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Life behind Trophies: What is Everyday Work Like in the “Best” Workplaces

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Abstract

This study explores organizations that have been able to simultaneously combine high job satisfaction with good productivity and profitability. The focus in this study is in the organizations that consciously have rejected many traditional organizational practices and are able to operate profitably while being recognized as the best work places in Finland. This study aims at describing the ways of working and management practices in these organizations.

This study was realized as a multiple case study involving three companies in the information technology business. The data was collected using theme interviews and there are five interviews altogether. The data was analyzed by classifying it according to the themes. The analysis produced a description of the ways of working in organizations which have abandoned the traditional management practices.

The organizations in the study have consciously removed rigid hierarchies and organizational charts and replaced them with a systemic organization. The organizational culture is free. The ways of working in these award-winning organizations lean on continuous learning and improvement, customer orientation and collaborative development. These companies continuously ensure that they are on the right track in customer projects and they let employees take initiative and responsibility.

Studied organizations have only a minimal amount of administration and they have consciously given up pursuing order and control. This is reflected in the ways of working both externally and internally. A strong sensemaking is also a distinct feature; it requires interaction and social interaction is in a remarkable role in these organizations. The importance of shared objectives is recognized and people are brought together to figure out the shared purpose. Usually the work happens in self-organized teams.

The importance of productivity and profitability was highlighted in the data, but they did not represent the aim of the organizations as such. They seem to emerge as a by-product when the other, more important conditions prevail. The most important conditions are the satisfaction of employees and customers. The key themes identified in the data are: trust, influence and equality, appreciation of diversity and shared objectives. They can be seen affecting the job satisfaction of employees. The satisfaction of customers is ultimately ensured in one company giving customers a 100% satisfaction guarantee. This reflects the fact how serious these companies are with customer orientation. Thus, customer orientation is not verbiage at all - everyone knows that customer satisfaction is always very important and doing great job is demanded from everybody.

Even though the primary target is not formulated as any financial measure, it seems obvious that an employee's billing rate is an important indicator of company performance. Ultimately, it ensures the financial success of the company.

These organizations show that successful business is possible even during poor financial times and that there are alternative ways of running a company instead of traditional management practices. The important question in the future is how to expand, execute integration processes and still maintain these features without becoming a rigid corporation. Therefore these organizations continue to be intriguing targets for study also in the future.

Key words: self-organizing systems, far-from-equilibrium, innovation, iterative

1. Introduction

Various kinds of competitions on the well-being of employees have grown popular among companies. By focusing on examples set by "great" workplaces the target for these competitions seems to be making a change in the quality of work life. Presenting novel practices and giving examples of tremendous working conditions is a way to get more companies interested in developing their culture.

Already in 1993, Daft & Lewin stated that redefining organizational practices means moving away from mass production efficiencies, hierarchical organization and central control. They described the need for flexible, learning organizations that constantly change and solve problems through interconnected, self-organizing processes. (Daft & Lewin, 1993.)

Empowering the organization's members to participate in making creative ideas for continuous improvement is the essence in Japanese Kaizen strategy. This management philosophy was introduced in Masaaki Imai's book *The Key to Japan's Competitive Success* (1986). The strategy has been effectively used for instance in Toyota where they established a strong corporate culture of continuous improvement (Stewart and Raman 2007).

Increasing global competition, ever growing service sector and the development of technology have all contributed to the fact that businesses have started to emphasize the ways of working and possibilities to renew them in order to keep up with the competition (Boxall & Macky 2009). Many studies have investigated how the productivity of organizations could be improved by new ways of organizing working (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg & Kalleberg 2000; Cappelli & Neumark 2001). Also, the new social innovations and new ways to manage work have been of importance according to prior studies. They have contributed to the productivity either as such or in combination with product innovations or production innovations. (Barney & Wright 1998; Kauhanen & Maliranta 2011; López-Cabrales et al. 2009.)

According to prior studies, highly productive ways of working are such that they decentralize the organizational decision making and problem solving and thus increase the employee commitment (Edwards & Wright 2001). The practises that enhance productivity vary in organizations depending on the size of the business and the field of industry. For example, companies producing expert services should focus on committing people. (Boxall & Macky 2009.)

This study contributes to the organizational research literature by describing work life in organizations which have been able to combine people's well-being and an organization's profitability. More specifically, the studied organizations have deliberately wanted to back down on the traditional management practices and leadership theories. They have been able to achieve these all: productivity, innovation and the quality of working life. Improving the productivity is a question of organizational learning process.

Self-organizing has a big role as all employees are involved in the development, which also helps in dealing with the changes and insecurity. People working for these companies feel that their achievement level is high and that they get support from their fellow workers and from the management. The benefits of work are spread out evenly and possibilities brought by new technology are utilized when creating new solutions or services. (Työelämän kehittämisstrategia vuoteen 2020, 2013.)

This study aims at describing work-practices and management of award-winning organizations in Finland. The authors had an opportunity to study three successful companies and try to shed light on what is life like behind trophies. Prevailing conditions in these organizations are independent decision making, equality and co-operation rather than targets that are deduced from productivity or profitability. The research problem of this study is formulated on the basis of these targets as follows: *What is everyday work like in these organizations?*

2. Key Concepts and Theoretical Framework

Traditional leadership models with top-down, bureaucratic paradigms have been effective for business of physical production. For a more knowledge-oriented businesses these models do not seem to suit as well. Different paradigm for leadership has been suggested by complexity science. In that paradigm leadership is framed as a complex interactive dynamics from which adaptive outcomes such as learning, innovation and adaptability occur. New leadership treats organizations as complex adaptive systems that enable continuous creation and capture of knowledge. (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey 2007.)

The operating environment in this knowledge era is more complex and multipolar. There is a clear need for a new kind of operating logic: self-organizing and constant renewal from within. Self-organizing refers to collective action and intelligence which manifests itself in the operations of a community like swarm intelligence in the animal world. (Stähle & Kuosa 2009.) In systems thinking there is a paradigm which focuses on the spontaneous dynamics of systems. This includes the complexity viewpoint and it reveals the extreme complexity of systems, the significance of a non-equilibrium state and a system's capacity for spontaneous renewal and change. The most theoretical contributions to this paradigm come from Ilya Prigogine's theory of self-organizing systems. (Stähle 1998.)

Chemist Ilya Prigogine explained complex behavior in physical and chemical systems and based his findings on thermodynamics and chemistry. He found out that conditions that facilitate structure are far from a state of equilibrium and fluctuations together with feedback can create order out of chaos. (Prigogine 1980.) Even though the research was conducted in physics, Prigogine also considered the aspect of social change in his works "Dissipative Structures and Social System" (Prigogine 1976) and "Self-organization in Human Systems" (Prigogine & Nicolis 1989). He stated that most biological and social systems are subject to much the same self-organizing forces.

Prigogine's and his co-authors Nicolis' and Stengers' work has been adopted also in social complex systems and these studies have been analyzed in studies of systems capacity for self-renewal (Stähle 1998; Stähle & Kuosa 2009).

Eve Mitleton-Kelly's description of co-creating an innovative environment offers interesting viewpoint to analyzing the characteristics of complex systems. Complex social systems have characteristics which they share with other complex systems. Human systems are, however, fundamentally different as we are able to reflect and act with intentionality. (Mitleton-Kelly 2003.)

Prigogine's work gave systems research a new perspective on how a system reorganizes itself without external control. The central themes for self-organization are Far-from-Equilibrium, Entropy, Iteration and Bifurcation. Here is a brief description of these themes.

Far-from-Equilibrium. Originally in Prigogine's chemistry research this meant that when open systems are pushed far-from-equilibrium they are able to create new structures. Far-from-Equilibrium means the state in or near the chaotic condition. Systems self-organize only in this state: stability does not create any kind of self-renewal. (Prigogine & Stengers 1984). Chaos is seen as a source of order. In social systems this means moving away from established norms and ways of working. Often there is a rhythmic cycle of recurring stable and chaotic periods, because in no workplace there is turbulence and chaos all the time. Also complexity theory recognizes this: in order to be creative, it is needed to move away from the usual way of thinking and/or norms of behaviour. In other words: to move away from equilibrium. Being able to move into a different way of thinking allows innovative solutions to be found. (Mitleton-Kelly 2006b) Peters has also written about chaos stating that those who enjoy chaos and constant change, succeed, not those who try to eliminate the need for change. Winners value and develop their sensibility. (Peters 1987.)

Entropy. This concept has to do with the quality of information: One does not always know in advance what is crucial information and there is always some amount (often a lot) of waste when finding this out. To tolerate with this state of uncertainty in accumulating entropy is a challenge. Creating entropy means that one needs to keep options open long enough and appreciate different opinions. Entropy decreases with prioritizing and value judgments. Dissipating entropy is, however, important: it means setting priorities and making decisions. The key in entropy is not to be too hasty in judging what aspects are more valuable than others. (Prigogine & Stengers 1984.)

Iteration. Prigogine identified sensitive internal interaction dynamics: iteration. In self-organizing social systems feedback is very important. Persons react to each other sensitively and respond to what they really hear – not holding to own biased opinions. People are receptive, alert, well aware on what goes on and ready to give and receive positive and negative feedback. (Prigogine & Stengers 1984.)

Bifurcation. This means the point when a system has a genuine chance to make a choice. This is possible only when the time is right, not any time whatever. The right time is when there is enough entropy and sensitivity within the system. In an organization this means that a person or a team acknowledges the point of bifurcation: when it is time to make a decision. This is the time the system jumps to a new level and creates a new order. The self-organizing feature requires an organization to be very sensitive and receptive to what happens inside the system and in its environment. This is demonstrated in bifurcation and chaos.

Choosing the right time is possible only when there is sufficiently entropy and sensitivity. If decisions are made without proceeding through the bifurcation zone, there might not be mutual acceptance for them: e.g. the people are not committed to such decisions. (Prigogine & Stengers 1984.)

Prigogine’s theory suggests prerequisites for organizational self-renewal. One basic prerequisite is abundant communication and mutual feedback. This requires the structure to be networked and people inclined to tolerate uncertainty and conflict. A traditionally managed organization is often quite the opposite and it is often harder to create new structures and self-organization in them.

When creativity and self-renewal are required, Prigogine’s prerequisites for organizational self-renewal can be applied. (Ståhle & Kuosa 2009.) The real power of self-organization is the iteration because it repeatedly compels the new structure and carries the effects throughout the whole system (Ståhle 1998).

Main concept	Far-from-equilibrium	Entropy	Iteration	Bifurcation
Characterization	State of the system	Knowledge creation	Interaction	Decision making
Contribution to self-renewal	Pre-condition for change	Creation of new structures	Cumulative power	Possibility for innovation and new solutions

Figure 1 Prigogine’s main concepts (modification based on Pirjo Ståhle’s (1998) characterization on the subject)

Eve Mitleton-Kelly (2003) states that understanding the characteristics of complex organizations can help to stimulate innovation in organizations through the co-creation of an enabling environment. This environment enables connectivity, emergence, self-organization, co-evolution, feedback, exploration of the space of possibilities and working far-from equilibrium. This way organizations can become more innovative by creating new order, for instance new products or culture. Connectivity and interdependence are central concepts in Mitleton-Kelly’s analysis of complex systems because emphasis on relationships both internally and externally contributes to the success of complex systems. When enhancing this, making connections should be encouraged for instance by letting everyone talk to anyone. This has resemblance to Prigogine’s concept of Entropy.

Self-organization, emergence and the creation of new order the other key characteristics of complex systems. With connectivity come emergent structures which arise from the interaction of individual elements. These cannot usually be predicted and they appear as a result of interaction at a lower micro level. They are not only the sum of existing ideas, but can be something new and unexpected. Encouraging connectivity in multiple ways can have unpredictable, emergent outcomes. Facilitating connectivity and emergence in physical office environments makes it possible to increase creativity and innovativeness in a workplace. It can also contribute to changing the office culture. (Mitleton-Kelly 2003.)

Co-evolution involves reciprocal influence and change within a co-evolving system. In organizations this can mean working in a collaborative way sharing ideas very early and getting them to change and co-evolve through discussion. Connectivity, emergence, co-evolution and exploration have all the important element of feedback. It can be described as reinforcing (i.e. amplifying) and balancing, since positive feedback drives change and negative feedback maintains stability in a system. Complexity theory summarizes that when an organization is faced with a constraint, it finds new ways, because far-from-equilibrium systems are forced to experiment and explore the space of possibilities. This helps them discover and create new structures and patterns of relationships. Innovation is about creating the enabling environment to generate ongoing stream of ideas. If individuals have the capacity, the support and the power to think in a novel way they will continue to explore. The minor personal initiatives can lead to major initiatives involving other members of organization. (Mitleton-Kelly 2003.)

An example of methods highlighting self-organization is the Agile management. It is a highly flexible and interactive method of management that has been used especially in information technology development projects. It emphasizes communication, self-organization and team dynamics and recognizes the contributions of individuals as fundamental in relation to productivity. The role of management is to facilitate and coach the teams. Scrum is an agile software development method where a team works in close co-operation to reach a common goal. The method is very empirical and flexible comparing to the traditional sequential product development methods and it emphasizes learning and individual decision making. The basic idea of the method is to recognize that in the course of the project the customers cannot fully understand the requirements of the end product and thus quick changes are needed because of emerging requirements. The work happens in self-organizing teams that work in close physical distance and communicate effectively both online and face-to-face. In applying Scrum, there is an emphasis on skills as an opposition of knowledge and there are few rules. (Pelrine 2011.) The studied organizations produce digital services and apply Scrum in their work-practices and self-organized teams are a central part of everyday work in studied organizations.

3. Methods

This study was carried out as a multiple case-study. The purpose of case-study is to map, describe, interpret and explain cases as precisely and thoroughly as possible and to learn as much as possible from the case companies and form a descriptive material that allows alternative interpretations. The purpose is not to produce results that are generalizable but instead the results should be transferable. Transferability is ensured through thorough documentation. (Jyväskylä yliopisto Koppa 2014; Kvalimovt 2014.)

Choosing the cases is one of the most important phases in a case-study. The essential criterion effecting the choice of cases is what we can learn from them. Since the number of cases under scrutiny is limited, the cases should be such that they contain essential elements of interest concerning the study in question. (Eriksson & Koistinen 2005, 23.)

The research problem in this study was to find out organizational work practices in companies which have been able to combine job satisfaction and profitability. The data for the present study was collected from three companies. The total number of the interviews was five. All interviews were individual interviews with always two researchers present. The companies are described in table 1.

Company	Turnover in million euros	Number of personnel	Operating in how many countries	Operating in how many cities in Finland	Year of establishment	Number of interviews	Number of people interviewed in the company
1	43	226	4	4	1997	1	1
2	28	300	2	3	2000	1	1
3	9	112	1	2	2007	3	3

Table 1 Case companies

All companies in the study are limited liability companies in the field of information technology. They all share an interest to be part in the process of improving working life by implementing the new ways of working. The organizations share the following features:

- Although they differ from size they all base their operations on expert work
- They organize themselves in an atypical way and use the new ways of work and management
- They have done something differently comparing to other organizations in the same field of business
- They are valued as good work places by employees
- They are profitable

The theme interview was chosen as a method of data collection. Theme interview is a suitable method in situations where we need to get information on topics that we know little about or when the research design cannot be defined precisely in advance but it is better to complement it in the course of the study. The idea of a theme interview is to give space to the interviewee's own interpretations, experiences and free speech. The themes are chosen carefully on the basis of the topic because the themes are the link between the data and the research question. The interviewees should be chosen on the basis of their appropriateness, i.e., those people who best can give information on the topics that are of interest. Prior studies give a guideline for the themes that are common for all interviews although they do not necessarily appear in the same order or in the same extent. (Kvalimotv 2014.)

The data consists of material that was recorded. Informative questions were asked first and the actual themes after them. The themes embody issues like how people work both on personal level and on organizational level, targets, responsibilities, co-operation, networks, the role of customers, the interaction and the challenges of the company in the past, in the present time and in the future. Free speech was also given space in the course of the interview. The interview material was transcribed verbatim.

The analysis started with an in-depth phase using full transcripts to search for common themes and to gain a deep understanding of the organization. Both authors of this article read each transcript. The analysis concentrated on highlighting the key points and on finding out the most interesting or important issues so that patterns started to emerge one by one. These were listed in an Excel spreadsheet and evidenced with a quotation. In the second phase of the analysis findings were discussed and the main themes were agreed in order to avoid bias and to provide a deep understand of the issues. The themes were then clustered. (Mitleton-Kelly 2006a.)

4. Findings

In this chapter the main findings are described. The main themes found in the data are presented in figure 2.



Figure 2 Main themes in the data

4.1 Minimal administration and free culture

The organizational culture is free and the common factors describing organizational culture are freedom, responsibility, independence, belonging, trust, the appreciation of colleagues, the building of own role in the company, personal branding, the building of own targets in the company, self-management, individuality, team spirit, communality, atmosphere, well-being at work, sociality, excitement, experiment, development, courage, ability to stand uncertainty, openness and transparency.

Although it may seem that there are no boundaries for the actions of employees, this is not the case in reality. There is no need to set boundaries, because the customers take care of that when they set budget, schedule and the tasks to be accomplished. 3

There is a long list of things these organizations declare not having. Among these are hierarchy, charts of organization, line organization, job description, management practices, bureaucracy, documents, instructions, processes, control, meetings, targets, problem solving or personal incentives. The absence of these may implicate that these organizations have consciously wanted to conceive and do things differently than has traditionally been done in the field of management. Instead of the traditional organizational model they have got something else. These organizations describe themselves as systemic and networking and the position of teams is emphasized.

We have abandoned difficult processes, like that we should wait for a management team to accept this and that – a management team that has a meeting in two weeks. We don't want that kind of bureaucracy. 1

Indeed, we have customer teams but they do not report to anyone. And the management is not controlling them; the power and the responsibility are in the team. 2

We have removed unnecessary bureaucracy. This allows us to spend our time in tasks that are really important. 3

The way of organizing is reflected in the way how the organization is managed or actually how the organization is non-managed. Since teams exhibit a relatively independent position in the company and since they are built around the problems the organization is tackling, the power and responsibility are in the team. This means that the role of management is to facilitate the teams by knowing whether they have problems and reacting quickly if they do.

In traditional management the decision making is usually separated from work, which is really weird if we think of knowledge work. 2

We have no strategy or such... Or we don't have a separate operative side and strategic side. Making decisions is integrated to work, to normal life at work. 2

We need to react rapidly to situations. We tender all the time for more projects than get realized. We never know which of the tenders get accepted and we just cannot keep workers on hold while the tendering process is still going on. We make final resourcing decisions once the deal has been finalized. At that moment, the resourcing occurs in a rather chaotic and ad hoc manner. We investigate, among other things, who is available and to what other tenders the potential worker is attached to. 3

These organizations realize and admit that they are not suitable for all.

We aren't good for everyone. – A person who needs instructions and procedures is not fit to work with us because here it's more about applying than taking the best possible decision in that situation. 3

This company is quite hectic and dynamic, employees have a lot of responsibility, so you have to be able to manage yourself and you have to have a bit entrepreneurial spirit if you work with us. 3

4.2 Continuous learning and improvement

Themes connected with learning and continuous improvement are highlighted in the data. These themes include factors that were described in the data with expressions like science, research, testing of theories, literature, top-level skills and know-how, professionalism, learning, continuous improvement, making the world a better place, doing things by oneself and the mastering of big picture. Learning is seen as an integral part of daily job instead of formal learning events. There are active daily discussions on working methods and different technologies.

This way one could hear what others may have done and then get an inspiration on how to improve his or hers own work. This we have tried and also we have shared information on what technologies people can use – in the chat there are different channels for different technologies or different topics so that you can always join a conversation there. 3

The function of management is very much in supporting the self-management of employees and to enhance the communality. In building such conditions the sense of equality and trust are in an important role.

For example, we don't watch over how our personnel use company benefits or spend company money. We trust that people are reasonable and follow one of our simple rules: Do as you need to do and spend money as you would spend your own. 3

We give every employee an opportunity to take one decision that will be put in practice automatically, there are no limitations. It can be any decision and it will be realized. The only rule is that it must improve well-being at work. It's a method that helps people to learn how to take decisions. It's a small thing but symbolically important. 3

4.3 Constant interaction and communication

Features connected with interaction are discussion, listening, dialogue, communication, visualization, narratives and own language. The organizational culture of these companies is vital and it is connected with recruitment; it is very important that new employees fit in.

It is the everyday communication that is very open, I think it is the most important method here. 3

Agile project methods are based on constant dialog and feedback. There are for instance daily meetings at the same time, each day, standing up for 15 minutes. Each team member reports to the rest of the team answering three questions: “What did I do yesterday? What will I do today? What impedes me?”

The teams meet the customers on a regular basis in order to give the experts an occasion to present their work and to get direct feedback. Customer feedback is discussed in public in personnel meetings and successful projects are celebrated.

4.4 Collaborative development

Teamwork and agile methods are typical in information technology companies. In the studied workplaces there is also a lot of freedom to choose the methods of working and the tools used. Besides internal, the collaboration is often also external. The external co-operation in the organization is described by expressions like customer insight, co-operation with the customers, partnership, co-operation with competitors and networking. Putting the customer in focus is essential and finally the only thing that gives the targets for the company. The satisfaction of customers is ultimately ensured in one company giving customers a 100% satisfaction guarantee. This reflects the fact how serious these companies are with customer orientation.

Thus, customer orientation is not verbiage at all - everyone knows that customer satisfaction is always very important and doing great job is demanded from everybody.

If the customer is not satisfied with our project, he will get his money back, that is, he doesn't have to pay anything, and he will get the source code of everything that has been done by so far. So it means that the customer really gets what he expects and that we understand correctly the needs of the customer 3

We wanted to be so good and so well-known that customers come to us and that we can choose what kinds of projects we want to do. 3

The external co-operation also includes the co-operation and connection with other companies operating in the same field of business, i.e. competitors. However, the case organizations see the co-operation with competitors as an advantage for them.

... it doesn't have any negative effect in our competitiveness if we share our practices, but on the contrary, we can both pick up those ideas that are useful for us in our own way. 3

Traditionally companies are managed by financial figures and the turn-over or profitability is the target itself. In these case organizations, these financial, numerical figures are not the only targets but kind of a natural side-effect that comes when the other premises are in order. These more important other premises are the customer satisfaction and success in a customer project.

But there are no such arbitrary numerical targets like +5 or +15 or something. It is common knowledge that these kinds of arbitrary, numerical targets impair the performance in the organization. 2

To sum up the findings, the studied organizations operate systemically rather than hierarchically and this systemic way of organizing seems to help operating in a complex context. The organizational culture of these organizations is free instead of an rigid one. Productivity and profitability were essential features of studied organizations, but they were considered the outcomes instead of aims. The two prerequisites make it possible to use new ways of working and when those are in use, productivity and profitability come as a side-effect without the need to name them as the targets of the company.

5. Conclusions

Many of the characteristics of case companies seem to fit into Prigogine's concepts. The themes of self-organization are all present in these organizations and they seem to lead to innovative and creative organizations which give meaningful jobs and have satisfied customers. In this chapter the findings are interpreted by describing what connection each theme has to self-organizing concepts. The results presented in figure 2 can be interpreted using Prigogine's central concepts for self-organizing systems. In figure 3 the findings are combined with Prigogine's concepts.

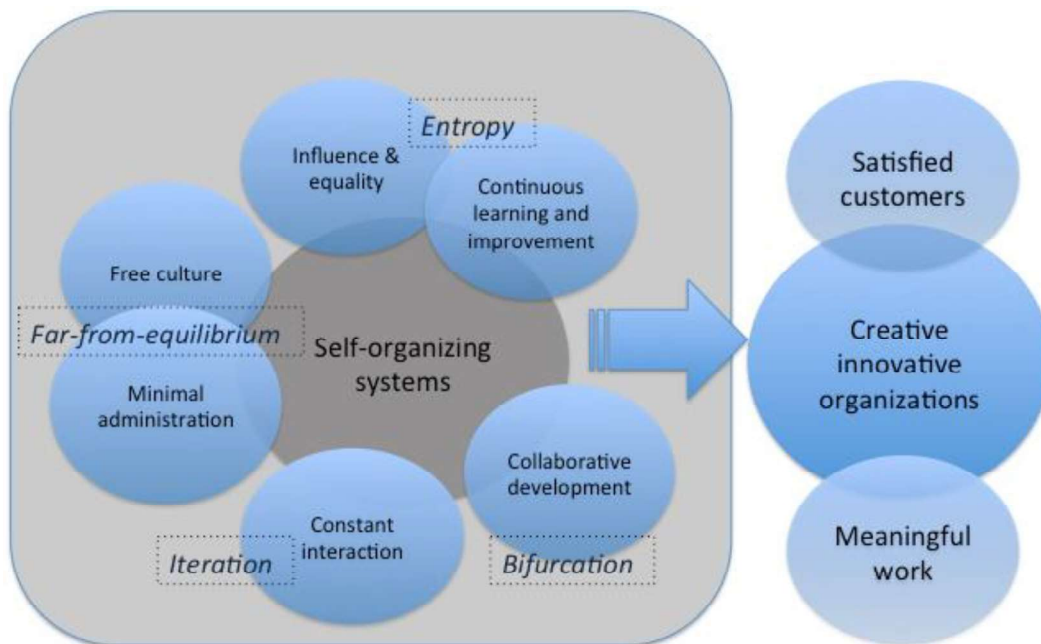


Figure 3 Findings combined with Prigogine's concepts

Findings of minimal administration and free culture are signs of the system being Far-From-Equilibrium. The state of Far-from-Equilibrium (Prigogine & Stengers 1984) can be seen in studied organizations in how they have consciously given up pursuing order and control and accepted the certain state of chaos in their operations. These organizations are not suitable for everybody as people working there need to be inclined to tolerate uncertainty and conflict. According to Prigogine, stability does not create self-renewal. In order to be able to create innovative solutions these companies foster a free organizational culture.

The companies in this study offer all expert services and these kinds of companies are known to use productive ways of working in order to make employees committed. (Boxall & Macky 2009; Edwards & Wright 2001). The studied organizations invest in commitment in many ways and they aim at continuous improvement. They try to keep both employees and customers satisfied. The management does not want to dictate practices but it tries to listen the employees to know to what direction the employees want the company to evolve. This way the commitment to the company and work will be on a high level. This continuous improvement can be associated with Prigogine's concept of Entropy: in order to find the best way to structure actions, one needs to be able to act intuitively without structure. The studied organizations value continuous learning and equality and let employees influence their work a lot. This is also a hint of the elements of knowledge creation, Prigogine's Entropy.

Bifurcation, i.e. the way decision making, is done is shown in the ways of collaboration both externally and internally. Externally it is reflected in integrating the customers in the operations of the company and in co-operating with competitors. Internally it is shown in systemic organizing and in the role of teams. It has been stated that collaboration does not only increase well-being at work but it has a remarkable positive effect on individuals', teams' and organizations' ability to increase productivity and profitability (Sveiby & Simons 2002).

The central elements in Agile methods are cross-functional teams of motivated individuals who are able to manage themselves and constant dialog and feedback. Significant focus on feedback is a clear sign of Prigogine's iteration in these organizations.

These organizations show that successful business is possible even during poor financial times and that there are alternative ways of running a company instead of traditional management practices. The important question in the future is how to expand, execute integration processes and still maintain these features without becoming a rigid corporation. Therefore these organizations continue to be intriguing targets for study also in the future.

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Conceptual model of ‘age at work as a social construct’

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual model of ‘age at work as a social construct’. Previous literature provides good understanding of age as an individual and group characteristic, dominantly building on calendar age, but a more holistic and comprehensive conceptualisation of age at work is called for.

The proposed model brings to attention to the importance of studying age and ageing in an integrated way, including relationships between age definitions and the socio-cultural and organisational context. The model builds on Giddens’ idea of structuration (1984), and emphasises how actors at the workplace draw on social structures related to their actions and at the same time produce and reproduce age-related social structures.

The model contributes to age and management research in three ways. First; it summarises previously identified relationships associated with definitions of age; second, it introduces socio-cultural and organisational aspects which influence the construction of age at work; and third, it proposes that age can be understood using the lens of structuration theory. In practice, the model increases understanding of age in relation to managerial and human resource management practices at the workplace.

Key words

Age, ageing, social structures, Giddens

Introduction

Age is one of the primitive categories into which people instantly place each other, and age *per se*, is a subject of research in social sciences. In organisation and management research, age has most often been understood in terms of chronological age, because calendar age has been regarded as the objective definition, and data can be easily gathered from official or organisational statistics (Pitt-Catsoupes, Matz-costa, & Brown, 2011). In addition, ageing is a major concern as demographics change and populations grow older in Western countries. Ageing encompasses numerous organisational phenomena, from risk, trust and culture to professionalism, leadership and change (Thomas, Hardy, Cutcher, & Ainsworth, 2014). Therefore, it is important to understand how individuals and cohorts of people grow older in the society and how the organisational context facilitates or nurtures age-related attitudes and effects at the workplace (Riach, 2015).

Studies of ageing at work that adopt individual and behavioural approaches provide valuable knowledge of, for instance, motivation and ageing (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Kooij, 2010), health and ageing (Ilmarinen, 2009; Liebermann, Wegge, Jungmann, & Schmidt, 2013), and retirement age (Kannisto, 2015; Zacher & Griffin, 2015).

In addition, social researchers with a critical approach have analysed the power relationships underlying the construction of age and ageing, as well as the relationships between gender and age (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2011), gender, disability and age (Zanoni, 2011), gender, ageing and sexuality (Riach, Rumens, & Tyler, 2014), and ageing, class and the masculine body (Riach & Cutcher, 2014). This line of research provides rich knowledge of ageing workers' identity and offers empirical accounts about the intersections between age and other characteristics of an individual. Various research has brought age in relation to organisational goals and practices, such as performance (Bal & De Lange, 2015), an age diverse workforce (Bieling, Stock, & Dorozalla, 2015), age management (Pärnänen, 2012) and older workers' career management (Furunes et al., 2015).

Despite their unquestionable contribution to the theoretical conceptualisation of ageing at work, previous studies also present three major limitations. First, most often research has presented chronological age as a factor, or a moderator, of behaviour or action at work. Defining the 'older worker' numerically and on the basis of psychological characteristics does not actually explain the phenomenon of ageing at work. Thus, even though concepts of age and ageing are recognised to be much more complex and multi-dimensional than just a numerical calculation or an individual characteristic (Fineman, 2014; Thomas et al., 2014), this conceptualisation is not necessarily applied in theoretical and empirical research. Second, the five widely cited definitions of age, namely, chronological, functional, organisational, life span and psychosocial age (Sterns & Doverspike, 1989), have provided a basis for several concepts and respective age indicators (Pitt-Catsouphes et al., 2011; Schalk et al., 2010), but these definitions are restricted with regard to understanding the interaction between them and lack understanding of age as socially constituted, as a social marker at work (Thomas et al., 2014).

Third, mainstream research does not typically include the societal or organisational context in relation to the conceptualisation of ageing. However, it has for a long time been agreed that the concept of ageing is a relative rather than an absolute experience, since the classification 'old' or 'older' is highly contextual, and can depend on the particular organisational setting and combination of social actors (Bytheway, 1995; Zacher, 2015). In addition, various research has revealed the importance of the socio-cultural environment to management and leadership practices and to employee identity, especially attitudes of managers and human resource staff toward older workers (Conen, Henkens, & Schippers, 2012; Loretto & White, 2006). Furthermore, even if institutional practices and legislation promote equality, organisational contexts, both internal and external, can include ageist or age-blind practices (Aaltio, Salminen, & Koponen, 2014). For instance, critical research provides some understanding about 'ageing as performative and as constituted in heteronormative terms within and through organizations dynamically and diachronically' (Riach, Rumens, & Tyler, 2014), but the ontological and methodological approach actually used may not be applicable to mainstream research on ageing.

In summary, the social perspective of ageing is underdeveloped within mainstream management and organisational studies. Current conceptualisations of ageing provide only a limited view of the relationships between different age concepts and lack the socio-cultural and organisational context in conceptualising ageing at work.

In this paper, a conceptual model of 'ageing at work as a social construct' is introduced. It first brings the relationship between context, social structures and social actors into focus when describing ageing at work.

Second, building on Giddens’ idea of structuration, the model emphasises how actors at the workplace draw on social structures related to ageing in their actions and, at the same time, how these actions serve to produce and reproduce social structures related to ageing (1984). Even though structuration theory has little to say about formal organisations, as the concern is more with individual agents and social systems (Nicolini, 2013), structuration theory has been successfully applied to understanding inter-sectionalities, for instance, between ethnicity, gender and age (Ortlieb, 2014). Structuration is particularly suitable to understanding age and ageing in social contexts as it allows comprehension of ‘age as an attribute’ (Riach, 2007), in order to highlight the imperative role of culture and social processes in both identifying a person’s age identity and perceiving others’ age category.

The aim is to provide a conceptual tool facilitating a more holistic and socially aware conceptualisation of ageing employees, such as, ‘middle-aged’, ‘mature’ and ‘older’, regardless of whether the research emphasis is to analyse symbolic meanings of age within organisational practices, or to use age as an embodied identity within an organisation (Thomas et al., 2014).

Proposed conceptual model

The ‘*model of age as a social construct*’ is presented in Figure 1. It builds on (1) age definitions, (2) socio-cultural and organisational context, and (4) social actors. The construction of age is created by social actors who draw on social structures (3) in their actions and, at the same time, these actions serve to produce and reproduce social structures related to age (Giddens, 1984). The model emphasises the relationships between the definitions of age, the context and the social actors, visualised as two-way-arrows in Figure 1.

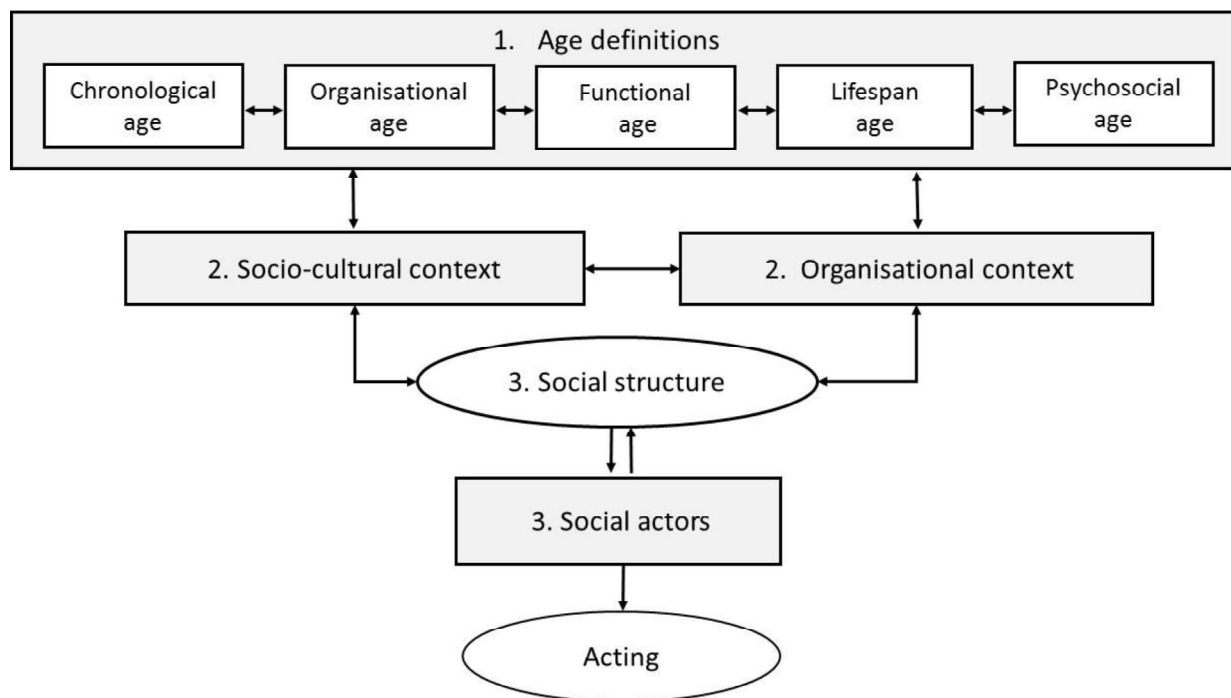


Figure 1 - Proposed ‘*model of age as a social construction*’ applying Giddens’ theory of structuration (1984).

1. The relationships between age definitions

The five definitions of age; chronological, functional, organisational, life span and psychosocial age; (Sterns & Doverspike, 1989) form a basis for how age is defined in a socio-cultural and organisational context, because empirically they have proved to be distinct in the context of ageing at work (McCarthy, Heraty, Cross, & Cleveland, 2014). Even though chronological age dominates perceptions of age in the work arena, a new range of perspectives, such as, organisational norms, retirement planning schedule and industry norms are recognised as being involved in the construction of age (McCarthy et al., 2014). In addition, relationships between age definitions, recognised in previous research, are visible in the proposed model. In the following the relationships between chronological and other age definitions are presented.

Organisational age and career stage

Even though chronological age, as indicated by calendar age, dominates the age discourse, it has relationships with other definitions. Age is described using organisational age, referring to the length of time that the individual has been with the organisation, the length of the tenure, and the length of the career to date (Sterns & Doverspike, 1989). Indeed a study in the field revealed that a clear majority of manager statements regarding employee age reflected an organisational age approach (McCarthy et al., 2014). Naturally, chronological and occupational age have a strong positive correlation; as an employee grows older, the years in the organisation and in tenure will increase (Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, & Dikkers, 2008). In practice, managers and employees discuss ‘work experience’, which includes assumptions on the number of years in an occupation, but also on the fact that, timewise, personal calendar age is extensive (McCarthy et al., 2014).

Functional age

Functional age is a medical construct, which is based on the physical and mental changes that may impact on physical and cognitive abilities to perform tasks (Sterns & Doverspike, 1989), but it is often used in conjunction with calendar age. For instance, Ilmarinen (2006) uses work ability (a performance-related concept that captures employee ability to carry out work with respect to physical and psychological job demands), as a rationale for defining an ‘older worker’ as being 45 years and over. He argues that this is the period when major physical and cognitional changes occur, and that this ‘early’ definition of ageing employees provides better possibilities to prevent early retirement. However, work ability as a measurement of job-related functional age is highly contextual: There is a negative relationship between [calendar] age and self-rated work ability in jobs with high mental involvement, high job autonomy, and low physical demands (Costa & Sartori, 2007). Moreover, there is a relationship between calendar age and age-related appearance, particularly in Western societies, with a long history of cultural ambivalence towards the aged (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008).

Career stage and lifespan age

Organisational age is also linked to career stage. For instance, worker are perceived as being ‘older’ because they have either reached the last phase of their careers, or are nearing the end of their careers, or are not seen to be career active (Furunes et al., 2015).

Also lifespan age, which takes into account individual changes in behaviour at different stages across the life cycle; childhood (0–22), early adulthood (17–45), middle adulthood (40–65) and late adulthood (over 60) (Levinson, 1978), not only has a linkage with chronological age, but also with organisational age (McCarthy et al., 2014).

Psychosocial age

By definition, psychosocial age is considered as a subjective assessment of how old or young the individual worker perceives themselves to be. Subjective age is relative in nature and reflects an employee's overall assessment of his/her feeling of being younger or older, including looks and acts, and identification with a particular age cohort. In addition, subjective age can be seen as an 'attitude', and individuals often refer to age reflexively, in relation to who they were and who they will, or would like to become (Armstrong-Stassen & Seung, 2009). Furthermore, the difference between chronological and subjective age increases with ageing, as the older the person is, the relatively younger he or she feels. The experience of feeling younger has been related also to healthy life habits and physical health (Ilmarinen, 2009). Self-categorisation as an 'older worker' is related to negative attitudes towards work (stronger desire to retire early, stronger inclination towards intergenerational competition (Desmette & Gaillard, 2008). Social age refers to the attitudes, expectations, and norms regarding appropriate behaviour, lifestyles, and characteristics for people at different ages. Other views of an individual's age are reported to be a limiting constraint when defining opportunities for older workers (Ng & Law, 2014).

Based on the previous research referred to above, the following proposition can be introduced:

Proposition 1:

Chronological, functional, organisational, life span and psychosocial age are intertwined and, therefore, age as a social construct draws not only on calendar age, but also on other appropriate age definitions and their relationships.

2. Socio-cultural and organisational context

Several socio-economic elements impact directly on age-related issues at work, for example, economic cycle, level of un/employment and age relevant legislation. More importantly, cultural aspects such as norms, values, attitudes and beliefs profoundly influence age constructions at work. Psychosocial processes creating stereotypes have also both a subtle and visible influence on constructions of age at work. The social perceptions of age are often based on stereotypes and ageism, but are primarily determined by context characteristics. Recent literature shows that perceptions of older workers can be influenced by organisational contextual characteristics, such as, the line of business, nature of the work, and time perspective (Fineman, 2014; Froehlich, Beusaert, & Segers, 2015).

Economy and legislation

An economic turn in the market seems to impact on the construct of age at work. In an upswing even older workers are seen as the last resort (Billett, Dymock, Johnson, & Martin, 2011), but during a recession workers over 55 often have difficulties to find a new job (Ilmakunnas & Ilmakunnas, 2014). However, after the latest recession in the UK, the situation for older worker employment was better than during the previous downturn (Beck, 2013).

Anti-discrimination legislation and legal obligations according to calendar age, such as the state pension age and unemployment benefit, impact in many ways on the construction of age

at work. For instance, age-related legislation promotes a longer working life and organisational policies on ageing, for instance, in terms of training and retirement. The implications of such a direct influence of legislative changes from early retirement to longer working life have been recognised in Europe (OECD,). However, the influence of the legislation is not simple because the practical situation is often more complex. It is a unique mix of ageing-related legislation, including the development of demographics in society and in any given organisation and the economic situation within the labour market (Beck, 2013).

Values and norms

Views on age and ageing are rooted in the memory of societies, and are presented as cultural values, norms and beliefs. For instance, age-related values in Western cultures continue to include more negative than positive socio-cultural beliefs, stereotypes and attitudes (Armstrong-Stassen & Seung, 2009). These beliefs and attitudes turn into culturally-prescribed norms concerning appropriate behaviour at certain stages in the life course interlinked with age. Consequently, age norms produce age effects (Schalk *et al.*, 2010). For instance, societal age grading such as retirement, and social norms about age-appropriate behaviour, create a timetable for an individual at work. For many older employees, the transition to retirement is normative and anticipated, creating a stricter social environment where this transition and retirement activities are planned years before the actual retirement. If there is a norm for early exit and employees retire well before the official retirement age, the actions reproduce the existing norms, and consequently, older workers are also typified by early retirement (Riach, 2009).

Beliefs and stereotypes

Even though many stereotypes of older workers, are empirically proven not to be valid in modern society (Brough, Johnson, Drummond, Pennisi, & Timms, 2011; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004), they continue to appear at the work place. Posthuma and Campion (2009) reviewed evidence for five stereotypes relevant to workplace ageing, namely, lower productivity, resistance to change, lower learning ability, declining tenure, and higher cost. There is a high risk that negative stereotypes become ingrained in organisational norms and incorporated into human resource systems unless actively challenged. In addition, there are probably more policies and decisions that are implicitly age-biased compared to those that are explicitly biased. Consequently, beliefs carry on the socio-cultural negative stereotypes of older or younger employees, impacting on the construction of social age in the work place.

Line of business

In certain industries, such as finance, insurance, retailing, and information technology age, stereotypes are particularly strong (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). It is noted that when corporate self-interest rests on preserving a team of less expensive, younger employees, older employees may face job stereotypes (Fineman, 2014). In addition, some industries have emerged to target this 'cultural dread of ageing' and highlight the meanings of outlook embodied in this particular business (Riach & Cutcher, 2014).

Nature of work

Workers of a certain age are defined as ‘older’ because the nature of work is perceived to be more ‘suited’ to those who are younger. In addition, age norms are associated with certain jobs where tasks are associated with the number of older people holding a particular job. That job tends to increase the likelihood that it would be perceived as appropriate for older workers (McCarthy et al., 2014). The construct of age has been linked to performance at work providing an approach, for instance, to age diversity and organisational performance (Bieling et al., 2015) and performance of older workers (Hashim & Wok, 2013). However, it has been argued, that the characteristics of the different age groups have different effects on productivity depending on the type of tasks that have to be performed rather than age (Backes-Gellner & Veen, 2013).

Future time perspective

Age as a concept has a temporal underpinning by nature, but there is also another timing aspect, namely, future time perspective, that is individual perceptions of their remaining time at work before retirement (Lang & Carstensen, 2002). The view for the future originates from societal and organisational schedules. At societal level, definitions of what constitutes younger and older employees are, on the one hand, starting to shift, because of increased life expectancies (Kulik, Ryan, Harper, & George, 2014). On the other hand, this shift does not reflect the compulsory retirement age which the European Commission has set at 65 – 68 years in Europe, 20 years less than average life expectancy.

There is a clear relationship between future time perspective and the organisational context. For instance, employee age distribution within an organisation seems to form an implicit career timetable and employees use their perceptions of this timetable to determine whether their careers are ‘on’ or ‘off schedule’, and when it is, for example, time to retire (Ng & Law, 2014). Froehlich *et al.*, (2015) found a relationship between age and occupational future time perspective in their conceptual model of ‘age, employability and the role of learning activities. Finally, the relationship between future time and organisational context is presented in a study in which job seeking intensity seems to be linked with expected years at work life (Zacher & Griffin, 2015).

To conclude, based on the contextual elements impacting on the construction of age as a social attribute and category, the following proposal is presented:

Proposition 2:

Age as a social construct is a relative attribute and categorisation, which depends on the particular socio-cultural aspects, such as laws, norms, beliefs and stereotypes. Age is in relation also to the organisational setting, with the line of business, the nature of the work and specific future-time perspectives.

3. Social actors and structures

The conceptual model of age as a social construct relies on the relationship between society, organisation and an individual, in line with structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). The model expresses that social actors, for instance, managers and employees, draw on ‘social structures’ in their actions and, at the same time, their actions serve to ‘produce and reproduce’ social structures (Giddens, 1984).

For instance, it has been recognised that, at the same time as individuals, organisations and societies struggle to deal with ‘problems’ associated with ageing, social actors create those very problems themselves (Ainsworth, Cutcher, Hardy, & Thomas, 2013). In this section, the two final components, social actors and structures, are presented, and some examples of their interaction with contextual components are discussed.

Social actors

Social actors, such as managers, employees and human resource professionals, perceive the age of others in relation to their own age. It is demonstrated that the age of a manager is an important factor when perceiving employee age (Shore, Cleveland, & Goldberg, 2003). For instance, younger managers more often reflect negative rather than neutral or positive stereotypes towards older employees, than managers with the same age as their team (Finkelstein, King, & Voyles, 2015). It could be argued that this is even more important in the work environment, as it has been investigated and shown that manager attitudes are very influential in relation to employee activities (Furunes, 2011). Stereotypes and less positive attitudes are explained using an individualistic approach. First, through social identity theory, where individuals build their identity around their age, or some other characteristics (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and second, by reflecting more positive beliefs towards the same age group individuals, as the similarity-attraction theory suggests (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The model of age is presented as a social construct that enlarges the perspective, and emphasises, that managers and employees draw on ‘social structures’ in their actions, and at the same time, their actions serve to ‘produce and reproduce’ social structures (Giddens, 1984), which interact with contextual components.

It is noted that other demographics, such as gender and ethnicity, may have a strong relationship with age. Younger or older women particularly, are typified by gender embedding conventions, for instance, regarding their life stage (child and parental care, menopause) or are facing ‘lookism’, which is a prejudice or a discrimination on the basis of appearance (Atkinson, Ford, Harding, & Jones, 2015; Zanoni & Janssens, 2007). However, recent research indicates that masculinity in certain professions contains scripts and norms surrounding the ‘male trading body’, which are produced and reproduced in social structures in the organisation (Riach & Cutcher, 2014).

It is argued that work orientation, as a socio-psychic pattern of the individual in their relation to work, influences the construct of age. Strong work orientation means that the work related norms the individual has internalised during their career will be applied by them in their daily life at the work place (Vendramin, 2009). For example, older workers may reproduce (negative) cultural age norms, as tenure age, defined as the number of years a worker has been with the organisation, is shown to be an important indicator of the experience and knowledge an individual has of the norms of the organisation (Crawford, Lori, & Jones, 2011). In addition, individual antecedents, such as, political persuasion, education and income, may impact on beliefs and attitudes towards age (Beck & Quinn, 2012).

Social structure

A social structure can be seen as ‘an apparatus’, which gives form and shape to social life, but gains substance through what people do in the work place. Following the work of Giddens (1984, 17), social structure, on the one hand, consists of ‘memory traces which are continuously re/produced by individuals’ actions’, and on the other hand, ‘manifests itself as rules and resources in a material time-space presence’. Thus, age as a social construction not only relies on socio-cultural beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes, but also on organisational practices.

For example, recruiting, training and early exit policies communicate prevalent age stereotypes, which influence employee self-identity (Fineman, 2014). In turn, self-categorisation as an ‘older worker’ is related to negative attitudes towards work, and an employee may see more constraints than enablers at work (Froehlich et al., 2015) leading to a stronger desire to retire early and a stronger feeling towards intergenerational competition (Desmette & Gaillard, 2008).

At work, social structures are continuously being created through organisational policies and the flow of everyday practices. Social structures may include the ways in which ageing workers in society are discursively constructed within limiting conditions, associated with declining health, rising dependency, and a move towards social and economic redundancy (Thomas, Hardy, Cutcher, & Ainsworth, 2014). Therefore, in the organisation, older age is understood to imply lower performance and productivity (Kunze, 2013), because older employees are believed to have low technological skills and lack openness to new ideas (Paloniemi, 2006). Additionally, they are often considered to be more costly, less flexible, and less willing to cooperate and learn new skills (Felstead, 2011). Social actors draw on these social structures, and act accordingly. For instance, some older workers are not willing to participate in training for new social media technology and learning how to use it on the job (Crawford et al., 2011). Consequently, these rejections reproduce negative associations, leading to social structures creating possible constraints for future training being offered to older workers. Even though organisational policies declare age-friendliness, everyday practices such as verbal or written communication and interaction with each other can reveal different social structures (Riach, 2007).

It needs to be noted that social structure is produced and reproduced in a unique context, where socio-cultural and organisational components may have different weightings. For instance, economic circumstances may reduce the influence of stereotypes, and emphasise other aspects of the situation. Employers in countries with low unemployment rates (like the Netherlands, at about 4-5 per cent) are more likely to recruit and retain older employees than employers in countries with high unemployment rates, like France, Sweden and Finland, with unemployment rates between 8 and 10 per cent (Conen et al., 2012).

The model of age as a social construct utilises Giddens’ idea of social structures to understand the mechanisms social actors use in defining age at work. The following proposal can, thus, be presented:

Proposition 3:

In the social construction of age, people draw on social structures, including not only socio-cultural age norms and beliefs, but also organisational age-related policies. People act according to social structures, and produce and reproduce these social structures, for example, through communication at work.

Conclusions

The conceptual model of age as a social construct answers the call for wider patterns surrounding the construction of age and ageing, and may serve as a holistic framework for further research (Riach, 2015). The model brings to attention the importance of studying age, and ageing, in an integrated way including the socio-cultural and organisational context, and the relationships with social actors, rather than focusing only on the individual aspects, as has been done in most previous research.

Based on the model, identification of employees as ‘older workers’ includes not only their chronological age, but also the organisational and possible other definitions of ages. In addition, the cut-off between ‘younger’ and ‘older’ worker is dependent on laws, norms and beliefs as well as organisational components such as the line of business, the work and the future time perspective. For example, the US policy of having an open-end retirement schedule facilitates longer tenure and less negative beliefs concerning the older worker. This compares with the Finnish compulsory retirement age of 68 years old, which tends to constrain the timetable for working life. Consequently, an older worker in a US bank may mean an employee having 25+ years of experience, whereas in a Finnish bank, an employee with 15 years of industry acumen is considered as ‘older’. The latter is valid particularly in a time of recession, when less experienced, but recently educated and less expensive, employees are available in the labour market. The model is in line with identifications of contextual importance when defining age and ageing at work. While the relationships in this model are formulated on the basis of previous empirical research, it has not been empirically tested, and thus, warrants closer empirical examination and validation.

The model contributes to age and ageing as well as to the management research in three ways. First, it summarises the previously revealed relationships between age definitions; second, it introduces the socio-cultural and organisational aspects which influence the construction of age at work; and third, it proposes that the construction of age can be researched using the lens of structuration. In practice, the model enhances understanding of age in relation to managerial and human resource management practices. For future research, this model can assist as a tool to understand, for instance, what combination of age definitions serves best in the particular social and organisational context, and how those contextual components can be integrated into the research. However, the model allows the researcher to incorporate important individual demographic characteristics and antecedents as appropriate for the research context. The model can be also used to increase understanding of how age is produced and reproduced through organisational discourse and practices, and why some are perceived as ‘older’ in the work place.

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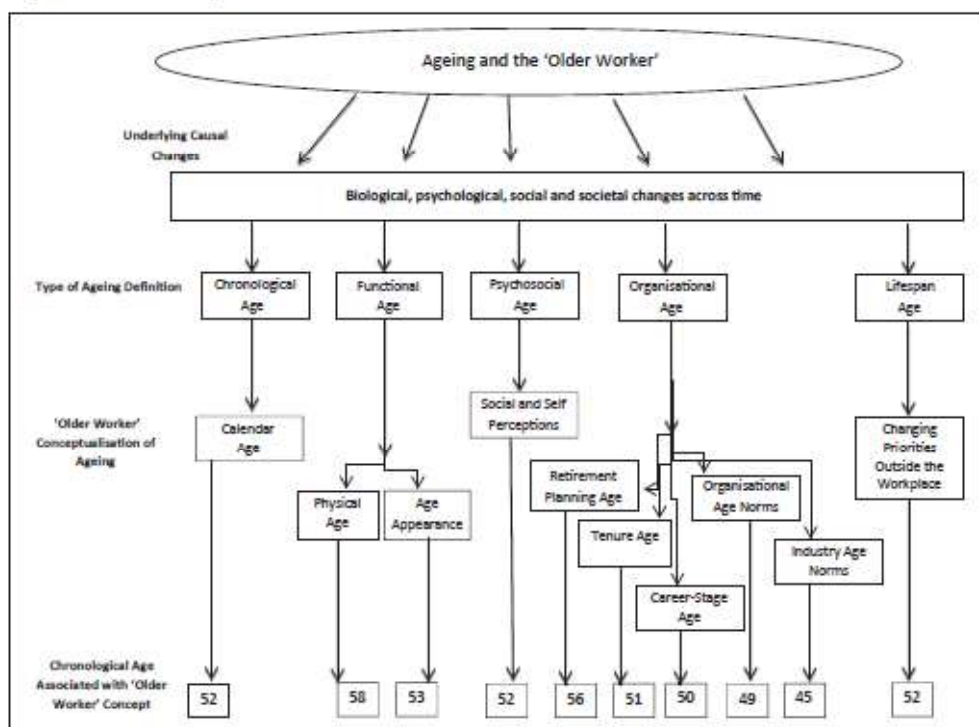
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Appendix 1.

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Figure 3 Extended age model



Source: McCarthy, J., Heraty, N., Cross, C., & Cleveland, J. (2014). Page 389.