



## AGEING AND EXPERTISE

### Narrative inquiry into the experiences of older workers who acquire master's degrees in their fifties

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#### BACKGROUND

The demographic and political changes in Europe put pressure on extending active working careers. There have been acts to prevent early exit from the labour market and to support the working ability and competence of older workers.

There have been recent studies on ageing at work and on learning and development of older workers. There have also been studies on access, motives, study experiences, and outcomes of adult learners at universities. Nevertheless, we are still missing fundamental knowledge on how ageing influences the expertise status of older workers, why some want to upgrade their qualifications at later age, and how older graduates are able to utilize their newly acquired qualifications at work.

#### OVERALL AIMS

I am interested in investigating in-depth why experienced professionals enrol in degree-oriented university programs, and what kinds of benefits a new master's degree brings to them. Moreover, the goal of this study is to theorize how ageing and expertise are intertwined, and how age and gender intersect in relation to the social constructions of expertise.

This study provides new interpretations and refines our current understanding of the aspirations and experiences of those older workers who compete for expert positions at work. Particularly it aims to clarify the impact of a higher academic degree for the opportunities to exercise agency in such positions.

#### QUESTIONS

1. What difference it makes to earn a master's degree at older age?
2. What kinds of age-related assumptions characterize the position of expertise?
3. How age and gender differentiate people in relation to expertise?

#### METHODOLOGY

This study is a critical narrative inquiry. The qualitative data of this study will consist of 30 conversational interviews with graduates who have recently acquired their master's degrees from different disciplines. The age range of interviewees will be between 50 and 59 at the time of graduation. The interviewees work in public and private and both female and male dominated sectors. The interviews will be conducted in fall 2012.

The starting point of a narrative study is to pay attention to the delicate details of particular events and experiences. Narrative research focuses not only on the experiences of research participants but also on the meanings those participants give to their experiences.

As part of the methodological considerations of my research project, I have explored narrative forms of inquiry within ageing studies. Despite the non-uniformity and even contradictory ways of using narratives in ageing research, narrative gerontology has been recognized as a field in itself. Its starting point is that age and ageing are social constructions. The analytical interest is in revealing the complexity and diversity of collective and individual stories told about ageing. I am most interested in the critical potential of narrative gerontology to interrupt and confront the ambiguities of ageing.

#### MULTIDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITY

My own field of research is adult education and during this research project I will move to the field of sociology. There has been relatively little research engagement to date focusing simultaneously on adults in higher education context and on sociology of expertise. This study has an attempt to bring those two fields of study closer to each other. Particularly, the sociological concepts of age and gender will advance this research. I will spend my international mobility period in the Centre for Research on Ageing and Gender (CRAG) within the Sociology Department, University of Surrey, United Kingdom.

#### EXPECTED RESULTS

Theoretically-informed interpretations of participants' experiences will end up producing rich, multifaceted, and complex knowledge about the relation between ageing and expertise. Moreover, this study will show what kinds of assumptions and practices lay beyond the seemingly age-neutral expertise discourse. It will reveal how unconscious and unrecognized age-related expectations influence our understanding of who the experts at work are. The position of expertise is differently available to people at different age. The point is to make the stereotypes related to older university students and workers visible, so that there is a better chance to reconstruct and change unequal practices related to age.