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# **Researching ‘older’ hotel and restaurant workers: challenges and issues**

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**Key Words:** ‘Older’ Workers; Ageing; Ageism; Age Discrimination; Hotel and Restaurants

## **Abstract**

Due to the changing demographic nature of the workforce and potential labour pool shortages in the hotel and restaurant industry, research needs to be undertaken into ‘older’ hotel and restaurant workers. It would be beneficial for the hotel and restaurant industry to employ more ‘older’ workers. Researching ‘older’ workers is extremely complex and there are three key areas that consist of challenges which researchers need to acknowledge and face. These are the areas of ageism and age discrimination; defining an ‘older’ worker; and perceived and subjective ageing. These challenges become ever more salient when researching ‘older’ workers within the hotel and restaurant industry. These challenges and issues require careful consideration and an explanation of the possible approaches to confront these and generate an understanding which will genuinely reflect ‘older’ workers in today’s society.

## **1. Introduction**

The UK government and academics acknowledge the existence of age discrimination in employment (for example, The Carnegie Inquiry into the Third Age, 1993; dti, 2003; Taylor and Walker, 1998; Snape and Redman, 2003). However, compared to other forms of discrimination, relatively little research has been undertaken into the workplace experiences of 'older' workers. Age discrimination in employment is not uncommon. A report on ageism in Britain by Age Concern England, revealed that more people (29%) had suffered from age discrimination than any other form of discrimination (Age Concern England, 2005). The British government believes ageism and age discrimination to be a problem, stating that it is "bad for the individual, bad for business and bad for the economy" (Department for Work and Pensions, 2005, p. 19). However, as highlighted by Loretto et al (2006), a change in legislation, policies and practices to encourage a more favourable view of 'older' workers may not be enough to eliminate ageism in the workplace as the complexities surrounding 'older' workers are not considered realistically. Offering programmes for 'older' workers is only part of the solution. 'Older' workers have to want to take part in and connect with the initiatives (Hewitt, 2009).

Compared to younger adults, 'older' workers are disadvantaged in the labour force and this is due to stereotypical views about older employees (Harris, 1990). Hotels and restaurants employ a predominantly 'young' workforce (Kersley et al, 2006) and much of the industry is style obsessed, such as designer bars, boutique hotels and celebrity-chef restaurants. The industry seems to be particularly ageist and employers seem determined to discriminate on the basis of age (Clark, 2000, p.24).

This paper will discuss the changing demographic nature of the population and 'older' people in the workforce. It will then provide an exploration of three key areas to be considered when researching the employment of 'older' people in hotels and restaurants, namely ageism and age discrimination, defining an 'older' worker and perceived and subjective ageing. Addressing these challenges is paramount in taking the research within this field forward and understanding how the misinformation regarding age may cause certain attitudes and stereotypes (Peeters and Emmerik, 2008)

## **2. The changing demographic nature of the population and 'older' people in the workforce**

Europe's population is ageing. This is a result of increased life expectancy, falling rates of fertility, the effects of the "baby-boom" and migration movements (Commission of the European Communities, 2002). Of all regions of the world, Europe will be the most affected by population ageing with the number of people in the 50-64 age group increasing by 26% in the period 1995-2015 (Taylor, 2001, p.1). Figures for the crude birth rate for EU27 show a decline from 19.2% in 1960-1965 to 10.2% for 200-2005 (Eurostat, 2008). This declining fertility rate is the result of a complex range of factors that include women having children later in life, an increase in the number of childless women, higher rates of female participation in the labour market, higher divorce rates, more women in higher education and increased costs of child rearing (Hollywood, Brown, Danson and McQuaid, 2003). One of the main factors affecting population ageing in Europe is increased life expectancy and it is forecasted that, for the UK, the life expectancy for a female will increase from 81.1 years in 2005 to 86.6 years in 2050 and a male will increase from 76.6 years to 82.9 years (Eurostat 2008).

Economic activity rates of men aged 50 and older have declined remarkably in OECD countries over the last thirty years (Duncan, 2003) with participation rates for “older” males in OECD countries falling, on average, between 29% and 30% in the period 1970-1990 (Desmond, 2000, p. 241). In the UK, as is the case with most OECD countries, employment of people aged 50 and over declined sharply since the 1970s, although the number of people aged 50 and over in employment in the UK increased by 650,000 in the period 1998 to 2002 (Disney and Hawkes, 2003). Employment rates for ‘older’ people vary greatly in the UK with activity rates being considerably higher in Southern England and lower in Scotland, Wales and Northern England (Brown and Danson, 2003). Furthermore, it is probable that occupation will greatly influence employment opportunities. Therefore, ‘older’ professional and managerial workers may have the opportunity of working part-time after retirement whilst “manual workers with grotty jobs and few skills often lack the opportunity, or desire, to work past their 50s” (The Guardian, 02/12/03).

According to the OECD (2006), population ageing is one of the main challenges facing OECD countries. The three Ps, namely Population, Productivity and Participation, are essential in order to address population ageing. The principal negative impact of an ageing population on GDP per capita growth concerns the decline in the size of the “prime-working” population (those aged 20-64) and an increase in the size of the ‘older’ and ‘younger’ age groups (OECD, 2006). One way of addressing this issue would be to extend the working lives for ‘older’ people. In terms of productivity, a decline in the prime-working population can be reduced by permanently increasing the labour productivity of all workers (OECD, 2006). By increasing labour participation rates for ‘older’ workers, public finances would be increased, economic dependency ratios would be reduced and economic growth could potentially be enhanced (OECD, 2006).

### **3. Ageism and age discrimination in employment.**

Ageism is a form of oppression which arises from a social construction of old age (Biggs, 1993). Furthermore, ageism, as is the case with racism and sexism, pigeonholes people and does not represent peoples' unique ways of living. One of the earliest definitions of ageism was developed by Butler and Lewis (1973, p.127) who stated that it represents "the prejudices and stereotypes that are applied to older people sheerly on the basis of their age". Giddens (2000, p. 587) has defined ageism as "Discrimination or prejudice against a person on the grounds of age". This is similar to Glover and Branine's (2001, p.4) definition of ageism as "unconscionable prejudice and discrimination based on actual or perceived chronological age". Age discrimination sets older people apart as being different in a oversimplified and generalised way. It is a set of social relations which is used to discriminate against 'older' people (Minichiello, Browne and Kendig, 2000). Ageism is a set of beliefs and attitudes which portrays older people in a negative, stereotypical manner, reinforcing the fear of ageing (Hughes, 1995). It combines with globalization to stigmatize older people as rigid, bigoted and backward-looking (Glover, 2001).

Research on the perceptions of age discrimination in employment mainly concerns "professional" encounters, i.e. encounters in the workplace. However, these will be affected by the wider political, economic, socio-cultural and technological factors which will affect the social construction of ageing (Lucas, 2004). Within an organisation, discrimination can take one of three forms: individual discrimination, structural discrimination or organisational discrimination (Hollinshead, Nicholls and Tailby, 2003). Individual discrimination concerns prejudice demonstrated by one individual against another; structural discrimination results in certain groups being excluded due to certain practices (e.g. requirements for promotion) and organisational discrimination

reflects commonly-held beliefs about the suitability of certain groups for certain jobs (Hollinshead, Nicholls and Tailby, 2003). Much age discrimination in the workplace is subtle (Cooper and Torrington, 1981) and appears to be deeply embedded in the policies, practices and cultures of many organisations (Hollywood, Brown, Danson and McQuaid, 2003). Therefore, legislation alone cannot be expected to fundamentally change peoples' perceptions of older workers but can act as a catalyst to foster change.

#### **4. Defining an 'older' worker**

There is no certain point at which a person suddenly becomes 'older'. Individuals are always ageing and the changing shift of a person between being 'younger' and 'older' is a gradual incessant process, and, therefore, any calculation of this is very subjective (Stuart-Hamilton, 2000) Jenkins (2008) discusses the complexity of establishing this very moment a person becomes 'older' and how individuals may not even recognise themselves as being 'older', even though it may be more perceptible to other people. Therefore, not only does the researcher need to establish their own definition of an 'older' worker, but they also face the challenge of establishing what 'age' and 'older' means to the individual participants. In order to explore these challenges further it would be beneficial to firstly explore the concept of age.

It could be argued that the counting of age is in fact a social construction generated by society with the aim to create order (Ong et al, 2009). Branine and Glover (1999) discuss how, until more recent times, there were very few European and Middle Eastern societies that monitored peoples' ages and recorded birthdates and the ages of the population. In the twenty first century, age has become extremely important and society uses this as a method to divide the society and as an explanation for the differences between individuals. Age is highlighted in most areas of society, from work to leisure

pursuits and may often be an excuse for certain attitudes or behaviours. Age is a key concept used within our society, and, therefore, we need to also consider how changes in demographics may influence this construction. Powell et al (2007) explain that age, as a concept, was not of huge importance in the past as many people did not even reach the age of 70. It is, therefore, important that researchers consider the construction of age within society and explore how society may adjust to this (Powell et al 2007). Indeed, Powell and Hendricks (2009, p.85) state that “Part of recognising the diversity of ageing in a global world, is being attentive to its social construction within the context of moral and political economies.”

Regardless of the constructions surrounding age, a fact is that all humans are ageing. Powell and Wahidin (2008) state the three key attributes of age and ageing. The first attribute is that age is an ascribed status, whereby there is very little to no control over the ageing process. We are all ageing, and despite the best efforts of health, science and psychology to slow this process down, it is inherent that we will all age. The second attribute highlighted by Powell and Wahidin (2008) is that the ageing process is always transitional. Thirdly, a key attribute of age is that we will all occupy different positions through life. An individual is never just ‘older’ alone. They will have once been ‘younger’ and may still occupy the ‘younger’ position when other people are ‘older’ than themselves. Universal ageing and probabilistic ageing are features that individuals will have within certain age groups (Stuart-Hamilton, 2000). Universal features are ones which all people within an age group share, whereas probabilistic features are ones that not all people at a certain age have but they may be more likely than other age groups to get (Stuart-Hamilton 2000). ‘Older’ people will have universal features such as an increase in wrinkles, and the probabilistic features such as arthritis (Stuart-Hamilton 2000).

In order to understand “age” and “ageing” for research it is paramount that the ageing process is explored. Chronological age is often used to distinguish the ageing position of individuals, however, there are complications with considering this alone, from a constructionist perspective as explained previously, but more importantly as a research tool to categorise participants (Stuart-Hamilton 2000). Before these complications can be understood, another method to categorise age needs to be considered. This is through functional age (Stuart-Hamilton 2000). A person’s functional age consists of three key areas: psychological age; biological age; and social age (Stuart-Hamilton 2000). The biological age is the physical aspect of a person and this degenerates as a person reaches ‘old’ age (Stuart-Hamilton 2000). Biological age includes the shell of the body, body cells, functioning of bodily systems, sensory systems, nervous system and the neuronal changes (Stuart-Hamilton, 2000). The psychological ageing process is the changes in personality, identity and mental functioning as the age of a person changes (Morgan and Kunkel, 1998). The social ageing process includes the life-cycle process and acceptance within certain societal groups based on the age (Morgan and Kunkel, 1998).

Despite psychological, social and biological ageing being segmented as separate processes, it is in fact arguable that, as individuals are multifaceted, they should be viewed as inseparable (Sabelli and Sugarman, 2003), and be discussed under the umbrella of functional age. Functional age, as a method to measure the ages of participants, may be viewed as providing a more accurate picture than chronological age, but this too comes with complications.

Once the researcher has understood the complexity of the concept of age and the ageing process, they need to establish what an ‘older’ worker is. As briefly mentioned, there are two key methods to define an ‘older’ worker. This could be using chronological ageing as a framework or functional ageing. Chronological ageing has its advantages in

that it is easily measurable and can separate between participants simply by setting chronological boundaries. For example, many researchers and government statistics categorise 'older' workers as aged 50 years and older (e.g., Loretto, Vickerstaff and White, 2005; OECD, 2004). However, ageing is a multidimensional process and just because a person has a chronological age within a boundary this does not mean they inherently are 'older' (Van der Heijden et al, 2008). Functional age cannot be ignored and hand in hand with chronological age it can provide more realistic and genuine findings for researchers. Combining chronological age with functional age is extremely complex but can allow recognition of the diversity of ageing if the construction of age is also considered (Powell and Hendricks 2009). Hazan (2009) supports the viewpoint that categorising 'older' workers by simply their chronological age is not necessarily the reality of society and workplaces. They state that:

*“The category of the old is not equivalent to the elderly themselves. ‘Old age’ is a symbolic space instilled in everyday language and demeanour, perpetuated by organisations and social policies and embroidered in popular culture.” (Hazan 200, p.61)*

Despite the researcher opting to use chronological boundaries or functional boundaries, a further challenge becomes apparent. Each participant is an individual and will have their own self-concept of age regardless of whether or not they are viewed by others as 'older' (Ong et al, 2009). Therefore, the researcher needs to take account of perceived and subjective ageing.

## **5. Perceived and subjective ageing**

Individuals change with their chronological and functional processes. However, despite these changes, they may not perceive themselves as 'older' workers (Peeters and

Emmerik, 2008). Andrews (2009, p.75) agrees and further explains that “each of us over time develops a personal model of what ageing means.” This model of ageing may often create internalised perceptions of what it means to be an ‘older’ worker, and subsequently the awareness of policies and issues such as ageism (Loretto and White, 2006).

There are many individual differences that play a key role upon a person’s perceived age of themselves and of others. According to Heijden et al (2008) everyone takes individual paths by which experiences are created and felt at various stages of a person’s life. These experiences then forge attitudes and perceptions, which in turn impact upon their subjective views on ageing. These views and perception may be susceptible to change as a person experiences change or moves through the ageing lifecycle. Therefore, consideration of the environments and social spaces within which people are ageing needs considering in order to truly understand ageing and what it means to the people that are ageing (Chapman 2009).

Despite governments and employers implementing policies and practices to create inclusion for ‘older’ workers, it is the media and society at large that need to ensure ‘older’ workers are valued and understood. Currently ‘older’ workers are portrayed to be far less skilled than research on ageing processes has found them to be (Buyens et al, 2009). This is emphasised by McKelvey (2009) who states that:

*“Just as employers, policy makers and social movements created the idea of labour force exit in old age through retirement, so globalisation reconstructs ideas about aged workers in ways that are likely to have equally large consequences.”*

There are defined expectations of an 'older' worker and these will shape the way an individual behaves in accordance with their age (Powell and Wahidin, 2008). Sabelli et al (2003, p.767) emphasise that "...ageing is accelerated by social norms and their psychological introjections." These expectations will not only be based on age alone, but their age relative to their ethnicity, gender, family structure and socio-demographics (Urwin 2006; Sabelli et al, 2003).

Researching 'older' workers in terms of their functional age would be extremely complex and may have many ethical issues attached. However, the functional age of individuals is always under the spotlight and is often used by society to distinguish between age groups. The biological, cognitive and psychological conditions of an individual are judged by others to establish and categorise the age. An individual whose attributes have declined further than is deemed appropriate for their age is often criticised far more than a person whose functional processes are less declined than their chronological age. Often people are unaware of one another's ages, so through functional aspects, particularly looks and attitudes assumptions are made (Stuart-Hamilton, 2000).

Society has now started to put further pressure on workers to look functionally 'younger' than their chronological age. It is now becoming more accessible to have the image and attitude to be viewed as 'younger' due to a more non-interventionist and tolerant society. As Andrews (2009, p.76) states:

*"Although we live in a society which constructs ageing as inevitable decline, at the same time, we are told what we can do to stop this process, or at least hold it at bay, for instance, by purchasing a wide range of anti-ageing products."*

Despite many believing that these advances are positive they are in fact detrimental for many as there is an even greater expectation that all should 'look good for their age' as opposed to being themselves naturally and taking the ageing process for what it is. As Powell and Biggs (2004, p.18) argue "the rationalisation of key areas of older people's lives has brought with it self care and better health, on the one hand, but also domination by professional control." This can be acknowledged through the way organisations and others in society expect 'older' workers to look and act younger than their chronological and functional boundaries. Moody (2006) explains that overall these advances allow social behaviour to change and how we view ageing and leave behind previous stereotypes of what is 'appropriate' for older workers.

## **6. 'Older' hotel and restaurant workers**

The challenge of researching 'older' workers becomes ever more complex when undertaking it in hotels and restaurants. The industry is renowned for its aesthetic labour and coupling with a predominantly young workforce and negative stereotypes, it is an industry which may be viewed as ageist. The industry will be largely affected by the changing demographics of an ageing population, particularly in the UK. The industry has a high labour turnover and is extremely labour intensive. The quality of the labour is also vital as the industry is within a highly turbulent and competitive environment. Hotels and restaurants have often relied upon 'younger' migrant workers to fill any labour shortages but due to the changes in migrant shifts this may no longer be a viable option. Therefore the employment of 'older' workers has become of paramount importance. Despite the industry being aware of this, a fundamental issue is to whether or not 'older' workers want to be part of the industry. Due to the ageist stereotypes surrounding hotels and restaurants this may pose difficulties for employees in

encouraging 'older' workers to be a part of the team, even though the industry can offer many benefits for 'older' workers such as flexible hours.

The industry creates its own ideologies that younger people are more suitable for job roles and portrays this through not only the high ratios of 'younger' workers employed, but also through representations of 'younger' workers as more energetic and suited to the industry, through both visual and textual descriptions in the media and advertising. These ideologies are deeply embedded in organisational cultures as well as society, so even though the industry has recognised the need for older workers and makes attempts to change these ideologies, the perceptions and attitudes still exist.

As previously discussed, defining who is an 'older' worker is a complex and problematic area for researchers. This becomes ever more salient within hotels and restaurants. Neither chronological nor functional boundaries may have any reflection whatsoever on what constitutes an 'older' hotel and restaurant worker. Ageing in the hotel and restaurant industry is very different from ageing in other occupations and in society. This deserves a more detailed analysis of why and how this may be the case.

Individuals occupy different positions in life and work. Within an occupation an ageing position is often created dependant on the average ages and expectations in particular job roles. Social construction becomes crucial in how ages are viewed within different occupations. An example of this could be the different conceptions of age between teaching and restaurants. Within the teaching occupation an 'older' workers has the positive image of being wiser with greater experience than their 'younger' colleagues. This is a stark contrast to restaurant workers whereby 'younger' employees are often viewed in a more favourable light for being more energetic, willing to learn and aesthetically suitable.

To research into the industry the most appropriate selection method would be for the participants to self categorise whereby they perceive themselves to be older and therefore self-select on that basis. However, many of the hotel and restaurant workers who subjectively view themselves as 'older' may in fact only be early on in their working life cycle. This is usually highly dependant upon the average ages and maturity of the rest of their workforce.

Within the industry it may be that self selected 'older' workers may in fact only be chronologically 'older' than their 'younger' colleagues by as little as a few years. This however, can be the start of a functional ageing cycle. Initially due to stereotypes, ideologies and 'lookist' attitudes embedded within the industry, an individual may start feeling 'older'. This in turn could result in these psychologically feelings to impend upon their biological age. Psychologically feeling 'older' could start the employee feeling biologically 'older' and less able than their 'younger' colleagues despite the fact that they may be no different biologically. This can then impinge upon their social age. Due to this functional circle, perceptions and subjective views are generated throughout the workplace. This becomes embedded and more salient as time goes by. These internalised perceptions of what it means to be an 'older' restaurant worker impacts upon each individuals model of ageing.

The environment and social space surrounding 'older' restaurant workers is far more multifarious and will impinge greatly upon the complexities already inherent. There are variations of the types of hotels and restaurants, such as ethnicity, standard of service, target markets and ownership. These areas will either add or subtract from the complexity of the challenges and issues regarding the research of 'older' hotel and restaurant workers. Another differentiating factor could be the variation of job roles

within hotels and restaurants. Being in a 'low-skilled' job role could create a greater level of ageist perceptions than an 'older' worker in a managerial job role.

These variations of context may also impinge upon the perceptions of younger or older workers. For example, in fine dining restaurants there is a greater number of older workers employed, and the perception of these older workers tends to be of a more positive stance, such as greater reliability and far more experience. However, in many aesthetically driven restaurants such as mid-marker restaurant chains, the perceptions of older workers are of a more negative nature, playing off stereotypes and stigma of being less enthusiastic and having slower service skills. The differences in context can be viewed throughout the hospitality industry, where being older may be viewed as an advantage or a disadvantage.

In continuation from the effects of environmental and social space, the researcher needs to also consider how the social norms and introjections are affected by further aspects such as gender and family structure. These aspects become ever more salient in hotels and restaurants. Being a parent or grandparent may not only have discursive implications of being 'older' but may also cause views that they are not as functionally efficient and flexible regardless of the workers chronological age.

These issues delve deeper in that some hotels and restaurant workers may feel caught in the middle of ageing conceptions as the boundary and personal model of age becomes ever more blurred. Whilst working within the industry they may feel older but outside their occupation they may categorise themselves as 'younger'. This can have huge effects on the workers as they may be aware of ageism and legislation designed to support 'older' workers but may not feel that it can apply to them. For example in Riach's (2008) research on 'older' workers, a 26 year old in the hospitality industry felt

they were an 'older' worker. However, government legislation using chronological boundaries may make 'older' workers of this age unaware of ageist attitudes towards them despite them *feeling* 'older' and consequently *acting* 'older' than their colleagues.

Hospitality managers will also need to consider these issues emerging in the future, and there can often be difficulties with managing an intergenerational workforce. As Brooke (2005) states:

“... the ways in which age-performance perceptions in organisations influence the age-segmentation of the labour force and generate tensions between different age groups of staff.” (Brook 2005:425)

Hospitality managers must attempt to gain an understanding of each generation, and how to manage these successfully. A strategy is required to create more integration between all employees of different ages. This could include the development of knowledge regarding the different generations for employees in order to create more favourable views of each generation (Hanks & Icenogle 2001). The limitations of older workers could be supported by younger workers, and in turn the limitations of younger workers supported by the older workers. It is paramount that managers and employees compliment each others strengths, and this may ease conflict between the generations.

Despite the hospitality manager facing these challenges, there is also the problematic issue of cognitive dissonance. Festinger's (1956) Cognitive dissonance theory explores how an individual cannot have two conflicting viewpoints. At some moment they must choose only one of the viewpoints in order to eradicate disharmony occurring. Once they have made this decision they will attempt to gather evidence in order to support this. In the hospitality industry, the two conflicting 'sides' can be established as a 'young' industry and an ageing workforce. Whichever side the manager or employees

chooses to be on, the stereotypes and ideologies may be used and manipulated as evidence of why the chosen side is the most effective decision. Cognitive dissonance can be a complex problem, and managers need to be aware of these complexities and will need to focus upon both the environment and stages of change within their organisation inseparably to avoid stress and resentment within the organisation (Burnes & James 1995).

## **7. Conclusion**

This article has attempted to identify and discuss the major challenges and issues concerned with researching 'older' workers in hotels and restaurants. It is clear from the discussion that many definitional ambiguities surround the topic of research into 'older' workers in hotels and restaurants, notwithstanding the difficulty of establishing when an employee becomes 'older'. This paper has argued for a "cultural" approach to be taken when researching 'older' hotel and restaurant workers. Therefore, in undertaking research into the employment of 'older' workers, a holistic approach is needed where old age is not seen solely as a biological fact but also a cultural fact (de Beauvoir, 1996). If research regarding 'older' workers is to advance and further seek these complexities of ageing, using chronological and functional definitions of age is not enough on its own. The perceived and subjective aspects surrounding 'older' workers needs to be explored, or at the very least acknowledged as a fundamental challenge. If research commits to this a new image of 'older' workers can be constructed which will genuinely reflect 'older' workers in today's society (Carrigan and Szmigan, 1999).

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