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**The Need for Fresh Blood:
Exploring Older Worker Discrimination through a Vampiric Lens.**

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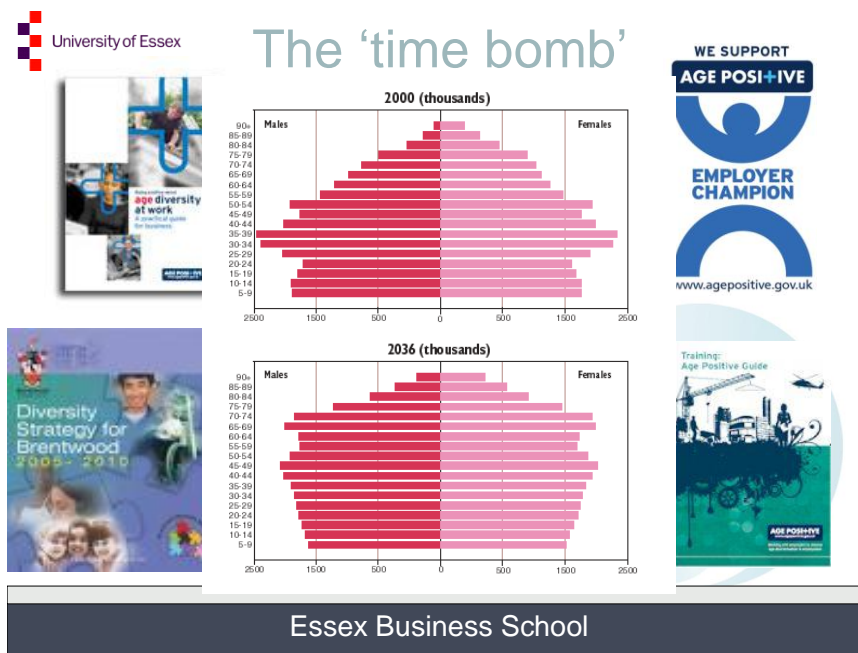
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Introduction



Anyone who has opened up a newspaper in the past 5 years will have noticed that there is a pandemic in the ether that has far greater consequences than either swine flu or the current economic crisis: it is the ageing population. By 2050, there will be around a quarter of the population over the age of 65¹ in the UK and currently, over 7 million people have inadequate savings for retirement. As a result, state pension ages are increasing to 68 by 2046², by 2012 new schemes for default pensions savings will be put in place³ and the battle to conquer age discrimination is in full force, at least according to recent policy and legal reviews. However, despite such gladiatorial rhetoric, both statistical research and empirical studies of the workplace still show those aged 50 or over still face disadvantage, discrimination and exclusion for the paid labour market. A significant percentage of those in receipt of former incapacity benefit are over 50⁴ whilst, recent figures show that unemployment has risen by 40% among the 50 plus age group⁵,

¹ OECD, 2004

² Turner/Pensions Commission, 2005

³ Pensions Act 2008. More information can be found in DWP (2006)

⁴ Half of all people aged between 50 and state pension ages (currently 60 for women and 65 for men) who are not working are in receipt of incapacity benefit (Beatty and Fothergill, 2007: 65).

⁵ Labour Force survey statistics

suggesting that the economic downturn has resulted in the government's age diversity campaign taking a step back.

I have studied ageing and older worker inequality from the level of workplace interviews to government commentaries for a few years now and one issue I am struck with is the decreasing value of individuals as they grow older in both work and other social arenas. For example, whilst I am by no means a policy expert, sociologically exploring the development of age discrimination legislation reveals that age as a topic could be seen as of secondary importance that inevitably leads into a marginalisation of both older people and the older worker. The emergence of the UK older worker agenda was prompted by an inquiry that was originally founded to create new ways of 'assisting' older workers into retirement. Once it showed evidence of an unsustainable ageing population a policy U-turn was made and schemes once promoted as good practice were now branded as ageist.



Age discrimination is of course a factor situated within larger norms and behavioural intersections concerned with ageing and work. It may be that pull factors make individuals leave the labour market before state pension age in order to enjoy a third age of post dependents but pre-dependency⁶, often on a beach as these pictures suggest, or that occupational injuries sustained at work prevent prolonged participation in the labour market, two 'choices' strongly polarised by class and socio-economic status. Elsewhere, studies of the processes of discrimination have focussed on the concept of leaving work involuntarily due to stereotyping⁷, lack of training and skills development⁸, or barriers to learning. Moreover, once out of the labour market, individuals face significant barriers too work through inadequate transitional paths that inadvertently produce a 'one way street'⁹.Of course, government schemes for older workers serve to co-produce 'work-first' ideologies, which legitimises practices such as cognitive behavioural therapy, which is being offered to those of pathways to work schemes, and as a result fail to take into account the complex dynamics involved in relation to age inequality or those who have been discriminated against. For example, some analysis I recently undertook suggested

⁶ Laslett, 1989

⁷ E.g. Chiu et al., 2001: Taylor and Walker, 1998

⁸ TEF training or skills development

⁹ OECD 2006: 10

that after a traumatic exit from the labour market, the identities older non-workers had fostered within long-term unemployment were far too important to be disrupted by returning to an environment which destroyed their sense of self in the first place¹⁰. One incapacity benefit participant put it perfectly: *'Self esteem is so important...when I finished work it was a major change in life and I was depressed and received counselling and so forth, for 18 months or more – it was such a massive blow to your pride, to everything, so it was a major shock to the system – physically and mentally. I've come out the other end of that now and I'm quite comfortable and I can function in my little box but I'm really frightened of it happening again'*.

However, even if we know that age is a potent phenomena within discrimination, as yet, there has been little attempt to explore the ways in which darker, more complex dynamics of organization life may render the older worker abject. Thinking about the quotidian experience of those who may be categorised as the over 50's, at least according to policy regulations, today I would like to explore how we can begin to empirically explore the more complex experiences through which older worker abjection takes place, in particular, how organizational talk of managers and workers can privilege youth and newness at the expense of those who fail to embody these dimensions, and how individuals negotiate an age-ful terrain that places them in precarious subject positions.



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The old and young

I would argue that the processes of ageing and discrimination are inherently linked. Therefore, how we view ageing must inform our understanding of age discrimination and go beyond the common reasons discussed in more generic organizational age discrimination literature. Therefore, before exploring the abjection of older workers, it is useful to understand how ageing and becoming older has been theorised and socially contextualised, since it provides us with clues as to how the topic itself might be seen as of lesser importance in certain circles of academia or praxis. In literature and the arts we see an obsession with reversing or preventing being older. These fictions conflated ageing with decreasing sexual prowess, for example, where the cure could be found through old men drinking a youth's semen, as we see in Jack London's 'The Rejuvenation of Major Rathbone' in 1899. Altogether better is not ageing at all, as in the

¹⁰ Riach and Loretto 2009: 19

case of Dorian Grey, where a young and beautiful man who pledges his soul in exchange for a portrait of himself to bear the burden of his age and infamy. Needless to say, the self-denial and rejection of ageing does not lead to a happy ending, although even after Dorian's death, youth itself prevails, albeit by returning to the painting. The conflation of virility and power with youth is something I will return to later, as it appears to not only drive fiction, but how we construe organizational life as well.

In scientific research we can see that whilst the same themes prevail, what we call 'old' now is a relatively new phenomena. Again the growing interest in ageing in the latter part of the 19th century was to prevent the process altogether, using a variety of creative and curious means. A personal favourite is Charles Edouard Brown-Sequard (1817-1894), a French endocrinologist who at 73, would self-inject a mixture of water, blood from the scrotum, semen and juice from the crushed testicles of dogs and guinea-pigs. He reported that not only did this improve his sexual prowess, but he was able to urinate with a far greater force, which was perhaps an enjoyable parlour trick for the up and coming Victorian nouveau riche. Such experiments were later covered under the term gerontology, a phrase used initially in 1903 by Methnikoff covering 'the scientific study of old age'. This definition still stands, and continues to have the effect of both framing ageing as a physiological 'condition' that should by its very medical status 'curable', and constructing particular illnesses as conditions of older age.

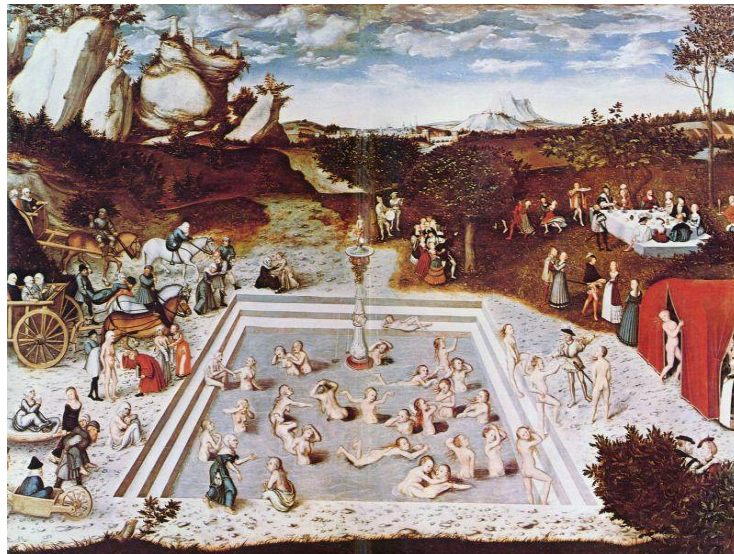


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Cultural and sociological studies of ageing have provided various themes and paradigms that explore ageing as something beyond physiological determinism, although still heavily informed by a medical view. Early theories explore ageing from an individual perspective, such as Erikson's life cycle approach. Of course, such functionalist theories frame individuals as passive to their own life trajectory, particularly in later life which is characterised by Erikson as acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that has to be¹¹. Later development within cultural studies sought to explore the connection between the marginalisation of older people in relation to larger socio-cultural beliefs or processes. This is of course what makes certain age proxies legally inscribed and accepted such as age for driving, pension age or who to test for particular health problems.

¹¹ Erikson (1965 [1950])

Enduring images of the aged as helpless, grumpy, senile, foolish, asexual or sexually inappropriate stigmatises both ageing and older people as undesirable¹². Fear of becoming or embodying such images is thus distanced through humour on birthday cards, television programmes and advertisements within the setting of a youth-orientated society¹³. Youth in contrast is conflated with beauty and truth¹⁴ and not only seen as a key to happiness, but the very *essence* of happiness¹⁵. Whilst theoretical devices such as Featherstone and Hepworth's 'the mask of ageing'¹⁶ have sought to challenge this concept of the passive ageing self, the illusion of being able to 'manage' the ageing process and availability of 'options' to enable this means that 'letting oneself go' becomes even more forbidden in society¹⁷. The privileging of youth may therefore be seen as a resulting in a double jeopardy. Not only are individuals not 'allowed' to get old, but they must also be forever young, a theme I shall return to later.



All this is not simply a colourful distraction from the issues of age discrimination in the workplace, but shows that both ageing and being older are marginal categories within social settings. For Chris Phillipson, one of the leading scholars in critical gerontology, this marginalisation can also be seen in the relative lack of theorising of ageing and age discrimination in general. For example whilst there has been a large amount of research at a macro policy level, there is still a dearth of research in how older people shape and sustain self and identity at a local level¹⁸. I would argue that this is also the case in conceptualising age inequality within studies of the workplace. As yet, the theoretical development of exploring both ageing and the older worker as a process of abjection is still in its embryonic stages, although can be divided into three main areas. The first challenges psychological concepts of difference and discrimination, for example challenging the notion of stereotypes by developing the concept of 'lifecourse' as a means of introducing individual biographies and . The main limitation here is the danger of promoting an 'age blind' agenda that can serve as a mask for more insidious practices to

¹² Featherstone and Hepworth, 1993

¹³ Sneed and Whitbourne, 2005; Bytheway, 1995

¹⁴ Wilkinson and Ferraro, 2002; Turner, 2004

¹⁵ Öberg and Tornstam, 2001; Post and Binstock, 2004

¹⁶ Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991

¹⁷ Goodman 1994

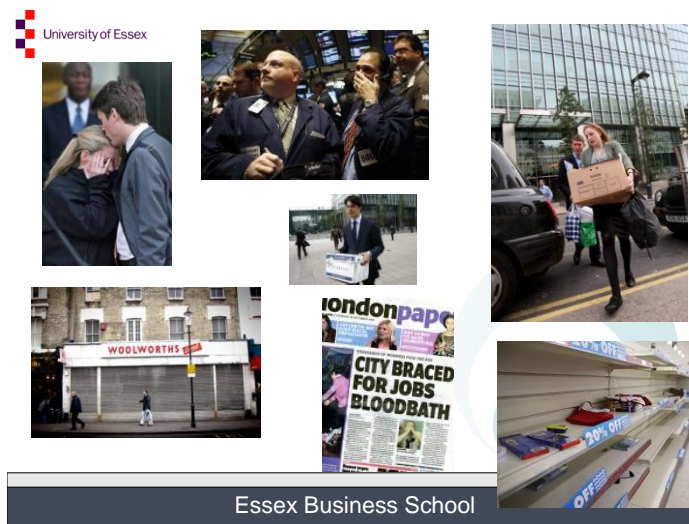
¹⁸ Phillipson, 1998: 139

continue unchallenged. If we are not to begin to accept ageing as playing a key part of the organizational dynamic, then it is difficult to begin to create theoretical vistas for exploring this.

The second strand involves more critically informed work that has drawn on processes popular in race or gender studies. Within this research grouping, older workers may be seen as marginalised in the workplace in similar ways to gender and race inequality. Whilst this enthusiasm to look below the surface to the complexities of age discrimination is welcoming, often scholars, myself included, become trapped in trying to remain sensitive to the specific challenges researching age presents, whilst acknowledging that other forms of marginalisation may intersect or exacerbate forms of age inequality. An example of this is ‘othering’ where incorporating the physiological potential for ‘everyone’ to grow older requires careful theoretical reflection. Whilst constructions of older age may be part of a processes of othering’, the difficulty in separating chronology from constructions in a way that the vocabulary of sex and gender affords us is difficult. Whilst we may all age, even those of us who are in our 60’s may never be constructed as older workers for a number of social, political and aesthetic reasons that require different terminology separate from psychology or gerontological studies.

The final growing body of literature tries to break from an affiliation with other modes of inequality by drawing on social theory or tropes as a starting point for exploring older worker experience, which is where I would locate the following study. Developed mainly within sociological arenas, researchers have sought to explore the experience of ageing as one that is both affected and affecting a number of other social processes and structures. Here the focus goes beyond the symptoms of discrimination or stereotyping and seeks to uncover the darker dimensions of age as a form of abjection. In the vein of this research vista, I’ll now introduce the lens through which my empirical work is explored.

Towards a Vampiric lens



So moving towards the vampiric lens of ageing. My initial thoughts of the vampiric lens have emerged directly from the field. Despite the initiatives and demonstrations of ‘good practice’, the response to age discrimination from the coalface, as far as I can see, has not been so much how to reemploy those over 50 into meaningful jobs, or prolong working lives, but to ensure organizations manage to portray themselves in a way that seduces the

depleting supply of generation Y cohorts. However, at the same time, the role of work on identity in later life is still promoted¹⁹, particularly within new labour ideologies. We all know of a ‘friend of a friend’ who received his gold watch on Friday and by Monday he was dead (note that there are of course gendered undertones to this urban myth). So we can deduce that at least as far as cultural references report, ageing at work is hazardous, but the alternative doesn’t hold much attraction either. Others have opened up interesting research vista through discussions of the zombie trope, or the metaphor of cannibalism most notably Chris Land, Alf Rehn²⁰ and Janet Sayers²¹, all of which serve to challenge the sanitised view of organizations, as Parker would argue²². However, this has not really been connected to processes of inequality at a local level, or discussed this in relation to age discrimination.

Of course, the most successful tried-and-tested way to stop ageing is to die. And whilst this might not be the most desirable solution to the ageing self and its associated marginalisation in society, exploring the relationship between ageing and death may enlighten the way in which we think about ageism and organizational age inequality as not simply something that emerges through demographical imbalances or archetypes, but something that festers deep within the nature of the contemporary workplace, causing an aversion to ageing and subsequent abjection of the ‘older worker’ despite the benevolent wishes of policy and management practice.

Whilst, I fully accept that I am not the first and most definitely not the most erudite when it comes to exploring death and organizational analysis, I understand that death is powerful. As Bauman²³ states, it can both deny any experience of meaning, or completely flood it with significance, disrupting and disintegrating the social order we constantly seek to erect²⁴. When placed into this framework, the power of death frames pithy issues such as employee motivation or culture programmes²⁵ as rather insignificant. In other words, death is far too powerful a phenomena and discourse to be left outside the control of organizations. Within high modernity, the rise in concern over working identities and the experience of work suggests that work should provide us with meaning, rather than suppress or deny meaning. What we see however, is an appropriation of meaning where existential questions are both framed and answered within organizational frameworks of knowing and believing²⁶. Employees can elicit ‘The Answer’, a sense of meaning, attachment and identity, all in exchange for their loyalty, body and soul.

Sensitive to this idea, Giddens discusses the notion of the sequestration of experience, the processes of concealments that distance everyday routines from madness, sexuality and death²⁷. Examples of this within organizations may include the rise in workplace spirituality, as discussed by Bell and Taylor²⁸, or fun at work explored by Costea and Peter Fleming²⁹. Not only do these workplace phenomena exemplify what Sievers would

¹⁹ Phillipson, 1993

²⁰ Rehn, 2009

²¹ Sayers, 2007

²² Parker, 2005

²³ Bauman 1992

²⁴ Walter, 2008

²⁵ Wilmott, 2000


²⁶ Giddens 1991

²⁷ Giddens 1991: 156

²⁸ Bell and Taylor, 2003

²⁹ Fleming, 2005

call ‘surrogates for meaning’³⁰, but I would argue rest firmly on a perverted concept of life trajectory. As Bogden Costea et al state, workplace fun embodies ‘the anticipation of life with no foreseeable end, or, at least, promising endless youth through a perpetually preserved and active “inner child”³¹. In this sense, it appears that rather than suggest organizations try to sequester the trajectory from birth to death, they may actually appear to linger on the concepts of immortality and youth in order drive the heartbeat of the organizations and, of particular interest here, to the peril of those failing to embody these dimensions.


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Age Discrimination through a vampiric lens

- Organizational Immortality

Perversion of lifecourse

Older workers potent reminder of mortality, degradation and despair



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This concept is most apparent in Sievers’ work which suggests that whilst individuals must submit to the powers of mortality, the primary task of an organization is to ensure the immortality of the firm. Founders of the firm transcend mortality through organizational narratives and contribute to the cultural immortality illusion³² created by the symbolic incarnation of its member’s collective immortality. On the occasions that organizational immortality fails, the devastation caused by this is clear, seen in the reaction to those in Woolworths or Lehman Brothers over the past 12 months, or in the work of Emma Bell, suggesting that the ‘death of the firm’ seems to go beyond metaphor and calls into question the immortality that has been created in the organization-in-the-mind of the employees. People appear to require this promise of ‘eternal life’ from organizations, and therefore it is unsurprising they are complicit or even contribute to its reproduction.

However, organizations cannot be regarded as a life force in themselves, due to their reliance on other forces, most notably people. Similar to a vampire, they survive through their parasitic relationship with the living, seducing through sleek, self-assured presentation. Moreover, in order to continue, there must be systematic sacrifices made of those who are no longer deemed as useful or contributing to the ‘life-blood’ of the organization. Therefore, as Sievers³³ argues, this quest must result in some members being ‘sacrificed’ for the cause. He states that ‘Immortality is a scarce resource, available

³⁰ Sievers, 1994

³¹ Costea et al, 2007: 170

³² Sievers 1994: 13

³³ Sievers, 1994: 24-25

only to the happy few; and immortality of the enterprise as well as of its few members can only be achieved and maintained at the cost of many others and their lack of immortality'. To extend the concept of the organization as vampiric organism, there must of course be a form of life-giving force that ensures its continuance. For Sievers this would be any worker: he is not indiscriminate in this; however, I would argue that it is often those who fail to represent the aspiration of the organization, older workers, who are more vulnerable within this paradigm. Whilst youth is of course not the opposite of ageing, according to Martens et al.³⁴ those who are older serve as potent reminders of mortality, degradation and despair. If organizations are craving some form of organism to 'grown fat on' conversely, there is an obvious sacrificial object in the form of the older worker.

In thinking through older worker abjection through a vampiric lens we are thus left with a dynamic that goes beyond biased beliefs or perceptions. In order to demonstrate how this concept can be seen as played out in the quotidian experiences of the workplace, I will now turn to a study I conducted a few years ago, where I interviewed a number of Human Resource Managers about organizational age discrimination and older workers. Due to the diverse trajectory of the sample, the interactions not only captured a managerial rhetoric, but also how the participants viewed their own ageing experiences in relation to organizational life. Hopefully this will show how using the vampiric trope to explore the symbolic mechanism surrounding age dynamics at work will illuminate the systematic marginalization of the older worker.

1. Neophilia



1. Neophilia & the need for fresh blood

I know that we are worried about the effect of the time bomb and the pressures on the organization. So first we need to assess how bad the situation is – I don't know if that has been done properly yet; then we need to see what the economic implications are; then the role of businesses should be considered in this fight against economic problems should be addressed... (Susan, 39, Education)

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Firstly, a vampiric lens can help us to understand older worker abjection as something that is deeply imbedded in the nature of the contemporary workplace. Whilst many managers accepted the need to employ older workers, this was often justified in relation to external forces such as the demographic time bomb and ageing population, as seen in Susan's quotation. However, at the same time, their own organizations were framed as being in a 'fortunate' position of being able to attract younger workers. This not only validated their own status as successful organizations, but did so through the inherent privileging of preferring younger over older workers. In this sense, the organization was

³⁴ Martens et al., 2005: 227

framed as both reacting to something outside their control and discussing an issue that was not personally relevant to them. This presented a strong contrast when discussing recruitment as a means of organizational development. Upon being asked whether it important people work up until retirement age?, typical responses are shown on the screen.



I would say minimum maybe 60. But I think you've got to allow for new fresh people coming through. It's all very well keeping a hold of your older, experienced workforce but you've got to allow for young fresh blood coming through.
(Amy, Communications)

It's just been very much a fresh blood coming in, people wanted to develop, whereas with someone of a slightly more mature age they're happy to just let their career float along without being overly ambitious, you know, it gives them a life style.
(Tara, Finance)

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However, this need for fresh blood was always conflated with the recruitment of younger workers. On one hand, life course justifications were used: according to one manager, younger workers would be 'fresh out of university and have their pulse on all the new techniques'. Elsewhere however, managers discussed the advantage of young recruits, as seen by Susan on the slide³⁵. This echoes work by Lyon and Glover³⁶ who purport a bias within human resource management's due to a preference for 'green workers' who will espouse organizational wide culture. However, it also feeds into larger ideas relating to the 'power of youth'. Youth is powerful, able to do things, revolutionise or transform. For example, Skelton and Valentine write that 'the concept of culture has been important in emphasising the active agency of youth'³⁷, whilst McRobbie refers to a 'range of different, youthful subjectivities'³⁸, suggesting a link between the potential for agency and youth.

This was far more explicit in other managers' interviews where they were quite clear that their organizational strategy required them to look for younger workers elsewhere, particularly those managers within the service sector³⁹. Not only do we see here a reactive stance taken to the ageing demographic, but an assumption that a 'fresh supply' of the young will always be available from somewhere. Interestingly, when asked about recruiting older workers the interviewee suggested that 'she hadn't really thought about it – but they wouldn't be interested in these kinds of jobs anyway'.

³⁵

³⁶ Lyon and Glover 1998

³⁷ Skelton and Valentine, 1998 :18

³⁸ McRobbie, 1994:180

³⁹ Alicia, 36, Hospitality

▪ *'It is refreshing to start with a blank canvas: their enthusiasm is infectious and brings up the rest of the group into thinking in new ways without a hangover of past failures'*
(Gail, Consultancy)

▪ *The labour force is going to get older definitely now we rely heavily on Eastern European countries, so with the lack of generation X generation Y, we have to look outside because we are going to run out of people for jobs, that's evident. So yes we do. But I think we will fundamentally have an older workforce anyway in the next few years. So discrimination will have to stop. People will have to fill those positions'*
(Angus, hospitality)

Taking these positions serves to contribute to the supremacy of newness, which was at once conflated with the young. This of course will not surprise some commentators such as Steffen Boehm⁴⁰ who has stated that modernity encapsulates a denial of death and destruction and 'Instead, what is celebrated by modern reproduction technologies are positive notions of progress and newness that produce shocks that make the subject docile'⁴¹. This results in a continual search 'for the new in order to reproduce the same'⁴². Rather than be seen to use 'the old' as a foundation on which to recreate or better the organization, studies of change have also shown how the old and new are dichotomised through structures of contrast, which attempt to sever any association between the two. Integral to this transformation is use of language as a symbolic form of creating social reality which is reproduced within organizational interaction. For example, using metaphors⁴³ has been shown as a means of directing the company 'away' from the old whilst change within the public sector has attempted to frame old models of organizational processes as inefficient⁴⁴. This bias may partly be the reason for older workers being more likely to lose their jobs, either through redundancy or early retirement during organizational restructuring⁴⁵.

2. The seduction of agelessness

⁴⁰ Boehm, 2005

⁴¹ Boehm, 2005: 91

⁴² Boehm, 2005: 91

⁴³ Palmer and Dunford, 1996; Cleary and Packard, 1992

⁴⁴ Doolin, 2003

⁴⁵ Campbell, 1999; Samorodov, 1999

2. The Seduction of 'Agelessness'

▪ Look where people go "I could not tell what age that person was". Which is a new thing I think. So it's not necessarily about looking younger, it's about looking where people can't guess your age and maybe that's so that we have to then, I don't know look more at your personality I don't know

(Tara, Finance)

▪ The way they (women) act as well if they go out, yes. You have to behave a way depending on your age but if you're male maybe not so much. I feel that I'm managing to fight it and don't look either young or old and that's fine but females they look in newspapers and things trying to make themselves look younger all the time. I'm not saying it's right or wrong. But that's what's perceived

(Alicia, Hospitality)

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Turning to the experience of those who may be seen as subject to older worker constructions. Secondly, a vampiric lens helps us to interrogate the concept of 'agelessness' as key in older worker abjection. This has appeared in both policy arguments driven by a rather naive 'age neutral' agenda, similar to the gender blind concept. For many of the interviewees, when it came to reflecting on their own position, many aspired to embody some elusive position in relation to age categorisation as shown in the excerpts on the screen⁴⁶. Whilst not being able to draw generalisations from a relatively small sample, there appeared to be a gender bias in this trend. In one sense this is unsurprising: Susan Sontag recognises that for women 'ageing means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification'⁴⁷, whilst Loretto and Duncan discuss the double jeopardy of gender and age where working women are 'never the right age'. Indeed, growing older appeared to be a double edged sword for many of the women interviewed where the benefits they felt they gained as they became more established in their careers often coincided with new negative stereotypes.

Now when I look back I got a couple of good promotional opportunities around 40 and my career really looked at if it took off, then nothing after that... I was past baby-making but still some years left in me

(Patricia, Utilities)

I still have to work hard at it, you know get my nails done, it's quite important to me, and make sure I **use just enough corrector to hide the lines without, em, looking like Frankenstein** (both laugh), but I've never had anyone comment on looking like an old crone... (Pam, Broadcasting)

Sometimes you have to know everything, learn everything and do everything, then at other times we're encourage to forget.. The blue skies thinking sessions we have every so often are not really my cup of tea, as they expect the impossible

(Miranda, Call Centre)

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The sentiments of many of the participants echoes Molly Andrews⁴⁸ idea that agelessness is often simply the notion of denying ageing as a construct. However, this appeared to be a personal project for participants that was strongly connected to a

⁴⁶ Alicia, 36, Hospitality

⁴⁷ Sontag 1978.

⁴⁸ Andrews, 1999

normalisation of a career trajectory where ‘making your mark’ was synonymous with ensuring that you had enough years left to prove your worth. This quest for agelessness is not possible physiologically and rarely achievable culturally or socially. Yet the perversion of temporality related to the career trajectory affected the individual identity work undertaken by the individuals within organizations, where they had to make sure their potential was not betrayed through their own ageing effects⁴⁹. Of course, if, the organization itself is defined through age paralysis via eternal rejuvenation, then it is of little surprise employees feel pressure to uphold this position. In one sense we could see this resistance to the ageing process as self preservation in terms of resisting experience and maturity in the face of organizational pressures. However, the time and stress that was invested into this process to ensure they were not put ‘on the scrap heap’, so to speak, seemed to require a huge amount of effort from women. This was even more significant when a successful outcome was never guaranteed and often had consequences for participants in trying to reconcile what was expected of them, both at work and in their appearance, as shown in these quotations. Just as Rank⁵⁰ suggests that not acknowledging death results in a *vita reducta*⁵¹, the living dead, it may be that the tension between the pressure to deny physiological ageing and the socially constructed aspiration of agelessness suggests a chaotic and unguided breakdown of temporality for many of the participants, suggested by Miranda’s quotation. After all, even Dracula, whilst ageless in his trajectory, finds the passing of time as affecting his behaviour, as seen in a quotation picked up from Godfrey et al ‘There was a time when I fed from golden chalices... (but) in my old age I feed erratically’⁵².

Feeling Old or being Old?



3. Feeling old not being old

I actually physically feel older but that's been quite a recent thing. I think in the last few years, you know, I've gone into a promoted post and I've gone through two house moves. I've gone through a part time MSc. I feel it's given me so little time for eating properly, relaxation, and actually fresh air and activity and therefore I feel like I'm lacking energy and I don't have the same ability to like buzz around the place. The funny thing is when I went to the doctor because I said I feel tired all the time, and not feeling very good, and she said well now you're over 30 you just won't have the same energy levels as you were when you were in your 20s - and I was like "what!" (laughter) you've got to be kidding me
 (Christine, Finance)

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As we discussed previously, the seduction of agelessness does not necessarily mean that individuals can or are encouraged to be situated within a timeless world. In playing around the concept of a future that is defined and solidified, organizational processes such

⁴⁹ The link between the temporal dimension vampiric tropes has previously been made by Godfrey et al.

⁵⁰ Rank 1930, quoted in Sievers, 1994: 105.

⁵¹ For him, the result is that people become the living dead, not truly alive. The employee who lives by these discourse is ‘one who has to erect all the barriers internally while avoiding the external real ones’

⁵² Defoe’s *Shadow of the Vampire* (2001): in Godfrey et al, 2004: 30

as hierarchy and promotions, remain ambiguous through temporality. In basing organizational behaviour on ‘how to be, and, perhaps even more significantly, what to become’⁵³, this provides an important means on ontological security in itself by assuring us that ‘we have a future’⁵⁴. Yet it also brings us to the third vampiric concept of succumbing to ageing not despite the organization but because of the organization. Through the narratives of participants there was a deep irony that investment in a career resulted in accelerated ageing, where individuals who were chronologically 26-35 discussed feeling old, as discussed by Christine, who was 31 at the time⁵⁵. This often occurred in the shadows of pressures to present a youthful dynamic within their work group, as felt by Lydia who is in recruitment and states ‘Sometimes I feel that I’m expected to be the new blood of the team and have all these amazing ideas, but there’s times when I’m just too exhausted to do that you know, I’ve had to stay up late on a report or whatever’⁵⁶.



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2. Feeling old, not being old

I suppose I have a mental block about it because when people ask me how old I am, or how old you are when you are at the doctor's or something, I can never remember. I've got this block, you know, I don't want to remember how old I am. It does vary and there's all sorts of, you're right, it does change from day to day and I think you look around and it gets a different time of year and you see everybody wearing flouncy skirts and all that sort of thing and you think I use to wear that and then I think oh God no I'd look awful. It just wouldn't suit me. People would go 'oh God look at that old woman wearing that stuff'. (laughter) and then at other times, I suppose I'm probably about the oldest in our team at work and that goes from about 25 to 30 years in age and I don't really feel, I just feel one of them.

Ingrid, Broadcasting

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However, whilst there was acceptance of feeling old as a result of work, being old was consistently rejected or denied. This can be seen in participant's careful negotiation of age in their daily practices, such as Ingrid who was in her late 50's. In one sense, the need to distance oneself from being an older worker appeared to be condition of high modernity, failure being ‘the great modern taboo’⁵⁷ as Sennet calls it, which is bound up with the notion of risk at a personal level. Just as individuals tried to ‘age-proof’ their bodies through diet, exercise and cosmetic adjustments, careers were also age-proofed through activities that preserved the body and stimulated the mind, in an attempt to create some form of chronological disjuncture, as shown in these excerpts. However, later on he stated that *I know that some of us are starting to get a little tired of the constant training for the systems, changes to regional structures, the yearly targets and the self-development away days – I never thought I'd say this but I can hear benidorm calling.*

⁵³ Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004: 169.

⁵⁴ Linstead and Brewis, 2007: 365

⁵⁵ Christine, 31, finance

⁵⁶ Lydia, 23, Recruitment

⁵⁷ Sennett, 1999: 118

3. Feeling old, not being old

I feel I'm 19. erm, because someone once sent me a thing saying "you can only be young once but you can be immature for ever" and that's ... but when key birthdays happen like my son, my older son was 21 a couple of years ago and my younger one's 21 this year, yes you are aware you are getting older but I ... no I don't

(Bob, Brewing)

*I've always had the chance to update my skills *** (name of organization) are very good are doing that, and I'm aware that it's down to me to look after my own fate. I've always looked after myself, still going out running every week, sleeping well, making sure I've got enough energy, more than some of the younger boys around here.*

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In one sense, keeping up with the ‘young ones’ was a key way of showing that individuals were not surrendering to the subject position of an older worker. However, the maintenance involved contributed to abjection of the self through the denial of our own ageing, particularly in relation to the embodied dimensions of the self. Kristeva writes that abjection relates to the ‘immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be’⁵⁸. Rather than focus on the relationship between mother and child, in the case of older worker abjection, we may see this separation as occurring not in terms of one actual body from another, but within ourselves, where the denial of the ageing body is in itself a revolt against the source of our own existence which is of course defined by the ageing process. This state of liminality of course reproduces the unfavourable position of the older worker as the inevitable outcome.

Conclusion



⁵⁸ Kristeva, 1982

To conclude, these examples are drawn from a relatively small study, and one which is both inherently subsumed in neo-liberal ideologies where we discuss the ‘older worker’ as a discrete identity, as well as a westerncentric middle-class bias. After all, not all cultures have the same age trajectory and, coming from Glasgow where the life expectancy in some areas is 43 years, even parts of the UK question the study’s validity. That said, I would argue that unfortunately we can see a vampiric element in current social policy. Whilst there may be one ray of sunshine in the new UK Equality Bill in 2010 which may further challenge deeper inset beliefs through extending legal protection against age discrimination beyond employment, other trends suggest a persistent bias against ageing and maturity. In particular, the concept of ‘active ageing’ has recently emerged as a key concept within the World Health Organization, encouraging older individuals to take responsibility for their healthier lives, ignoring, for example, the increase in occupational illnesses during the life course due to work intensification and the work intensification in the new economy. In some sense there is a spirit of rejuvenation here, where the effects of ageing can be reversed in a similar way to the ‘old wives mill’, shown in the picture above, where wives could be recycled into something altogether more pleasing, or in Huxley’s *Brave New World* Huxley’s brave new world where, ‘the old men, work, the old men copulate.... not a moment to sit and think’.

Of course, since vampires have entered the public imagination, there has always been defence mechanisms against them, and similarly, individuals will also seek to assert their maturity through various practice. However, from talking to a number of employees over 50, it appears that the embodied identity work and the constant pressure to rejuvenate their skills, update their CV and reapply for their jobs exemplifies the consequence of an organization striving for immortality which in turn produces a culture dominated by eternal youthfulness. Sievers writes that ‘a culture which places its main emphasis on youth and early adulthood must make it even more difficult for its individual members to question the predominant ideology of immortality’⁵⁹. I would argue that more significantly, this denial of ageing ultimately affects those who have seemingly failed to uphold this ideal.

Looking at a relevant phenomenon through alternative lenses can help to demonstrate how insidious the level of age inequality is within organizational structures, and challenging it may lead to a growing debate over the nature of career progression, work trajectories and norms of working. What I have tried to show is that rather than simply focus on older worker discrimination in isolation, in considering the dynamic of organizational ageing, we can see older worker marginalisation as an outcome of complex psycho-social organizational dynamics. Therefore, it is simply not enough to suggest that as more and more people age discrimination will disintegrate through a process of osmosis. As seen by the participant’s narratives, many of us shall always see ourselves as the exception, rather than fully submit to an unfavourable archetype or embrace the process of ageing. In doing so we not only leave prejudices ingrained in employment structures and workplace dynamics but we surrender ourselves to the prospect of embracing the full journey of life.

⁵⁹ Sievers, 1994, p.13