

Chris Kossen

Lecturer

University Southern Queensland

kossen@usq.edu.au

***Barriers to employment for marginalised
mature age workers***

Sociological PhD Research

Supervisor: Dr Roger Wilkinson

James Cook University (Cairns)

Outline: Topics for discussion

- **Developments in labour market trends**
impacts on mature age (or older) workers
- **Barriers to employment**
(marginalised) mature age jobseekers
 - My research:** including *personal challenges*
faced by mature age workers participating in
interview based research
regional Queensland centre - Toowoomba

Age Discrimination in Employment

Appears to be a key issue of our times

→ Recessions, economic downturns

→ Reform, restructuring, downsizing

1970s, 1980s & 1990s

Redundancies targeted older workers

However a long history exists

over a century eg. USA (Segrave)

Early Redundancies based on:

Distorted/inaccurate perceptions

by employers **of older workers as:**

- ***slower & therefore less productive***
- ***more prone to accidents & illness***
- ***less trainable***
- ***less flexible***
- ***leave jobs sooner (closer to retirement)***

Despite contrary productivity data

- National & international research shows that **productivity among mature age workers compares favourably** to younger counterparts
 - *Higher levels of accuracy (less error)*
 - *Less time off (sick)*
 - *Lower (staff) turnover*
 - *Loyalty & commitment: “work ethic”*
 - *etc...*

Employments Prospects:

- **Gaining & maintaining**
 - sufficient & secure employment
 - suitable / quality employment
- **Access to training & development**
- **Opportunity: advancement & promotion**

Mature age workers have been over-represented in unemployment statistics along with **youth** both are regarded as being **non-prime age**

Decade of change & growth

- Strong jobs growth
Large drop in (official) unemployment rate
- Mature age workers no longer feature as a problem group in unemployment statistics

Considerable progress in combating ageism!

- anti-discrim laws, education & awareness promotion...
- changing Human Resource Mgt practices, tax incentives

Mature age more vulnerable to:

- **Hidden unemployment**
 - ***Underemployment:*** casualisation of labour
temp & contract labour
 - those ineligible to register unemployed welfare
- **Long-term unemployment**

Marginalisation is contingent
(many are far from being marginalised)

Major Research Theme

Problematic Transitions

- Difficulty re-entering work & gaining comparable work - **once displaced**
- Many **leave secure work due to stress/ful** environments (eg. subjected to *bullying*)
- **Shock**: never had difficulty getting work
Some - regret leaving
- **Find their 'profile' is not an 'easy' fit**

Confirmatory evidence from literature

- *Phenomenon: scarring* of profile (ABS)
eg. *downsizing*: city dairy factory workers
Profile: limited experience & education
- Pitfalls/dangers
 - Phenomenon: *churning* (ABS)
 - *Cumulative disadvantage: scarring*
very long-term unemploy/separation

Common Financial Stressors Identified:

- Children dependant longer (mid-20's)
- Divorce: depletion of wealth (eg.house)
- Child rearing later in life (eg. 2nd marriages)
- Disrupted work: to care for ageing parents
- Financial setbacks (business failure)
- **Growing need self-fund extended retirement**

some personal costs

- Subsistence/frugal living: no coffee shops!
- Poverty: use of assistance from charities
- Depriving children

eg. fashion, McDonald's, sport, music ...

- Loss of confidence (parents & children)
- Loss of “sense of purpose” despair
- Isolation (cut-off), alienation, depression

Some findings of interest:

- Pressures to be a “compliant worker”
- Age & Resumes (*shaving off the years*)
- The “*financially secure*” vs “*the poor*”
- **Beneficial Coping Strategies**
 - Realising importance: to manage stress, motivation, etc ...
 - Taking on meaningful activity eg. exercise
 - Ability to appreciate positive aspects of life

Some Key Aims

- Explore 'traits' among participants
Identify useful & unhelpful **coping strategies**
- Phase 2: **Participatory Action Research**
 - Work collaboratively 'select' participants to help develop higher levels of awareness about their life situation and
 - Assist them to plan & act more strategically in coping with their circumstances: **reflective**

Theories on stereotyping

Ideal Types Schutz (1970) Lakoff (1987)

Ease by which things are *brought to mind*

Typical-ness

- A Bird
- A “Policeman” **
- A “Male” Nurse
- A “Female” Doctor

Dominant *Deficit Model*

Exaggerates decline

To construct dominant social understanding as:

less than “normal”

less than “full” = “substandard”

“incomplete”

“deficient”

Linguistically marked: *“older” worker*

Biased Mental Models

- **Distort:** *'because there are valid grounds for supposing some workers..'* (Harris 1991)
- **Resist contradictory data:** easier to accommodate contradictory data, than to revise established thinking structures
- **Self-fulfilling & Perpetuate:** restricts opportunities for learning & development
→ **effectively out-dating one's skill set**

Health & Life Span Research supports:

“Biology places limits on life-span but the social world also...”

“imposes limits on what is biologically possible...”

- In other words, society determines how long and in what manner the individual organism shall live”

(Berger & Luckmann 1966:202)