



Turning age into agency: A qualitative longitudinal investigation into older jobseekers' agentic responses to ageism

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ABSTRACT

Despite existing laws prohibiting age discrimination in employment and hiring practices, ageism creates inequalities between jobseekers because of their age. Deeply manifested ageist practices take place in everyday interactions within the labor market, complicating changes in career trajectories during late working life. Bringing the time dimension into studies on ageism and individual agency, we narratively examined qualitative longitudinal interviews with 18 older jobseekers from Finland to better understand the role of time and temporality in agentic practices that older jobseekers employ to counteract forms of ageism. Older jobseekers exhibited various resilient, and reworked strategies in response to ageism depending on their diverse social and intersectional positions. As their positions changed over time, jobseekers employed different strategies, highlighting the relational and temporal dimensions of individual agency in labor market decisions. The analyses suggest that acknowledging the dynamics between temporality, ageism, and labor market behavior is vital for creating effective and inclusive policies and practices to tackle inequalities in late working life.

Introduction

Ageism poses a considerable challenge in all areas of life, including access to income in late working life. Workers classified as “too old” face additional barriers to attaining and maintaining employment as they face discrimination based on their age in different contexts, including hiring processes, access to training and promotions, internal job mobility, firing decisions and retirement transitions (Harris, Krygsman, Waschenko, & Laliberte Rudman, 2018; Krekula, 2019; Naegele, De Tavernier, Hess, & Frerichs, 2020; Pärnänen, 2012; Previtali, Keskinen, Niska, & Nikander, 2022). Although policies are in place to support the extension of working lives, these are often targeted only towards the employed portion of the population (Heisig & Radl, 2017; Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2020; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021). This means that when older workers become unemployed, they often face longer unemployment periods, greater difficulties to find full-time employment, and may be “othered” into accepting precarious positions that do not match their skill, expertise, and experience (Previtali et al., 2022; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021).

The social category of older workers is somewhat problematic and generally described in research as an open-ended category starting from

the age of fifty years (Harris et al., 2018; Previtali et al., 2022). The open-endedness of group membership entails not only all workers who have passed the arbitrary fifty-year threshold, but also all forms and extents of activity in the labor market including the unemployed, part-time employed, apprentices, and individuals working on retirement as well as formal and informal work. This type of grouping and homogenization of older workers easily depicts an ideological image of the older worker that fails to portray the multistranded reality of contemporary working life (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2020). Therefore, to understand the heterogeneity and the multiple pressures at play, it is important to draw a distinction between aging individuals in and out of employment. In this article, we use the term ‘older jobseeker’ to describe individuals who are actively looking for employment at the age of 50+ years. By adopting this term, we attempt to draw a distinction between individuals actively looking for employment and individuals who have decided to withdraw from employment. Although it is challenging to define who is active and who is not, this distinction is important as policy arguments drawn to support extended working lives tend to homogenize the older generations as the problem, unwilling to support the continuation of welfare systems rather than understanding the diversity of the group it captures (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019; Krekula &

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Vickerstaff, 2020).

In this article, we investigate older jobseekers' agentic responses to ageism in everyday job-seeking practices over a three-year period in Finland. Our findings are threefold. First, older jobseekers employ various discursive strategies to rework their situations and cope with everyday ageism. Second, these discursive strategies vary depending on the intersectional social positions individuals hold and their available resources. Third, individual response strategies may change over time after continuous exposure to experiences of ageism in the labor market. Consequently, our research sheds light into the complex dynamics of ageism and individual agency in labor market decisions and contributes to the methodological advances and literature on ageism.

Older jobseekers and everyday ageism

Multiple existing stereotypes of older jobseekers contribute to their job-seeking practices. Age stereotypes are actively reproduced in organizational interactions by both employers and employees themselves (Previtali & Spedale, 2021). Although the debate on the overemphasized role of age stereotypes in personnel decisions has been raised due to inconsistencies in research findings (Murphy & DeNisi, 2022), both conscious and unconscious age bias take place in organizational settings (Cadiz, Brady, Yaldiz, Zaniboni, & Truxillo, 2022). Older jobseekers are considered less productive, less able to learn and use new technology, uninterested in training and career development, less motivated, trusting, and healthy, as well as resistant to change and needing more time off because of their family circumstances (Harris et al., 2018; Ng & Feldman, 2012). In addition to negative stereotypes, Abrams, Swift, and Drury (2016) show that even positive age stereotypes of older workers are viewed less favorably in hiring decisions, creating an even more challenging environment for older jobseekers.

The role of supportive employment services becomes crucial in late life unemployment, as people may face job searches even after decades of working under the same employer. Bowman et al. (Bowman, McGann, Kimberley, & Biggs, 2016:655) delved into the emerging pattern of "carelessness" in the jobseeker/job-provider relationship within employment services in Australia and described the job-seeking processes as "ticking the boxes" from the jobseekers' side, whereas job providers tended to be systematically indifferent in their efforts to help the older jobseeker. Kadefors and Hanse (2012) suggest that reasons behind this type of systematic indifference originate from the shared understandings among employment agency officials who easily perceive older jobseekers merely as members of the "50+ age group", rather than facing the jobseekers as individuals.

Instead of challenging existing ageism, employment services tend to be indifferent and advise jobseekers to adapt their expectations to the ageist reality in the labor market (Bowman et al., 2016; Kadefors & Hanse, 2012; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021). For instance, Berger (2006) shows how employment services use positive stereotypes of older workers that depict them as flexible, loyal, and calm to justify downgrading older jobseekers to precarious entry-level positions that require no experience and have minimum hours. In addition, studies comparing the hiring practices between younger and older applicants have shown that implicit age stereotypes negatively affect the older job applicants, and to avoid ageism, older jobseekers are expected to have education and experience that matches their age, which is difficult if they have breaks or changes in careers in late working life (Dormidontova, Castellani, & Squazzoni, 2020; Zaniboni et al., 2019).

In order to counteract and disarm ageist practices and stereotypes in job-seeking practices, older jobseekers develop various discursive strategies (Berger, 2006, 2009). Examining the identity work older jobseekers engage in during their job search after being labelled "old", Berger (2006) found that older jobseekers can successfully maintain and negotiate their identities by drawing on available resources such as worker programs and social support, changing their identities and thoughts about aging, and by maintaining important roles in their life,

such as previous work roles. In her 2009 study, Berger investigated different age-related management techniques to counteract age discrimination and found that older jobseekers engage in skill maintenance, changing expectations about their employment and concealing their age through alterations to their language use, appearance, and resumés. Moreover, Lyons, Wessel, Tai, and Ryan (2014) suggest that older jobseekers are aware of age-related biases that operate against them in hiring practices and, as a result, mislead or avoid bringing up their age during job search. Navigating the labor market thus requires older jobseekers to employ various strategies to counteract the existing barriers in place.

Theoretical framework

In this article, we investigated different strategies through which older jobseekers face ageism in their everyday practices. Ageism manifests deep within societies and is reproduced and reinforced by social institutions maintaining ageist ideologies (Bytheway, 2005). Ageism occurs when individuals interact with social structures and institutions as well as with each other. Through these encounters, individuals internalize, apply, and enact ageism and ageist discourses in their everyday talk, actions, and choices. Since the discursive turn in social sciences, the discursive approach has been employed as an "umbrella term" to describe a variety of methods that analyze how social realities are constructed through language (Previtali et al., 2022; Willig, 2003). Approaching age and ageism from a discursive perspective allows us to investigate everyday practices and how individuals have the agency to "...do things with words, they can do ageism as well as undo and challenge it..." (Previtali et al., 2022:11). However, few studies have investigated the discursive strategies older jobseekers develop in response to ageism and hitherto, none we are aware of have investigated the development of the strategies through time. Individual agency is often mentioned or teased out in these studies, however, most have not placed it in center stage.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in policymaking towards individual agency in labor market decisions (Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021). Agency is a contested concept that has been widely studied in the social sciences to understand the dynamics at play between individual actors and the structural components regulating individual actions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The study of agency allows us not only to understand the pressures individuals experience but also to critique and disarm the existing stereotypes of aging (Jyrkämä, 2008; Tulle, 2004). Moreover, agency takes place in a temporal setting in which both past experiences and future expectations meet (Kohli, 2019). In a similar vein, Kohli (2019) draws a distinction between two types of individual agency orientations in relation to temporality. He argues that while making decisions about their lives, individuals resort to either everyday orientation or life-time orientation in their individual agency. Everyday orientation refers to repeated patterns and expecting every day to be the same as the one before, whereas life-time orientation focuses on goals and ambitions set on a longer time period, such as working life or the life-course. In this article, we have adopted the definition of agency as "temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 970). Individual decision-making practices are thus informed by an internalized predisposition to act in certain ways (Shilling, 1993), "the social field" including coordinates such as education, class, gender, politics, lifestyle, geography (Strauss, 2009: 308), and most importantly, age and timing of the events (Jyrkämä, 2008; Keskinen & Nikander, 2023). These coordinates then construct and regulate the spatio-temporal arena in which individual agency operates through restricting and enabling certain actions at given time points.

To examine agency among older jobseekers through time, we have adopted a relational typology for identifying social agency from Katz (2004) as our guiding framework. Katz bases her typology on longitudinal ethnographic research among children growing up in a globalizing world, focusing on how developmental shifts such as decline of manufacturing jobs and increasing need of educated workers transforms the grounds on which children transition into adulthood, allowing a multifaceted understanding of the spatial and temporal dimensions of individual agency. This typology has been widely used in previous studies examining collective and individual labor agency (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Katz (2004) suggests that there are three relational strategies through which individuals exhibit their agency against capitalist structures: *resilience*, *reworking* and *resistance*. Acts of resilience are classified as everyday strategies actors employ to cope with difficult situations without challenging the actual cause of the situation. This is when individuals “make do” with their available resources. Acts of reworking aim to improve the conditions set by the given structure, that is, the actions alter or are expected to alter the conditions in which individuals live their lives. Whereas reworking strategies can sometimes undermine and reorganize the constraining components of life, the acts of resistance are the ultimate acts that challenge the systems in place (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011). These actions are conscious actions to confront the oppressing constraints, often in the form of activism and unionizing in the work life. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the classifications are relative to the agency relationship under investigation. In other words, the actions need to be grounded to a specific context, as acts of resistance in one context may be classified as acts of resilience in another and vice versa.

Data and study context

The data used originate from a nationwide qualitative longitudinal research project Towards a two-speed Finland. The project was created to investigate everyday life, class- and age-based inequalities, and agency of older persons experiencing unemployment near retirement age (Tampere University, 2021). For this purpose, 40 people aged 50–65 experiencing job loss from the state-owned postal service were recruited to take part in the project. The Finnish postal service served as an example of a company where globalization and digitalization had resulted in a number of dismissals in recent years. The majority of participants were approached through name lists provided by the postal service, and others were recruited through snowballing. The data generation period took place between 2015 and 2018, during which two researchers followed the participants for approximately two years

following job loss. The research conducted here has received funding from the Kone Foundation and from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant. The funding sources have no involvement with the data and findings reported here.

The participants came from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds and held both white- and blue-collar positions during their employment at the postal service. Each participant took part in 3–11 face-to-face and phone interviews during the follow-up period depending on often they wanted to be contacted. The participants followed diverse career pathways after job loss leading either to continuation of or withdrawal from working life (Keskinen & Nikander, 2023; Kosonen, Keskinen, Nikander, & Lumme-Sandt, 2021). This also meant that while some of the participants continued in the working life, others had chosen to withdraw from active job search or to retire. In this study, we were especially interested in experiences of job-seeking practices in late working life and thus, selected participants from the data who expressed interest for continuing working life after job loss through active job search, re-education, and re-employment, resulting in 18 participants (Table 1).

We posit that individuals enact their agency by employing various strategies during their careers and transitions between work, unemployment, and retirement in a tangled order. To better understand the decision-making processes behind these transitions, Neale and Flowerdew (2003) note that the interconnectedness of agency and external pressures as well as the micro and macro dimensions can only be understood better through qualitative longitudinal research. At the core of qualitative longitudinal methodology “lies a concern with the dynamics of human agency – the capacity to act, to interact, to make choices, to influence the shape of one's life and the lives of others” (Neale, 2019:9). In our research, we were especially interested in the dynamics between ageism and individual agency through time. Thus, we utilized all available interview data from all time points collected from our 18 participants totaling 84 audio-recorded and approximately 700 pages of transcribed face-to-face and phone interviews.

Our 18 participants represented a cohort of workers who mostly started working at the postal service at a young age and built an impressively lengthy career inside the company once famous for its job stability and in-house training and promotion opportunities. Ten of the 18 participants resided in an urban area and eight in a rural area, with <50,000 inhabitants. All participants were eligible to receive unemployment benefits and depending on their career length and year of birth, participants over the age of 59 were able to access an early exit scheme “unemployment pathway to retirement”, old-age pension, or

Table 1
Description of participants (gender, age, previous position, education, and family situation).

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Age	Previous position, years in the company	Educational background	Family situation*
Kristiina	Woman	50	Administrative, 20 years	Tertiary education	Married, children at home
Markku	Man	50	Controller, 29 years	Tertiary education	Single, no children
Eva	Woman	51	Administrative, 30 years	Post-secondary education	Lives with partner, adult children
Raija	Woman	53	Planner, 30 years	Post-secondary education	Married, no children
Helena	Woman	53	IT worker, 17 years	Tertiary education	Married, adult children
Eeva-Liisa	Woman	53	Controller, 30 years	Vocational education	Married, children at home
Stina	Woman	54	Customer service, 36 years	Comprehensive education	Married, adult children
Raimo	Man	54	Planner, 33 years	Comprehensive education	Divorced, children at home
Kaarina	Woman	56	Customer service, 35 years	Post-secondary education	Married, children and grandchildren
Aki	Man	57	Driver, 18 years	Vocational education	Married, children and grandchildren
Janne	Man	57	Customer service, 40 years	Vocational education	Married, adult children
Vuokko	Woman	58	IT worker, 38 years	Comprehensive education	Married, no children
Kari	Man	58	Delivery, 38 years	Post-secondary education	Married, children and grandchildren
Marketta	Woman	60	Customer service, 36 years	Post-secondary education	Divorced, adult children
Liisa	Woman	61	Customer service, 42 years	Upper secondary education	Single, no children
Siru	Woman	62	Finance manager, <10 years	Tertiary education	Married, adult children and grandchildren
Ilmari	Man	62	Service manager, 45 years	Comprehensive education	Married, no children
Juho	Man	63	Delivery, 40 years	Vocational education	Married, children and grandchildren

* For this study, we chose to report whether the participants had children/grandchildren and omitted the exact number of children each participant had. Where participants' status is reported as single or divorced, they were the sole earner in their household.

other part-time pension solutions to further financially support themselves.

The data generation period took place at a time when the Finnish labor market was going through major changes and reforms. At the time, educational opportunities during unemployment needed to be approved by the public employment services. The Finnish government engaged in several ways to activate unemployed workers through financial (dis)incentives (see Nivalainen, Tenhunen, & Järnefelt, 2020 for a review). Depending on their location and job loss situation, some of our participants were able to utilize private employment and career services and educational courses offered by their previous employer. Our focus here was on the different strategies older jobseekers developed and employed in response to ageism in the labor market during their job-seeking efforts.

Analysis

In this paper, we analyzed qualitative longitudinal interview accounts from 18 Finnish older jobseekers to better understand the agentic practices jobseekers developed and employed to counteract ageism in their everyday job-seeking practices. Our analysis was guided by qualitative longitudinal methodology, investigating both “snapshots” and “through time” (Neale, 2019). We first read through the interview accounts multiple times on ATLAS.ti to familiarize ourselves with the data. We then analyzed the interview accounts narratively with Katz (2004) relational typology for agency as the guiding analytical framework, looking for distinct, small stories of resilience, reworking and resistance in job-seeking practices. Narrative analysis was identified as the best-fitting method, as it has the potential to capture experiences and unfolding events through time (Riessman, 2008).

We identified multiple small storylines over time from individual interview accounts, marking a change in agentic responses. Once a chosen response strategy was deemed ineffective, individuals developed new response strategies to continue their job-seeking efforts. We also found differences in how individuals responded to structural ageism in comparison to ageism originating from interactions with others. Ageism originating from individual actors, including employers and employment services officials, was challenged, and resisted in interview accounts, whereas structural forms of ageism were less contested, and more often accepted as “matter-of-facts”. Developing various response strategies to ageism required older jobseekers to utilize their various social positions and available resources to overcome the expected and encountered barriers. These strategies were: changing expectations about future employment, identity work, accepting short-term precarious job contracts, applying for entry-level jobs, creating a modern resumé, using one's own social networks in job searches, investing time in education, and moving to a new area with more job opportunities. In the analytic section to follow, we discuss these strategies in more detail with data extracts.

Results

Resilience strategies

All older jobseekers employed different resilience strategies in their everyday lives to cope with unemployment and job-seeking. In our analyses, we identified actions as resilience when individuals internally negotiated their position in the labor market through adjusting expectations about future employment, engaged in identity work, and chose to continue their job-seeking practices with existing resources rather than changing the conditions of their employability. As the older jobseekers entered the labor market following job loss from long-term paid employment, they had high expectations for fast and easy re-employment. However, jobseekers quickly realized that the reality did not match these expectations. Here, Liisa, a 61-year-old woman with nearly 42 years of customer service experience, voiced her and many

others' experiences from visiting the employment services where she was told that finding employment would be very unlikely in her situation.

I asked at the employment services ‘what is the situation, do I stand any chances [for re-employment],’ and without knowing my age, the lady answered that even 10 % would be too much a promise. Then she said that there are so many young people, and when it comes to me, re-education is definitely out of the picture.

For Liisa, a single woman living alone, working was not necessary to support herself financially, as she was able to transition to early retirement and continue her job search while receiving pension. However, this was not the case for all our participants, and some voiced their need to continue working to support their families financially. Hearing the news from employment services, Liisa no longer perceived the same options for career continuation she had prior and changed her attitude from wanting to work to working only if the employer could not find anyone else to hire. Ageism in the form of excluding access to education and limiting employment was viewed as more acceptable when supported by the normative order of life-course timings (Keskinen & Nikander, 2023). In Liisa's case, this was present in the way she was excluded from re-education and employment opportunities with the justification of making room for younger generations in the labor market, a notion supported by both employment services and jobseekers themselves. News on low chances of re-employment were often not contested despite lengthy career histories but rather were seen as matter-of-fact warnings issued by the actors familiar with the system. A year later, Liisa shared during an interview how she had already given up the idea of working, but then, her former manager asked her to come back for seasonal work.

My former manager called me during the fall that his manager had said “you need to ask the old ones”. And so they did, and I was .. the only one who promised from the three of us, I said “I'll come”. So he called me again in October asking “are you serious, are you coming?” I said “if you have someone younger, take them instead”. Soon, it was end of November and he calls me again, “I've already scheduled your hours”.

Devaluation of career histories and drops in income were not the only adjustments older jobseekers faced when transitioning from paid work to unemployment. The transition also required adjusting one's expectations in terms of available jobs. When finding a job in their previous field of expertise proved challenging, older jobseekers shifted towards applying for any job they could do rather than targeting the jobs based on their expertise and work history. This was the case for Raija, a 53-year-old woman. Having previously worked in an expert position in finance, she expected to get a job as an assistant easily but now found herself applying for cleaning jobs. Over time, her expectations of future employment changed. All she now wanted was to be and remain employed. Although Raija still applied for positions that matched her previous career, she was not too hopeful about her chances of re-employment in the same sector.

The call I just received was about a cleaning job. It's interesting how your thinking changes. When I lost my job, I thought that surely I can become a financial assistant somewhere. I had this thought that it should be enough because I'm done, I've been a well-paid expert before. Then I decided I'm not trying to go for the same job as before, because I know the job is being outsourced all the time. ... Somehow, I'm very grateful that I was given the chance to work 30 years in a row and good jobs. ... I have still, I checked the pension reform and the earliest I get to retire is when I turn 65. But if I want a full pension, it's 66 years and 10 months. So quite a way still...

Raija's example also portrays the experience of other older jobseekers in our study, as many found themselves applying for jobs that they thought were below their experience and previous position. The trend was also visible in Berger's (Berger, 2006; Berger, 2009) studies, where

she identified changing expectations about future employment as one of the discursive strategies older jobseekers employed in their job-seeking practices. In Raija's case, her expectations changed during the job-seeking period, whereas for some jobseekers it was clear from the beginning that they would not apply for positions that matched their expertise and work history. One defining factor in her story was realizing how many years she still had left before reaching retirement age. For many, unemployment carried a social stigma that required internal negotiations about one's identity as a worker and as an older jobseeker (see [Riach & Loretto, 2009](#)). This was the case for Raija also, who had to revisit her ideas of unemployment after experiencing it firsthand following job loss from her expert-level position. Few months later during a follow-up interview, Raija was re-employed in her own field and explained how unemployment changed her own views about her self-worth and her relationships.

I guess it's because you've been in permanent employment for so long, so now, I'm extremely happy I have a job. It's funny how quickly it goes. Last fall, I was taking courses, I had an active life, but then this year, it's been only job search. Somehow it started getting to me even though it was only a couple of months, it's already affected my sense of self-worth. And at the same time, you started seeing changes in attitude in some people, unemployment after all is a big thing, and a bit of a hot potato. It somehow quickly gets to your relationships too.

Raija was conflicted since, for her, work had not been just a source of income, but also a permanent structuring factor in her life around which to organize her relationships and leisure life. Having established that employment does not simply come by applying for jobs, the older jobseekers employed and engaged in various resilience and coping strategies to overcome the intersectional stigmatization they faced both because of their age and their unemployment status. Over the years, for instance, Janne, a 57-year-old man with decades of work experience from postal service, had developed his own coping strategy after experiencing downsizing decisions firsthand many times in his career. He had decided that he would bounce between the company branches until they stopped offering him even short-term or part-time contracts. During his first interview, Janne shared his reasoning for staying with the same employer, even with such precarious work contracts.

It's, I'm starting have so many years under my belt that studying is not that, if you think about going back to school for a couple of years, then retirement age starts to be so close it's not worth it. Then when it comes to me, my tasks are the kind that not many companies have in Finland, if any apart from postal services, there isn't another place where I could use my skills.

In Janne's case, proximity to early exit was the key, as he focused on getting by until he reached the early exit age two years later and was able to take early retirement. Juggling precarious contracts meant not always knowing whether he would have a job next week and where that would be. It also meant that despite being employed, he was constantly looking for a job. Janne's case was not an isolated incidence, as these patterns of precarity and downward job mobility among older jobseekers have also been reported in the United Kingdom ([Riach, 2007](#)) and more recently in internal job mobility in Sweden ([Krekula, 2019](#)).

Precarious job conditions and devaluation of older jobseekers' work histories had also convinced 56-year-old Kaarina to take the first job she was offered. She had been adamant from the beginning that she would continue working regardless of the employment offered. Working as a cleaner with nearly four decades of customer service experience, she summarized that although there are employment opportunities available to people in their fifties and over, these opportunities are rarely lucrative and do not support career development.

It's a common misconception, a general opinion that over 50s don't get jobs. They do. I've shown that now that for sure they do. But

maybe not so smart and flashy things anymore, but I'm not even trying, I'm not, I have my own hobbies, I don't need, any career-... Those who want to build a career can do it for all I care.

Kaarina's case exemplifies the resilience strategies older jobseekers adapted to find employment. This meant having to accept jobs that were not "so, smart and flashy" and did not meet the skill level or previous work experience. For Kaarina, her resilience strategy was replacing her career with hobbies and seeing work merely as a mean to gain income. Simultaneously, her stories reflect internalized ageism and the need to follow the normative life-course when saying it is acceptable that jobseekers in their 50s are not offered good jobs anymore despite having more than a decade until retirement age. Overall, the resilience strategies were in [Kohli \(2019\)](#) terms "everyday oriented" acts designed to get by until reaching the retirement age or another option for exit from working life.

Reworking strategies

In addition to resilience strategies, our analyses identified four reworking strategies through which our respondents changed the existing conditions of job-seeking at age 50 and over. These strategies included utilizing external help with applications and resumés, using one's own social contacts to get past externalized recruitment systems, enrolling in education to update and improve qualifications and domestic migration to areas with more job opportunities.

Navigating the job-seeking practices was challenging for most older jobseekers, especially with the digitalized systems in place, each with their own unique instructions on how to fill in the job applications. Older jobseekers referred to the early days of their careers when the practice was to walk up to the workplace and ask for a job and start the next day. Working for decades under the same employer had allowed them years of job mobility and advancements within the company ranks to new positions. Having learned that most companies have outsourced their recruiting processes to external recruiters with complex application systems, the older jobseekers developed strategies to improve their applications, for instance, through utilizing publicly available resources targeted at jobseekers. In the following extract, a 60-year-old woman, Marketta, with a lengthy career in sales and customer service shares her confusion of the job-seeking practices today.

Actually, I have to show you, I went straight away before midsummer and started filling in the employment services forms, I started well in advance even though I knew I didn't have to before September. But they said you should be prepared to start filling these things in early, so I did pages of questions, I answered, for instance, that contemporary CV is something I can't do. It must be electronic and with images. I have education in economics, I know accounting, I mean knew accounting, but today it's not good enough for anything. Back in the day, I did my CV on a typewriter, I have applied for jobs before and been to job interviews, but it's been 36 years in between.

Finding help to navigate the labor market was easy for Marketta in the end, as employment services offered her help with creating a modern resumé and taking pictures for her profile. Creating a modern resumé facilitated the application processes, as she now knew what her strengths were and what companies were potentially looking for. The services participants were offered varied vastly depending more on their location rather than age, with some jobseekers gaining coaching sessions and others a mere call asking whether they had thought about retiring already.

For those receiving less attention from the employment services, personal social contacts and networks became a vital tool in job-seeking practices. Jobseekers who hoped to continue in the same line of work relied more on their existing contacts, as advertised jobs on different websites were mostly entry-level or lower positions than they had hoped. Here, a 54-year-old man, Raimo, shares how he decided to use

his previous social contacts to get past the external hiring processes that do not seem to favor older applicants.

Sure, there are jobs out there, but I've tried more to use my own old contacts. When you go to the employment services and recruitment websites, I go there too. But as an example, I've worked in logistics for around 30 years, I know all the managers from our competitors because I've worked together with them. I've contacted all of them last summer already.

Given his career history, Raimo was able to get many interviews, but having finished only comprehensive school, he lacked the necessary education for the positions he had previously filled. This was a common story also portrayed in research conducted by [Dormidontova et al. \(2020\)](#) in Italy. Another reworking strategy we identified was gaining assets through re-education. To study while on unemployment benefits, older jobseekers needed to apply for approval from the employment services that the new career path they had chosen would be deemed as employable. However, jobseekers needed to gain the study places first before the approval process, which itself was not an easy process. After creating a modern resumé, Marketta visited a recruitment fair in her area to find vocation courses.

I was interested in gardening, but the recruiter instantly said at the recruitment fair that there's more than a hundred applicants and only 25 get it. So I said, "so an old wench like me has no business there then," and he just laughed [laughing], but so, then he told me that there are a few spots open to study agriculture in a program that's just started. So I could get electives in gardening in what interests me. And suddenly, my hobby became my educational direction. Many ask me what I'll be when I grow up, but honestly, I still don't know.

When deciding whether re-education would be an option, older jobseekers often considered their age and proximity to retirement, as re-education can take years off working life. These decisions also resonated with [Kohli \(2019\)](#) argument on life-time orientation, with the working life being the timeline in relation to which individuals scaled their actions. Another topic for consideration was whether re-education was deemed acceptable at a later stage in life, as it challenged the standardized life course and its chrononormative ideas of which order things are done in life and at what time point ([Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015](#); [Keskinen & Nikander, 2023](#); [Leonard, Fuller, & Unwin, 2018](#)). Among our participants, the jobseekers embarking on new education tended to be closer to their 50s than their 60s, with some 15 years left before reaching their set retirement age. However, participants closer to their 60s, such as Janne, were aware of the nearing possibility to exit early through unemployment and often considered it as a more favorable option if they could not find a job in their own field.

Sometimes, however, available job opportunities in their area were scarce and motivated a move to another location with more potential job opportunities. This was the case for Aki, a 57-year-old man, who had worked as a driver for all his career. He managed to get few months of employment from local employers around him after job loss but soon noticed that employers were constantly conveying the same message of "we want someone younger." Aki soon noticed the lack of job opportunities in his hometown.

Interviewer: So, was there anything left to do around there, did you contact the employers?

Aki: Yeah, I don't understand, I was constantly contacting them, the same jobs, I can name the companies [company names], and what-nots, month after month they're looking for a driver, but they won't employ you. I was even ready to take a lower pay if they only offered me a job, but no. I guess there are people for the job, I understood that it's all about the age.

In Aki's case, the blatant ageism from local employers preferring only younger applicants limited the number of job opportunities in the area.

During his job search, Aki noticed that employers who recruited drivers preferred younger, non-unionized drivers who were expected to settle for less money than their unionized, more experienced counterparts. In his experience, rather than admitting ageism, the employers justified their preferences through the cost-effectiveness of cheap labor. As the job opportunities became scarce, Aki grew more motivated to move to a larger city with more job opportunities. Migrating across the country in hope of employment in late working life is a complex decision and dependent on many situational factors. For Aki and his wife, the move was also motivated by moving closer to family members and the possibility of paying off their remaining mortgage. In comparison, other interviewees, like single parent Raimo, also considered moving but hesitated, as he still had children living at home. This highlights the need to acknowledge the overlapping social positions limiting and enabling different agentic actions in late working life.

Resistance

In our analysis, we classified actions as acts of resistance when individuals challenged the ageism they faced through conscious actions that would contest the age stereotypes imposed on them. We could not find any overt acts of resistance among our participants, although many voiced clear dissatisfaction with ageism, age discrimination and the pension reforms and unemployment policies in place at the time. In these cases, however, ageism was not challenged, rather the jobseekers questioned whether the decision-makers pushing for extension of working lives in an ageist labor market were in fact the right people for the job. Nevertheless, many of the older jobseekers had actively resisted the closures of their previous workplaces and their dismissal decisions through their labor unions and organized work-communities. We offer three possible explanations as to why we could not identify acts of resistance among the interview accounts. First, in contrast to workers, jobseekers are less likely to be organized, as unions traditionally represent current workers, indicating a need for a platform to connect and group jobseekers together for peer support. Second, the nature of ageism makes it difficult to resist. Ageism manifests deeply within the labor market practices, structures, customs and everyday language and habits. By interacting with ageism, individuals come to internalize ageism and apply it to themselves and their situations ([Keskinen & Nikander, 2023](#)). It therefore makes an invisible enemy, as there is not one clear actor who mobilizes it to attain power. Third, rather than forcing our data to fit the framework, we have reported here findings from two out of three possible agentic strategies categories. [Katz \(2004\)](#) herself argues that finding the pioneering type of resistance has become more challenging in the contemporary era. Even if somewhat ideological, keeping the three forms of the strategies is essential to describe the historical labor movements that resisted oppressive labor conditions.

In sum, our analyses indicated that there are various discursive strategies through which older jobseekers act agentially and respond to ageism in the labor market. We categorized actions based on their motivations rather than the outcomes of those actions. That is, we were more interested in the discursive strategies older jobseekers developed in response to ageism rather than their effectiveness against ageism in job-seeking practices, as the effectiveness of the strategies varied vastly. We identified both acts of resilience and reworking in our participants' stories. The strategies of resilience through which individuals coped during their job-seeking practices were changing expectations about future employment, identity work, accepting precarious working conditions and applying for entry-level jobs. We also identified reworking strategies through which individuals aimed to improve their positions as older jobseekers in the labor market, namely, creating a modern-style resumé, using personal assets and social networks in job search, enrolling into re-education and ultimately, moving across the country for better job opportunities. In our longitudinal analysis of change over time, we identified patterns of trial and error. Once older jobseekers deemed their strategies inefficient, they developed both new resilience

and reworking strategies in response to ageism. However, despite clear indication of resistance strategies being everyday agency oriented and reworking strategies life-time agency oriented, individuals shifted through these two types of strategies over time in an incoherent manner. We discuss these findings and their implications further in the following section.

Discussion

In this article, we were interested in the different agentic strategies older jobseekers develop and employ in response to ageism in the labor market. Through qualitative longitudinal interviews and narrative analysis as our guiding framework, we discovered different discursive strategies to counteract ageism, either through changing the job-seeking conditions (reworking) or through providing the jobseeker perseverance to continue their job search (resilience). Like previous studies investigating discursive strategies in late life unemployment, we found older jobseekers to demonstrate resilience strategies, such as changing their expectations about future employment, engaging in identity work to overcome the negative images of unemployment and being an older jobseeker (Berger, 2006, 2009; Riach & Loreto, 2009). Our findings on reworking strategies were also consistent with previous literature, as the older jobseekers counteracted ageist stereotypes through enhancing their applications and resumés with the help of available services and resources, drawing on social support and networks to advance job search and engaging in skill maintenance through re-education, as reported in Berger's studies (Berger, 2006; Berger, 2009). In addition to these previously reported strategies, we also found that older jobseekers adapt to ageism in the labor market as a resilience strategy through applying to and accepting precarious and entry-level positions that do not match their experience or skill level.

Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich (2021) characterize this trend to result from individualization practices within employment support provisions, where the responsibility for career continuation in late life unemployment is shifted towards individuals while the barriers restricting access to career continuation remain unaddressed. It is thus important to highlight that not only are older jobseekers expected to continue working, but they are also required to continuously negotiate the terms of their agency against ageism while doing so. Ageism embedded in everyday practices and talk contributes to how individuals perceive their available opportunities and resources to continue working. Thus, to create effective measures and opportunities to encourage continuation of work among older workers and jobseekers, policy-makers need to take action to address the existing age stereotypes and discrimination in various labor market locations preventing individuals from engaging in the labor market.

Furthermore, we urge further research to also consider the social positions individuals hold and their contributions to individual agency and career decisions in late working life. In this article, our main focus has been on the intersection of age and unemployment status. Our analyses found no differences in the ways in which older jobseekers employed strategies to counteract ageism between men and women, rural and urban inhabitants, sole household earners and double income households or different educational levels. However, individuals with social contacts in the field were more likely to rely on their social circles than employment services for support in job search.

Our second interest was on the effects of time and temporality on the agentic responses. Through qualitative longitudinal analysis, we found first that the developed strategies to counteract ageism were dynamic, and individuals tested their strategies through trial and error in their efforts to find employment. Second, the developed strategies were connected to institutionally established age limits, such as the proximity to early exit from the labor market and set retirement age. Therefore, our findings confirm that agency is a spatio-temporally located, relational concept and supports calls for more nuanced understanding of agency and its guiding coordinates in future studies.

Our analyses have only scratched the surface on understanding temporality ageism and individual agency in late working life. The research was grounded in the assumption that ageism manifests deeply within the labor market structures and practices, and although it was not the target of our investigation in this study, we uncovered similar instances of ageism preventing or challenging access to employment and education in late working life as reported by previous studies on ageism (see Harris et al., 2018; Previtali et al., 2022). Ageism took place in employment services when older jobseekers were labelled as too old for employment and re-education, in hiring practices when employers clearly expressed their preference for younger applicants and in interview conversations when individuals applied internalized ageism to justify their labor market decisions. Subsequently, we suggest that further qualitative longitudinal investigations into ageism in late working life have the potential to unravel the complex processes through which individuals challenge ageism and turn their age into agency.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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