



Article: *Discrimination at work*

'Rusty, invisible and threatening': ageing, capital and employability

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Abstract

Levels of mature-age unemployment and under-employment are increasing in Australia, with older jobseekers spending longer unemployed than younger jobseekers. This article focuses on two key explanations of the difficulties confronting older jobseekers: human capital theory, which focuses on the obsolescence of older workers' job skills, and ageism in employment. Drawing upon narrative interviews with older Australians, it critically engages with both these understandings. Using a Bourdieusian analysis, it shows how ageing intersects with the deployment of different forms of capital that are valued within particular labour market fields to shape older workers' 'employability'. By examining how class, gender and age intersect to structure experiences of marginalization, it questions conventional analyses that see older workers as discriminated against simply because they are older.

Keywords

ageism, Bourdieu, gendered ageism, human capital, older workers

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Introduction

In line with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development view that longer lives should be 'matched by longer working lives' (OECD, 2006: 3), the Australian Government is increasing the pension eligibility age to 67 years by 2023 and, pending legislation, 70 by 2035. Yet there are increased levels of unemployment and under-employment among mature-age workers, defined for statistical and official purposes in Australia as being 45 years and over (Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2010: vii). In March 2015, almost 250,000 mature-age Australians received unemployment benefits (Department of Employment, 2015b) compared with less than 155,000 in June 2008 (Department of Social Services, 2009). This reflects an overall increase in unemployment and the fact that mature-age workers who lose their jobs remain unemployed and on income support for longer than younger jobseekers: nearly 70 per cent of mature-age jobseekers receiving unemployment benefits in March 2015 had been registered for income support for a year or more (Department of Employment, 2015a).

This article focuses on two key explanations of the difficulties confronting older jobseekers: human capital theory and the pervasiveness of age-related discrimination in employment. Drawing upon narrative interviews with mature-age Australian jobseekers, it critically engages with both these understandings. It develops a Bourdieusian analysis of mature-age workforce participation that offers a more finely grained account of the different forms of capital that are valued within particular labour market contexts and how these intersect with age. It questions conventional analyses of ageism, which see mature-age workers as discriminated against simply because they are older, by examining how class, gender and age intersect to structure mature-age jobseekers' experiences of exclusion.

The article begins with a critical discussion of the human capital and ageism explanations before considering how Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital offer a more nuanced theoretical frame for understanding mature-age workforce participation. The explanatory power of a Bourdieusian perspective is then illustrated through investigation of three distinct narratives of marginalization articulated by mature-age jobseekers.

'Employability', human capital and ageism

The concept of 'employability' has become an increasingly influential explanation of, and 'to some extent a legitimisation' (Fejes, 2010: 90), of unemployment. Its adoption within policy discourses signifies a fundamental shift in the understanding of unemployment as being related to a lack of knowledge and skills required for today's jobs rather than a shortage of work. This shift has proved influential in the emergence of the social investment state and its commitment to 'human capital theory orthodoxy' (Dobbins et al., 2014: 517): the view that 'the knowledge, information, ideas, skills and health of individuals ... [are] by far the most important form of capital in modern societies' and that the economic successes of individuals and whole economies therefore depend 'on how extensively and effectively people invest in themselves' (Becker, 2002: 3). With the shift of manufacturing to low-cost economies, the prosperity of developed economies is

held to depend on their ability to become ‘magnet economies’ for high-skilled knowledge-jobs (Brown and Lauder, 2006). Investment in human capital development is considered critical to the competitiveness of countries and individuals, with additional years of education projected to deliver higher wages and employment rates for individuals and productivity increases for economies (OECD, 2001: 3–4).

Human capital theory has been influential in OECD countries, with an emphasis on lifting skills attainment contributing to the shift of risk onto individuals which characterizes neoliberal policies. It has informed the skills agenda in Australia since the early 1990s and remains effectively unchallenged (see, for example, Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, 2013). Training and re-skilling to enhance ‘employability’ have become cornerstones of policy debates on jobseeker activation, including older jobseekers. As the Assistant Minister for Employment elaborated in his speech to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia:

workers aged 50 or older must be agile and competitive ... updating their skills and broadening their experience at regular intervals to ensure they have as many options as possible. (The Hon Luke Hartsuyker MP, 2015)

The reality in many OECD countries, however, is that employment policy is dominated by a ‘work-first’ approach that emphasizes moving people out of unemployment and into jobs as quickly as possible (Peck and Theodore, 2000). The increasing conditionality of welfare and outcome-weighted funding of employment services has resulted in a shift towards ‘activating’ jobseekers through ‘short-term work preparation and the threat of benefit withdrawal’ (Peck and Theodore, 2000: 120; Shutes and Taylor, 2014). Nevertheless, a common explanation for the high rates of mature-age, long-term unemployment emphasizes the impact of economic restructuring, with the decline of manufacturing and growth in knowledge occupations meaning ‘that some mature-age people have skills and experience that suited industry needs in previous decades, but less so in the modern economy’ (National Seniors Australia (NSA), 2011: 19). Ranzijn (2004: 290–4) highlights how the forms of human capital valued by employers have shifted from ‘hard’ task-related skills towards interpersonal communication and other ‘soft’ skills more commonly associated with younger workers. Mature-age unemployment is ‘individualized’ and understood as arising from older workers’ employability skills being ‘out of step with those that are in high demand in the labour market’ (Lippmann, 2008: 1262). Future older workers should be more employable because, as McDonald (2011: 27) forecasts for Australia, educational levels are rising and each successive cohort is ‘more highly endowed with the skills required for a knowledge-based economy’.

The view that it is not their age per se that disadvantages older workers is challenged by studies showing the pervasiveness of age prejudice throughout the employment cycle and especially during recruitment (AHRC, 2015; Duncan, 2003). Academic and policy research suggests many employers hold ageist attitudes, believing that older workers: ‘don’t like change ... are more likely to be forgetful, do not like being told what to do by someone younger, have difficulty learning new things or complex tasks, do not want to work long hours [and] prefer not to use technology’ (AHRC, 2013: 38). In a recent AHRC (2015) study, more than a quarter of interviewees aged 50 and over reported

experiencing age discrimination in employment, with reports higher among those looking for work.

Campaigns aimed at changing employer attitudes and highlighting the economic costs of discrimination are a popular response to ageism. The underlying message of such 'business case' approaches is that older workers have much to offer businesses and that ageism is 'inefficient for firms, the economy and society' (Weller, 2007: 418). Paradoxically, this approach reifies the assumptions of human capital theory: that an efficient labour market selects candidates into jobs according to the relative worth of their human capital. The marginalization of older workers is considered problematic because it is based on mistaken beliefs about their productivity and skills that distort the efficiency of the labour market.

Conventional approaches to ageism tend to treat older workers 'as a homogenous group' (Duncan, 2003: 108), representing it as 'a gender-neutral phenomenon' (Duncan and Loretto, 2004: 97). For example, the AHRC (2010: 2) follows Butler's pioneering research in understanding ageism as 'the systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people simply because they are older'. However, as intersectionality approaches emphasize: '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). Women and men experience ageism in different ways and to different degrees, with evidence that female workers are subject to negative age stereotypes from a younger age (Duncan and Loretto, 2004; Itzin and Phillipson, 1995). Calasanti (2005) attributes this to the heightened importance of bodily appearance as a form of capital for women. As Twigg (2004: 62) argues, ageing undermines women's traditional source of power because 'their sexual attractiveness [is] seen to reside in youth', whereas, for men, grey hair and wrinkles can signify authority and power (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012: 65). Studies suggest employers within the female-dominated occupations of clerical, secretarial and receptionist work see the ideal age for employees as around 25 and rarely recruit those over 45 (Wallace, 1999; Steinberg et al., 1998; cited in Handy and Davy, 2007: 86). In her study of temporary agency employment in Japan, Gottfried (2003: 266) attributes this preference to how temporary agency companies screen for 'qualified female workers who embody certain sexualised body traits and gendered organizational norms'.

By encasing ageism 'within a rationalistic discourse' (Riach, 2007: 1704), conventional analyses underplay how specific labour market contexts and the forms of capital that carry symbolic power within them motivate gendered and classed experiences of ageism. In focusing attention on knowledge skills as the most important form of labour market capital, human capital theory similarly obscures how the attribution of skill and employability is shaped by social institutions that are 'fundamentally entangled with power-infused social relations such as gender and age' (Weller, 2007: 421). It masks the 'commoditization of the body' (McDowell, 2009: 1) highlighted in feminist organizational studies, which show how distinct worker embodiment(s) and their gendered and classed performances feature as important assets in the labour market. Here, Huppertz and Goodwin (2013: 300) observe how the male capital of 'a body that cannot get pregnant' assists men in promotion to management positions whereas the careers of young women conversely 'seem to suffer from the "threat" of getting pregnant' (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012: 74).

While deindustrialization is often associated with the rise of ‘knowledge’ jobs, another ‘less glamorous’ aspect highlighted by McDowell (2009: 8–9) is the growth of interactive service occupations ‘in which the physical shape of bodies, their adornment and workers’ emotions matter in workplace performances’. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of embodied cultural capital, Witz et al. (2003: 37) define this commoditization of worker embodiment as ‘aesthetic labour’. Processes of selection and training transform distinct worker embodiments (height, weight, looks, voice) ‘into “skills” which are geared toward producing a “style” of service encounter that appeals to the sense of the customer’ (Witz et al., 2003: 37). This challenges human capital theory’s analysis of employability because the forms of embodied cultural capital that carry an exchange value are fractured by unequal power relations that determine ‘which looks – and whose – count’ (Mears, 2014: 1334). Within high-end retail and hospitality businesses, for example, studies suggest a preference for employing young, middle-class, white women so that the embodiment of a middle-class *habitus* itself becomes a kind of capital (Williams and Connell, 2010: 352; also Witz et al., 2003). Research on the image consultancy industry suggests that aesthetic labouring extends beyond retail and hospitality work and includes professions such as accountancy and law, where employees are encouraged to become ‘made up’ to conform to client, employer and societal images of the professional body (Wellington and Bryson, 2001: 941). Following these approaches, this article draws on Bourdieu’s interrelated concepts of *field*, *habitus* and *capital* to develop a more nuanced understanding of ‘employability’ that can adequately disentangle ‘the complexity and diversity of skill as a concept’ (Dobbins et al., 2014: 519).

Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus and capital

The concepts of *field* and *habitus* are two of Bourdieu’s most fundamental and ‘deeply interdependent’ terms (Moi, 1991: 1020). A field can be understood as a social space in which a game takes place: ‘a competitive system of social relations which functions according to its own specific logic or rules’ (Moi, 1991: 1021). Different occupational settings function as different fields insofar as each has its own ‘rules of the game’ and ‘is structured according to different species and amounts of capital’ (Spence et al., 2016: 6). Each field also generates its own *habitus* or system of ‘lasting, transposable dispositions’ that become embodied in the individual and which orient and give meaning to social practices. *Habitus* includes not only those norms and values acquired through practical experience but also the gestures, postures and gait that ‘become durably incorporated in the body’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 86). In embodying *habitus* as innate, actors permit power relations within fields – and the specific kinds of symbolic capital they prioritize – to seem unremarkable and natural. For example, Riach and Cutcher (2014: 779) document how the culture of hedge funds engrains a hyper-masculine *habitus* that disposes traders to embody a ‘fit for work’ body as a project and performance. Through their ‘competitive exercise’, traders uphold ‘the testosterone-fuelled expectations’ of their field to the exclusion of those whose bodies are not seen as ‘built to last’ (Riach and Cutcher, 2014: 779). *Habitus* can thus function as a kind of capital though ‘one, which, because it is embodied, appears as innate’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 86).

The three main forms of capital, for Bourdieu, are economic (income and wealth), social and cultural capital, the latter being the most complex of the three as it can exist in cultural objects, in the institutionalized state of educational qualifications and in the embodied state of the long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body (Huppatz, 2012: 11). It is the distribution of these forms of capital and their properties that distinguishes the social world from a game of chance ‘so that everything is not equally possible or impossible’ (Bourdieu, 2002[1986]: 280). However, the extent to which individuals can deploy particular forms of capital to their advantage depends on how those forms of capital are symbolically valued within particular fields, because ‘capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 101).

How forms of capital come to be symbolically valued or de-legitimated have gendered and classed meanings. Skeggs’ research shows how women’s ability to convert the cultural capital of their femininity into symbolic capital is restricted in comparison to men, who can ‘trade masculinity more readily and for greater reward in the labour market’ (1997: 8–9). An example is how arguments about ‘women’s emotionality’ are used to exclude women from upper management (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012). The growth of service work, however, may mean that women’s ability to trade their embodied cultural capital is increasing since the attributes that are considered necessary for employability within low-skilled service work – friendliness, deference and flirtatiousness – are frequently constructed as ‘gender-specific skills’ (Nixon, 2009: 306). Accordingly, Lovell (2000: 25) suggests that the gendered embodiment of a ‘working-class femininity’ may now be a greater asset in the labour market than ‘the attributes of traditional working-class masculinity’.

In highlighting how labour market mobility is so frequently linked to the deployment of various masculinities or femininities that are symbolically valued within particular fields, Bourdieusian approaches in the sociology of work challenge the rationalist logic of human capital theory that knowledge skills are the most important form of capital within the modern economy. They also draw attention to how the capacity to mobilize symbolically valued forms of embodied cultural (and other) capital is structured by relations of gender and class. Relatively little attention has been paid, however, to how age affects people’s ability to capitalize upon their various forms of embodied capital. A notable exception is Wainwright and Turner’s (2006: 241, 248) research on the ‘ballet habitus’, in which they show how classical ballet dancers are engaged in ‘the unrelenting development and refinement of physical capital’ and the production of ‘a particular type of body’ that becomes more difficult to embody as they age. In other words, bodily ageing corrodes older ballet dancers’ capacity to deploy those forms of embodied capital that are symbolically valued within their field.

This article argues that ageing has a similarly corrosive effect on older workers’ deployment of capital within other labour market fields in which different forms of capital are symbolically valued. For example, Walker et al.’s (2007: 43) research on gendered ageism in the UK suggests that the symbolic power of a professional feminine embodiment is deeply age related, with older professional women feeling pressure to look ‘youthful [and] to remain unchanged and unblemished’ if they want to advance their careers. The remainder of this article extends this analysis to consider how the forms of capital linked to employability vary between occupational fields and in ways that reflect

the gendered and classed patterning of employment; how, within particular labour market fields, the forms of capital that can be converted into labour market advantages are symbolically associated with youth so that the perception of being older carries 'negative symbolic capital' (Spence et al., 2016: 6). This enables a more finely grained analysis of ageism that highlights how age intersects with other locations in social space to shape the employment opportunities of different groups of older workers in divergent ways.

Method

The research presented is drawn from narrative interviews with 80 mature-age Australians which took place as part of a larger mixed methods study on the factors shaping workforce participation and non-participation in mature age. Interviewees ranged from 45 to 73 years and came from a range of occupations: managers, professionals, technicians, trades workers, community and personal service workers and clerical and administrative workers. At the commencement of the study, all interviewees were either under-employed or involuntarily without paid work. They were recruited from three areas of Australia – Western Sydney, the Gold Coast and South Eastern Melbourne – with high mature-age unemployment using advertisements placed in libraries, employment services, specialist online jobsites and advocacy group networks.

Initial semi-structured phone interviews, generally lasting 50 to 70 minutes, were conducted with all interviewees (37 men and 43 women) in 2013.¹ Interviewees were asked a series of questions about their experience of ageing and age identities, including: the advantages and disadvantages of their chronological age as well as the discrepancies they experienced between their chronological age, the age they felt and the age others perceived them to be. In this way, the questions allowed for the complexity of 'age' as a category of differentiation while enabling interviewees to elaborate about tensions between their 'personal' or subjective age, their chronological age and their 'social' or 'contextual age' – which refers 'to the estimates and age-attributions made by others in various social situations' (Coupland, 2009: 961). Interviewees were also asked about their work histories and career trajectories, including: their previous employment experiences (from first entering the workforce up until the interview); the sequencing of their transitions into, within and out of employment; and the personal and social circumstances surrounding these transitions. Information was also gathered about any education or training they had undertaken prior to or during their working lives. In this way, the interview questions adopted a life-course perspective, situating interviewees' current labour market experiences within the context of past constraints and opportunities (McDaniel and Bernard, 2011).

The interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. A sample of 20 transcripts, stratified by age and gender, was analysed manually by the authors and a series of categories and themes identified from the data were agreed upon following an intensive workshop. NVivo software (version 10) was subsequently used to manage the coding of the data, and transcripts were coded in depth 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) – occurred after 38 interviews. A further eight interviews were coded to check that saturation had not been achieved through 'spurious homogeneity of the sample' (Francis et al., 2010: 1234).

In 2014, follow-up interviews were conducted with 22 female and 18 male participants to explore key identified themes in greater detail. Questions addressed interviewees' perceptions of age discrimination as well as their perspectives on the changing nature of work across the course of their lives and the attributes required for success within contemporary labour markets. The findings reported focus on interviewees' understandings of the nature and pervasiveness of age discrimination, which was widely reported as a major barrier facing older jobseekers. Importantly, different groups of interviewees emphasized different types of employment-related age discrimination, including the common negative stereotypes about the flexibility and adaptability of older workers, the slowing of their bodies and the physical demands (and pace) of work and the loss of a youthful appearance. The different factors that interviewees emphasized were coded thematically and examined through an intersectional lens to consider 'the dynamic interrelationships' (Moore, 2009: 657) between social divisions such as gender, class and age in shaping interviewees' reports of age marginalization. This analysis focused not only on *what* was said but by *whom* (gender, class) and in relation to which particular labour market context or occupational *field*. Three distinct narratives of age marginalization were identified: 'rusty', 'invisible' and 'threatening' older workers.

'Rusty' older workers

A minority of interviewees associated ageism with the perception that older workers were slower, less fit and more prone to injury. This group comprised men from traditional working class occupations such as machinery operators, labourers and production workers, and some women who had worked in industries exposed to technological change. Their accounts focused on how bodily ageing and technological change compromised their competitiveness in the labour market. Manual workers, in particular, emphasized the importance of being able to portray themselves as 'fit and fast' workers, something that became more difficult as they aged. This was illustrated by Connor's² (age 48) account of being photographed during recruitment for a job as a stevedore, a 'demanding' job that required workers 'to be a reasonable height ...': 'I think it was a bit of a screening exercise. You know, he's too short, he's too tall, he's too old, he's too fat ...'.

In explaining why workers needed to be seen as 'still fairly fit to work in a warehouse environment', Larry (50) emphasized the pace at which warehousing workers were expected to work, indicating that the requirement for physical job fitness is not intrinsic to the type of work but stems from the management processes under which it is performed. While there were several 'guys in his age group' in the postal sorting warehouse, they were long-term employees 'who might not be the quickest workers'. However, Larry felt employers 'might be a bit hesitant' about recruiting 50-year-old men from the casual labour pool who 'probably have a middle age spread, aches and pains, their joints aren't the best'. Drawing on the logic of age and decline, he adopted an employer's perspective asking: 'Can they work quick enough? Are they going to make a compensation claim in 6 months?'.

Interviewees also described how the technical job skills that they had acquired earlier in their careers had been made obsolete by technological change. This was typified in

Les' (61) account of how technology had enabled firms to shed staff and automate jobs so that 'telephone systems don't need to be used and these big companies don't need to employ as many people'. With little demand for his telephony maintenance skills, Les had fallen back on manual jobs, including a recent job installing fans. That job lasted a month because the employer told him he 'wasn't quick enough'. Interestingly, he interpreted this experience as 'basically [age] discrimination' rather than a lack of fit with the changed nature and intensification of the workplace: 'I am sure he employed a younger person ... No one ever says you are too old'.

'Rusty' women tried to adapt by transitioning to service employment. Marina (48) had previously worked as a typesetter and print layout designer. After several years caring for her daughter she was retraining as a disability support worker because 'they need less people these days because of the digital age ... they're not printing as many books'. She was confident of securing employment, explaining 'they're screaming for people ...'. This contrasted with the experiences of 'rusty' men who had attempted to become service workers. Les, for example, had also retrained as a disability worker but 'when it finished, there was no work'. He explained, 'they don't want me'. Other 'rusty' men felt that their ageing bodies effectively excluded them from working in the retail and tourism sectors. Neil explained, 'They don't want older people ... they want young, youthful people, good-looking people'.

'Invisible' older workers

Not having the 'right' embodiment for customer service and sales work was also an issue for many older women. This was highlighted by the narrative of exclusion recounted by a second group of interviewees (almost all women) which centred round the importance of a young appearance to women's 'employability' within customer service, sales, administrative and secretarial work. The overriding impression among these interviewees was that employers 'generally speaking ... want people who *look* young, fit and attractive' (Natalie, 52). However, for women, the symbolic value of a youthful embodiment was associated with looking *attractive* whereas 'rusty' older workers' accounts focused on *being* physically fit-and-fast. This distinction was highlighted by Jacinta's (46) account of being asked to include a photograph with her application for a receptionist position at a hairdresser. Whereas 'rusty' workers interpreted being photographed as screening for physical job fitness, Jacinta interpreted it as involving the sorting of applicants according to their perceived attractiveness. She said: 'I could have picked up [a photo of] some stunning bird and put [it] on my résumé'. She acknowledged that this tactic was flawed, because 'they probably want someone that's a lot younger ... being a hairdressing company' and 'once they saw what I looked like' her age would be apparent.

Jacinta cited retail fashion – where 'they always want someone young' because 'they think that's what's pulling in the people' – as another example of where an older female appearance was a barrier to employment. She, along with other women such as Rita (57) – who commented that she could not see herself 'working in Supré [fashion retailer] or somewhere like that' – rationalized this as 'probably ... common sense', elaborating: 'to see me dressed up in a Supré outfit ... may not be very appealing'.

The importance of a youthful embodiment went beyond the retail sector. It included other sectors, such as libraries. Diane (52) observed that ‘if people are going to use the libraries, the people who work in them have got to look cool and be cool’. She associated this with not looking like an ‘old person wearing a cardigan’, explaining that even though she did not ‘look like Mrs Doubtfire’ her older appearance was still a barrier when she went for interviews and ‘you seen their face drop when you walk in the room’. Lisa (49), an administrative worker, described how ‘a woman becomes invisible after a certain time because we’re not as attractive, physically ...’. She observed that in the past, when she was in her 20s and 30s, her looks were probably an asset along with her qualifications but now, as an older woman, they seemed to be all that mattered:

I remember even being told ... ‘Oh, you were the best looking one that came for the interview’ ... I can look back and say ‘Yeah ... I have my qualifications and I have my personality but the looks [were] very much a part of it ...’.

Signs of ageing, such as grey hair, were experienced as particularly problematic during interviews. Eileen recounted how ‘they take one look at my grey hair, and just completely dismiss you’. Some women responded by trying to look younger. Kate (56, social worker) had started to dye her ‘white hair’ because people ‘can’t look at anything else during the interview’. Others deployed their economic capital in an effort to counter negative assessments about their age. For example, Jacinta explained:

It’s got to be some expensive type of bag ... I do have one of those just for interviews ... I even wear a different pair of earrings because ... they’ve got to be impressive in some way.

Catherine (58), a former teacher, recognized the importance of economic capital in managing embodied ageing as a form of symbolic capital in the workforce. She explained that a friend ‘had cosmetic surgery to look younger ... Some people go down that road, because they’ve got the money’. At the time of the interview, Catherine was living in a caravan park with her husband after they had both lost their jobs:

After [45] I started to put weight on ... [I was] eating vegetables and on my exercise bike, but when we had to move out of our house I had to toss it all out. [You] eat whatever you could when you’re living in a tent.

‘Threatening’ older workers

The ageing of their *physical bodies* was almost entirely absent from a third narrative of age marginalization which focused instead on the perception that older and experienced workers might resist organizational change and management authority and be less malleable than younger workers. The interviewees who drew on this narrative of ‘threatening’ older workers were predominantly managers or professionals, with the exception of two older female administrative and sales workers who had worked for multinational pharmaceutical and media companies. They also tended to be highly educated, with over half having completed a Bachelor’s degree or higher. Several had adopted the logic of

human capital through investing in job-related training. For example, Andrew (64) recounted how he had been appointed manager of online security in his last job after ‘doing a lot of internal study’ in his own time ‘just trying to build up knowledge and be seen to be pushing heavily’.

These interviewees saw themselves as highly skilled workers who could ‘still add a lot of value’ to organizations. Their accounts suggested they were discriminated against not because they had low stocks of human capital – indeed, many felt their knowledge and skills were probably ‘more than people really want’ (Dan, laboratory technician, 53) – but because employers saw them as too ‘rigid’ and ‘inflexible.’ In contrast to conventional analyses that depict negative stereotyping as a denial of older workers’ agency, they interpreted the negative stereotypes they were subject to in highly agentic terms: as signalling a fear that they might resist organizational change and management authority. As IT professional Tim (61) remarked: ‘I’m working mostly with people a lot younger than I am, especially in the IT industry ... I’m absolutely convinced that you are seen as a threat to their position’.

The knowledge and experience that these interviewees had accumulated over their careers equipped them with a level of agency they saw as threatening to organizational cultures that required employees to, as one professional put it, ‘fit in or get lost’:

‘You’re too experienced’ ... ‘This is a young and vibrant workplace’ are all code for ... we just need people to turn the wheels ... There are lots of, I call them, ‘hamsters on treadmills’.
(Ed, 54)

Ed’s observation highlights how these older workers perceived that organizational cultures had shifted towards a more compliant and procedural model of organizational life – one where workers were ‘probably much more reliant on following the rules rather than being innovative or taking risks’ (Sharon, 50). Jim, a programmer in his mid-50s, explained that ‘they want people [to] start with a fresh, clean slate in their mind so they’ll ... [be] more likely to follow company policies’. These ‘threatening’ older workers felt that there was a tendency among Australian businesses to favour ‘fast-tracked university graduates’ (Neil, 55) over those with ‘past experience and work experience’ (Eve, 63). Anne (59) observed that the authority of these ‘35-year-old managers’ could be especially threatened by the presence of senior professionals who ‘might know more than they do and show them up for being perhaps incompetent’. This manifested in being told they were ‘not a cultural fit’, which older professionals interpreted as ‘just code ... [for] maybe you’re too old, or maybe they don’t like you’ (John, 57). Ed, who had managed the marketing portfolio of a multinational, recounted how he had also been ruled out for positions on the basis that ‘the culture may see you as a bit of an awkward fit’ despite being told that he had ‘some of the most amazing experience’ the recruiter had seen.

This kind of explanation suggested a lack of fit between older managerial and professional workers’ now outdated common-sense understandings and the current field of work. They made sense of this lack of fit by reference to their skill and expertise, which they understood posed a threat. In a sense, their outdated understandings did pose a threat as they were evidence of different workplace cultures that valued stability and loyalty more than flexibility.

Discussion

The distinct narratives of age marginalization highlight the complex relationship between ageing and older workers' perceived 'employability'. Several heterogeneous influences on older workers' 'employability' can be seen that relate to the different forms of embodied capital that carried symbolic power within interviewees' labour market fields. These include the effects of deindustrialization on the ability of older manual and production workers to mobilize their embodied masculinity in the labour market, as well as broader changes in the nature of employment and work organization, such as new management approaches that engrain continuous organizational upheaval. This is illustrated by the shift in organizational cultures described by older managers and professionals, whose accumulated experience threatened to disrupt the functioning of a more compliant model of organizational life. In Bourdieusian terms, these interviewees embodied an outdated habitus – in the form of the practical sense and dispositions that were written onto their years of experience – that no longer fitted the 'rules' of the corporate game. This coheres with Lyon et al.'s (1998) observations about the fit between older workers and the ideology of human resources management (HRM), which emphasizes the perpetual regeneration of firms and flexibility and adaptability as core aspects of organizational commitment and competitiveness. Within this thinking, older workers are 'tainted by the length and diversity of their work histories' (Lyon et al., 1998: 58). 'Their accumulated institutional knowledge appears as a barrier to swift change', Sennett observes, since the experienced older worker 'complicates the meaning of what he or she learns, judging its work in terms of his or her past' (2006: 96–8). Conversely, inexperienced 'green' workers are seen as blank canvases for engraining high organizational commitment (Hallier, 2001) and the pursuit of what Riach and Kelly (2015: 298) describe as 'organizational vampirism'. Lacking experience or standing, they are valued as pliable workers who, if they do not like the conditions, 'tend to leave rather than resist' (Sennett, 2006: 96).

Older workers are dismissed not because of any real inabilities but because of 'their capacity to question new management decisions and practices' (Hallier, 2001: 343). The narrative of 'threatening' older workers thus suggests that age marginalization *within professional fields* emerges from general organizational dynamics (compare Riach and Kelly, 2015: 300–01) and will not disappear with the accumulation of additional human capital by future cohorts of older workers. Indeed, older managerial and professional workers are marginalized because they have more human capital than organizations want. Their accumulated institutional knowledge carries 'negative symbolic capital' (Spence et al., 2016: 6) for corporations competing within what Sennett (2006) terms 'the culture of new capitalism'.

The age marginalization of 'rusty' and 'invisible' older workers, by contrast, arises from how ageing intersects with older workers' capacity to deploy a very different kind of symbolic capital: the embodied cultural capital of particular gendered and classed forms of worker corporeality. Issues of embodiment and employability have been largely neglected in mainstream discourses on ageism, which focus on discrimination based on negative associations between chronological age and the value of older workers' intellectual and human capital (Clarke and Griffin, 2008: 668). However, the findings reported in this article reinforce those in the wider literatures on aesthetic labouring and gender in organizations about how distinct 'gendered embodiments' (Huppatz, 2012: 4) operate as

forms of capital in the labour market to include and exclude different groups of (older) workers. As Calasanti (2005: 10) observes, although both men and women strive to have healthy bodies as they age, popular culture stresses different components of this health-appearance association for men, where ‘appearance means looking like one can perform’, and for women, where ‘appearance in terms of sexual attractiveness prevails’. This distinction is reflected in the different ways that older ‘rusty’ men and ‘invisible’ older women interpreted their embodied age identity as carrying negative symbolic capital.

‘Rusty’ older males experienced their (older) embodied masculinity as hindering their perceived ‘employability’ for manual jobs that required the mobilization of a ‘muscular masculinity’ (Baron, 2006: 146–50; cited in Huppatz and Goodwin, 2013: 300). It was also out of sync with the forms of embodied cultural capital valued within the service economy, in contrast to some older women, like Marina, who responded to the decline of the printing industry by retraining as a care worker. Care taking, as Huppatz (2012: 38) observes, is still largely seen ‘as a feminine competence’ and the majority of care workers are ‘middle-aged, working-class women’ (McDowell, 2009: 169–70). Marina’s decision to retrain as a care worker can be interpreted as involving the deployment of her gender capital in response to the changing nature of work. Conversely, the unsuccessful attempts of ‘rusty’ men, such as Les, to retrain as care or service workers suggests that the development of human capital through the acquisition of technical job skills and qualifications may not be sufficient for older workers to move occupational fields, especially if they cannot mobilize the other forms of embodied capital required to succeed in those fields. Certainly, as the broader research on aesthetic labouring highlights, workers can (and do) engage in body management strategies to enhance their ‘employability’ within interactive service and stylized labour markets. Nevertheless, this development of worker corporeality depends on workers having the ‘raw material’ or look that suggests ‘how they *could* be’ (Witz et al., 2003: 49), subject, of course, to the means – and desire – to manage and maintain that appearance. Embodiments are not transferable skills that *anyone* can acquire with sufficient investments of time and money. As Mears (2014: 1334) argues, it is:

not a matter of mere individual effort to look good – applying makeup and working out ... because bodies only make sense in their respective social fields, where whiteness, heterosexuality, *youth* and upper-class privileges play out. (emphasis added)

This was illustrated by the difficulties that older ‘invisible’ women experienced in the labour market for retail, customer service and secretarial jobs, despite the efforts of several to look ‘young’ or ‘impressive’ through dying their hair or dressing in particular ways. Biological ageing had eroded the capacity of these women to deploy the symbolic capital of a young, slim, female embodiment.

Conclusion

Conventional policy analyses foreground older jobseekers’ labour market difficulties in either their ‘out of sync’ human capital or age prejudice motivated by negative and inaccurate stereotypes. Both explanations locate the ‘employability’ of older workers in employer judgements about the relative value of their human capital. In the case of the

ageism explanation, reduced employability is based in *mistaken beliefs* about older workers' stocks of human capital. In the case of the *human capital* explanation, reduced employability supposedly reflects the actual obsolescence of older workers' knowledge and skills wrought by deindustrialization and the 'age of human capital' (Becker, 2002: 3). Policy responses focus on re-establishing the value of older workers' human capital: whether through re-skilling or 'business case' campaigns highlighting the positive contribution of older workers.

These conventional analyses overstate the relationship between human capital and 'employability'. The narratives of age marginalization reported here illustrate how the forms of capital underpinning 'employability' vary between occupational fields, and the different forms of symbolic capital prioritized within them. This leads to a more nuanced understanding of age discrimination, whereby ageing intersects with workers' 'employability' and capacity to mobilize symbolically valued forms of capital in different gendered and classed ways. Appreciating the complexity of age discrimination in this way challenges conventional approaches and responses that individualize mature-age unemployment and extol increasing skills and training 'as the recipes for return to work' (Gabriel et al., 2013: 70). As Brown and Lauder (2006: 40–1) caution, human capital is itself 'subject to the law of diminishing returns' when the expansion of higher education means 'vast numbers of highly skilled workers are available in developing economies'. While the decline in manufacturing jobs has undoubtedly affected many older workers, their competitiveness in the labour market is not simply a function of their knowledge and technical job skills. Increasingly, it is also related to their capacity to deploy distinct gendered and classed embodiments which cannot be individually acquired through human capital investment.

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Notes

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2. Pseudonyms have been used with interviewees' ages provided in brackets.

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