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Age work in organizations: Maintaining and disrupting institutionalised understandings of higher age

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Abstract

Age diversity research calls for new approaches in explaining the persistence of age inequalities, which integrate different levels of analysis and display greater context-sensitivity. Concurrently, neoinstitutionalist research interested in social inequalities calls for merging institutional theory with critical perspectives and to account for issues of power. In this study, we address the calls of both research streams through developing the concept of 'age work': the institutional work actors undertake on age as a social institution. Applying our novel concept to a multi-actor study of four German organizations known for their age management, we come across a counterintuitive insight regarding actors' age work: maintaining stereotypical age images can serve to counter age inequalities, whereas deconstructing age images can reinforce age inequalities. The multi-actor perspective of our study allows us to categorize different forms of power-laden and interest-driven age work and to portray the reproduction of age inequalities as a result of actors' age work, embedded in different contexts and complex power relations. Comparing employees' forms of age work across sectors and organizations, we detail how notions of masculinity as well as income and job security shaped the categorized forms of age work.

Key words: age diversity, institutional work, inequality, interests, power

Introduction

Age diversity studies provide manifold explanations for persisting age inequalities. Research on age stereotypes explains age discrimination at the workplace through ageist behaviour, yet seldom accounts for the broader context (Shiu, Hassan and Parry, 2015). Discourse-based age-research predominantly focuses on identity work and acts of resistance (Riach, Rumens and Tyler, 2014; Riach, 2007), but less frequently on related management practices (Spedale, Coupland and Tempest, 2014). Therefore, age diversity researchers (Thomas, Hardy, Cutcher and Ainsworth, 2014) call for a context-sensitive perspective on age and ageing in organizations, which combines the micro level of everyday (inter)actions with the macro level of societal cultural norms and power structures.

In our study, we respond to such a call through developing the concept of 'age work', understood as the institutional work of organizational actors to pursue their particular interests and to (de)legitimise age inequalities. Our innovative approach shows how their material embedding in working conditions and labour relations shapes actors' age work. We combine critical discourse-based research on age with the concept of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) to examine how and why different actors reproduce or alter age images and related age inequalities. Therewith, we respond to calls for new approaches in age diversity research (Shore et al., 2009; Yang and Konrad, 2011) and to calls in institutional theory for 'developing a strong foundation for dealing with power' (Munir, 2014, p. 2) through merging it with critical perspectives (Suddaby, 2014).

We apply our novel theoretical approach to a multi-actor case study of four German organizations known for their age management. We come across a counterintuitive insight: in contrast to assumptions of critical diversity research on age (e.g. Ainsworth, Cutcher, Hardy and Thomas, 2014; Posthuma and Campion, 2009), we find that maintaining stereotypical images of higher age does not necessarily reproduce age inequalities. Instead, it can serve to

insist on older workers' employee rights, whereas disrupting (negative) age images can be used to dismantle employee rights. Applying an intersectional perspective we further see the specific forms of age work as shaped by differences in income and job security (Craciun, Gellert and Flick, 2015) as well as gender roles (Courtenay, 2000).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, against the background of previous research on age inequalities, age management and age discourses, we lay out our theoretical conception of age work, which explains the mechanisms that guide the maintenance and disruption of institutionalised age inequalities. Second, we introduce the context and the specifics of our case study design. Third, we present our main results on different forms of age work. Finally, we summarise and discuss our findings.

Theoretical approach: A theory of age work

Extant approaches explaining the persistence of age inequalities

Transferring general definitions of social inequalities (Warwick-Booth, 2013) to age relations in organizations, age inequalities can be defined as differences in material and symbolic resources of socially constructed age groups within and between organizations. Accordingly, age inequalities are context-specific and thereby differ depending on country, industry, organization, team, or job (Segers, Inceoglu and Finkelstein, 2014). Age groups are often constructed with reference to the chronological dimension of age, in terms of lived years. Yet they refer to many more, often interacting and context-dependant dimensions such as generational age, relative age, or career stage (Pitt-Catsouphes, Matz-Costa and Brown, 2011). In this article, we focus on higher age, hence on chronological notions of age, as the age management practices in Germany studied predominantly address these notions.

There are several research streams, which show that age inequalities are quite persistent (Wood, Wilkinson and Harcourt, 2008). The most prominent, age stereotype research, explains the emergence and persistence of age inequalities through ageist attitudes and

behaviours. Negative stereotypes of older workers refer e.g. to declining physical abilities or less resistance in dealing with stress. Older workers are further ascribed a resistant attitude towards technological and organizational change; and are stigmatised as less flexible and motivated than younger workers (Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Rabl, 2010). Conversely, positive stereotypes portray older workers as more customer oriented; and they are perceived to work more independently and precisely than their younger counterparts, owing to their work and life experience. They are also portrayed as exceptionally committed to their organization or position, even beyond the work contract (Backes-Gellner, Schneider and Veen, 2011; Posthuma and Campion, 2009). While such age stereotypes are widespread, they vary cross-nationally with differing consequences on job satisfaction and inclusion of older workers (Shiu et al., 2015). Nonetheless, literature on age diversity tends to treat age stereotypes and ageist behaviour as individual and/or interactional phenomena, broadly devoid of an account of their context-specific embedding (Marcus and Fritzsche, 2016).

Discourse-based research on age and age management is more explicitly aware of the embedded nature of age stereotypes and age inequalities. However, it focuses on identity work and leaves the effect on related age inequalities rather unspecified. For example, age discourse scholars analyse the discursive production of a 'new ageism' through contemporary management practices (McVittie, McKinlay and Widdicombe, 2003). They show that a simple replacement of negative with positive age images may establish a new (oppressing) norm of an ideal type of older worker (Riach, 2014). Studies also trace how potentially *not* discriminatory practices contribute to the reproduction of age inequalities at work (Spedale et al., 2014) or how physical and psychotherapeutic discourses regulate older workers' identity (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009), such that older workers become complicit in their own marginalisation. Discourse-based studies also document instances of resistance, when older workers reject age stereotypes or stress another aspect of their identity unrelated to age; including gendered instances of resistance (Trethewey, 2001) and the opposition to

heteronormative norms (Riach et al., 2014). While resistance is possible, the taken-for-grantedness of age images often leads to their reification. As all actors are 'constrained by the same discourses' (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009, p. 1225), not only managers reinforce age stereotypes, but also employees themselves and employee representatives who could be expected to tackle age inequalities.

Like discourse-based research on age, psychological research on differing possibilities of active ageing underlines how 'the rhetorical and discursive accounts of ageing are grounded in material circumstances of participants' lives' (Breheny and Stephens, 2010, p. 41). Accordingly, scholars have shown that differences in socio-economic status (Schöllgen, Huxhold, Schüz and Tesch-Römer, 2011), education level (Shaw and Spokane, 2008) and pension security (Craciun et al., 2015) affect perceptions of ageing. However, the impact of context- and actor-specific meaning of age and ageing on management practices still remains underspecified in this research stream.

In our study, we merge the abovementioned studies to develop a theory of age work, which addresses the shortcoming of each research stream. Thereby, we seek to develop a framework for examining the complex, recursive relationship between the construction of age, an actor's access to material and symbolic resources, the legitimisation and impact of management practices and the reproduction of power structures. For this purpose, we draw on the concept of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011), which helps us to understand how and why actors reproduce or alter specific age images and related age inequalities in a specific context.

Age work: Constituting practices that maintain or disrupt age inequalities

According to Lawrence and Suddaby (2006, p. 216) 'there are enduring elements in social life—institutions—that have a profound effect on thoughts, feelings and behaviour of individual and collective actors'. Institutions are formal and informal rules, regulations and

practices that over time have acquired the ‘status of taken-for-granted facts’ (Barley and Tolbert, 1997, p. 99) and that ‘provide stability and meaning to social life’ (Scott, 2001, p. 48). Literature on age discrimination in organizations reveals that age is such a social institution, where age and management discourses are interwoven and thereby shape and normalise rules, regulations and practices driving age inequalities in societies and organizations and vice versa. We refer to such products of intersecting age and management discourses as socially embedded, taken-for-granted, more or less collectively shared age images, which are an integral part of age as an institution. While research on age discrimination applies the term age stereotypes and often focuses on the construction of age categories on the individual level, we use the term age images to explicitly point to the entanglement of macro- and micro-level discourses and practices in producing age as an institution. Accordingly, age images are context specific, multidimensional and intersectional phenomena which are ‘nested’ (like other social institutions; cf. Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 249). They shape the categorisation, perception and treatment of age groups, and give sense to and (de)legitimise rules, regulations and practices driving or deinstitutionalising age inequalities. In turn, age inequalities position actors differently in their access to material and symbolic resources, which influences their perceptions of ageing and possibilities of living up to the current ideal notion of ageing (Craciun et al., 2015).

Although institutionalised age images and related age inequalities are deeply rooted in most societies and therefore relatively persistent over time, they are also inconsistent, contradictory and open to change (Trethewey, 2001; Riach, 2014) as a result of actors’ institutional work (Dacin, Goodstein and Scott, 2002). We refer to the dynamics by which age as an institution is changed and maintained as ‘age work’. In their initial definition, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006, p. 215) define institutional work as ‘the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions’. Incorporating their definition with our notion of age images, we conceptualise age work as practices that

maintain or disrupt unequal age relations, through invoking and/or modifying existing age images as well as creating new ones.

As discourse-analytical studies on age suggest (Spedale et al., 2014; Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009), ageist organizational practices are the result of effortful accomplishment by a variety of actors. Correspondingly, institutional change and maintenance are ‘not a stable property of the institutional order’ (Micelotta and Washington, 2013, p. 1138). Institutional maintenance is often intensified when threatened by disruptive events (Currie et al., 2012; Lok and de Rond, 2013) and/or becomes apparent after such events through attempts of repairing an institution (Micelotta and Washington, 2013).

Institutional maintenance can be achieved through containment or restoration work. *Containment* stabilises the flow of practices ‘despite small divergences from the relevant script’ (Lok and de Rond, 2013, p. 197) and can be distinguished into *normalisation* and *custodial work*. In our study, we expect human resource (HR) managers to normalise ageist practices by ignoring employees’ claims to change them; and we expect employees to normalise the status quo by accepting it and remaining silent. Custodial work is instead done with a specific strategic intent to stabilise and legitimise practices (Lok and de Rond, 2013). For instance, HR managers could refer to declining physical abilities of older workers to justify ageist wage distributions.

Restoration work is conducted when containment work becomes increasingly untenable and a major breakdown occurs (Lok and de Rond, 2013). It can appear as *repair work* (Micelotta and Washington, 2013) or *reversing*, whereby actors try to convince others to fully restore an institutionalised practice (Lok and de Rond, 2013). Regarding age work, employee representatives might for example draw on images of declining physical abilities of older workers to argue for restoring early retirement practices. Such a form of maintenance work can be labelled as restoring moral foundations, adapting the term of ‘disassociating moral

foundations' by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) which is associated with institutional disruption.

The institutional disruption work of disassociating moral foundations disassociates 'the practice, rule or technology from its moral foundation as appropriate within a specific cultural context' (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 236). It often rather gradually undermines and not overthrows these foundations. Altering meaning and constructing new identities are especially powerful tools to undermine institutional foundations and induce institutional change (Hardy and Maguire, 2008). Another form of disruption is *undermining assumptions and beliefs*, which facilitates 'new ways of acting that replace existing templates' (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 237). Organizational actors could for example contradict the perceived risks of demographic change through deconstructing taken-for-granted images of higher age.

Research discussing institutional change suggests that marginalised actors might rather seek to disrupt the status quo yet often lack access to material and symbolic resources, while more resource-rich actors might seek to maintain it (Hardy and Maguire, 2008; Currie et al., 2012) or might simply lack the motivation to induce institutional change due to their privileged position (Garud, Hardy and Maguire, 2007). Material and symbolic resources such as community support or organizational positions have furthermore proven decisive for the institutional work actors engage in (Voronov and Vince, 2012). While even those disadvantaged by particular practices might maintain these practices because of underlying, often taken-for-granted assumptions of their legitimacy (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009), competing discourses challenge the dominant discourse on age and serve as discursive resources to fight age inequalities. Even marginalised actors are thus not entirely deprived of power, yet, different access to resources shapes whether and how actors can use discursive positions to alter or maintain taken-for-granted age images and age inequalities. Ultimately, institutional frameworks and (related) differences in access to discursive and material resources shape actors' perceived and pursued interests (Scott, 1995, 1987), and accordingly

the forms of institutional work they engage in, as Creed et al. (2010) demonstrated in their study on the identity work of gay ministers in a context of competing institutional logics.

Our notion of age work builds on these insights, making aware that age inequalities are as much a result of effortful maintenance or ignorance by those who profit from a specific institutional arrangement as by the complicity or resistance of marginalised actors (Spedale et al., 2014). Actors' possibilities and interests in changing institutionalised inequalities are thus not simply given but discursively produced through a combination of actors' situated knowledge, their material embedding and their access to discursive positions. Tracing how and why actors' maintain or disrupt age images and related age inequalities therefore requires paying attention to actors' complex embeddedness in unequal power relations. Through coupling institutional work with critical age diversity studies we seek to 'develop a sensitivity to problematic issues of power … and confront them' (Munir, 2014, p. 2); an issue called for in theoretical reflections about the state-of-the-art of institutional theory (Suddaby, 2014).

Our unique framework allows tracing how and why different actors reproduce or alter age images and related age inequalities in organizations. Empirically, we build on four case studies of four German organizations known for their proactive age management.

Methods

Data collection

Germany provides a rich case to examine the persistence as well as the disruption of age inequalities because there have been numerous legal, socio-political and organizational attempts to activate older workers' potentials. At the time of data collection in 2008/2009, early retirement options were already being dismantled; the abolishment of the Partial Retirement Act (*Altersteilzeitgesetz*) as well as the increased State Pension Age were still debated but predominantly seen as given. Several socio-political activation measures had also been taken (Muller-Camen, Croucher, Flynn and Schroder, 2011).

We draw on four in-depth case studies conducted within an research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council on the challenges and implications of age diversity management in the UK and Germany. Case studies were chosen on the basis of purposive sampling. The choice was restricted to large organizations (>1.000 employees) as these are known to implement HR strategies and programs more formally than small and medium-sized companies. As HR practices differ between industries, we included four German organizations: chemical, steel, retail and education (schools). These four sectors were selected, as they are known to be adressing the challenges of an ageing workforce. In Germany, the steel and the chemicals producers have to follow sector-level collective bargaining agreements concerning demographic change. Moreover, they and the retail company are members of the government initiated ‘Demographic Network’ whose members have committed themselves to eliminating age discrimination and promoting inter-generational knowledge transfer through HR policies. The German educational institution studied is also known for addressing and discussing the opportunities and challenges of demographic change for HRM policies (Schroder, Muller-Camen and Flynn, 2014).

To study age work as the joint work of all organizational actors and to triangulate perspectives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), interviews were conducted with different organizational actors (see Table 1). Besides managers, we were keen to interview older employees themselves as well as employee representatives who are there to stand in for their rights. Managers and employee representatives were interviewed alone, in dyads or groups, depending on their disposability. Employees 50^+ were interviewed collectively in dyads or groups of four to eight, each members of a specific work group or holders of the same job, in order to facilitate discussions about their experiences in relation to their jobs, managers, colleagues and the shared workplace context. The interviewed employees of the chemical and the steel firm were all men, whereas the interviewee groups of teachers and retail workers consisted of women and men. The chemical and the school employees represented highly

qualified employee groups (engineers and teachers), whereas the retail and the steel workers had lower qualification levels. The group interviews of employees 50^+ allowed us to uncover underlying perceptions of higher age and institutionalised age inequalities ‘that members already have, and which are expressed, amplified and possibly modified through the collective interaction in the group’ (Payne and Payne, 2004, p. 104). In our research context, group interviews (especially with employees) bear the advantage of revealing discussions about possibilities of collective resistance, whereas interviews with single actors might have led to a stronger focus on individual challenges of ageing. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, with the larger part running one hour each.

Issues covered in the semi-structured interviews with HR managers, line managers and employee representatives were the strategy, structure and HR context of the organization; workforce demographics; the impact of (age) discrimination legislation; HR policies and practices in the areas of workforce planning, recruitment, training, health and safety, performance management, redundancy and retirement. In contrast, the group interviews with employees aged 50^+ concerned their view regarding own experiences in their jobs, perceptions of age discrimination, involvement in age management practices and plans for retirement.

In order to triangulate and contextualise the findings, publically available documents such as collective bargaining agreements, studies on demographic change, company websites and internal documents such as age management strategies were used. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed and finally coded and analysed using NVivo10.

The text corpus contains 30 interview transcripts with a total number of 58 interviewees, as outlined in Table 1. Our analysis is based on the original transcripts in German language; we therefore have translated illustrating quotes in the results section.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data analysis

In the analysis we followed an iterative process, oscillating between the literature, the data, an emerging structure of empirical categories and theoretical arguments, which we developed by a cyclical reading of the material. In a first step, we traced the construction of age images together with their maintenance and disruption. We detected text fragments that contained developed argumentations on age at work. Based on a condensation of the aforementioned literature on age stereotypes and discourse analyses on age, we coded the text fragments by four categories of age images that actors related to management discourses: body and mind, attitude towards change, age specific competencies, as well as commitment and motivation. We further differentiated whether actors used these age images to present older workers as an organizational resource or problem (maintaining images of higher age). We additionally coded if actors argued that age did not matter or that age specific competencies were overlooked by the organization (disrupting images of higher age).

In a second step, we asked for which purposes actors upheld or disrupted these age images, thereby identifying different forms of age work based on the abovementioned research on institutional maintenance (e.g. age work of containment or restoration) and change (e.g. age work of disassociating moral assumptions).

Finally, we searched for different patterns of age work within the group of older employees that might result from their embeddedness in different organizational structures and power relations. We compared employees' attitude to work, early retirement, and flexible working hours. Thereby, we discovered that employees' differing attitudes and perceptions as well as fears about losing the actual job or being transferred to a lower-status position were related to job or income security – and therewith not least: to gendered job attributions. Our sample

does not allow concluding on generic gender-specific differences in age work; yet it shows with a view on the male only employee groups that some forms of age work can be categorized as reflecting masculinity, as we detail in the findings and discussion.

Findings

Co-occurrences of age work by different actors

Within our first analytical step of reconstructing age images we found a large amount of co-occurrences. Almost all actors constructed and maintained higher age predominantly as an organizational problem by stressing older workers' declining physical abilities or their resistance to technological and organizational changes. References to instances of disrupting taken-for-granted age images instead remained rare. Sometimes speakers referred to older workers' competencies that have so far been overlooked by the organization or they argued that physical abilities depend on individual lifestyles rather than increasing age. Due to this surprising amount of co-occurrences, we subsequently further examined actor specific forms of maintaining and disrupting age images. That is we examined how actors used age images in their speech to maintain or alter age management practices related to age inequalities.

In the following, we present our findings by distinguishing between forms of age work directed at maintaining and disrupting age images. As Table 2 summarises, actors maintain (predominantly negative) images of higher age for different purposes, namely through containment and restoration.

Insert Table 2 about here

Forms of age work that maintain or change age inequalities by preserving age images.

Containing age work. When containing age images, actors either actively reinforced the moral foundations of taken-for-granted age images by demonising or valorising them or by rather passively accepting existing practices, even when practices structurally disadvantaged them.

We noted that employees were *accepting the status quo,* as a means of *normalising work*. They intensely talk about increased stress and strains that lead to declining mental and physical abilities. Employees often say that it becomes harder for them to support these strains the older they get. Despite these complaints, they seem to accept the current situation in a more or less resigned manner. This is most prominent in the school interviews, as shown in the following excerpt.

> 'In the last ten years a huge burden has been added … Further, it gets more difficult to keep up physically … and that indeed decreases job satisfaction, yet I still think that I will continue to work till 65' (School, male employee 50^{+}).

The work of teachers has intensified over the last decades while the workforce is rapidly ageing due to recruitment freezes and low labour turnover. The teachers interviewed hardly perceive any possibility to stand against the changes of the Federal authority such as increased teaching hours and reduced personnel. Their high pension security as civil servants further binds them to their jobs leading them to accept the continuously increasing stress and strain.

A member of the works council echoes this view and highlights the consequences of lacking motivation—'an inner certain opposition attitude towards the school authority (…) a rebellious attitude, but it serves self-protection as otherwise it is not feasible (to cope)' (School, male employee representative). He complains about lacking 'possibilities to take work pressure of older colleagues, and therefore they are forced to claim disability for service'.

Self-protection also influences the age work of the steel employees, who fear losing their jobs when reporting injuries or illnesses and therefore remain silent, as one of them explains.

> ‘On the one hand the employee fears losing his job, such that he avoids communicating his bodily defects … Fear is an issue here. Will I be fully assignable again? It would not be the first case of someone having to sign a termination agreement ‘(Steel, male employee 50^{+}).

The interviewed male steel workers predominantly accept the status quo and do not raise their voice, as they would be faced with a loss of work status if they did. They fear being relocated to jobs in departments, which one HR manager referred to as ‘welfare departments’ where the steel workers ‘actually don’t do productive, value-added work in the sense of our core business’ (Steel, HR manager 2). As a union publication underlines, health issues are a major concern in the steel industry where about half of the steel workers aged 50^{+} can no longer be fully deployed owing to stress-induced physical limitations (Feldes, 2007). However, resulting from the steel workers’ high job security, relocation equals a status, but not an income loss. To avoid status loss the male steel workers engage in normalising work through remaining silent.

Valorising and demonising was another form of *normalising age work* that we found in the accounts of all actors, particularly in the school case. Older teachers seem rather disillusioned about a potential change of disadvantageous practices, while their line managers *demonise* the teachers’ alleged lack of commitment with increasing age. They lament the inner resignation of some teachers who ‘only want to get by unnoticed in their last years’ (School, male employee 50^{+}). Yet, they also *valorise* to a similar extent the volunteer work of teachers beyond retirement, which was especially important in the relatively poor social district the examined *Gesamtschule* (comparable to secondary schools) was located in. Such a commitment might also lead to an accelerated exhaustion and frustration. Older teachers themselves engage in valorising; they stress their experience and authority gained over the years.

Custodial age work. Compared to normalisation work, institutional custodial work is done with a specific strategic intent and effort to stabilise as well as legitimise practices. Above all

HR and line managers engage in this form of age work. Often they refer to the master narrative of decline to justify management decisions, as the following quote relating to wage policies for line managers in the studied retail company exemplifies.

> ‘At the end of the day, [an employee] has to show the same performance at 62 [as a younger one], otherwise … the employee of 60 or 62 has indeed for whatever reason problems to yield the business results which a younger could … In line with the new function, we adapt the pay … It is not the case that here, say, is the land of milk and honey. We want to earn green dollars’ (Retail, female HR manager 1).

The respondent links declining physical abilities of older workers to poorer performance in order to justify a reduction of salary with ageing, further backing the argumentation up by the self-evident business need to yield financial success.

An HR manager of the chemical company suggests the same, when he argues that performance decreases with higher age and that the company needs to rethink where to deploy older employees.

> ‘This is a challenge for the future when you have more and more older workers who cannot fully perform their tasks any more. You can either think about favourable workspaces (Schonarbeitsplatz) or workspaces where they can perform 100 per cent again, or you let them perform a lower skilled task where you would have to adapt payment. However, this is not possible at the moment’ (Chemical, male HR manager).

Interestingly, employee representatives also engage in this form of custodial work with a reference to physical decline, yet based on different interests. For instance the steel union secretary interviewed applauds the standard wage maintenance included in the collective bargaining agreement as it prescribes to retain older employees and protects them against wage reductions—provision he characterises as ‘of course a thorn in the company’s flesh’ (Steel, male trade union secretary). The trade unionist further argues that ‘more and more

work is packed into the available working time … with increasing age it gets increasingly difficult to cope with this'. In contrast, an HR manager of the steel company laments that

> 'we will note that our sick persons will get increasingly sick within the next five to ten years … not because our working conditions have worsened but because this selection effect (owing to partial retirement options) is no longer in place. This is very dramatic' (Steel, male HR manager 2).

Restoring age work seldom appeared in our study and was predominantly done by employee representatives to preserve employee rights. The attempts of restoration mainly revolved around the abolishment of the Partial Retirement Act by the German government in 2010. *Reversing* as a particular form of restoration appeared to be especially prominent in the steel company, where up to the time of the interviews, almost all employees still retired early. Employee representatives problematised the lack of alternative age management practices, while the Partial Retirement Act was being abolished. An employee representative advocates for the restoration of the old model as follows:

> 'to think in time about who are the older colleagues that need help and whom their tasks need to be passed on … has proven to be popular … the employers' association has started to personally voice their concerns to the Secretary of State for Employment to rethink the abolishment of partial retirement, at least for the steel industry with its specific conditions' (Steel, male trade union representative).

With reference to declining abilities of older colleagues (who need help), the employee representative constructs early retirement as in line with the age-specific challenges the steel industry faces. The invoked problem-oriented age images serve to protect employee rights against the ideology of the healthy and highly productive organizational performer in the context of declining social security systems and decreasing state pension systems.

While the above quote is an example of reversing as a form of restoring practices, it also contains instances of *restoring moral foundations*. Early retirement practices, which at the

time of research were not yet disrupted, provide a template for both forms of institutional work. The trade union representative states that it is 'relatively unquestioned' that 'a possibility for early retirement is needed'. Before arguing that it would be best to keep the existing early retirement practice, he adds 'there might be different opinions about how the concrete solution looks like'. Instead of reversing the disruption, the employee representative solely aims at restoring the ideological foundation of the disrupted practice. For him, the notion of well-deserved retirement is in line with age-specific competencies and declining physical abilities. He might allow different age management practices to emerge, as long as early retirement is kept as their legitimate ideological foundation.

Forms of age work that maintain or change age inequalities by modifying age images.

As seen above, actors seldom altered age images in their speech, when justifying existing or defending new age management practices. They either disassociated taken-for-granted age images from existing practices or undermined such age images by directly opposing them or providing alternative, here more positive age images.

We found the discursive practice of *disassociating moral foundations* of age management practices and replacing them by new ones above all in the speech of managers. They echo the call for a paradigm shift, away from a problem-oriented to a resource-oriented view on higher age as formulated in respective corporate age management initiatives. This implies the necessity 'to establish a new philosophy, indeed working towards a longer working life time, offer longer training and development and new career models that also support and demand the employees' engagement', as an HR manager of the chemical company explains. The associated principle of 'supporting and demanding' is regularly connected to new moral foundations such as lifelong physical and mental fitness and health. Participants disrupt the narrative of physical decline through ageing by claiming that fitness and performance do not depend on age, but on individual efforts to remain fit and healthy.

This pattern of age work was most pronounced in the chemical company. Its age management scheme builds on the idea that employability is not a question of age, but requires self-responsible prevention, as the HR manager pointed out. Related age-neutral norms are backed up by incentives and sanctions, as a line manager reports for the case of an employee who did not fulfil targets such as losing weight and attending a nutrition course. 'To me this is the right way if we talk about keeping up performance at least up to the legal retirement age' (Chemical, Line Manager 1). Also the member of the works council interviewed engages in this form of age work, replacing the narrative of physical decline with the new principle of individualising responsibilities, as the following excerpt shows.

> 'Work adjusted to age and ageing is not only a question for the older employees, but also for the younger … Where are my performance limits, what are my weaknesses, where do I have to readjust, that is the most central point in my opinion' (Chemical, male employee representative).

Interestingly, one of the interviewed engineers of the chemical company points out that 'you have to clearly say that health promotion does not exist for the high paying jobs' (Chemical, male employee 50^{+}) but is solely directed at chemical workers in the plants—even though the measures of the bargaining agreement on working life and demography would also be applicable to engineers (IG BCE, 2011). One of his colleagues adds that 'the average fitness level is relatively high … The reason might be that we do not have such a high proportion of physical labour here' (Chemical, male employee 50^{+}). Therefore, the engineers would love to have a gym at work but do not demand any other health measures to be installed.

The other form of disrupting age work, which we labelled *undermining assumptions and beliefs*, focuses on contradicting taken-for-granted views on higher age in order to criticise existing practices and to reframe assumptions. We found this last form of disrupting age work predominantly in the speech of older employees, interestingly most often in the case of chemical employees who distanced themselves from the company's age management scheme

and the way it is presented by the company, thereby insisting on the capabilities they and their colleagues have, as the following excerpt shows.

> 'Quite of a lot of people here are still driven by something exceeding their individual needs … and if we can keep this alive … If people have this attitude then we have really the generations at work and I think we are on a good way' (Chemical, male employee 50^{+}).

Other chemical employees analogously highlight the performance and motivation older colleagues display. Despite a lack of formal procedures they strive for composing teams in such a way that knowledge transfer is possible. The engineers of the chemical company, in contrast to the teachers, do not seem to mind the heightened pension age imposed by the German government. It seems more important to them to remain inspired until the end of their work life, as one of them explains.

> 'This desire to be someone, this patience that goes beyond … the (retirement) security of your own life … If we can keep this alive and transport this to more employees, then this truly is German Chemical's Demography Scheme' (Chemical, male employee 50^{+}).

Variation, high employment security, the principle of seniority pay and a high level of recognition characterise the engineers' job. Therefore, they do not seem to rely too much on age management practices but are concerned with keeping their individual motivation alive.

Discussion

This study was driven by our interest to understand why age management practices only lead to minor changes in institutionalised age inequalities. We propose the theoretical concept of 'age work' to explain how and why institutional work serves to maintain and potentially disrupt social inequalities. Organizational actors negotiate age images and use them to pursue their embedded interests, that is, either to legitimise and reinforce or to delegitimise age management practices and institutionalised understandings of age inequalities. Thereby, age work produces paradoxical effects of maintaining established age images while trying to

disrupt age inequalities and vice versa. Furthermore, resistance against ageist images and practices is acted out and undermined depending on employees' material circumstances and further modified by gender roles.

Age work: A multi-actor, power-sensitive perspective on age inequalities

Applying the theoretical concept of age work to four German organizations that were highly committed to promoting age diversity, it was striking that all actors predominantly maintained negative images of higher age. This was even more surprising given high institutional pressures to establish more positive and more differentiated images of higher age. Regarding taken-for-granted age images, institutionalised images of physical decline seem to be more prominent and powerful than age images, which point to age-specific competencies and commitment. The narrative of decline flourishes, even amongst a rhetoric of resources.

However, and this is an important insight of our study, which particularly expands critical diversity studies on age (Ainsworth et al., 2014): maintaining negative age images does not necessarily reinforce age inequalities, whereas disrupting negative age images does not necessarily reduce them. Instead, the multi-actor perspective of our study underlines that especially HR managers and employee representatives engage in age work pursuing different interests. HR managers seek to increase productivity and to profit from legitimising disadvantageous practices for older workers in that they refer to older workers' presumably declining physical and mental abilities. In contrast, employee representatives aim at protecting employee rights. They use the image of physical and mental decline to restore early retirement options for older workers, which had been abolished due to a general cut in social spending in Germany. Here, our analysis reveals the paradoxical effect of similarly maintaining and disrupting age as an institution, which has also been noted by Ainsworth and Hardy (2009). While our study confirms this insight, we can further point out different

interests in institutional maintenance (*restoring moral foundations* and *reversing*) underlying such reproduction.

The data indicate that managerial actors *strategically* legitimise or delegitimise age inequalities through maintaining or disrupting taken-for-granted age images whereas older employees themselves appear as relatively passive. This rather passive, resigned behaviour points to the entanglement of institutions and power, as dominant actors often lack the motivation to induce institutional change while marginalised actors often lack the resources to alter institutionalised practices (Garud et al., 2007). The employees in our study did not perceive themselves as change agents regarding (age) management practices and age inequalities, whereas managers induced changes in (age) management practices, but only those practices that served their interests of increasing productivity. They dismantled taken-for-granted age images to establish the new paradigm of the ever-healthy organizational performer, regardless of age, yet also blind to differences in resources and abilities. Here, our multi-actor perspective e.g. problematises HR and line managers adaption of hegemonic management discourses of performance, which often remain unquestioned in neoinstitutionalist studies (Munir, 2014; Hwang and Colyvas, 2011).

Our power- and context-sensitive reading of actors' age work responds to calls for merging institutional theory and critical perspectives (Suddaby, 2014) with the aim to 'develop a strong foundation for dealing with power' (Munir, 2014, p. 2). Whereas most institutional theory papers on power are of conceptual nature (Lawrence, 2008; Lawrence et al., 2014; Munir, 2014), this study demonstrates how to empirically merge critical perspectives with institutional work. It goes beyond the mere description of processes of institutional maintenance and disruption. Instead of praising managers' disruption of taken-for-granted age images and condemning employee representatives for maintaining them, we show that these actors strategically use positively and/or negatively connoted age images in order to argue for

or against a dismantling of social security systems and a tendency to individualise social responsibilities.

Our study also shows that the reactions of older employees to the introduction of new age management practices significantly differ depending on job or income security and gender, as we will discuss subsequently. The persistence of age inequalities thus is revealed as the result of embedded actors' co-construction shaped by their differing interests and resources in changing institutionalised understanding of higher age and related age inequalities.

Intersectional issues: The influence of job and income security and gender on employees' age work

Differences in ascribing meaning to age and ageing, and in turn in supporting or dismissing particular practices, can according to our study be attributed to differences in gendered job and income security expectations. Table 3 displays the respective differences in age work of older employees by gender and job or income security.

Insert Table 3 about here

It shows that while all employees seem to normalise existing ageist practices, they do so for very different reasons. Fear played a significant role for the steel and retail workers and drove them to accept existing ageist management practices or to expect nothing more than basic work simplification measures. Also, both employee groups engaged in valorising their age-specific competencies. Yet, the male steel workers often did not report their health issues because they feared losing their current organizational position e.g. by being relocated to a less prominent job with income reductions. Here, fear of loss of status, which is connected to notions of masculinity since 'men's acquisition of power requires … that men suppress their

needs and refuse to admit or acknowledge their pain' (Courtenay, 2000, p. 1389) plays a decisive role, as the comparison with the gender-mixed retail staff underlines. The retail staff had much more precarious work contracts and had to fear severe income reductions and job loss. In contrast to the steel sector, unions are relatively weak in the retail sector. That is perhaps why they also more insistently engaged in disrupting negative age images by undermining assumptions about the physical decline of older workers and by pointing out other neglected not age-related experiences. While the female retail workers rather accepted the relocation and hoped for more appreciation of their skills, one of the male retail workers fought to get his previous position back after the relocation.

In sharp contrast, teachers did not fear to criticise increased stress and strain in the education sector. Nonetheless, this gender-mixed group also engaged in normalising age work, yet for other reasons. Teachers seemed to accept the status quo because of an inner resignation and the conviction that the school authority would ignore their critique. The high job security of the teachers, who were all civil servants, provided them with a safe base for critique and options to call in sick. They valorised competencies of older teachers, yet could also freely engage in demonising age by describing and legitimising their decreasing commitment.

Fear was completely absent in the interviews with the again exclusively male group of engineers of the chemical company. Being in the company for a long time, they talked about the principle of seniority, which continuously increased their income and provided a feeling of security. With regard to age management practices, they criticised the current organizational practices as ignoring the specifics of a highly motivated workforce committed to making the best of their particular project. Interestingly, they did not seem to mind a heightened pension age, as long as they could maintain their high self-motivation. Their privileged position as to income and job security combined with an individualistic perspective on health and fitness can be read as an expression of a privileged masculinity (Courtenay,

2000; Crawshaw, 2007), that shaped their age work of valorising own competencies and let them undermine assumptions about an decreasing motivation of older engineers.

The results underline that even marginalised actors unconsciously reproduce taken-for-granted age images, while their ability to change such images is at the same time limited by organizational positions and power inequalities. Here, agency can be traced as a multidimensional concept emerging from 'the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement' (Battilana and D'Aunno, 2009, p. 46). In the organizations studied, the perception and judgement of early retirement or other age management practices is significantly shaped by actors' perceptions of job and income security, which are mediated by gender norms. The employees' institutional work reflects that their interests, or 'micro-motives are fairly mundane, aimed at interpretation, alignment, and muddling through' (Powell and Colyvas, 2008, p. 277) and are rather individually than collectively pursued.

Our results connect to and expand studies on the effect of higher and lower job and pension security on attitudes towards and possibilities of ageing (Craciun et al., 2015), underlining similarities and differences between actors and across sectors and providing an intersectional reading of the results. We thereby also contribute to intersectional perspectives on age and identity (Riach et al., 2014; Coupland, 2007; Spedale et al., 2014), showing that notions of masculinity apparent in fear of status loss and an individualistic perspective on health shape actors' age work at the intersection of age, gender and job status.

Limitations and avenues for future research

Our analysis is subject to limitations. In the examination of German case studies we solely focused on one national context. A comparative study between two or more countries would allow a better understanding of national particularities, as the comparative case study of Flynn et al. (2013) as well as the cross-national study on age stereotyping of Shiu et al. (2015) prove. Furthermore, our categorised forms of age work refer primarily to higher age, whereas

analysing age work on younger age or other dimensions such as career stages would bear different results. For example, retirement practices are less relevant for younger than for older workers; and the respective age work practices we found for employee representatives are specific for older workers due to the focus of our interviews.

Additionally, observing team meetings or everyday organizational practices—ideally in a longitudinal analysis—would allow for conclusions about the extent of deinstitutionalisation taking place in the organizations studied. Here lies a promising contribution to research on institutional work, which seldom analyses the 'connections between institutional work and institutional outcome' (Lawrence, Leca and Zilber, 2013, p. 1029).

Conclusion

In line with recent claims of discourse-based research on age (Spedale et al., 2014), our analysis shows that it is important to examine how constructions of age are connected to organizational practices and how they maintain or disrupt age inequalities. It underlines that neither advocating a resource-oriented view on age nor criticising the reproduction of taken-for-granted age images can be the only solution, as this runs the risk of ignoring the complexity of context-dependant power relations shaping actors' interests and age work. Particularly managers promoted a healthy lifestyle independent of age, where employees were entirely rendered responsible for maintaining their health; thereby dismissing differences in resources and intersectional perspectives, which have been proven to be important in shaping attitudes towards ageing and possibilities of remaining healthy in older age (Craciun et al., 2015; Riach et al., 2014). Our study particularly highlights the effect of job security as well as gender roles on perceptions of age and health management practices. Surprisingly, employee representatives focused on restoring older employee rights through ageist discourses of declining abilities while fighting for a broader notion of active ageing.

We claim that in order to tackle age inequalities in organizations all actors, individual and collective ones, have to take differences in access to material and symbolic resources into account. Otherwise, society's poor—and here especially older women and ethnic minorities—will continue to be marginalised, struggling to achieve the ideal of an ever healthy performer, instead of being encouraged to accept and integrate changing needs, abilities and resources over the life course (Boudiny, 2013). Those fighting against age inequalities, like employee representatives, socio-political actors and HR managers who stand in for the rights for older employees, should thus critically address the dismantling of social security systems and the related tendency of individualising risks and responsibilities. Without such a strategy, the deconstruction of age images will predominantly serve the corporate interests in reinforcing the norm of the ever-healthy organizational performer.

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