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Disruptive Demographics: Ageing, Socio-economic Change, Challenges and Potentialities

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Questions related to ageing are shared widely in and between organizations because people are living longer and age is widely used to judge workplace tenure and suitability for certain types of work (e.g., age restrictions on pilots and surgeons in some countries). Further, historically, a number of countries have retirement ages in place but recent debate has led to the ending or extension of the age at which some people are required to stop full-time work (in Canada, for example, the retirement age was 65 years of age until recently when the practice was legally ended in most jurisdictions). Cross-disciplinary work on ageing is, however, still rare. For instance, geriatrics, sociology and management research have not engaged much in cross disciplinary research, in the field of ageing. Statistical and other numerical approaches, which include age as a background variable, although rarely used, have nonetheless been the major orientation in ageing research. Yet, as is been increasingly recognized, questions of age are broadly tied to issues of tolerance, equity and innovation throughout age generations. Within this focus, issues of age are finding a place among diversity management scholars, including those with an interest in gender, ethnicity, cultural background and other typologies (Aaltio & Mills, 2002; Bendl, Bleijenbergh, Henttonen, & Mills, 2015; Helms Mills, Miller & Mills, 2010).

Across the globe, this century has witnessed the growing phenomenon of ageing and its impact on social and work life. The percentage of people over 60 years of age, worldwide, is growing rapidly, with one report estimating that by mid-century the number of people over 60 will triple to nearly two billion people (Coughlin, 2010). In Africa, for example, "the number of people over 60 living in Africa" will increase by 400 per cent to 200 million people by 2050 – "with profound implications for society, influencing people's social, economic and political lives" (http://www.global-ageing.eu/agafrica.html). Similar research agendas have focused on detailing the potential problems and challenges of ageing in Arab countries (Abdulrahim, Ajrouch, Jammal, & Antonucci, 2012), Latin America (Wong, Peláez, Palloni, & Markides, 2006), Asia (Hermalin, 2001), Australasia (McCormack, 2000), Europe (Davoudi, Wishardt, & Strange, 2010), and North America (Duvergne Smith, 2011). This global phenomenon has led one commentator to refer to ageing as "disruptive demographics" (Coughlin, 2010).

The growth of ageing populations in North America, Europe, and other so-called developed countries has led researchers to study the impact of age on such things as stereotypes of the ageing worker (Hedge et al., 2006; Brought et al., 2011), workplace efficiency, career development, retirement policies, experience (Kanfer and Ackerman 2004), training needs, etc. (Ilmarinen, 2006). In other regions of the world, the issue of ageing is often viewed from a different perspective. In Latin America, for example, is has been predicted that, due to outstanding health issues, ageing "will not proceed along known paths already followed by more developed countries" (Palloni & McEniry, 2007).

Asian cultures usually value ageing more than Western societies (Leung, 2000). However, in Western organizational contexts, ambivalence concerning the value of ageing employees is common. On the one hand, it is recognized that 'old age' may bring valuable expertise and wisdom, and what is referred to as crystallized intelligence (Kanfer and Ackerman 2004). While on the other hand, stereotypes related to older employees include being viewed as less productive, less healthy and less able to cope with change (Hedge et al., 2006; Brought et al., 2011). In either case, the association of age with innovation and change is problematic. Experience and wisdom, although perceived positively can nonetheless suggest sedentary and established qualities rather than an ability to respond in new and innovative ways. Although recent research has shown that the assumption of a general decline with age is simplistic and incorrect, stereotypical assumptions concerning an older worker's abilities and job performance continue to influence Western organizations' understandings of age (Brought et al., 2011). In any event, innovation and change is not normally viewed as a potential quality of older employees. Issues usually focus on compensating for a supposed loss of skills and abilities through such things as training and re-evaluations of the types of work that ageing employees are expected to undertake (Ilmarinen, 2001).

What happens in respect to age in organizations has not often been subject to critical research (Fineman, 2014) in and between organizations, which is surprising knowing the crucial meaning of age in the organizational setting and for people's careers (Aaltio et al., 2014, Bonsdorff et al., 2009). The growing interest in research into ageing and work raises questions about a range of issues linked to the supposed dichotomy between the needs of organizations to retain organizational memory and experience while balancing concerns about the supposed loss of skills in older workers. Western societies emphasize the need for workers to stay in work-life longer, but often ageing employees are frequently the main victims of downsizing or restructuring (Buyens et al., 2009). Nonetheless, in the context of specific labour shortages, it has in recent years been recognized that something must be done to stop older employees from leaving the work place and to raise the employment level of ageing employees, particularly in European countries (Henkens et al., 2008; Walker, 2005; Parry & Tyson, 2009). In short, the focus has been on different kinds of practices for managing the older workforce, including leadership and human resource management that consider age.

Throughout the various recent debates on ageing and work little has focused on such issues as the discursive nature of age and ageing – this clearly differs across regions of the world – and the implications not simply for organizational managers but for the fundamental human aspects of being understood as aged or ageing. Nor has the role of age and work been adequately accounted for in issues of discriminatory practices and theories of discrimination and intersectionality (Bendl, Bleijenbergh, Henttonen, & Mills, 2015). Nonetheless, there are signs of growing interest in ageing as seen lately in research streams, the recently published special issue of Organization Studies (which seeks to bring an age-sensitive lens to organizational analysis – Thomas et al., 2014, 1569), and, of course, this special issue of the International Journal of Work Innovation.

The discourse on ageing and work is growing and opens a highly relevant theoretical space for the discussion of the issues involved. For this special issue we encouraged reflections from a number of directions, emphasizing several areas of research:

- Ageing and work as a discursive set of ideas and practices

- Organisational challenges and potentialities of an 'ageing workforce'

- Ageing employees and knowledge work

- Gender and ageing at work

- Employment market, innovation and ageing

- Organizational entrepreneurship and the older workforce

- Cross cultural knowledge on ageing and work

- Management of the ageing workforce

- Cross-cultural issues of ageing

The result was a selection of five articles in this issue that focus on the need to study age as a conceptual challenge – with various paradigmatic approaches and related methodologies. The papers concentrate on issues of ageing and management, and especially on how human resources can be managed. Therefore, all the articles discuss the difficulties of defining age and exploring this not merely through numbers but as a discursive and relational phenomenon.

In the first article, "Perceived development opportunities and reward satisfaction as antecedents of nurses' job withdrawal intentions," researchers Hanna Salminen, Monika E. von Bonsdorff, Sirpa Koponen and Merja Miettinen focus on the retention of nurses and the shortage of nurses in the context of an ageing population. The paper discusses the need for the development of age sensitive human resource management based on a quantitative study of nurses in a Finnish hospital system. The study analyses the antecedents of different forms of job withdrawal intentions with special reference to perceived development opportunities and reward satisfaction. The findings indicate that job withdrawal intentions may be age dependent and that good work ability and high reward satisfaction decrease the odds for occupational turnover and early retirement intentions. Salminen et al. contend that nurses may stay longer in work-life if their personal development potential is better used and if the reward policy supports their job satisfaction. The authors conclude that while improving the nurses' work ability and reward satisfaction can prevent job withdrawal intentions, age-sensitivity is required when it comes to providing development opportunities.

The next two articles deal with the related concepts of generation and age. The first, "Age, age-generations, and organizational generations: neglected intersections in studying organizations," by Charlotta Niemistö, Jeff Hearn and Marjut Jyrkinen, focuses on age as a central issue in studies of work and career. Using qualitative data from nine case organizations in Finland, the article reviews forms of discursive talk about age and generation, namely physical restrictions, retirement issues, age diversity as a strength, lack of a particular age group, and a discourse of silence on age/age as a non-issue. They conclude that the dynamics and intersections around age and generation in organisations are complex and multi-dimensional, with some positive aspects, some negative and some ambiguous. They suggest that a focus on the generationally-sensitive management of age issues can improve the organising and management of working life in and around organizations.

The second of these two articles, "Generation as a politics of representation," by Karen Foster, engages with the 'generations' management' literature and focuses on the possible conflict between different generations of work. Foster eschews the adoption of the dominant definition of generation as grounded in birth cohort, but rather takes an approach that focuses on generation as a discourse and a politics of representation. She pursues the study through the analysis of 52 interviews with older and younger workers to show how age is used discursively (e.g., referring to young workers as 'entitled'), and as such has important implications for organisation and the critique of paid employment in the 21st century.

The fourth article is about age generations within organisations, especially in the care sector. Catherine Earl and Philip Taylor studied the job opportunities of older workers in Australian residential organisations, where age-based stereotyping and intergenerational issues show up as important. In the article, "Discriminatory practices of older workers in an ageing workforce: A case study," it is found that age discrimination is a complex issue, and age based stereotyping and discriminatory practices are practiced in multiple ways and also across work generations. There is heterogeneity among work generations in how discriminatory practices are used, and therefore, age discrimination is not simply an intergenerational issue. This article relates to the next article where, Halme argues that aged people are not a heterogeneous group and a strict typology of the workforce based on ageing is to be avoided.

The last article is a theretical essey, "Implications of ageing in work: perspectives for research. Decrease of innovation through ageing," by Pinja Halme was prompted by the need to examine the significance of age management within organisational frameworks. Therefore, she focuses on the issue of age as an ontological question. As she states, there is no real and measureable way to define what is being aged or young. Burrell and Morgan's four paradigms are used in order to understand how to conceptualize age and ageing, showing that each of the paradigms handles age differently in organisational contexts. Halme ends up by concluding that these four paradigms are mutually exclusive, and crossing paradigm boundaries is rare. The paradigms offer different ways of seeing age management where synthesis is not easy to hand. The purpose of this study is to present a many-sided view of the phenomenon of age and age-management, which is usually overly simplified. Halme's approach supports the idea of a multi-faceted picture of ageing and management. She also makes an association between power and ageing by asking, who actually has the right to determine age and ageing, and whether aged people really are a heterogeneous group.

Theoretically ageing needs multiple perspectives including chronological age, which is usually the only one that is used. The motivation and opportunity to remain innovative also occur in late career. Leaders and HRM managers, who are especially responsible for the treatment of the aged workforce can develop ways to treat ageing employees as a heterogeneous group of individuals but at the same time use age-sensitive management tools. With this special issue we have set out to show that using critical approaches, defining age discursively and symbolically instead of using pure numbers, and having age-sensitive study-designs we can convincingly end up concluding that ageing is a relevant organisational phenomenon and needs further research and practical attention in and among organizations.

Furthermore, ageing is also an institutional phenomenon, and as we have also shown in this special issue, includes generational aspects. There are differences in attitudes between work generations and there might be conflicting interests and values that should be handled through equality management. Therefore, the politics of ageing should be considered at the organizational level. Equality questions are important not only because older members of the workforce expect fair treatment and management but young people also need fair future visions for their careers while they themselves also age.

This special issue also approaches ageing in work-life practically, and explores and shows ways to effect organizational attitudes and other obstacles that affect seniors' full continuity in work-life. As shown, careers do not end at a certain age. We can use a variety of specific organizational tools in order to support individuals staying in work-life and their high work engagement. Even if ageing and innovation stereotypically is a paradox, practically it is not.

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