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What's age got to do with it?

On the critical analysis of age and organizations

by

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Introduction to the Special Issue of *Organization Studies*

Abstract

Age, as an embodied identity and as an organizing principle, has received scant attention in organization studies. There is a lack of critical appreciation of how age plays out in organizational settings, the material and discursive dynamics of age practices, how age discourses impact on the body, and how age and ageing intersects with other identity categories. This is curious since age works as a master signifier in contemporary society and is something that affects us all. In this introductory essay, we show how the papers in this special issue redress this lacuna by enhancing and challenging what we know about age and organizations. We also set out an agenda for stimulating research conversations to bring an age-sensitive lens to organizational analysis. We structure our analysis around two focal points: age as an embodied identity, and the symbolic meanings of age within organizing practices. In doing so, we aim to provide a catalyst not only about research on age *in* organizations but also about the aged nature *of* organizing.

Keywords: Age, youth, ageing, older worker, identity, discourse

Age is a culturally and politically resonant discourse, informing both material and discursive practices in contemporary society. Whether it is the fetishizing of youth and novelty or the anxieties of ageing and decline, age has become a reified system of classification and a pervasive organizing principle with significant effects. The young and the new tend to be lauded, while old age is subjected to the ubiquitous narrative of 'age as decline' (Trethewey, 2001). Moreover, as individuals, organizations and societies struggle to deal with various 'problems' associated with different ages, they help to create those very problems, consciously and unconsciously perpetuating age stereotypes, rather than transforming them. Age is thus a complex and pervasive discourse, cutting across diverse organizations, institutions and societies, and producing significant material effects. As a dominant discourse (Foucault, 1981), age works as a master signifier to establish ways of thinking, being and doing, establishing what we can see as reality and truth, and both creating and constraining meanings related to age. Discourses transmit and produce power (Foucault, 1978), the effects of which are brought to bear on individuals in organizations through complex sets of practices, which are themselves made meaningful through discourses. In Western societies, these power relations consist of knowledge systems and social practices that play out in and through organizations. And yet, age as an embodied identity has received sparse scholarly attention in organization studies. At first, this seems rather surprising since we all age; but perhaps, it is precisely because we do age that it has been overlooked. In any event, there is considerable scope for more research on age in organization studies. Issues such as how age works as an organizing principle, the symbolic valorization of certain meanings of age in relation to organizational identities, professions and institutions, and how age is seen to matter for organizational operations and performance all pose novel research foci for organizational scholars.

In this introduction to the special issue, we show the importance of adopting a critical lens to question the meanings of age and to explore how and when age matters in organizations. In the first section, we consider the presence and absence of knowledge about age in organization studies. We start with considerations of youth and youthfulness before moving on to consider the dominant

discourse of ‘age as decline’ and the precarious nature of resistance through counter discourses of ‘successful’ ageing. We then discuss research exploring generations and inter-generational relations. We structure our critical exploration around two foci: the meanings of age as an embodied identity, i.e. age *in* organizations; and the ways in which organizations are constituted though assumptions about age, i.e., the aged nature *of* organizing. We conclude by providing a matrix that suggests possible avenues for future research, mapping the articles in this special issue against the quadrants of the matrix, in order to elaborate fruitful lines of inquiry for future research conversations and provide a research agenda for engendering a more age-sensitive organization studies.

The presence and absence of age

Existing research on age has tended to focus on the experiences of individuals, the labour force generally or on industry and nation-wide trends, rather than age and ageing within organizations. At the level of the individual employee, the ‘problem’ of age has been considered in relation to diversity (Backes-Gellner and Veen, 2013), careers (Claes and Heymans, 2008; Desmette and Gaillard, 2008; Dobrev, 2012; Goldberg, Finkelstein, Perry, and Konrad, 2004), skills (Backes-Gellner, Schneider and Veen, 2011), performance (Avolio, Waldman and McDaniel, 1990; Ng and Feldman, 2013), commitment (Rhodes, 1983) and discrimination (James and Wooten 2006; Duncan and Loretto 2004). Age has been found to be a significant variable in labour market studies of low paid and flexible work (Bloch, 2013; Escott, 2012; Fenton and Demott, 2006; Gebel, 2010; McDowell, 2003), unemployment (Bradley and van Hoof, 2005), and the ageing workforce (Boudiny, 2013; Moore, 2009; Simpson, Richardson and Zorn, 2012). Many of these studies have, however, taken a reductive bio-essentialized understanding of age, treating it as a ‘given’ – a fixed category founded primarily on chronological age.

Critical gerontology, including the field of ageing studies, is one research domain that has challenged these assumptions. It takes a critical reflexive approach to analyze the power relations underlying ageism and constructions of age, influenced by critical and poststructuralist, feminist,

disability and queer theories, as well as other forms of discourse analysis and the sociology of the body. This work has emphasized how age is never merely a number (Calastanti, 2008; Gullette, 2004, Biggs, 1997). Rather, the focus has been on understanding how the aged body and the meanings and importance ascribed to age are produced through power relations, with discursive and material effects. Oriented towards praxis, these studies aim to explore, critique and, ultimately, transform the discourse of ageing towards more enabling ways of being and knowing. Here, greater emphasis is placed on the indeterminate nature of age, recognizing that age, like other identity categories, can be "a site of oppression and contestation as well as an arena of choice" (Gilleard and Higgs, 2013, p.17).

As far as the critical analysis of organizations is concerned, despite theorizing of the subject being a core concern (Thomas, 2009), age has been largely a silent player compared to other salient categories of identity classification, such as gender, ethnicity, and disability. It is as if organization members are assumed to be ageless, and organizational structures and practices are age-neutral. Further, while ageing provides compelling evidence that the body is a material phenomenon, studies of ageing bodies are conspicuously absent from studies of organizations (Shilling, 2005, 762). There are exceptions, of course, as we will discuss in this introduction. Nonetheless, there is much more to be learned about the ways in which assumptions about age are omnipresent in daily organizational practices, and pervade a myriad of organizational phenomena, from risk, trust and culture to professionalism, leadership and change. Images of age saturate organizational processes, working to privilege some organizational members, while marginalizing those who transgress age norms – those who are the 'wrong age', either too young or too old to correspond with the 'ideal worker' profile.

Youth and youthfulness

When it comes to age, youth is often taken to be the norm. Age seems to materialize only when it is construed as a problem in conventional thinking, which occurs mainly in relation to the

'older' worker.[1] As Fineman (2011) notes, not everyone is targeted by discourses of ageing: there comes a time when individuals pass from being an organizational member and move into a state of being an older worker, at which point age comes squarely into view. The younger worker, in contrast, is far less likely to be the focus for interrogation – invisible and yet the centre of the discourse in that they are the norm.

Some research has explored the corporealized nature of youth and its evocation of desirable organizational attributes as, for example, with work on aesthetic labour. For example, in their study of holiday tour guides, Guerrier and Adib (2004) explore the intersections of normative heterosexual, 'laddish' performances of masculinity undertaken by young male tour guides in order to assert a masculine identity, while performing in a predominantly feminized and highly sexualized environment. However, age is not theorized to any great extent and it remains unclear as to the role that youth plays in securing career success in this profession, or what happens in the case of older tour guides who may find it more difficult to perform these normative roles. Coupland's (2014, p. 12) study of rugby league football players considers the built-in obsolescence that arises when work valorizes youthfulness, noting the 'inevitable and gradual erosion of bodily capital' that goes hand in hand with reaching the pinnacle of success in professional sport. She describes how rugby players' bodies are worked on in order to realize their potential, as well as the 'body work' that players themselves undertake in order to constrain and sustain the fit body. In this way, we can see how through the intersections of age, gender and class, these rugby players are complicit in the formation of a highly precarious sense of self, bound up in a body that through injury or passage of time, will, inevitably result in failure as it ages.

Other studies have also focused on how particular age-related assumptions inform constructions of self. Down and Reveley's (2004) study of young aspiring entrepreneurs demonstrates how these individuals reflexively construct a sense of themselves as entrepreneurs

[1] One exception to this might be the phenomenon of youth unemployment. The effects of the global financial crisis and high rates of unemployment among the young have put this on the agenda (e.g., Escott, 2012).

through an oppositional strategy of setting themselves against the 'older generation' in their encounters with older managers. Such identity work, the authors argue, is influential in decision making over whether to embark on an entrepreneurial career. Zanoni's (2011) study shows how, through diversity management, female, older and disabled workers were discursively constructed as being less productive within the lean factory system. Ironically these 'disadvantaged' workers were able to deploy these identities to resist managerial control and exploitation. In contrast, young workers, who were considered to be fully productive, lacked an identity-based resource to legitimate their resistance to management control and so, when they did resist, they were constructed as deviant. Zanoni's (2011) study thus shows how individuals can draw on identities of difference, such as age, to resist exploitation at work.

Despite these studies, there is still much more to learn about the experiences of young workers in organizations. Studies that involve young workers rarely have the construction of age as a core focus – their age is incidental to the analysis. We need to know more about the organizational practices that are constitutive of youth and youthfulness, as well as the material and discursive consequences that result. How and in what circumstances does youthfulness and being young become a salient identity? How do young people experience organizations and what factors affect these experiences? What happens when investments in a youthful identity become problematic, as they inevitably do as one grows older, particularly in organizations that operate in youth driven industries, where ageing may pose problems at a relatively young chronological age. How then do younger workers 'age' in such organizations, for example, aircrews in the airline industry (Mills, 2006), performing arts (Dean, 2005; Wainwright and Turner, 2004), professional sports (Eagleman, Rodenberg and Kee, 2014; Tulle 2008), or in knowledge-based industries that place a great emphasis on career success at a relatively young age, such as advertising, IT and investment banking (Riach and Cutcher, 2014; Fineman, 2011; Sennett, 2006)? How do younger workers experience the pressures to conform in compulsory youth/fun cultures, especially when these cultures compromise other identity investments such as religion, gender, or sexuality? Conversely,

what are the experiences of younger workers entering 'aged' organizations, such as highly traditional, patriarchal and class-based 'gentlemen's clubs' (Maddock and Parkin, 1993) or those that operate in industries where it is important to convey maturity and experience such as banking (Ainsworth and Cutcher, 2008)? We need to distinguish between the privileging of youth as a cultural signifier and the experiences of young people in work and organizations. While young people may possess the visible markers of youth that is so highly prized, they may not always be in a position to mobilize this to their advantage and, indeed, be vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization.

Discourses of decline and the ageing subject

Ageing and, especially older age, tends to be discursively constructed as a limiting condition, associated with declining health and faculties, rising dependency, and a move towards social and economic redundancy (Phillipson, 2002). Ageing represents the nexus of the decline in two dominant subject positions in Western societies: the autonomous agent and the productive worker (Gergen and Gergen, 2000). Older age means that the construct of the idealized productive worker intersects with discourses of ageing as decline to produce the 'old and useless' worker (Sennett 2006). The older worker is often situated in contemporary organizational discourses that tend to valorize speed, dynamism and technological savvy; attributes typically associated with young workers (Ainsworth, 2006). Writers such as Bauman (2007) and Sennett (2006) suggest that 21st century workers need to reinvent themselves on a continual basis to cope with the rapidly changing, uncertain environment. This idealized worker is one with 'the capacity to surrender, to give up possession of an established reality' (Sennett, 2006: p. 98). Such a profile is more likely to value adaptation over experience and youth over maturity. A future orientation becomes the prized skill – 'the ability to do something new, rather than to draw on what one had already learned to do' (Sennett, 2006, p. 98). The older worker, whose assets lie in her or his 'crystalline intelligence' (Backes-Gellner at al., 2011) – skills and experience built up over long working lives – face the 'specter of uselessness' (Sennett 2006, p. 99).

The construction of the older subject as ‘useless’ has profound implications not only for the individual, but also for the organization and wider society, especially as we are living longer and working lives are extended. Older workers face a ‘grey ceiling’, where their careers plateau and their skills become obsolescent or outmoded, and they are assumed to be too old and inflexible to learn new skills and keep pace with the demands of the modern organization. These individuals are further disadvantaged when organizations have the choice of whether to train an older worker or hire a cheaper younger worker who may already have the necessary skills (Sennett, 2006). They may be more likely to be selected for redundancy on the grounds of being too old and inflexible to learn new skills and keep pace with the demands of the modern organization (e.g., Riach, 2011). Furthermore, older workers can be viewed as less compliant, more judgemental about their employers, and more likely to voice criticism than their younger counterpoints, making their employment status even more precarious (Zanoni, 2011).

The discourse of decline has particular resonances for female workers. There is much to suggest that the discourse of ageing has a worse effect on midlife and older women, who are particularly stigmatized due to other forms of discrimination in work organizations. The social construction of age thus has differentiated gendered effects (Zanoni, 2011), and research is itself gendered (Woodward, 2009). Women age differently from men (Sontag, 1972). They face a ‘double blow of sexism and ageism’ in organizations (Trethewey, 2001, p. 184), with the older woman being more likely to be disadvantaged in the gendered and aged organization (Barrett, 2005; Gullette, 1997; Putnam and Bochatin, 2009). Older men, in some occupations at least, are able to draw on their greying hair, paunches, reading glasses and lined faces to portray gravitas, wisdom and experience (Dinnerstein and Weitz, 1994), whereas older women, no longer viewed as sexual objects of desire, become invisible, effectively ‘erased’ from the workplace (Dean, 2005; Trethewey, 2001). Accordingly, women often experience a profound feeling of loss of a valued identity. Menopausal woman in particular are seen as ‘suffering, hormonal, emotional, and asexual’ (Putnam and Bochantin, 2009, p. 60). The menopause acts as a clear symbol of ageing,

complicating efforts to pass as younger, signalling the body's decline, and rendering women vulnerable to the messages portrayed in the anti-ageing commercial machine that make them feel less valuable and more marginal in the organization (Trethewey, 2001). These women also typically have to resort to subterfuge to manage the emotional and physical trauma of menopause due to the demands of work organizations for bodies to be controlled, disciplined and productive.

Future research conversations in relation to older age and ageing might start by elucidating the differentiated experiences of older workers, in different industries and organizations. How do assumptions about age influence organizational practices? How do discourses of age and maturity intersect with other organizational concepts, such as culture, change, professionalism and trust and with what effects? Likewise, we might ask how does older age intersect with other identity categories, such as gender, race and ethnicity and what are the outcomes? How do age and masculinities intersect? How do individuals use age as an identity resource to construct, challenge or resist organizational discourses? Are there examples of more fluid or parodied aged identities that give individual additional resources for a successful career? Another fruitful area for research is empirical work in settings far removed from 'Western' countries which, not only ageing and age-obsessed, are most associated with narratives of age as decline. This area calls out for research situated in other countries where cultural and demographic differences might provide striking new insights regarding meanings of age.

Holding back the years? Resisting ageing

A counter discourse of 'successful' ageing has emerged which ostensibly resists the discourse of decline, although its effects are somewhat more complicated (Rudman, 2006). Born partly from policy agendas attempting to find a 'solution' to an ageing population, successful ageing can be understood as part of a neo-liberal discourse that places increasing emphasis on individuals taking personal responsibility for their own health, lifestyle and well being. Laliberte-Rudman and Molke's (2009) analysis of Canadian newspapers shows a shift from the association of

retirement and age, with an emphasis on ‘early exit’ for individuals to enjoy freedom and self-fulfillment, towards a discourse of ‘productive’ or ‘active’ ageing as governments began to question the economic burdens of a rapidly ageing population and longer life expectancy. Rozanova’s (2010) study of British newspapers shows how successful ageing is an individualizing discourse that places the responsibility for ageing ‘well’ squarely on the individual, who must make wise choices and stay actively engaged with work and society. These studies show how this counter discourse emerges at the intersection of the discourses of decline and of enterprise (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008; Trethewey, 2001) where, in challenging the negative subject position of the older worker, the enterprising subject is entreated to manage their ageing to achieve a state of eternal youth through exercising well and healthy living. In championing self-help and invoking moral tones of abstinence, hard work and care, the enterprising individual ages well, achieving personal, professional and economic success, while relieving the state of much of its duty of care.

Resistance to ageing also requires individuals to work upon their ageing bodies (Foucault, 1994) to mask (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991) the effects of becoming older so that visible signs of ageing are prevented, remedied or minimized. Women in particular are compelled to engage in the necessary ‘body work’ to fit in with professional norms (Trethewey, 1999), making ‘choices’ over how to pass themselves off as younger as discourses of age, gender and professionalism are written on their bodies. Younger workers are not exempt, as Riach and Cutcher (2014) show in their study of the highly competitive organizational context of hedge funds, where ageing, gender and class intersect to produce the ideal trading body, while also reproducing organizational ideals of competition and virility. Body work extends beyond the workplace. As Blaikie (1999) notes: ‘older citizens are encouraged not just to dress “young” and look youthful, but to exercise, have sex, diet, take holidays, and socialize in ways distinguishable from those in their children’s generation” (cited in Segal, 2013, Loc. 2683). This requires a substantial amount of body/identity work, not to mention economic resources, with the market beckoning. Huge profits are to be made from age anxiety, with products and services as diverse as hair gels and skin creams,

fitness programmes and personal trainers, pharmaceutical remedies and various other promised lifestyle changes being offered to hold back the sands of time. There are, however, physical and economic limits to the degree to which ageing can be hidden or masked.

> We see that the body, as a symbol of one's identity and capability, can be managed in culturally approved ways, and age remedies are ever more available on the production of a chequebook or credit card (Fineman, 2011, p. 39).

Thus while wrapped up in the language of choice, freedom and self-determination, these technologies of the self continue to submit the individual to the dominant discourse of ageing.

Successful, productive, active ageing may then appear to challenge the discourse of decline and the association of ageing with illness, disability and loss. However, this discourse remains complicit in the general disparagement of old age in denying the reality that for many, older age does indeed involve dependency and decline in health (Segal, 2013). It can also be seen as a retreat by the state from the responsibility of pension and welfare provision in later life, by placing it firmly on to the individual (Katz, 2001; Putnam and Bochantin, 2009; Riach, 2009).

> Issues previously framed as social problems, such as age discrimination and later life unemployment, were re-framed as individual challenges to be overcome through engaging in practices of the self aimed at improving one's marketability, defying looking and acting 'old' and creating one's own path for work in later life (Laliberte-Rudman and Molke, 2009, p. 385-386).

Those who fail to age well, who look their age, or who suffer the consequences of ageism, such as underemployment, being passed over for promotion, or singled out for redundancy (Zanoni, 2011), are constructed as morally inferior, as if they have brought it on themselves through careless living, leading to self blame and a perpetuation of the association of ageing with decline. There is then a strong moral undertone to the productive ageing discourse, associated with discipline, control over excess, and selfless dedication to maintain a youthful and fit body. As such this counter discourse

exerts a powerful and subtle form of governmentality over the aged body (Barrett, 2005; Rose, 1990), undercutting the possibilities for individual and collective resistance to ageism (Gullette, 1997).

Resistance to ageing raises a number of issues that invite critical consideration, especially in relation to how shared responses to the cultural repression of ageing bodies and the abdication of state responsibility to provide for the most vulnerable groups of elderly people becomes translated into an individualized anxiety about how to manage one's own ageing. In this regard, resistance is multi-faceted – both physical and financial – in efforts to delay or avoid membership of a socially stigmatized group. In this context, we need to know more about how aged identities are and can be resisted? How do organizational members draw on discourses that counteract the negative meanings associated with age? In what ways is the manipulation of bodily image used to comply with and/or challenge age-related discourses? How do paradoxes of resistance play out insofar as some individuals resist age by trying not to age, whereas others might age "disgracefully" through parodied practices of resistance? What roles might social movements, such as the Grey Panthers, play in influencing ageing discourses in organizations? Also, we hear little about resistance to youth and, so, a greater understanding of how the young might resist their 'lack' of age and under what circumstances would also be useful.

My Generation

One way in which age has attracted attention in organization studies, as well as in management more generally, is in the work on generational differences (Down and Reveley, 2004; Joshi, Dencker, Franz and Martocchio, 2010; Parry and Urwin, 2011; Wade-Benzoni, 2002). This work reflects the wider popularity of the use of generational markers to distinguish social groups, such as specific generational groups. The so-called baby-boomers, Gen X, Y and Z have attracted the attention of practitioner-oriented business journals, popular management books and the consulting literature.

The theoretical roots of generational differences can be traced back to the work of Karl Mannheim in the 1920s, who proposed that people are significantly influenced in their youth by their socio-economic environment. Consequently, significant events such as the Second World War, the civil rights movements of the early 1960s, or the September 11th attack on the World Trade Centre, are argued to leave a strong mark on the collective identity of a particular cohort of young people. Thus, generations are defined by – and individuals come to define themselves according to – significant periods of social change and distinguishing dramatic events and crises. This argument has since been developed into a theory of generations which, when applied in work organizations, suggests that individuals from the same generation have similar attitudes, preferences and orientations to work. The use of generational classifications has gained widespread and popular appeal with each generation being depicted as making particular contributions – or offering particular challenges – to those who manage them (Benson & Brown, 2011).

> Organizations and managers who understand these deeper generational differences will be more successful in the long run as they manage their young employees, finding ways to accommodate differences in some cases and exert constructive counter pressure in others. The profits of the twenty first century will go to businesses that can harness the unique traits of Generation Me to their benefit and that of their company (Twenge and Campbell, 2008, p. 873).

Consequently, management consultants are increasingly called upon to provide advice and training into ‘generational insight’ i.e., how to understand, manage and motivate different generations (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2008).

While it can be argued that as we age, we might indeed adapt our individual orientations, preferences and values, it is by no means clear that this adds up to distinct generational groupings. It may, instead, be due to the graduated and experiential variations that arise during an individual’s life time. In fact, there is very little conclusive evidence to back up the popular appeal of distinct

generational categories, with studies failing to demonstrate the noted attributes of different generations (Parry and Urwin, 2011). Attributing the significance of age in organizations to generational categories in this manner reduces the complexity of organizing to simplistic clichés, which 'have their occasional place in everyday shorthand but …. should play no part in the design and execution of workplace policies' (Fineman, 2011, p. 54) for a number of reasons. First, the reduction of individual differences to generational categories posits the idea that regardless of, for example, gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality and place of birth, people born within 20 years of each other all demonstrate the same attitudes, values and preferences. Clearly, this is a highly spurious assertion and it is far more likely that within-group differences would outweigh any definitive differences between generations. As such, it is too simplistic – and insensitive – to attribute a fixed set of assumptions to an extremely diverse set of individuals. Privileging 'generation' over other aspects of identity seems highly problematic in ways that range from managing diversity to exhibiting cultural sensitivity. Recent developments in understanding identity have emphasized how identities are dynamic, context-sensitive and evolving set of constructions, rather than a fixed and enduring essence (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008). The reductive nature of generational difference, which suggests little variation among particular age cohorts, while ignoring the importance of other forms of social identity that intersect with age, as well as the significance of socio-cultural and historical settings does not seem a viable basis for either the study, or the management, of contemporary organizations.

The generational classification system is also questionable in so far as stereotypical assumptions about each generation can produce exploitation. Emphasizing older or younger workers' differences, whether grounded in reality or not, serves to reinforce stereotypical notions which then reinforce a marginalized status in organizations. For example, Riach's (2007) analysis of job advertisements targeted at older workers highlights how, by appealing to assumptions that this age cohort is intrinsically motivated, locks them into low paid, insecure work, with little prospect of advancement. Bradley and Devadason's (2008, p. 121) study of young people's

transition into paid work shows how these individuals were seen to have a work orientation of 'internalized flexibility', which helped them make sense of 'their generation' and their experiences of low paid, precarious and insecure work. Thus the authors coin the phrase 'the adaptable generation' (Bradley and Devadason, 2008, p. 133) to describe the way that the young people exercised agency in constructing themselves as a cohort of flexible workers, but also to retain a positive sense of their experiences of a marginalized position in the labour market. Finally, generational stereotypes run the risk of setting generation against generation, as we have already noted in Down and Reveley's (2004) study of old and young entrepreneurs.

In sum, the celebration of generational differences classifies workers into narrow age-based behaviours and identities, arbitrarily delineates generational groups, and reduces the complex, dynamic and multifaceted nature of individual identities into homogenized, simplified clichés. Bio-essentialized age-stereotyped assumptions limit individuals' discursive and material choices, locking them into age-related subject positions, while the reification of generational groups takes on a form of neo-positivist rationality to what is a socially constructed concept. Despite the lack of empirical evidence, flawed theoretical assumptions and ethical considerations, a social consensus around generational difference has nonetheless constructed an undeniably powerful and persuasive discourse that creates the very thing that it purports to describe. Accordingly, the generational arena seems ripe for critical study by organizational researchers. It would help debunk the labels Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and Millenials by providing evidence of the complex and diverse ways in which people of different ages interact within organizations. In doing so, we might ask what currency do different generational categories have within organizations? Are managers drawing on the popular literature on generations in their practice? How do generations interact within organizations and how much saliency does the notion of inter-generational 'warfare' have? How do generations marginalize and exploit organizational members? Are individuals able to carve out new spaces of work and identity by evoking generational categories? How do individuals resist the stereotyping that comes with generational categories?

Towards research conversations on age and organizations

In this final section of our introductory essay, we offer some suggestions by way of stimulating new research conversations about age. This is not to award age some sort of reified ontological status in organization studies; rather, it is to suggest that taking an age-sensitive approach might offer some novel and nuanced theoretical approaches and provide alternative understandings of organizational phenomena, enabling us to interrogate some of the unquestioned assumptions and organizational 'truths' about age. We aim therefore to encourage reflexive thinking about research on age in organizations and also about the aged nature of organizing. We structure our research questions around two axes. The first axis relates to whether the research emphasis lies in analysing the symbolic meanings of age within organizing practices or age as an embodied identity. The second axis relates to the discourse of youth and youthfulness or the discourse of older age and maturity. These axes are intended to function merely as a heuristic, recognizing that the separated axes are intimately connected with each other: discourses of youth gain their meaning in relation to discourses of older age; and embodied identity is influenced, and is influenced by, organizational practices. For each quadrant in Figure 1, we offer some sample research questions or themes on how we might develop critical studies of age and organization. We offer these questions to stimulate reflection and debate among organizational researchers.

- Insert Figure 1 about here -

In the first quadrant, we focus on the symbolic mobilization of age as an organizing principle, and how this is influenced by discourses of youthfulness. Here, an age-sensitive lens might ask how the discourses of youthfulness circulate in organizations to promote certain sets of understandings around a range of organizational phenomena, such as organizational identity, organizational change, inter-organizational relations, professions, motivation, leadership and technology.

The article by Spedale, Coupland and Tempest (2014, this issue) is situated in this quadrant. It notes how the organizational routine in television broadcasting of 'day-parting' legitimizes and reproduces bio-essential understandings of age, as well as the ideology of youthfulness, in ways that are both ageist and sexist. Their study refers to an infamous case in the UK where BBC presenter Miriam O'Reilly took the organization to an employment tribunal for age and sex discrimination after she and three other presenters were dropped from a programme when it was moved from Sunday morning to a prime time Sunday evening slot (Plunkett, 2011). Their analysis of the report of the employment tribunal shows the discursive strategies bound up in the organizational routine of day-parting that served to reinforce power asymmetries regarding ageism and sexism at work. The study also highlights the complex relationship between discourses of age and gender in organizations and wider society. In this case, an older male presenter was retained on the basis of his experience, drawing attention to the differentiated rationales for women and men that arise from the intersections of age and gender.

Also in this quadrant is the article by Pritchard and Whiting on 'Baby Boomers and the Lost Generation' (2014, this issue). The article directly engages with the literature on generations and generational categories, comparing older and younger individuals. This critical interrogation of generations at work is examined through an analysis of online news reports in the UK, showing how the 'baby boomer' and the 'lost' generations are discursively constructed. The study suggests that intergenerational tensions emerge from discursive work through which the two generations are constructed as being entitled to work and held responsible for generational 'problems'. The discursive construction of each generation depends on the presence of the other, as the two generations are juxtaposed against each other. Thus the younger group was positioned as individually and collectively hopeless and helpless, while the work options for baby boomers were somewhat more positive. Firmly repudiating the idea of generations as essentialized identities, these authors show clearly how generational categories are deployed as an organizing principle in ways that legitimate – and produce – age-related differences at work.

Turning to the second quadrant, we suggest research questions stimulated by the intersections of age as an organizing principle with the discourses of ageing and maturity. Questions might be asked around how an age-sensitive lens can bring new insights into a range of organizational issues that are grounded in assumptions around ageing and maturity. One of the most dominant motifs in current public discourse about ageing is the concern about the projected costs associated with an increasingly older population. These concerns often take the form of alarmist dependency ratios that depict a shrinking taxpayer base that is inadequate to fund a growing proportion of older people. In those countries where citizens might once have relied on some level of government assistance when they were deemed 'too old to work', there is now general acceptance that the individual has a responsibility to be as financially independent and self-reliant as possible in older age. Indeed, this is part and parcel of the 'successful' ageing narrative discussed above. In important ways then, public concern about the macro-level financial implications of population ageing has been accompanied by individual anxiety about how to secure a future standard of living in older age.

The article by Graham on 'The Calculation of Age' (2014, this issue) examines these issues in relation to the specific context of the changing retirement income system in Canada, tracing how it has evolved over the twentieth century. Implicit in this evolution were changes in the way the elderly were constructed as an object of public policy which provided, in turn, certain modes of acting on this population. Canadians were also encouraged to relate to their current and future (older) selves in particular ways through shifts in 'calculative technologies' of accounting, taxation and investment. The markets, products and services in the finance sector that target these individuals 'hail' (Althusser, 1972) them as investors who need to engage in responsible decision-making in the present in order to secure their financial future. Such certainty is perpetually deferred however, as financial markets require individuals to remain uncertain in order to be continually re-engaged in investment decision-making and activity.

The article by Tomlinson on ‘Negotiating the Self between Past and Present’ (2014, this issue) explores another aspect of associated with successful ageing – the move to encourage older people into self-employment as a means to extend their working lives. The study examines how older women negotiate discourses of age and enterprise in constructing provisional identities as self-employed people. It focuses on the accounts of five women to illustrate contrasting forms of engagement with age. Age serves as a narrative device, supporting the idea of change as one passes through different stages of the life course. When the women introduced the idea of having reached a new stage, it served as a transitional point from which to contemplate a different future. However, issues related to expectations of enterprise and active ageing came into play as they approached retirement. The women engaged with these issues in different ways through the narratives they told – some explaining, supporting and justifying moving into self-employment; others expressing self-doubt and pessimism. And so, while self-employment is not a panacea for older women, envisioning a future as self-employed can construct a sense of agency and purpose for those facing the challenges associated with successful ageing.

The third quadrant points to the intersections of age as an embodied identity with discourses of ageing and maturity. Here research conversations might focus on how the midlife and older worker is constructed in different organizational contexts, and with what discursive and material effects. Research might also consider how age intersects with other identity categories. The article by Riach, Rumens and Tyler on ‘Un/doing Chrononormativity’ (2014, this issue) explores how the intersections of discourses of age, gender and sexuality are experienced in organizations, focusing on those who transgress their normative logics. Their study draws on the work of Judith Butler to explore how heteronormative assumptions in relation to ageing and the life course constrain and enable the formation of viable subjectivities for people self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT). It shows how understandings of the life course are infused with a set of heteronormative and chrononormative assumptions, a temporal schema of monogamy, family, and inheritance that requires complex identity work for LGBT people. The findings reveal both the pain

and pleasure of being on the margins of normalizing discourses of gender, age and sexuality: respondents were happy to be free from pressures to perform to expectations of heterosexuality; and, at the same time, they felt the pain of being excluded due to transgressing these norms. The article thus demonstrates the importance of critically interrogating the heteronormative assumptions underlying our understandings of ageing, particularly the notion of successful ageing.

Also in this quadrant is the article by Hyde, Burns, Hassard and Killett (2014, this issue) on 'Colonizing the Aged Body', which discusses the experience of embodied ageing in a totalizing institution. No organizational setting captures our deep-seated fear of ageing more than aged care homes. Many of the elderly who reside in these institutions are evidence of 'unsuccessful' ageing – dependent, vulnerable and in decline. Hyde et al. show how the corporate colonization of the organization of aged care interacts with negative discourses about older age in ways that profoundly affect older peoples' possibilities for being. They outline three inter-related processes: the reduction of older people to older bodies which are regulated by the organization of work and space in the care home; the 'letting go' of previous selves and acceptance of a present identity based on residence in the home; and the scope, albeit limited, for resistance by residents to their treatment. The study is important not least because it focuses on the experiences of residents in eight UK care homes, conveying the complex interpersonal and intergenerational dynamics that contribute to the 'consent' of the older person to their residency.

In the final quadrant, our focus turns to issues of embodied identities and discourses of youthfulness. Here research might point to understanding better the various ways in which youth is constituted and experienced in organizations, from the very creation of youth with the production and consumption of youth brands through to micro-communicative interactions where youthful identities are brought into being and become salient. It is interesting that none of the articles in this special issue speak to the embodiment and discourses of youth; nor were many of the papers submitted. The term age seems to herald thoughts of *old* age, whereas we can, of course, engage in organizational life at any age. This lacuna is itself clearly a call for more critical work in this area.

Concluding comments

The motivation for this special issue was driven by the realization that there is relatively little critical work about (all) age(s) in by organizational scholars and, therefore, an opportunity for this research community to contribute much more directly to debates around age. The articles in this special issue are one step in this direction, offering rich empirical accounts that in their various ways both enhance and challenge what we know about age in organizations and the aged nature of organizing. Together, they offer insights into the potential of taking a critical lens to age and organization studies, to stimulate nuanced and innovative understandings. In presenting this collection, we hope that the insights offered will stimulate new research conversations that will help organizational scholars realize the potential of taking a critical analysis of age because, as Fineman (2014, this issue) so eloquently explains in his reflection on the special issue, age really does matter.

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Figure 1: Research conversations on age and organization