies. We approach entrepreneurs' written narratives as situated interactive actions and the act of narrating as an activity of giving an account. Specifically, we apply positioning analyses (Bamberg, 2006) to find dominant discourses or master narratives concerning late career entrepreneurs. Further, we use this approach in order to analyze how the late career entrepreneurs position themselves and how they are positioned by others in relation to the dominant discourses in situations where the entrepreneurs consider retirement.

### **Our research journey with the entrepreneurs' narratives**

Our data consists of seven Finnish entrepreneurs' working life narratives that they sent to us in the spring of 2018. The data was collected by publishing an invitation on the University of (anonymized) Internet pages. By publishing the invitation, we wanted to give space to the entrepreneurs to write their own narratives, and to find out what they considered as worthwhile telling us about retirement, what themes they would write about and what themes would they keep quiet. We found this methodological approach justifiable because entrepreneurs' retirement is an under-researched theme. We did not want to steer the responses with specific questions or with an interactive interview situation. It was only afterwards, when we noticed the strongly interactive nature of our invitation and the entrepreneurs' responses to that we invited them to discuss their narratives further with us.

Seven entrepreneurs sent us their stories. Their ages varied between 51 and 71. Three of them were women and four were men. Some of the participants were, or had been, employers, whereas the others were self-employed. Some could be called serial entrepreneurs. The industrial fields of their business ventures included manufacturing industry, retail, and knowledge-intensive business services. There were, for example, stories of an accounting company, a service station, one little grocery store, industrial enterprises and private consultants. Some of the entrepreneurs even had doctoral degrees while some did not have an academic degree, although not all mentioned their education level specifically.

The length of the stories varied, but the whole material contained 36 written pages. In addition, one participant included her thesis and another provided a link to his publication. These texts were closely related to the themes of the invitation, but we used them only as sources of additional information due to their narrative nature as thesis and guidebook, which differed from the private and personal nature of the other writings.

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of (anonymised) in March 2018. In addition, we obtained written consent from each participant. In this article, we have used pseudonyms for the entrepreneurs to hide their identities.

Our qualitative study focused on entrepreneurs' retirement that had lasted for three years. Until now, we had made analyses based on the data only by using content analyses. In the beginning of our research process, we read the narratives several times and attempted to find the process and point in time of retirement, and the features that influenced the retirement decisions, because only few previous studies had examined the retirement process of entrepreneurs (Morris *et al.*, 2018). We found this task very difficult, because the definitions of retirement in narratives were scattered, which is why we made one content analysis of the retirement definitions used by entrepreneurs themselves (reference anonymised).

Based on our study (anonymized), entrepreneurs seemed to use varieties of the following criteria for retirement: starting to utilize the benefits and investments collected during their career (i.e. different pension benefits, investments), applying for pension benefits (i.e. mandatory pension and private pensions), reducing working hours, changing the main form of employment or occupation, entrepreneurial exit, becoming redundant or even harmful for the company, and health concerns. One of our conclusions was that the research participants did not see retirement as finishing working or "not working". (Reference anonymized.) This finding surprised us, while "not working" is one of the most common definitions of retirement (Denton and Spencer, 2009).

This contradiction inspired us to continue with the next analyses. Our research proceeded with a content analysis of the construction of every respondent's careers. We tried to construct a linear career trajectory of each narrative. However, we found that there was no single career process or linear trajectory, but many sub-processes and sub-trajectories for one individual. These overlapping processes we described in another publication (reference anonymised).

With these two analyses and publications, we ended up with complex and unorthodox career trajectories with no exact ends, which could have been named as "retirement". In this study, we focus on the narrative nature of the entrepreneurs writings and apply positioning analyses to shed light on the observed messiness of the entrepreneurs' "retirement".

### **Methodology: narratives as actions and interactions**

Despite our collected data and the wording in our published invitation, our approach to narrative methods is grounded in a functional perspective on narrative and language use than

on the so-called autobiographical model (Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; de Fina, 2013). This means that we are interested in the social actions and functions that narratives perform in the lives of people and in societies. We approach narratives as situated and contextualized “small stories”, which people use in their interactive engagements to construct a sense of who they are as opposed to an autobiographical “big story” research that analyzes stories as representations of world and identities. (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008.)

We apply the framework generated by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), and developed further by De Fina (2013). These researches highlight the importance of small stories, and conceptualizing narratives-in-action as the sites of engagement where identities are continuously practiced and tested out. They see that identity work is being conducted in these everyday practices and that such continuous and repetitive engagements become the source for a continuous sense of who we are in spite of continuous chance. In other words, the actual work conducted by individuals in interactive engagements feeds into a sense of self in the form of a continuous process within which this sense emerges. (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008.)

Our narrative analysis is interested in narrators who are engaging in the activity of narrating and the activity of giving account. As an example of this, Bamberg (2006) states that analysis can focus on when an individual engages in making past actions accountable from a particular moral perspective for particularly situated purposes. Especially interesting for him is how narrators position themselves in relation to discourses by which they are positioned as well. According to Bamberg (2006), through talk, speakers establish both what the talk is about, and what the particular social interaction in the form of social relationships is. While relating the world created by use of verbal means to “the here and now” of the interactive situation, speakers position themselves to the world out there and to the social situation at hand, and this position is taken as a sense of self by themselves, and as a sense of who they are by the interlocutors. (Bamberg 2006.)

According to De Fina (2013), recent approaches to positioning underscore studying positioning in interaction, where people display local understandings of positions. Therefore, the analysis should start at the micro level in order to get to the macro level. Positioning is seen as a reciprocal and dialogical process, in which individuals take positions and are attributed to positions in emergent ways. However, the relations between local and more global processes are understood to be very complex. (De Fina, 2013.)

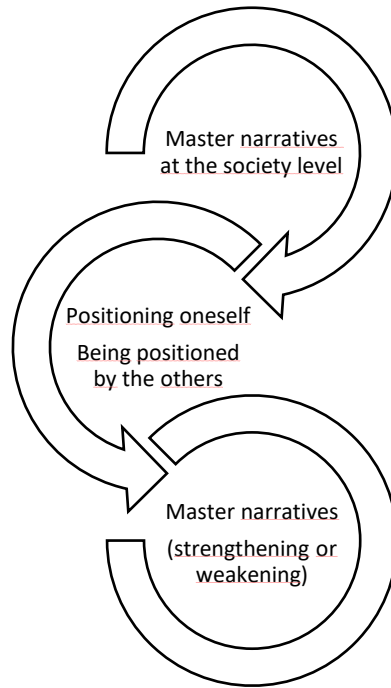
We apply Bamberg’s three level model for analyzing positioning in narratives, but on the level three positioning, we apply the insights developed by De Fina (2013). In that framework, level 1 positioning refers to the ways characters are positioned in relation to one



another within the story world. Level 2 explores how the narrators position themselves in the story-telling world, that is, in the interactive situation. Level 3 deals with the dominant discourses and master narratives, and with the ways the narrator makes them relevant to the interaction and to the narrator's positioning a sense of self. (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008; De Fina 2013.) De Fina argues that positioning analysis at the level 3 constitute an important middle ground construct, which allows linking local talk with socio-cultural relations that surround and affect the local interaction (De Fina 2013).

Interestingly, De Fina adds an ethnographic orientation to the narrative analyses, especially concerning level 3 positioning. In contradiction with the traditional principles of ethnographic methodology, which emphasize observation (Tedlock, 2005), De Fina finds a possibility to use data collected only through interviews. She sees potentialities to find meaningful recurring patterns by comparing the narratives of different narrators who could be seen as members of the same community or category. She also shows ways to identify dominant discourses and master narratives in narrators' stories by using general information the researches have collected during their previous work, media or even by living as participants in the same societies. She states that repetition of story-telling roles, actions, positions and other elements across different narrators, points to the possibility of their significance beyond the level of particular interactions. (De Fina 2013.)

We apply De Fina's insights to extend our analyses beyond one entrepreneur's written narrative to cover the whole of the seven writings data and to find master narratives. Our approach to the circulation of narratives is compressed in the Figure 2. We understand the levels of master narratives and narratives in situated interactions as tightly interconnected. Like Bamberg (2006), we see that the convenient starting point of analyses is the local interaction, which is situated in the middle ring of the picture.



*Figure 2. Circulation of narratives.*

### **Data collection and analysis approach: The circulation of the written**

Our published invitation was targeted at people who identified themselves as entrepreneurs who had considered retirement, and who voluntarily wanted to send their writings to be used in our study. We asked the research participants to share their thoughts regarding retirement and late career in a free format, and to provide us with only some background information, like age, family connections, and the business branch. The invitation was published on the (anonymized) University’s internet pages, and it was distributed through social media and the Federation of Finnish Entrepreneur’s weekly newsletter.

Our invitation was headlined “Researchers are looking for entrepreneurs’ perspectives on issues concerning retirement. Send your writing by (the date of expiring).” The invitation begun by our explaining: “Entrepreneurs’ retirement is often more complex than employees’ retirement. Considering exit and preparing may take several years and the age of retiring may not take shape clearly. However, the retiring process is not understood completely, which for example complicates developing suitable support instruments for entrepreneurs. For better understanding we study the subject at the (anonymized) University in the research project financed by (anonymized).” In the invitation we also declared that we are now collecting data for our research purposes, where these writings were based on the entrepreneurs’ own experiences from the entrepreneurs who have considered “retirement” or have recently “retired”. We gave some hints of what the writing could be about: “In your writing, you can

consider, for example, the meanings of your close circle, health, work-related factors, economic situation, or social systems to your retirement, its timing, or any surprises or challenges you may experience. You can also bring to light the relevance of entrepreneurship and your business to yourself in terms of both psychological and financial perspectives (i.e. whether the entrepreneurship is a side job or a full-time form of employment to you, and what is the role of your business in building your income and wealth).”

We analysed the seven writings we received by moving from level 1 and level 2 analysis to level 3 analysis in order to find repetitive patterns and positioning actions as signs of dominant discourses and master narratives. We also found it necessary to return to level 2 analysis, once we had considered the 3 levels. This opened up an opportunity to further investigate the positioning of the narrators in their story-telling. By doing this, instead of using the positioning framework in a traditional way to analyze a data based on interactive interviews or conversations, we used it to analyze written working life narratives of entrepreneurs, which we collected by invitation. By doing this, we opened up some possibilities for bridging autobiographical texts and small story research. We approached our own published invitation as an action, and the entrepreneurs’ responding to the invitation by writing a narrative as an action, as well. In other words, we included in our analysis the interactive process between the entrepreneurs and us (the researchers).

We see that the local interactive process included an expectation of continuation, which is why we included the future perspective in our analyses. It is crucial to notice that in the published invitation we made a promise to the respondents to write about the results to the general audience. The future expectations generated by our promises are likely to have had an influence on the content of the entrepreneur narratives. Correspondingly, it is important to notice that this written interaction is situated both in the frame of researching entrepreneurs’ retirement and in the wider societal context, that frames entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs’ retirement in Finland.

The text in the invitation had induced the entrepreneurs to write to us and to tell their stories. That is why it is crucial to analyze both the working life narratives of the entrepreneurs and our own invitation. These writings should be considered as a written interaction and as processes of interactive positioning in order to understand the entrepreneurs’ actions and messages. We suggest that these kinds of analysis of written texts could be situated at the level 2 in positioning analyses. In the analyses, we focused the on following questions: Why and for what purposes did the entrepreneurs write their stories? How they were and wanted to be positioned? In relation to which (master) narratives did they position themselves or are positioned by others, including us as the researchers?

The university may be positioned as an objective and trusted research institute, while the Federation of Finnish Entrepreneurs could be positioned as a guardian of the entrepreneurs. In the invitation, we promised to publish the results at scientific and popular forums, which signals that the study has a twofold purpose: scientific; and, political. In the invitation, we specified that the results would be delivered to the Finnish policy-makers in order to add the relevance of the entrepreneurs' shared experiences with the other entrepreneurs who were considering retirement, and for developing the instruments that would help such entrepreneurs.

Answering to the invitation can be interpreted as positioning oneself as an entrepreneur and, more specifically, as an entrepreneur who has considered "retirement". In addition, writing can be interpreted as giving an account and as positioning oneself as someone who has something important to share and to tell both to the researchers as a response to the invitation and to the wider audience that was promised to hear the results. In other words, by writing to us, the narrators positioned themselves as entrepreneurs who had considered retirement and who had some expertise to share in that area.

We chose Matthew's story here as a starting point to shed some light on the entrepreneurs in our study. We did this because the story is quite short but it still includes hints of all narratives and positioning actions crucial to answering our research questions. We shortened the story but tried to preserve the expressions while translating from Finnish to English. We used literal translations in the most important sections.

### **Matthew's story**

Matthew (born 1966) previously owned an industrial enterprise for almost twenty years. He sold it one year ago but he still works as a general manager for the firm. Continuing to work as a paid manager for two years was included in the conditions of the sales agreement. In addition, Matthew owns a venture capital company and continues working there.

Matthew wrote, "It has been quite clear from the beginning that one must take very good care of one's own pension benefits in order to ensure financial security". Matthew states that his enterprise has been quite successful. He has been able to make reasonable pension contributions and obtain additional voluntary pension benefits to compliment his basic retirement funds. Also, he has been able to make other investments.

Matthew explains that he was pretty young, when he achieved financial freedom and was able to consider exiting his enterprise. He had considered, if he would be too young, because his wife pressed him to continue at least until the age of 57. However, Matthew was

pondering why he should continue to work, if you don't have to. One answer he found was the responsibility for 30 employees. Another was that maybe his teenage sons would someday want to continue the enterprise. However, he noticed that it would take at least seven to ten years to find out that.

He told us that as a father, he should leave something to inherit to his sons. He wondered if it would be possible for him to decrease working and not to interfere with the business. Matthew considered different alternatives. Finally, he had decided to develop his firm in such a way that would allow him to sell it.

Matthew then received a good offer shortly after making a decision to sell it, but the decision was still difficult for him. He told us that he was lucky to have a professional and objective board of the company that could evaluate the situation "as an outsider". The board encouraged him to sell. Matthew highlighted that "the enterprise got Finnish owners and the employees will have a good home". He was sure that many development activities would be organized in the enterprise in the future.

After his working commitment was met, Matthew planned that he would rest a bit, but he admitted that he felt a strong social pressure. He wrote that his family, relatives and friends told him: "you cannot 'retire' that young". Matthew wrote that in their mind, "an entrepreneur must continue until the end". He added, "of course I would not be without work, but the others cannot think about any other possibilities than that a successful entrepreneur begins to drink and wastes the money".

At the end of his narrative, Matthew wrote: "My own thoughts of being retired are to take care of my own wellbeing and health - not having time for that would not be a valid excuse; and looking around if there would be something interesting to do that would not force you to have an alarm clock ringing every morning."

### **Analyzing positioning based on and beyond Matthews' story**

**At the level 1**, which is the positioning of characters in relation to one another within the story world, we found that, the characters of Matthew's story include his wife and sons, other relatives and friends, the employees and the board of the enterprise, the new owner and Matthew himself. The wife and other relatives and friends are positioned as the sources of "a strong social pressure" to continue working. The sons are positioned as justified inheritors of the father, and the employees as other people that an entrepreneur should take care of also. The new owner is positioned as "good" for employees (gives a good home to them) and for

the enterprise (will develop it in the future). The board is positioned as a professional and objective actor whose coaching has a crucial role in Matthew's decision making.

In his writing, Matthew positions himself as being in front of difficult decision-making and under severe social pressure where his own thoughts are somehow meant to "take the back seat". He positions himself as financially free and as not having to work (hard) anymore. He is strongly pressured to continue working, because "an entrepreneur must continue until the end" in order to be good and decent. However, Matthew decided to sell. With this decision he has put himself in a position, where he must give arguments for his solution, because he positions himself against the narrative of a family business entrepreneur.

In his story, Matthew shows that he considered the decision to sell from every stakeholders' perspective. By this, he positions himself as a caretaker, rather than as someone who profits from selling the company, without thinking about the future generations (next-of-kind) or the company employees. He even has taken care of his own pension contribution in a way that enables him to receive a "decent pension" as he retires. The board is positioned as an objective and professional sounding board, which he can turn to for advice. It is also positioned as the one who sees, understands and supports Matthew. In the end, Matthew finishes his writing by declaring that he is not going to "finish working". With these words, he gives a strong account that while exiting his enterprise, he should not be positioned as an entrepreneur, who has finished working.

**In level 2 analyses**, which explores how the narrators position themselves in the story-telling world, we notice that Matthew tells his story as a response to our invitation. He positions himself as having something to share with the researchers, who are studying entrepreneurs' retirement, although he positions himself as "pretty young" and as a person, who is not going to "finish working". In addition, he positions himself as a person, who tells something that would be necessary to be delivered to political decision-makers, and that would somehow help other entrepreneurs in their retirement processes, as well. Why tell of a strong social pressure to continue working despite the achieved financial freedom in this interactional context? Moreover, why is it important to show himself to us in the light of good and care-taking entrepreneur as opposed to someone who makes selfish and unwise decisions?

In spite of these interesting questions, Matthew surely did respond to us. He told us of complexities as we had asked about, and he considered the various aspects we had given as hints to what we were looking for. However, he does not tell us explicitly about retirement. He uses the word only once in his story and puts it in quotation marks "you cannot 'retire' that young". Although Matthew responded to the invitation to tell us about entrepreneur retiring, he does not position himself as retired or someone who will retire. On the contrary,

he positions himself as one who continues working, who takes care of different stakeholders' futures, including himself.

Nevertheless, Matthew had considered his exit, that is, selling his enterprise. He gives us a strong account that he has not planned on finishing working, which is the most common definition of retirement. He may only decrease his working time, in the future. It seems that with his story, Matthew somehow positions himself against our invitation to give information on entrepreneurs' retirement, despite the fact that he has responded to it. In order to understand better these contradictions, we will go to the level 3 of our analysis.

**In level 3 analyses**, the ways the narrator makes dominant discourses relevant to the interactions and to the narrator's positioning, we compared Matthew's story to other entrepreneurs' writings and to our own "ethnographical" knowledge as Finnish citizens. We tried to find if there exists the same kind of narrative patterns. We found that some narratives and positioning actions were repeated in writings only in slightly different forms. For example, the narrators mentioned that "I feel that I started to plan my retirement at an early stage, a round the time my spouse went into retirement as "under aged", or that "even if I am already 66 years old, my understanding that I still have something to give to the entrepreneurs has been reinforced by other entrepreneurs". We interpreted these as master narratives and dominant discourses that expressed the social expectations in relation to which the entrepreneurs were positioned by themselves and by other stakeholders.

The comparisons of stories across our sample showed the master narrative about the entrepreneur who does not stop working, and keeps on taking care of someone or something. Careful comparisons revealed different variations of this narrative and sub narratives. The narrative of care-taking had versions where the entrepreneur is positioned to take care of: 1) oneself, 2) one's enterprises, and 3) many groups of stakeholders.

In addition, we found another way to relate oneself to the master narrative of continuing working and taking care of the stakeholders until the end. It was positioning oneself as an entrepreneur who leaves something positive behind. Matthew wrote directly about financial heritage that the father should leave to the sons. Correspondingly, three other writers described the importance of not to exit one's firm before it would be profitable or debt free and could be delivered proudly.

We decided to use the term "career heritage" to refer to the many different types of "heritages" the entrepreneurs told they were leaving in order to be able to position themselves as entrepreneurs, who do not finish working and care-taking. We differentiated three kinds of career heritages from the narratives. First "business career heritage" can take a form of an

enterprise, which is successful and develops further to the direction the entrepreneur has seen as meaningful and which is handed over to the next generations through a selling process (like Matthew did) or through family succession (like two writers did). One woman described herself as one ring in the chain of family successions as follows:

“Next year, it will be 20 years since the time my mother handed the firm over to me, and in that same year, my daughter will get 40% of the firm. I can be happy, because I can give my daughter a modernized firm with almost no debt.”

Second, “spiritual career heritage” means keeping the promises given to customers or personnel even after exiting the enterprise. As an example of positioning oneself as an entrepreneur, who takes care of continuing her heritage, the owner of an accounting company wrote:

“Every now and then somebody called and asked about my retirement plans. They did so in vain, because I had promised to my customers, that no bigger firm will continue my business.”

Third we differentiated the “intellectual career heritage”, which can be expertise shared through written materials, like books or articles, or social practices like lessons and lectures, or mentoring. One serial entrepreneur positioned himself as gradually decreasing working but still contributing to business world as an avowed mentor of other entrepreneurs:

“I still want to develop myself and follow the development in the business world. However, I do not want to invest or work as a lecturer at the University of Applied Sciences anymore. In my opinion, and other entrepreneurs have confessed that too, I still have much to give to entrepreneurs, even if I am almost seventy years old.”

In line with the master narrative of the entrepreneur who continues working until the end, one serial entrepreneur in his seventies entitled his text “Once an entrepreneur, always an entrepreneur”. He stated that entrepreneurship is not something that could be finished, and positioned himself as “forever being an entrepreneur”. Naming oneself in such a way is an explicit account of positioning oneself and it reflects the dominance of the narrative.

Correspondingly, another writer had chosen a heading, “Complicated retirement”. She began her story: “Retiring is much more laborious than becoming employed”. We interpreted that she positions herself against the narratives that it is difficult to find a job as a salaried worker or as making a living as an entrepreneur, where in comparison, it is the act of retiring, that is difficult and complicated. In the text, she also positioned herself as one who continues working, as every other writer in our sample did.



In their stories, the writers also told us about many jobs and activities that they pursued or will pursue instead of “retiring” where retiring here is used in the sense of finishing working). The forms of employment and activities, in which the writers positioned themselves included: 1) continuing to work in one’s company after family succession (2 people); 2) continuing in wage and salary work as a manager after selling the company; 3) continuing some of the entrepreneurial activities or paid work while discontinuing others (3 people); and, 4) working temporarily in another company in the same branch after selling one’s own business.

Through writing about leaving a career heritage and continuing to work as entrepreneurs, the individuals in our sample can position themselves as care-takers in the light of the master narrative of continuing working until the end. Simultaneously, they contribute to strengthening these master narratives. The entrepreneurs are and will be positioned “under strong social pressure” to continue working “until the end” by the interlocutors who use the master narrative. The narrative circulation seems as a trap that cannot be resisted. Why did the entrepreneurs contribute to strengthening that narrative by their writings? To inspect if there might be some other reasons than the dominance of the master narrative, we found it useful to step back to the level 2 analyses to inspect the reasons for strengthening that master narrative locally in our written interaction.

### **Returning to narrators positioning themselves in their story-telling: Relating local interaction to discourses in wider society**

By positioning themselves as “not retiring” (in the meaning of finishing working), and as leaving many kinds of career heritages to different stakeholders, the entrepreneurs themselves take the subordinate position relating to the master narrative. Nevertheless, the question arises, what was the purpose of the entrepreneurs, when they sent their stories to the researchers? If they positioned us as trusted researchers who would deliver their message to decision-makers in order to help other entrepreneurs in their own processes of retiring, what kind of continuation did they expect from our interactive process?

Let us first consider the wider context of the entrepreneurs’ stories. We noticed that some accounts and positioning could only be detected and interpreted in light of our own ethnographical knowledge. For example, Matthew wrote that for him it has been clear that he should take care of his financial survival “from the beginning”.

In Finland, it is common to state that many entrepreneurs don’t pay enough for their social and pension security, and that is why they cannot finish working (Knuutti & Palomurto, 2014). They cannot afford to retire because they have neglected or avoided making their payments. In relation to this, Matthew declared in the beginning of his story that he was not

in that kind of position. He has not neglected his pension benefits. On the contrary, he had achieved the financial freedom as a young person and his enterprise has been successful. He was not financially forced to continue, but he continued working nonetheless. There was the presence of the “strong social pressure” to continue to work.

In our invitation, we had asked the writers, among other things, to “bring to light the relevance of entrepreneurship and your business to yourself in terms of both psychological and financial perspectives.” By this, we positioned the entrepreneurs as persons whose businesses may have meaning and relevance for the entrepreneurs themselves. That relevance may be either psychological or financial.

Correspondingly, we were positioned as members of the group that sees the complexities of entrepreneurs’ retirement. With our invitation, we may have positioned ourselves as belonging to the people who consider that the entrepreneurs have neglected their payments during their career. Further, we were positioned in relation to another narrative, which declares that entrepreneurs are special kinds of people, who actually see their enterprises as a part of themselves or as “their own children”. This narrative tells us that entrepreneurs, especially small business owners, typically regard their business as an extension of themselves and this kind of attitude towards one’s enterprise may result in complexities and difficulties in retirement (Carlan, Hoy and Carlan, 1988). In our invitation, we have positioned us as potential supporters of that narrative, as well. We were positioning ourselves as researchers who may think that continuing working and having difficulties in retirement process are due to “psychological or financial” reasons.

To be clear, we did not refer to the relevance of the entrepreneurs’ work and business to the wider society or to different communities and people. However, that was exactly what the writers wrote to us about. They wrote about entrepreneurs as caretakers and those who leave many career heritages behind them. They positioned themselves as highly important people for different stakeholder groups and for the whole society. With this, they gave us strong notice that the reason to continue working and not to retire might be social caretaking, instead of psychological or financial reasons.

The entrepreneurs could show the importance and relevance of their work by positioning themselves in relation to the widely known and confessed master narrative, which states that “once an entrepreneur, always an entrepreneur”. In our local context, the entrepreneurs could not be unequivocally state to be subordinated by the master narrative of continuing working until the end. Instead, the entrepreneurs actively used the master narrative in our local interactions for their own situated purposes, like commenting about the social relevance of entrepreneurs.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we set out to challenge the grand and harmful negative stereotyping narratives concerning late career workers by offering an alternative positive circulation story, one where people in their late careers may position themselves within. Our methodological solution was to give a voice to the under-studied group of late career entrepreneurs. We found that they have some freedom from the negative age stereotypes that mostly concern people in salary work and that are based on general discourses, HRM practices, and institutional orders bound to chronological age (Byens *et al.*, 2009).

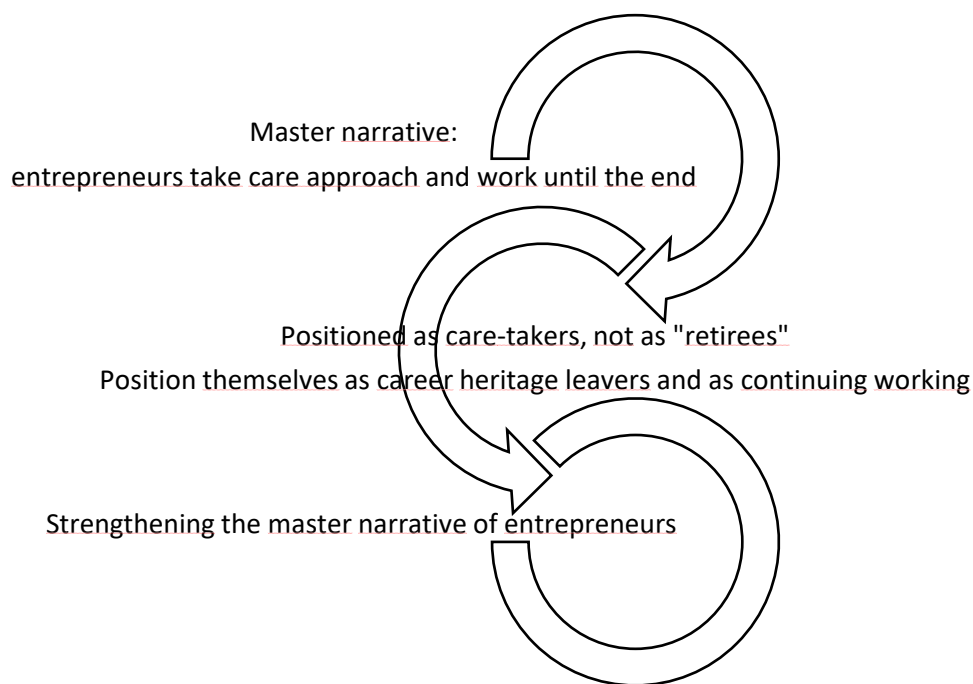
We applied narrative positioning analysis in written working life narratives, which we have collected by via our published invitation. We approached the invitation and the entrepreneurs' answers to it as situated interactive narrating framed by Bamberg (2006). We interpreted that the entrepreneurs wrote to us not only to answer our invitation but also to make an account to which they were waiting on our "responses" or next steps, such as analysis and publications. This kind of written interaction is a slow process if compared to interactions in verbal discussions or in research interviews. However, we see that the main principles of positioning analyses can be applied to this kind of written communication as well.

During our research, we found it useful to step back and forth between the different analytical levels (1, 2 and 3), although we began our analyses on level 1. Following the insights written by De Fina (2013), we found comparing entrepreneurs' stories and noticing similarities crucial for discussing wider implications of the stories and for the full interpretation of positioning in Matthew's story. We decided to focus our analyses on Matthew's narrative because we interpreted it to be some kind of summary of the main features of the stories. However, we notice that focusing on some other writing may open different perspectives and interpretations.

Through our analyses, we found some master narratives concerning entrepreneurs, in which the entrepreneurs were positioned as people, who work until the end and who do not finish working by "retiring". The entrepreneurs related themselves in their narratives by describing the many activities they continued to do instead of finishing working, and by writing of their care taking-activities. These narratives were about: 1) taking care of the company even after the entrepreneurial exit; 2) taking care of the multiple shareholders of one's business even after the exit and, 3) taking care of one's own reputation as a decent entrepreneur, who takes care of oneself and one's property, and continues meaningful activities until death. However, with these narrative actions, the entrepreneurs could position themselves against the negative stereotyping narratives of entrepreneurs who "stop working and start drinking" or who have not taken care even of their own financial survivability.

Further, the entrepreneurs positioned themselves as caretakers who were leaving many kinds of career heritages, like business career heritages, spiritual career heritages and intellectual career heritages. In light of these results, it is interesting that previous research has suggested that generativity and generative motivations are important for older people, in general (Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004; Kooij *et al.*, 2008). Future research may inspect this closer, if this type of generativity may offer some shelter from the negative age stereotypes among late career paid workers.

In our study, we did find alternative narratives of late careers and ageing at work. The master narrative concerning entrepreneurs doesn't form an interactive context of age discrimination or of stereotype threat; instead, it allows and encourages late career entrepreneurs to successful age (Zacher, 2015). Based on our study, a more positive narrative circulation could be demonstrated as we have done in Figure 3.



*Figure 3. Positive narrative circulation of late career entrepreneurs.*

In conclusion, we can state that the entrepreneurs in our sample used the master narratives and dominant discourses actively to the local purposes in the interactive process between them and us. By positioning themselves as caretakers, the entrepreneurs conveyed to us the social relevance of their work. They gave us an account that the reasons for continuing working and not retiring expand beyond the psychological and financial, which have been in dominant positions both in research (Carlan *et al.*, 1988; Morris, Soleimanof, & White, 2020)

and in general narratives in Finland. The entrepreneurs highlighted that they continued working for social reasons, which sometimes even takes a form of social pressure to continue working “until the end”.

This conclusion raises a question for us with respect to, what we could recommend for decision-makers. Psychological support or better social security are not the one and only answer, although they may constitute part of it. Instead, maybe also acknowledging the entrepreneurs’ relevance in societies would be an important addition to consider. Further, it might be time to question the narrative about the “proper” entrepreneur, who continues working and care taking until the end, and replace it with a new narrative, which provides room for a confession of having done enough in life.

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