

# AGEING AND EXPERTISE. NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF OLDER WORKERS WHO ACQUIRE MASTER'S DEGREES IN THEIR FIFTIES

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# RESEARCH PROJECT

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Funding: Academy of Finland

Site of research: Institute of Behavioural Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland

Mobility: I had a status of a visiting researcher during the project (Jan/2012 – Jan/2015) in the Centre for Research on Ageing and Gender (CRAG) within the Sociology Department, University of Surrey, UK, and Professor Sara Arber was my mentor during the project

# PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

Why HE studies at older age? personal development and fulfilment; new knowledge and skills; positive effect on career; some are additionally concerned about redundancy at work

missing fundamental knowledge on how ageing influences the expertise status of older workers and how older graduates are able to utilize their newly acquired qualifications at work

refining our understanding of the experiences of those older workers who compete for the expert positions

bringing educational knowledge to the field of ageing research and contributing to the efforts of promoting active ageing and active employment of older people

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Why experienced professionals enroll to degree-oriented university programs at later life?

What kinds of benefits the new Master's degree brings to their remaining careers?

How does it change self and social status?

# METHODOLOGY

conversational interviews with 14 graduates having a Master's degree from two well-established Finnish universities in their fifties

degrees in social sciences or economics

age range was 54 to 62 at the time of the interviews

discursive-narrative approach: to uncover cultural and political age-discourses that are embedded in participants' narratives

counter narratives and resistance

# EDUCATIONAL CREDENTIALING

on average across OECD countries, 38% of the younger generation (25-34 year olds) and 23% of the older generation (55-64 year olds) of working-age adults have acquired university-level education + credentials inflation

the basic motive for studying was to earn a recognized degree, which provides eligibility for professional jobs, validates past successes at work, and enables a good position

at the same time, what seems like a contradiction, the older graduates questioned the power of educational credentials to define the status

educational credentialing can become entangled with age-discrimination

Isopahkala-Bouret, U. (2015). Educational Credentialing of an Aging Workforce: Uneasy Conclusions. *Adult Education Quarterly* 65(2), 83–99

# DISTINCT GRADUATION EXPERIENCES?

age experienced as a resource; as a difference; and as a limiting option

older graduates enjoy obvious benefits from their new Master's degree; but variation between graduates and all anticipated outcomes are not realized; some negative consequences (conflicts at work)

degree attainment in midlife anticipated active ageing after retirement

Isopahkala-Bouret, U. (2014). Graduating at older age - what are the expected, surprising and unwanted outcomes? In B. K apflinger, N. Lichte, E. Haberzeth & C. Kulmus (Eds.) *Changing Configurations of Adult Education in Transitional Times*

Isopahkala-Bouret, U. (2014). A master's degree in one's fifties: A way to stay active beyond the retirement age. In Leist, A., Kulmala, J., & Nyqvist, F. (Eds.) *Health and Well-Being in Old Age: From Biomedical and Life Course Factors to Policy and Practice*

Isopahkala-Bouret, U. (2013) Exploring the meaning of age for professional women who acquire master's degrees in their late forties and fifties. *Educational Gerontology*, 39(5), 285-297

# CONSTANT AGE-NEGOTIATIONS

LLL is part of the experience of 'new ageing'

age may be interpreted as a positional (dis)advantage notwithstanding the chronological age of the adult graduates; with the right kinds of social resources, adult graduates have better chances to negotiate what their age means

age-negotiation narratives are dichotomist and ambivalent (yes, but...)

university studies at age 50+ became a talking point against cultural age-stereotypes; it was a proof that midlife professional were able to accomplish a big goal; it updated professional knowledge and 'renewed' intellectually

Isopahkala-Bouret, U. (2015). Graduation at age 50+: Contested efforts to construct 'third age' identities and negotiate cultural age-stereotypes. *Aging Studies* 35, 1-9.

Siivonen, P. & Isopahkala-Bouret, U. (2014) Adult graduates' negotiations of age(ing) and employability. *Journal of Education and Work*.



# INTERSECTION OF AGE AND GENDER

the decline narrative is not enough to capture the ageing experiences of midlife professional women

changing physical appearance and 'invisibility'; women are no longer being subjected to a sexualized gaze and are taken more seriously

ageing opens up possibilities for 'doing' gender differently and transcending rigid gender dichotomies and relationships

ageing can empower women to take up new roles in society, including striving for further university studies and leadership positions

Isopahkala-Bouret, U. (*conditionally accepted*). 'It's a great benefit to have grey hair!' Narrative inquiry into aging, gender and changing appearance of professional women. *Women and Aging*

# CONCLUSION

This study has advanced the societal discussion on the consequences of credentials attainment in midlife.

Advancement of theoretical and methodological approaches to study age-negotiation (and 'new ageing')

## Implications:

The importance of developing inclusive higher education practices / to take seriously the efforts of older students

The need to develop age-sensitive and fair recruitment and rewarding practices at workplaces

Moreover, in order to prevent social exclusion of older workers, it is necessary to question the normative faith on ever-increasing importance of educational credentials and address accompanying ageist practices

New research agenda!