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Age and generations in everyday organisational life: Neglected intersections in studying organisations

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Age and generations in everyday organisational life:

Neglected intersections in studying organisations

The purpose of the paper is to highlight and critically analyse age and generation-related issues and their intersections with other social divisions in working life, and their importance for how work, careers, organisations and related work innovations are constructed. We draw mainly on qualitative data from nine case organisations in Finland and focus on the following questions: i) what aspects of age and generational relations are articulated in the case organisations studied?; ii) and how do age and age-generations intersect with other social divisions in workplaces? In our analysis, we work from the data in forming and recognising thematic groupings, and, in this way, we identify five main forms of discursive talk about age and generation: physical restrictions; retirement issues; age diversity as a strength; lack of a particular age group; along with silence on age or age as a non-issue. As such, the dynamics and intersections about and around age and generation in organisations are complex, multi-dimensional, and often contradictory and ambiguous. More specifically, building on an online survey (n=122) and through interviews (n=53) and qualitative fieldwork in nine organisations, we seek to contribute to empirical, policy, intersectional, and theoretical areas and debates on age, generations and intersectionality at work, organisations and work innovation.

Keywords: age; generation; gender; age-generation; organisational generation; ageism; gendered ageism; demographic change

Age and generations in everyday organisational life:

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Introduction

Age, age-related issues and their intersections with other social divisions are central in working life, and for how work, careers, organisations and innovation in and around work are constructed, yet they remain relatively neglected in studies of work, and even more so in studies of organisations. Despite this relative neglect, in recent years there has been growing recognition of and possible positive emphasis on the co-existence and mutual constitution of different age, generation and gender relations in workplaces. In many ways this perspective builds on and extends ideas of equity, equality and inclusive corporate policies on gender equality and diversity.

Age is a very powerful means and dimension of organising, even a so-called powerful "master discourse" (Fineman 2011, p. 2). According to Moore (2010, p. 656), age is socially, historically and culturally specific, although in late-modern (consumption) culture age identities are relatively fluid and negotiable, at least for those who can afford it time-wise and money-wise. For instance, anti-ageing industries offer nearly endless possibilities for body moulding and face reconstructions through cosmetic surgery (Shilling 2003; Kinnunen 2010); extensive body projects and training often aim not only to get physically fit but work towards (imagined) perfect body shape ideals and extended youth (Hearn and Wray 2015).

Theories on age and generation are still rather underdeveloped in organisational studies. Generational cohorts are presently used as measures of both larger age-groupings and as indicators of collective values and features within these groups. 'Age-based generations', or age-generations, can be defined as identifiable groups which share birth years or more broadly life stages, as well as major life events at critical stages in society (Kupperschmidt 2000).

In this article we focus on age and generations at work, drawing mainly on qualitative data in nine case organisations in Finland, along with some contextualizing quantitative survey data, gathered in a three year research project on work and well-being within what were identified as 'growth sectors', albeit at a time of economic stringency. However, from the time of the planning of the research the economic

conditions deteriorated in many Western societies. Thus, by the start of the project the issue of 'growth' felt somewhat misplaced, as many companies were doing less well economically, and formal negotiations between employers and employees on possible redundancies were everyday news. Furthermore, between the first quantitative and the second qualitative data collection phases the economic situation improved, and many companies reported changed situation in the later phase when the economy was recovering, at least temporarily. Drawing on this empirical data, we focus on i) what aspects age and generational relations are articulated in the case organisations studied?; and how age and age-generations intersect with other social divisions in workplaces?

In analysing this material, we seek to contribute to four main areas: first, to empirical studies on what is still – compared with, say, studies on gender, work and organisations – the relatively neglected, yet growing, area of age and generation in workplaces; second, to policy in work innovation; third, to the study of the intersections of age, age-generations and organisational generations with other social divisions in workplaces; and finally, to the foregrounding of age and generation at the level of organisational and managerial discourse, and academic analysis of organisations and management. Moreover, this article draws on data and analysis from a non-Anglophone context; the context here is Finnish, a Nordic country, with an ageing population, that can still be characterised as a welfare society even with trends towards neoliberalism. More generally, non-Anglophone contexts continue to be profoundly neglected in academic publishing.

In the first part of the paper, we present the general aim, namely, the case for analysing both, what we call, age-generations and organisational generations in workplaces and organisational settings. This is followed, in the second part of the paper, with a more specific focus on how age and generation intersect with other social relations and social divisions, and how age and generational aspects are represented in our case organisations, before some concluding observations on the general significance of these concerns.

"Age-generations" as a theoretical perspective

Generations have in social sciences traditionally been looked at from at least four different, or indeed simultaneous perspectives: generation as cohort; generation as life stage; generation as kinship; and generation as historical period (Kertzer 1983). Generational cohorts have been the most widespread, and widely studied in the Western world during the past decades. The generational cohort groups, or 'age-generations' as we call them, share birth years as well as collective experiences of major shifts in

broad socio-cultural environment over time (Scott 1999; Kupperschmidt 2000; Lancaster 2004; Crampton et al. 2007, 2009; Macky et al. 2008; D'Amanto and Hertzfeldt 2008). The major shifts can include wars, major political events and socio-economic transitions, new technologies resulting in changes of work and leisure practices, and changes in family and work patterns. Socio-economic transformations resulting in relative material scarcity or lack of security in working life may play a central role for generational differences and values towards working life.

Examples of socio-economic transformations impacting especially the 'Baby-Boomers' are the childhood experiences of national re-building after the harsh times of World War II, as well as, later on, the rapid rise of the economy (see Table 1). 'Baby-Boomers' have in many cases experienced class mobility compared to many in the 'Traditionalist' generation, often including their parents. This was possible both due to economic growth, the demand for workforce after war time and the development of the education and welfare system in the case of Finland and several other similar societies. Early 'Generation X' (born 1960-1970) experienced the economic boom of the 1980s together with the earlier generations. Examples of collective factors, especially for late 'Generation X' (born approximately 1970-1979), and 'Generation Y' (born 1980-1999) could be the economic depressions and financial crises of the 1990s and 2000s, resulting in organisational downsizing, restructuring, unemployment, job insecurity, and short-term employment. Some Generation X and Y people have experienced reverse class mobility compared to their parents, while unemployment of young people persists at high levels across Europe. Table 1 presents age-related generations (approximate birth years and broad attributes from earlier research), and interpretations of related embedded gender contracts.

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Table 1 here

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Previous research on generational differences has been theoretically relatively underdeveloped in terms of the incorporation of notions of gender, intersections of age, generation and gender, and shifts in gender contracts in different societal and organisational contexts (Krekula 2007). While generational cohort theory can be used to study differences between age groups and generations (Mannheim 1952; Beutell and Wittig-Berman 2008), this approach has many weaknesses, including problems of generalisation, as well as cultural, social and historical aspects that restrict definitions of generation, and neglect of intersections with, for example, gender, class and ethnicity (Macky et al. 2008). Indeed

in studies and discourses based on neo-liberal and neo-individualist ideas and ideals (cf. Julkunen 2010; Harvey 2008; Elliott and Lemert 2006), notions of age, generation and gender are often especially diluted.

In theorising generations at work, it is important to acknowledge not only the intersectional nature of work identities, but increasingly also their international aspects in the context of a global, or more precisely a transnational, environment. Furthermore, it is important to understand how age-generations interact, for example, how mid-aged and older people in management evaluate (gendered) ageism present in working life. The age-based generations intersect with other social divisions, and these can be made visible or silenced and kept invisible in organisational contexts.

Both age and generation are at least partly social constructions, and often organisational constructions. Indeed, age and generation can also be analysed from working life perspectives, and are sometimes presented implicitly as, for example, 'recruitment', 'organisational cohorts', 'organisational socialisation', and 'organisational succession'. Alternatively, one might recognise 'professional generations' (length of time with professional competence), 'positional age-generations' (time spent in, for example, management positions), and 'organisational generations' (time spent in specific organisations, being part of a group of recruits at a given time, illustrating the 'socialisation' of a group to an organisation, this affecting forms of cooperation, promotions, loyalty and so on). These can be very helpful in understanding human aspects of organisational life-cycles, especially during turmoil and changes, but also when, for example, studying 'business as usual' from the perspective of social dynamics.

Age, generations and gender in macro- and meso-organisational contexts

Age and generation are social divisions and social differences need to be included more fully in research on work and organisations. While chronological age is something everyone "possesses", the social experience and perception of age is constantly changing and intersecting with other social divisions and experiences. These intersections, for example, of age and gender, or age and ethnicity, can also lead to various disadvantages and discriminations (as well as various advantages and privileges for some) in organisations and elsewhere. In considering age and generation at work, birth year and biological age are clearly relevant in some organisational processes, for example, retirement

age. However, they are insufficient as measures of organisation- and work-related age and generation. Thus researchers have adopted other broader, social approaches to age and generation, for example, cognitive age based on subjective feelings of age (Barak and Schiffman 1980), cultural age(ing) (Katz 2005), and social constructions of age (Suokannas 2008).

Seen from a macro-perspective, social inequality and inequalities in organisations are still very much based on social class, occupational and work situation, and socio-economic position more generally, especially the intersections of class with gender and ethnicity, racialisation and migrant status. This is reflected in many analyses of work and organisations. Even in Finland, a country with less social inequality and less 'visible' class divisions than many societies, socio-economic position is somewhat affected by family background (The World Bank 2013; Kelhä 2008). Specifically, such socio-economic processes have substantial effects on education, organisational position, and organisational well-being. Moreover, such broad patterns are also strongly affected by age and generation, as well as other social divisions.

Furthermore, the rise of neo-liberal economic and social policies with changes in priorities within welfare states and division of wealth have strongly affected the later age-based generations (Harvey 2008). Working life and organisations are undergoing significant changes in late modern societies (van der Hejden, Schalk and van Veldhoven, 2008). According to Castells (1998), major social transitions include the revolution in information technology, economic crises of both capitalism and the state, and an increase in new cultural and social movements. These profound societal changes are notably affecting work and organisational life; one such new challenge includes a discontinuity in careers of particular of younger generations. Globalisation and the increase of transnational corporations, corporate multinational capitalism, a global labour market and increased diversity have also had a substantial effect on these generations' worldviews and life priorities, which is also apparent in contemporary Finnish working life (Niemistö 2011).

Age is clearly relevant in workforce recruitment, selection and retention, performance and performance evaluation, and training and career development (Perry and Parlamis 2006). Current demographic changes induce competitive pressures between people of different ages and generations within organisations. At the same time, age and generational relations generally intersect with other social relations and social divisions, and these intersect with organisational well-being. Earlier research has emphasised generational differences at work in terms of interpersonal interaction, feedback, appraisal, loyalty to employers, technology use, personal responsibility and centrality of work and

career in general (Lester and Kickul 2001). Rapid change in power relations is also visible based on digital citizenship, affecting both men and women of different age-generations. Several researchers note that different generations have significantly different expectations for work and careers, and expect and respect different kinds of psychological contracts at work (Broadbridge, Maxwell and Ogden 2007, 2009; Terjesen, Vinnicombe and Freeman 2007; D'Amanto and Hertzfeldt 2008; Crampton and Hodge 2007, 2009; Sabattini et al. 2010;).

Gendered age

In recent years issues of age, ageing and ageism have become increasingly topical, with demographic trends towards ageing populations in many western countries continuity (European Commission/Eurostat 2011; Linz and Stula 2010; European Commission 2006). Attitudes and prejudices concerning ageing and older workers, and concerns about income in later life, are pertinent issues for employing organisations and workers themselves (Wilkinson and Ferraro 2002; Ilmarinen 2005; Desmette and Gaillard 2008; Irni 2009; Moore 2010). Paradoxically, as people live longer, ageing populations have brought up many concerns on how to organise and finance care for the elderly, but also generated whole industries which are built on the primacy, even obsessions, of youth, youthfulness and agelessness (Barak, Mathur, Lee and Zhang 2001). Policy-level interest has much concentrated on the question how to prolong working life stay, although the unemployment rates are high in many countries and working life contains many age discriminatory patterns that rather push senior workers away from their jobs rather than offering.

According to Traxler (1980), there are four main factors that contribute to the negative image of ageing in western societies: 1) the fear of death, which is associated with old age; 2) emphasis on the youth culture in the media and the valuing of youth, physical beauty and sexuality; 3) emphasis on a defined culture of productivity, where older people are interpreted as being ineffective; 4) and poorly controlled gerontological studies which have reinforced the negative image of the older adult. Feminist researchers have, on the other hand, criticized the lack of gender analysis in social gerontology and in research on older age and working life, such as the lack of emphasis on gendered retirement issues (Twigg 2004; Krekula 2007; Hearn and Wray 2015). For instance, gender wage gap tends to increase with age, and many senior women whose wages are lower than their men counterparts are obliged to stay employed longer than they might wish, in particular in circumstances of covert or overt gendered ageism often present at work.

Duncan and Loretto's (2004) survey study of the financial sector in the UK suggests that women experience more age discrimination than do men. Further, women and men often experience age and ageing in different ways in organisations (Moore 2009; Krekula 2007). According to Itzin and Phillipson (1995), women are often understood and defined as ageing at an earlier chronological age than are men, which poses challenges for women's careers and brings pressure to stay 'youngish looking'. Women are often still valued for their physical appearance, which is understood to deteriorate according to current beauty ideas. The intersectionality of gender and age thus depends also on their bodily dimension and expressions (Martin 2003). Thus there are double standards for women's and men's ageing: women's ageing is less acceptable and they experience a triple discrimination because of age, gender and 'lookism' (Granleese and Sayer 2005). A similar kind of multiple discrimination based on age, gender and looks was found researching women managers in Finland and Scotland (Jyrkinen and McKie 2012; Jyrkinen 2014). In many organisations women's self-presentations, bodies and looks are subject to gendered ageism already even at rather early career stages, but increasingly during their senior years. Women managers encounter myriad forms of gendered ageism from men, and also sometimes other women. Thus, pressures on 'agelessness' are strongly present in women's lives. Gendered ageism can take place at many stages of career development, and includes comments on women's roles, looks, sexual availability and potential to become pregnant and the menopause. However, women managers also enjoyed benefits of experience and seniority that came with ageing, including recognition of self-worth, increased control and empowerment (Jyrkinen and McKie 2012; Jyrkinen 2014). Women might be constructed as "never the right age" (Duncan and Loretto 20042), while their 'double jeopardy' across the life course is cumulative. As men are valued more for their accomplishments, they may even gain more respect, prestige, power and positions when ageing (see Krekula 2007; Irni 2009; Moore 2009). (Older) women's knowledge is not valued in the same way as that of their men counterparts – gendered value systems and organisations tend to exclude 'old people' when they are women (Jyrkinen 2014).

Gendered age and ageing also concerns men, and intersectional approaches to age and generation offer possibilities to understand work-life and career developments of men managers and employees more in depth. Earlier studies have indicated that homosociality enhances men's career progress in many organisations (see Holgersson 2003). Young men may proceed faster than many women as they are not expected to take parental leave (Kiianmaa 2012). The issues of glass ceiling are to some extent a counterpart to glass lift, where young men are proceeding in their careers while many women's careers tent to stagnate. Even though more senior age often increases rather than decreases the status of men

in organisations and the value of their knowledge, also men may encounter uncertainties about their ageing bodies when they exhibit weaknesses, dependency and passivity (Hearn 1995; Sinclair 2005, 2011).

Organisational ageism is one of the less visible gendered mechanisms (Gorman and Kmec 2007). Demographic changes challenge organisations and management to re-evaluate their HR policies and practices in regards to age and gender in the future. These changes are likely to intensify when the Baby-boom generation of the 1940s reaches retirement as this decade progresses and are indeed visible in organisations already today. People in different ages and career stages encounter working life issues and careers in very different ways. For instance, care responsibilities for immediate family, ageing relatives and friends change over time, although care as such is strongly gendered (McKie et al. 2008). Gendered care responsibilities, which cause hurdles in particular in women's careers at many stages and ages, are likely to increase rather than diminish as populations are ageing and many countries are going through economic downturns and reforms (Jyrkinen and McKie 2012).

Opting out and downshifting are career developments in current working life, with significant effects on generational cohorts in career shifts and contextualisations of careers. Women in management may opt-out because they find their careers unrewarding: women's turnover decisions relate often to their work-life (im)balance and care responsibilities, but also perceptions of fewer career development opportunities (Miller and Wheeler 1992; Jyrkinen and McKie 2012). Women managers also opt-out in order to 'opt-in', for example, to build up their own businesses or to make some other radical career change, which they expect to offer them more control of space and time, more flexibility to one's work-life balance, and more autonomy to self-determine key aspects of careers (McKie, Biese and Jyrkinen 2013; Biese 2014). Previous research indicates that especially women in generational cohorts of 'late Boomers' and 'early Xers' might be more keen to opt out from the labour market, and that 'late Xers' as well as 'Generation Y' might be less interested in traditional careers (Hall 2002; Liikkanen 2004; Allen 2004).

Gendered processes in working life affect women and men's possibilities and willingness to enter and stay in working life differently at different age phases and career stages (Acker 1990; Hearn and Parkin 1987/1995; Itzin and Phillipson, 1995; Forret and Dougherty, 2004; Mainiero and Wilkinson 2005; Konrad 2007; Sullivan and Mainiero 2008; Hearn et al. 2009). Current intensive public debates in Finland, as elsewhere, on policies aiming for later retirement from working life (and lengthening of career at both the beginning and the end) often lack a gender perspective (see Työelämäryhmä 2010).

Having reviewed the case for examining both age-generations and organisational generations in workplaces, we now turn to a more specific focus on our empirical material.

Research questions and data collection

In the remainder of this article, we draw on empirical data from studying work and well-being to address two research questions, the first more specific, the second more general, namely:

What aspects of age and generational relations are articulated in the case organisations studied?

How do age and age-generations intersect with other social divisions in workplaces?

We approach these questions through an overall critical realist epistemology, using both quantitative methods and qualitative analysis, with a focus here on the construction of everyday organisational life through discursive talk. The concept of discursive talk is used rather widely in discourse studies, albeit in a number of different ways. Here we use it refer to explicit uses of talk on and around a specific topic, as opposed to (non-discursive) talk that are "not necessarily statements made … in vocalised words intended to communicate a main idea" (Murray, 2009, p. 15; cf. Gunkel and Taylor, 2014). Quantitative and qualitative methods should not be seen as products of competing paradigms, but rather valued as mutually enriching when used together (Brannen 1992, 2005; Bryman 2006, 2008). Quantitative methods can be used to establish the broad framing of the study, and a means to ask the most interesting questions when moving onto the qualitative phase, or vice versa. The first alternative has been applied in this research.

The quantitative data was gathered by a survey answered by 122 employing organisations in what were identified as four central growth sectors on the EU level: care (n=52), electronics (n=23), finance (n=25), and tourism (n=22). Through an online survey with organisational representatives, a broad scale of occupational health and organisational well-being activity was measured by self-reported activity in having organisational well-being related policies (Authors reference, to be inserted). The survey data was analysed in terms of the development of formal well-being policies in the different sectors, and in organisations of different sizes, as well as how these policies related to economic and personnel growth expectations and outcomes, mean age of employees, gender of employees, and other background organisational level factors.

From these analysis, the organisations were classified into different clusters based on three variables; (a) the well-being "activity", measured by existing formal policies on occupational health and well-being, (b) company size, and (c) sector. Nine employing organisations were chosen for more detailed qualitative fieldwork. The case companies were chosen so that each sector had one "active" and one "passive" company based on the number of well-being policies reported, and that the companies were evenly small, medium and large. One additional case company (E3) was included as extra interesting, due to its small size yet high growth.

The quantitative data of the project has been analysed elsewhere [reference to be added later], but is relevant here in contributing to our pre-understanding of age-related issues within organisations. The survey provided invaluable contextual information for the subsequent fieldwork. For example, the mean age of employees was significant in relation to organisational well-being activity: the higher the mean age of the employees in the organisations surveyed, the lower the well-being activity of the organisation, and vice versa. This could indicate that companies are adopting more proactive human resource management in order to attract and retain younger workers, who according to previous studies (for example, Lester and Kickull 2001) have higher expectations and demands towards the employers than previous generations.

Each of the selected organisations needs to be understood as a different location of practice, a different organisational world, with different histories and influences on well-being and its understanding and construction among different groups of employees representing different age-generations and different organisational generations. The case organisations thus provided with very different starting points for the fieldwork. Even if they had been selected on the basis of quantitative analysis, the case organisations were everything but similar even within the same category or field of business. In order to clarify the characteristics of the organisations studied in the portraits of practice phase, we provide a short summary on each sector. In the electronics sector we selected three case companies (E1, E2, E3). E1 is large and part of a multinational corporation. E2 is medium-sized, and part of a multinational corporation with its headquarters in Finland. E3 is a small, relatively recently founded, and specialised electronics company in Southern Finland. The companies had all gone through different kinds of organisational changes in recent years. E1 had conducted formal negotiations between employer and employees on possible redundancies in 2008. E2 had gone through a merger few years back, involving confrontations between employees of different company origins, and between management and employees, thus creating continuing fractions among and between different employee groups. E3, a rather typical family business employing family and friends, had grown rapidly and continued to grow during the time between the survey and fieldwork. In the finance sector there were two case companies

(F1, F2). Both had faced harsh economic times a few years earlier, with formal negotiations between the employer and employees on possible redundancies. F1 was a large company, a subsidiary part of a multinational corporation; F2 was a smaller independent company, bought up from foreign owners by a group of employees, thus saving it from bankruptcy. In the care sector we have two case companies (C1, C2). C1 was a relatively small care and educational institution that was recently subject to reorganisation with two of the units being administratively combined into one. C2 was a large healthcare organisation comprising many units dispersed over a wide geographical area and employing thousands of people, and facing many restructurings over the previous decade. The care sector had a complex relation to the economic situation, leading to both more demand and potential work, yet restricting resources. Finally, in the tourism sector there are two case companies (T1, T2). T1 is one of the largest tourist companies in Finland that had instituted a large amount of development work on improving its work processes. T2 was a hotel and conference centre which had faced growing economic uncertainty.

The more detailed fieldwork involved qualitative data gathering through interviews (n=53), informal conversations, observations, and field notes in order to get a more complete perception of the chosen case organisations. In each of the organisations, between 5 and 7 interviews of between 45 and 90 minutes were conducted at different levels of the organisations. In particular, the interviews involved both general questions on what facilitates and hinders well-being in the studied organisation, together with the use of a key method, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan 1954; Chell 1998; Hettlage and Steinlin 2006), to especially focus on well-being in their workplace in relation to: i. economic and/or personnel growth of the organisation; ii. issues of age and/or generation; and iii. one other well-being-related area (e.g. health, equality, rights) of their choice. This data was then triangulated with the survey and extensive documentary data (such as **seminar presentations**, **personnel plans**, **health and occupational safety guidelines**, **gender equality plans**, **corporate annual reports**, **guidelines for discussions after returning to work after absence**), and by analytical discussions among the researchers.

Discursive talk

The analysis of the interviews and the qualitative fieldwork more generally has been conducted in several phases. First, before the interview a proforma was completed about the organisation based on the survey data, and during and after the interview a second proforma about the individual respondent

(n=52) was filled in during the interview. After the interviews, the researchers had analytical discussions about the interviews. These discussions were taped and transcribed as an aid in analysis. The researchers involved also read all the interview transcripts, including those where they had not been present. The interviews have been listened and re-listened to, read and re-read several times, in order to gain better understandings of and multiple perspectives on the data (see McCracken 1988; Saunders et al. 2000; Tilley 2003; Silverman 2005; Mann 2011; Jacobsson and Åkerström 2012). During this process, the content of the interviews has been analysed, by linking what has been said to the themes arising on how the respondents talk about different thematic areas, along with other themes arising from the interviews and analytical discussions between the researchers.

In this process, we applied the idea from a method called the 'substance-method' to group the data in different groupings according to their qualities and characteristics (Eneroth 1984: 141). Here data is summarised into qualities in discursive talk, which in their turn provide a name or a framing to the phenomenon that is researched. This method helped us to find the groupings for the analysis of discursive talk. We used this as an instrument even if we were not looking for new ways of defining the issues in hand but for alternative ways of conceptualising them discursively. We were not looking for 'ideal types' or seeking to 'label' everything. We simply listened to the respondents' talk and later began to code the repeated themes in the transcripts. For this specific paper, the focus is on talk that was about age and generation, and how this interconnected articulations of everyday organisational life. Thus, for this paper we especially looked at data deriving from those parts of the interviews where the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to ask about age and generation in the organisation.

Five main forms of discursive talk about age and generation were identified. We use the term 'discursive talk' here as we have concerned with explicit and implicit talk, and with silence, but also with wider observations and visible signs. The main forms are: physical restrictions; retirement issues; age diversity as strength; lack of a particular age group; and silence on age/age as a non-issue. Table 2 presents the main forms of discursive talk. Different interviewees in the same organisation can present talk belonging to several different categories.

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Table 2 here

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Physical restrictions: the negative talk of embodied labour process

The issues of physical restrictions in conducting work tasks that become visible for ageing employees in some organisations were spoken of in five of the nine case organisations and in three of the four sectors, these being: electronics, tourism, and care. In electronics, the blue-collar work is mostly done in assembly lines, with some physically heavier phases of the labour process. This field is still very much male-dominated. The static nature of the work makes it very demanding; there is a lot of standing in everyday work. Also, in one of the case organisations, work processes were changed due to a merger, so that people could circulate between different work locations. However, this actually reduced the ergonomic quality of the work, as personal adjustments were too slow to carry out with the intensified pace of work, where the phases were clocked and closely measured. Additionally, some of the work tasks demanded precision, and consequently in some age-related deteriorated eyesight slowed down the work. This is illustrated in the following:

> *"Like yesterday when we were working in the lab, John [name changed] who is pushing fifty complained that he can't really see the smallest parts that should be joined with solder, and how it would be good to have an assistant with a sharp eyesight. So far I'm ok, but let's see in ten years [laughter]."* (E3, interview 2)

Physical restrictions in conducting work tasks, especially compared to age, were also talked about and indeed visible in one of the tourism case companies. The case organisation was a conference venue and hotel with a relatively small staff. The cleaning staff consisted of female workers. The staff enjoyed good morale, and the age as such was not presented a central issue, but the team leader for the cleaning staff defined the problem as follows:

> *"It is, because that's physically heavy, well, let's say like this: age does show in every kind of work, that all our floor maids are under fifty, all of them, you can't …, a few a bit older have tried to, but it's too heavy, they just can't do it."* (T2, interview 1)

Thus, the negative representations of age and ageing are, in these examples, constructed in the intersections of embodiment with work, class, labour process and occupational divisions. We also note here that there are important intersections of age with ethnicity, racialisation and migrant status in many organisations, often implicitly so, and even when white (Finnish) ethnicity is taken-for-granted. Only one of the interviews, this in the electronics sector, was conducted with a non-Finn, and even this person was a highly educated European fitting easily into the male-dominated, homogenous organisation with mostly relatively young, male engineers working long and demanding hours. In many ways, such organisations exclude on the basis of gender, age, education and class, and often also

ethnicity. Intersections of age with ethnicity, racialisation and migrant status demand more analysis in future research.

Retirement issues: gendered generational embodied ageism

Although the issue of retirement was articulated in all the case organisations, discussing age in relation to past, ongoing or upcoming retirement among employees was not easy or straightforward. In the finance sector, the issue of retirement had been discussed previously and was presented very undramatically. However, at the time of the interviews it was not very much on the agenda in the companies. In the care sector, the issue of retirement was ongoing but without intense emotions being apparent; it was merely seen as the natural circle at the organisation: older workers retiring and younger ones constantly entering the organisation. In tourism, one of the case companies had older workers who were about to retire.

The other case company in tourism had experienced some years earlier the retirement of the previous CEO on the grounds of ill-health and, dramatically, his death the same morning we came there to conduct the interviews. Within the electronics organisations, there were some examples and experiences of laying off older workers when economic times were harsh, and indeed the most obvious cases of ageism were apparent in this sector.

> *"Q: So, it was not an issue, who had been longer in the house, or..?"*
>
> *A: Not really, not at least with everyone: those who have come later have been the ones who got to stay. But of course, I guess they did try to see if anyone was close to 58 or 59, or wherever the so called 'retirement pipe' starts. But the last ones to leave there were five people who left, … yes, they were close to 63, so they kind of retired. So, that was sort of checked, that are they close to retirement, but on the other hand, not that many was, the age structure is such, that, it just didn't work very well every time."* (E2, interview 5)

And another example from the same company:

> *"Of course now during the recession, maybe many of the older ones were cast away because many of them were retiring anyway, and as the oldest one who was allowed to stay on the first round was 67. Last spring when we first let people go that person was not put away but now when we had the second round in the turn of the year we had to;*

we could not argue why, if the skills level is the same, one who is in retirement age is not put away if a 50-year-old is put away instead, who really then is in a difficult position in the employment market." (E2, interview 1)

The issue of ageism can be connected to gender, and this seemed to be so in the case organisation where ageism was most apparent:

"The, kind of, culture of open communication is in many situations missing completely. On the other hand, there is this attitude that nowadays everyone has to have a good time at work'; well, there is a very strong old boys' network culture here: when a bloke has worked here for twenty years, even if he would not be qualified to the next level, but as he has worked here for so long, he is promoted. New strength is not necessarily sought outside of the organisation." (E2, interview 4)

Here, age and ageing are seen more clearly in relation to both gender and generation, both age-generations and organisational generations. The question of retirement, actual and upcoming, intersects very intimately and delicately with gender and embodiment. It can also intersect with the pressures of self-presentations, bodies and beauty ideals, and the thrive to sustain a youthful image in the organisation. The lengthening of careers, now a topical political issue, relates closely to aspects of gendered ageism in organisational processes and practices. National policy objectives of lengthening of working life, in Finland as in other similar societies, often intersect, even collide, with various forms of ageism and gendered ageism in specific workplaces.

Lack of an age group: the loss of "missing generations"

In both electronics and finance, the economic recession of the early 1990s led to longstanding prohibitions on recruitment in many organisations, which in turn produced a specific form of age structure in these organisations, with what can be called "missing generations" in some business fields and organisations. The missing age group is in their 40s, the so-called '(Late-)Generation X'. This is a very interesting phenomenon, which needs more attention in research. This generation was also largely if not totally missing in the older and larger electronics company as well as in both of the financial case companies (F1 and F2). Further, the main part of the employees in the smallest and youngest of the case companies in the Electronics sector belonged to Generation Y and were male, The organisation also heavily relied on the 'ideal worker'-model, young male employees who had no

other obligations and who could form a coherent organisational generation working together and spending free time together. Additionally, there were a few older men in the organisation, who were seen as 'masters' in the field. Generational distance was visible and, in this case, family dynamics were important, as the CEO had the support of his father, 'the master'. Though not often explicitly articulated, this contrasts with the optimistic potentiality found rather widely around diverse ages and generations.

Age and generation are here articulated as or through absence, that is grounded in past economic differentiations and social divisions. Seen intersectionally, age and generation are inseparable from organisational dynamics and specifically the economic employment relations. To put this another way, age and generation have a long memory, sometimes tainted with sadness and loss, even melancholy and nostalgia, which themselves may carry a more or less articulated ethnic or national(istic) subtexts.

Age/generation diversity as strength: optimistic potentiality

In many of the case organisations, age and generation diversity was seen as strength. Employees of different ages were said to complement each other, with in some cases more or less formal mentor–mentee relations. However, these kinds of arrangements and broader constructions of work and organisation function with varying success.

The following quotes are from one of the finance case companies:

> *"I feel that I am in that sense in a lucky situation that, we three who sit here, there is one student who is even younger than I am, but then I have an older colleague; she is 55."* (F2, interview 5)

The interviewee continues and refers to the older colleague, who was in a supervising position towards him:

> *"In my case, I think we complement each other very well. I don't want to make this into a gender-issue, but both because she is a woman and I am a man, and that she is a bit older and I'm a bit younger, this is a good combination and it gives good results."* (F2, interview 5)

Also in the care sector, the different ages were seen to complement each other. The same easiness that was apparent in relation to retirement issues was visible even here: the organisation seemed to in some

ways represent the circle of life, and both retiring and new employees were equally valued, perhaps partly due to a lack of workforce in this heavily expanding sector. Younger and older workers had different strengths and weaknesses, mainly in older generations' hands-on experience of the care work and younger generations' technological skills, and both were valued at work.

> "When we do things together, we'll get it, the best results." (C2, interview 7)

> "[…] that's the way it is; youngsters can handle that [technology] and, on the other hand, the older ones have the know-how there [in the practical care work]." (C2, interview 7)

In one of the organisations (E2) there was a strong ethos of "'them' and 'us'" after a merger, which can be a factor that further strengthens the organisational generations in that organisation. The assessment of organisational generations complements age-generations by focusing on the organisation and its members, the history, length of individual service in the organisation, seniority, knowledge, expertise and indispensability. It also consists of the collective memory of organisations including organisational myths, gossip and rumours, issues around social embeddedness, commitment and organisational citizenship. It can also have relevance for working relations and relationships among colleagues.

In many cases different ages were easily seen to complement each other and create positive learning loops and synergies. A typical quote from the electronics sector is:

> "… […] I guess some issues appear due to the age differences, but … I would consider it in our case more as richness than a restriction." (Case E2, interview 4)

It is very hard to avoid seeing this kind of optimistic potentiality of age and generational diversity as paralleling other organic assumed harmonies, most obviously gender, often with an assumed heterosexual complementarity (Cockburn 1988). Such a discourse on complementarity is not necessarily a conservative position, but it does tend to emphasise or presuppose seeing age and generation (and aged and generational people) in relatively essentialised postionings, rather than in terms of how people do *not* fit presupposed aged and generational characteristics. Such a latter construction would indeed represent a rather more interesting way of articulating diversity of age and generation. To be clear, this form of discursive talk is not necessarily about the harmony of specific diverse ages and generations in the organisation in question, but rather a way of talking about age and generation.

Silence about age: age as a non-issue

The previous form of discursive talk where age and its diversity was constructed as positive overlaps to some extent with that where age was regarded a non-issue. The difference between these ways of presenting age was that when regarded as non-issue, the issue was presented as what might appear neutrally or even avoided. With questions of age and generation, as with other social categories, there can also be silences instead of explicit verbal or written in formal organisational policies and practices; thus in some instances these are better seen as discursive silences. The same can also be said of some instances in everyday organisational life. Silence can be used to fade out the meanings of representations and subject positions of different dominant or oppressed categories (Holvino 2010), and organisations can be presented as seemingly equal and fair by avoiding discussion of the intersections of social categories, such as age.

In a discursive sense, silence can also be seen as sometimes verbal; by talking about something one can avoid talking about something else that is 'easier' being avoided or presented in a different manner, thus being silent about problematic or uncomfortable issues. The unspoken or silenced is constructed within and outside of organisation, as part of the unspoken forces of organisational worlds, and have a powerful effect even in the non-existence of what is said (Hearn and Parkin 2001). This is a powerful discourse within many organisations, including in some of the case organisations. Here, age and generation are overridden, intersectionally (if only implicitly), by other articulated divisions, such as gender, or obscured through implicitly aged/generational organisational euphemisms such as know-how, position, experience, commitment, recruitment, promotion, appraisal, talent management, even simply occupation. This is an important perspective that needs much further exposition.

Concluding discussion

This paper has addressed aspects of age and generational relations that were most explicit and visible in our qualitative research on work and well-being in four Finnish growth sectors. The most frequent used forms were: physical restrictions; retirement issues; age diversity as strength; lack of an age group; as well as various forms of silence and avoidance. Even though not always foregrounded, age and generation were an important focus in the respondents' narratives on their workplace. In many

cases these forms of discursive talk were linked to assumed effects on organisational change, well-being, relation to working life stay and everyday organisational life.

In some narratives age and generation were a combined or composite construction, while in some there were also embedded tensions between groups and individuals on this issue. Age and experience were often valued, but age was also sometimes seen mainly in terms of physical restrictions for tasks related to some work and occupations in the case organisations. On the other hand, generations were also sometimes seen as a form of a 'mental state' that is closely combined to both collective generational features, such as collective memory, as well as life phases more generally.

In this analysis we have aimed to make four main contributions: empirical, policy, intersectional, theoretical. First, we contribute to the growth of empirical studies on age and generation at work and in organisations, what is still the relatively neglected area of study. The social meanings and constructions of age and generation, and their interrelations vary considerably in different workplace contexts. Moreover, the dynamics and intersections about and around age and generation in organisations are complex, multi-dimensional, and sometimes contradictory, such as the dynamics of two-fold ageism directed to both those older and those younger. Within this discursive talk, ageism, itself a double-sided form of discrimination potentially towards both older and younger people, becomes visible in some instances.

Secondly, we seek to contribute at the policy level, in terms of the management of age-related and generation-related issues is a challenge that needs much greater attention in work innovation. It is a key element in innovating in and around work and workplaces, and likely to become more so in the future, in terms of reducing ageism and developing work practices sensitive to age and generation. Even if Houlihan's (2007) idea of understanding and recognising the special features, needs and demands of each generation in order to be able to manage them well can be difficult to realise in everyday working life in workplaces, understanding some of their differences and collective features can be helpful. A possible implication of this is that combining generationally-sensitive management with understanding organisational generations can improve the organising and managing working life.

Thirdly, we have sought to contribute to theorising on intersectional relations in and around organisations. More specifically, we want to promote critical analyses of how age, age-based generations and organisational generations intersect with gender and other social categories in the everyday organisational life and organisational change. These intersections affect well-being at work, positively or negatively, and are thus important in both managerial and national policy development. It is partly for these reasons that we have chosen to work with the concept of organisational

generations, which includes aspects other than age-related generational features. Age, age-related generations and organisational generations are conceptually distinct, but do overlap in the everyday practices of organisations. Even though organisational ageism is one of the less visible gendered mechanisms (Gorman and Kmec 2007), gendered ageing and gendered ageism necessarily prompt intersectional analyses to age, generation and organisations. Furthermore, such discriminatory processes are contradictory to the national governmental goals and visions of lengthening the work-life of the ageing population. Thus one part of an intersectional approach is the specification of not only gender and class, but also both age-generations that seem dependent on life course and biological or body time, and also organisational generations that are specific to the organisation in question and are dependent on organisational time.

Another intersectional aspect to ageing is that blue-collar work increasingly done by ethnic minorities in Finland. This is visible (at least) in two ways: first, increasingly, ethnic minority blue-collar workers are partly replacing ageing blue-collar workers of white Finnish ethnicity; secondly; the ageing population in Finland is increasingly cared for by minority ethnic workers. Analyses of such changes need to be developed further in order to avoid simplistic assumptions and stereotypes connected to age, ethnicity and generation and their intersections with other social categories.

A final area of contribution concerns the foregrounding and deconstruction of age and generation (and their neglect) at the (meta-)level of organisational and managerial discourse, and academic analysis of organisations and management. Just as gender was once largely invisible in organisation studies, now it is seems that age and generation are often less than fully articulated in analysis or are presented through supposedly more 'neutral' concepts, such as cohorts or succession. Age and generation still largely remain a non-issue at a meta-level of organisational and managerial discourse, and academic analysis of organisations and management. Age and generation in workplaces are still heavily naturalised and normalised at a very fundamental level, as part of the life course of people and of organisations. How indeed is it that many, perhaps most, organisations have a very clear aged and generational structure, yet this is not part of everyday organisational discourse nor organisational analysis? Transforming everyday and academic knowledges, discourses and practices in these respects is the longer term and unfinished project.

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Table 1. Generations and gender contracts

GENERATION	BORN	DISCURSIVE FEATURES	DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER CONTRACT
Traditionalists	1925-1945	Disciplined, respect for rules and regulations, authority towards manager	Gendered roles in both private (public) sphere
'Baby-Boomers'	Early Boomers: 1946-1951 Late Boom 1952-1959	Commitment to work, loyalty to employer, tendencies of workaholics w introduced 'presenteeism', prefer to be as equals, competitive, affected by change individuals, e.g. 'sexual revolution'	Gendered roles in both private a public; the sexual revolution an rise of a new gender contract
'Generation X'	Early Xers: 1960-1970 Late Xers: 1971-1980	"Latchkey kids" treated as friends rathe children by their parents, self- individuals, who grew up questioning authority and parents' workaholism, desire balance be work and life	Awareness, gender equality as important value; clashes in real
'Generation Y'	1980-1999	The internet- generation. Less process outcome focused, sense of morality an duty, viewing work as contract, not calling	Ignorance as gender equality as 'self-evident', less attention; clashes in real life

Table 2 Forms of 'discursive talk about age and generation' in the case organisations

Physical restrictions	Retirement issues	Lack of an age group	Age/generation diversity as strength	Silence on age/age as a non-issue
E1, E2, E3, T2, C1, C2	E1, E2, T1, T2, C1, C2, F1, F2	E1, E2, F1, F2	E2, F1, F2, C1, C2	E1, E3, T1, T2