Deconstructing the 'older worker': Exploring the complexities of subject positioning at the intersection of multiple discourses

Simona Spedale

Management Division

Nottingham University Business School, UK

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Abstract

This study adopts an intersectional approach to explore the complexities and contingencies of subject positioning in the case of an individual older worker. Five deconstruction strategies are applied to an older worker’s account of his experience of the workplace to unveil the variety of discourses and taken-for-granted assumptions that regulate individual identity formation and contribute to perpetuating the marginalization of the ageing organizational subject. Deconstruction analysis shows how the unique positioning of the research subject emerges at the intersection of complex discourses of age, enterprise, family, death and mental and physical health, casting him as both victim and perpetrator of inequality across a kaleidoscope of interacting categories of oppression. The analysis contributes to the critique of the binary dualism implicit in the victim-perpetrator paradigm dominating mainstream research and policy making on age discrimination in the workplace. It also advocates for new conceptualizations of ageing at work that recognize the systemic nature of inequality as the product of intersecting systems of power relations.

Keywords

Age inequality, ageism, deconstruction analysis, intersectionality, older worker

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> *'And everybody is so nice to me. They all carry on saying things like 'I don't know how we will manage around here without you, you have been around for so long and you have seen it all. Your experience ….' Especially my younger colleagues…one of them actually said that she will feel 'bereaved', like missing her father-at-work figure. I keep saying that they will do just fine, they will not need me…nobody is indispensable! I least of all… an old – hang on, not that old, you know, but still – art teacher. Art, for God's sake! They will carry on just as they always have, and after a while they will not even remember me. It's life! And Thank God that I am still young enough and fit enough to keep busy with other things, with my painting and my golf… there is time before I go completely gaga, you know'*
>
> (Mike, end-career interview)

Mike's account of 'work' now that he is approaching the end of a life-long career is distinctly unremarkable. With its stereotypical themes and imagery, it sounds so familiar that no casual listener would think about it twice, let alone stop and reflect on what it may or may not say about work and inequality. This ordinariness – what it implies and affects – is precisely what organizational scholars should explore to unveil the hidden ideologies and taken-for-grated norms and beliefs that regulate behavior and experience at work (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002). It also constitutes the core of my analytical efforts in this paper. My broad interest lies in the experience of ageing at work and

specifically in how social processes regulate the creation, maintenance and reproduction of ageism in the labor market and the workplace (Ainsworth, 2002; Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008, 2009; McVittie, McKinlay and Widdicombe, 2003; Riach, 2007; Riach and Loretto, 2009). My focus here is to explore the complexities and contingencies of individual positioning by analyzing how an ageing organizational subject, Mike, engages with different categories of identity and with a variety of discourses to construct an acceptable image of self (Goffman, 1959) as 'older worker'.

In developing this line of enquiry, my contribution is twofold. First, I adopt an intersectional approach (Acker, 1998, 2006) that departs from a focus on linearity and coherence in identity construction to acknowledge that the nexus between categories of social difference such as gender, age, race and class is complex, multifaceted and potentially paradoxical (Castro and Holvino, 2016; Holvino, 2010). In adopting an intersectional stance on ageism in the workplace (Moore, 2009), I explicitly recognize that the 'victim-perpetrator' paradigm upon which mainstream organization scholarship relies is over-simplistic and untenable (Riach and Kelly, 2013). My premise is that age interacts with gender, race and class in shaping the experiences of people coping with multiple and simultaneous types of oppression (Bradley, 1996; Brah, 1996) and that individuals that are usually treated as 'homogeneous' and added-up through labelling and categorization may

significantly differ in their situated experience of age and age inequality at work (McCall, 2005; Valentine, 2007). The main aim of this study is, therefore, not to ascertain that such interactions occur but to investigate how the complexities of intra-categorical subject positions (McCall, 2005) play out in a specific case – Mike's – and reflect on what this individual case may tell us on agency and age inequality in the workplace.

Second, and relatedly, I maintain that the methodological strategy of deconstruction analysis (Boje, 2001; Martin, 1990) may be usefully employed for the study of age inequality at work from an intersectional perspective. Deconstruction is especially suited to analyze a text or a narrative account from a critical standpoint 'in a way that is particularly sensitive to the suppressed interests of members of disempowered, marginalized groups' (Martin, 1990: 340). By revealing 'power operating in structures of thinking and behavior that previously seemed devoid of power relations' (White, 1986: 421), it peels away the layers of ideological obscuration and exposes the conflict that has been silenced. Deconstruction also systematically explores the multiple ways a text can be interpreted and is, therefore, inherently suited to intersectional analysis, where the aim is to understand the complex, non-additive, potentially contradictory and conflictual interactions between different systems of power relations (Holvino, 2010). Finally, by exposing the authoritative centers and dualisms around which narratives are typically constructed (Boje, 2001)

deconstruction analysis facilitates, to quote Knights, the 'shattering' of the 'binary fundamentalisms' that dominate our ways of thinking and making sense of reality, and that are 'inimical to gender sensitive (and I would add *age sensitive*) research, let alone practice' (2015: 200). To put it simply, deconstruction strategy provides an analytical toolkit that is especially suitable to make sense of multiplicity, contradiction and paradox and is, therefore, appropriate to study inequality from an intersectional perspective that privileges 'open-endedness, incompleteness or even fuzziness (Davis, 2008)' (Harding, Ford and Fotaki, 2012: 57).

The paper is articulated as follows. First, I briefly review extant literature on ageism at work from a predominantly discursive perspective, using the critique to the 'victim-perpetrator' paradigm (Riach, 2007) to articulate why an intersectional perspective on agency might prove fruitful in the study of ageing at work. I then apply five deconstructive analytical strategies (dismantling a dichotomy; examining silences; attending to disruptions and contradictions; focusing on what is alien and/or taboo; interpreting metaphors – see Martin, 1990) to Mike's account of the workplace. The discussion focuses on two main insights emerging from the analysis. First, the analysis supports and develops extant literature in showing how an individual's positioning as an ageing organizational subject occurs at the intersection of complex and varied discourses that include but are not limited

to age. Second, these complex interactions result in a multifaceted and potentially paradoxical and conflicting identity, whereby the ageing organizational subject in question acts as both victim and perpetrator of different types of inequality across a kaleidoscope of systems of oppression. Finally, I discuss some implications of the study for organization studies and policy making.

Ageism in the workplace and intersectionality

Whether rooted in human capital theory or institutionally-oriented, studies of ageism in the workplace have traditionally investigated employers' attitudes and practices, analyzed their consequences for older workers and identified policy-making implications for the labor market (Loretto, Vickerstaff and White, 2005; Loretto and White, 2006a; Taylor and Walker, 1994, 1998; Weller, 2007). Attention has also been devoted to the perspective of the older workers themselves, the alleged victims of discrimination (Duncan and Loretto, 2004; Loretto, Vickerstaff and White, 2006; Loretto and White, 2006b; McNair, 2006; Maltby, 2007). Overall, however, mainstream policy-driven studies have underplayed the role of social processes in the creation, maintenance and reproduction of ageism in general and, more specifically, in the workplace. This gap has been highlighted by a body of research that focuses on issues of identity for older workers and on the discursive, relational

nature of ageism (Ainsworth, 2002; Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008, 2009; McVittie, McKinlay and Widdicombe, 2003; Riach, 2007). From this perspective, the label 'older worker' does not signify a status achieved based on a biological marker (age) but refers, instead, to the discursive identity constantly negotiated by individuals within different political arenas and webs of power relations (du Gay, 1996; Hardy and Phillips, 1999). Accordingly, the research agenda has shifted from understanding the consequences of wider economic pressures, attitudes and organizational practices for older workers, to investigating the hidden ideological assumptions that lie at the root of ageism and gender discrimination as an everyday fact of organizational life.

To unmask deeply entrenched inequalities in the workplace, and to expose employers' taken-for-granted assumptions about older workers, several studies have followed the example of prior research on gender (Garnsey and Rees, 1996; Gill, 1993; Mumby and Clair, 1997; West, Lazar and Kramarae, 1997) and race (Kleiner, 1998; van Dijk, 1996; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wodak, 1997; Wodak and Reisigl, 1999) and adopted discourse analysis as a key methodology. Discourse, in fact, constructs social identity through a process of differentiation whereby certain groups such as, for instance, 'older workers', are defined by their relative interests and position in society vis-à-vis other groups (van Dijk, 1997; Wodak, 1996). By adopting critical discourse analysis techniques,

studies of ageism in the workplace have also focused explicitly on the reproduction of power relationships showing how structures of inequality are created through discourse (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Attention has been predominantly directed to accounts and narratives by managers and by those responsible for employment (McVittie et al., 2003; Riach, 2007) rather than by older workers themselves, with the latter often portrayed as the somewhat passive recipients of discursive pressures and micro-political games located elsewhere. A few scholars have, however, exposed the active role of older workers as unexpected agents of their own marginalization. In their study of older unemployed workers participating in an Australian Parliamentary inquiry, Ainsworth and Hardy (2009) show that individuals actively resist discriminatory pressures by means of the three key mechanisms of participation, collaboration and translation. More specifically, the study shows how 'by *participating* in the discourse – by referring to physical and psychotherapeutic discourses themselves, older workers inadvertently talked their own way into the identity cul-de-sac' (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009: 1224). Such direct participation has the effect of undermining the older workers' authority and situating them in a relatively powerless position despite any attempts to exercise agency and resist marginalization.

More recently, Riach and Kelly have called for a departure from the traditional framing of ageism as an 'older worker problematic' arguing that the 'older worker' cannot

be investigated as a 'subject position independent from the larger circuits of organizing principles constituting the workplace' and that scholarship should focus more productively on 'the complex dialectics between ageing and organizational life more generally' (2013: 287). I would argue that, in this effort, a useful starting point is to acknowledge the inadequacy of the 'victim-perpetrator' paradigm dominating mainstream scholarship. As intersectionality theory (Holvino, 2010) has already pointed out, the dichotomy 'victim-perpetrator' provides a ready-made interpretive framework that identifies 'victims' *ex-ante* by singling out the most obvious targets of discrimination (typically the old, the poor, women and some ethnic groups – or a combination of the above) without paying attention to wider organizational practices and without questioning the ideological assumptions underlying such categorical view of advantage and disadvantage (Bacchi, 1996; Eveline, 1994; Eveline and Bacchi, 2005). The analysis of Mike's account below is conducted in this vein, and is guided by the ambition to incorporate contributions from feminist studies and intersectionality theory (Harding et al., 2012; Holvino, 2010) into organization research on inequality at work.

Deconstructing Mike's account: An intersectional analysis of ageism at work

The analysis focuses on the text that fronts this paper, Mike's account of his experience of the workplace. The text is an excerpt of an interview conducted during a study of end-career, where narrative interviewing techniques (Mishler, 1986) were used to elicit the participants' experiences of approaching retirement whilst technically still 'at work'. The focus on end-career is significant from a critical perspective because it implies that Mike's presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) as an older worker was predominantly unconscious and informed by age-related hidden assumptions and taken-for-granted beliefs. Mike's account is, moreover, located within an organizational context that is salient for the study of age discrimination. Mike's place of work – a comprehensive school – is centered on age as an organizing and coordinating principle, with pupils allocated to different classes and activities principally if not exclusively based on biological age.

Despite widespread acknowledgement that children benefit from exposure to diversity of knowledge and experience, and in contrast with calls for all age groups to be represented within the teaching profession, older teachers still face considerable discrimination and negative stereotyping at work (Redman and Snape, 2002). Against this backdrop, however, Mike's own account does not cast him as a victimized older worker. It is this inconspicuous incongruity that has attracted my attention as a scholar interested in

ageism at work. As previously argued, I suggest that deconstruction techniques (Boje, 2001; Martin, 1990) might prove especially fruitful to analyze Mike's text from an intersectional perspective and to explore in detail the complexities and contingencies of his subject positioning in a way that is sensitive to the hidden workings of discriminatory ideologies.

Martin acknowledged that deconstruction 'requires subjectivity and reflexivity' as it 'inevitably reveals the I/eye/ideology of the deconstructor as well as the deconstructed' (1990: 341). Mike did not voice his story in isolation. He voiced it to me in the context of a face-to-face interview. This encounter generated a relatively 'private' text in ways that differ in many respects from the more 'public' and polished texts that are typically at the centre of deconstruction efforts. Indeed, Martin's seminal analysis focussed on a story told by the CEO of a very large multinational corporation in a public forum hosted by a well-known television anchor. The stated purpose of the interactions generating the text, the characteristics of the interactants, the presence (or indeed absence) of an 'audience', the nature of the setting (public stage vs. private location) are all factors that bear on the production of the text subject to deconstruction and need to be considered in analysis and interpretation. In my case, the 'private' nature of the text is especially salient because it aligns with my critical stance and with my scholarly interest in investigating inequality at

work by unveiling the hidden ideologies and assumptions that lie under the familiar and ordinary. In other words, the choice to focus on a 'private' text generated during a relatively intimate and mundane face-to-face conversation away from public scrutiny is a deliberate component of the research design and fits its overall strategy.

As a white, middle-aged, middle-class, female academic I inevitably carried my own identity with me into the research like a 'tortoise shell' (Riessman, 2008: 139) and one could argue that in the face-to-face encounter generating the private text at the centre of this study, Mike dialogically 'performed' his identity (Goffman, 1959) to someone who was different in (biological) age and gender but similar in ethnicity and class. How this might have affected what he said and how he said it is something that I have born in mind throughout the different stages of the analysis – and that readers will have to consider in making their own judgement on the arguments put forward. Similarly, my identity has accompanied me from the start of the research project, and has been influential in my choices of theoretical perspective (intersectionality) and analytical strategy (deconstruction, a strategy primarily applied within 'feminist' scholarship). I do not regard such inherent subjectivity as a weakness – quite the opposite, I embrace the richness it generates in stimulating alternative readings of important facets of organizational life (including the

experience of age) and welcome the debate it engenders from different, equally subjective, positions.

What follows is my alternative reading of Mike's account based on five deconstructive strategies, purposefully selected because of their relevance for the purposes of this study and amenability to intersectional analysis: dismantling a dichotomy; examining silences; attending to disruptions and contradictions; focusing on what is alien and/or taboo; and, interpreting metaphors.

Dismantling a dichotomy

Deconstruction analysis typically starts with the identification – and subsequent dismantling – of the duality which lies at the centre of the text under study. This duality is of fundamental importance for deconstructionist efforts as it reveals the storyteller's implicit assumptions about what is dominant and hegemonic on the one hand, and what is marginalized, subordinate or excluded on the other. This binary opposition can be articulated explicitly, with the two terms of the dichotomy clearly identified by the narrator, or it can be more implicitly subsumed in the narrative by foregrounding the predominant side. In the text above, Mike emphasizes quite explicitly the importance of the distinction between 'experienced' and 'inexperienced' workers, a dichotomy fundamentally based on a

rationalistic and modernist view of the workplace (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008). According to this perspective, experience is an asset. It improves organizational effectiveness and productivity; it constitutes an important knowledge base and contributes to the stock of intellectual capital; and, last but not least, it is associated with superior inter-personal skills and decision-making capabilities (Geisler, 1999; Loretto and White, 2006a; Porcellato, Carmichel, Hulme, Ingham and Prashar, 2010). Inexperience, on the other hand, has less positive connotations. It tends to be associated with a degree of risk (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008) and is typically conceived of as a 'potential' source of future value for the organization. In his narrative Mike associates himself firmly with the category of the experienced workers, and introduces the more subordinate 'inexperienced' ones by means of a generic '*They all carry on saying things like..*'. He then moves on to single out the 'younger ones' – namely, his younger colleagues – as especially representative of this riskier category. He is, in other words, equating experience in the workplace with age and reinterpreting the hierarchy of 'experienced/inexperienced' employees in terms of 'older/younger' ones.

Mike's reinterpretation is symptomatic of the problematic nature of the dichotomy 'experienced/inexperienced' workers, which is fundamentally oversimplified (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008). 'Experience' itself is an ambiguous and vague concept, and its

usefulness for organizational effectiveness is paradoxical: while praised as a source of increased productivity and as intellectual capital, it is at the same time identified as a potential barrier to the acquisition of new knowledge and an obstacle to adaptability and flexibility (Hewitt, 2008). This paradox is reflected in the apparent contradiction detected in studies between employers' attitudes towards experienced workers on the one hand and employers' actual practices in areas like, for instance, recruitment and training on the other (Porcellato et al., 2010). While attitudes towards experience are generally positive, practices continue to discriminate against it by means of a systematic negative bias towards experienced – that is, mostly, older – workers.

The 'experienced/inexperienced' dichotomy put by Mike at the centre of his narrative is ideological and socially constructed. Part of the reason as to why such distinction is, despite its problematic nature, perpetuated and reified is because of its direct association with age as Mike conceptualizes the workplace as a political arena characterized by an age divide which puts older employees in direct conflict with younger ones. Mike uses a rationalist business case to present older workers in a positive light as reliable and loyal, thereby reinforcing the stereotype of their psychological characterization (Loretto and White, 2004; McGregor and Grey, 2002). But while doing so, he is also maintaining and perpetuating an ideology that splits the workplace in age divides and

potentially pitches the interests of younger workers against those of older ones. By casting himself as the experienced older worker and despite his best efforts at actively opposing negative stereotyping as an 'unattractive product' for enterprise (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008), Mike is entering an 'identity cul-de-sac' (Aisnworth and Hardy, 2009) of, ultimately, disempowerment and marginalization.

Silences

A second strategy used in deconstruction analysis examines silences by concentrating of what is not said, implicit and left out to understand the web of power relations and micro-politics characterizing the context in which the story is grounded. The text opens with a factual statement ('*And everybody is very nice to me'*) that overtly portrays the workplace as a collaborative and harmonious space while, at the same time, implicitly positioning Mike as the isolated and passive recipient of others' goodwill. This isolation chimes with the negative stereotype attached in Western societies to being unemployed, whatever the circumstances: in a context where being eligible for paid work is a fundamental form of social differentiation (Phillipson, 1998), exiting the workplace – even in the institutionally legitimate case of retirement – means becoming potentially 'unproductive', economically dependent and burdensome (de Vroom and Guillemard, 2002; Kohli, Guillemard and

Gunsteren, 1991; Phillipson, 2002). Paradoxically, Mike is still in full employment and economically active but his value at the school and in society at large is being discounted on the grounds of age. Age, in other words, interacts with other systems of power relations such as, in this case, employment practices, job security, income security and retirement (Collien, Sieben and Müller-Camen, 2016) in a complex interweaving of identity claims and subjective positioning. The agentic, dominant voices in the texts belong to Mike's younger colleagues.

Moreover, the changing nature of work in modern society and the progressive 'Balkanization' of labor markets (Roberts, 2006) also constitute meaningful societal factors that operate alongside those specific to Mike's situated workplace (Riach, 2007; Riach and Kelly, 2013). Traditional models of work-relations in skilled jobs such as teaching were based on a system of apprenticeship that encouraged the emergence of a 'moral order' whereby older workers trained younger ones and, in exchange, were supported in their old age without being stigmatized as dependent and burdensome. However, the progressive professionalization of, particularly, skilled jobs together with changes in management and training at work, have resulted in the labor market for older workers to increasingly resemble that for younger ones. Changes in the way age and generations are dealt with at work have, therefore, put the age-categories of 'older' and 'younger' workers into a path of

collision, fomenting intergenerational conflict and generating a state of 'arrhythmia' (Roberts, 2006: 81).

Amongst the agentic voices of his younger colleagues, Mike singles out that of a female junior teacher to re-situate the text at the juncture between the public and the private domains: linguistically and relationally, the workplace is characterized in this text as a 'bereaved family' grieving for the loss of a valued member. As Martin has argued, the 'public/private dichotomy is an ideological assumption, not a social fact' (1990: 343) whereby in Western societies a false distinction is made between gendered spheres of influence, with men dominating the public world of politics, economics and organization and women presiding over the private world of familial, nurturing and caring relations. By foregrounding the individual voice of a younger female colleague over other relations in the public arena of the workplace, Mike gives away his own ageist bias, actively participates in the maintenance and reproduction of ageism in the workplace, and inadvertently contributes to his own victimization as an older worker; at the same time, by metaphorically removing this female voice from the actual place of work and by re-locating it within the private context of the family, he implicitly contributes to the reification of the false public/private dichotomy and consequently shares in the reproduction of inequality on the basis of both age and gender.

Disruptions and Contradictions

A third deconstructive move involves the analysis of potential disruptions, contradictions and exceptions in the text which introduce elements of inconsistency within the story and contradict its more obvious, literal message. Fault-lines in an otherwise coherent account reveal, in fact, the hidden ideological assumptions and taken-for-granted notions upon which the story itself is constructed. The most obvious disruption to the flow and coherence of Mike's narrative occurs at the point when he stops and corrects himself: '.. *nobody is indispensable! I least of all… an old – hang on, not that old, you know, but still – art teacher.'*

The statement '*I least of all…an old art teacher'* is in direct contrast with Mike's earlier rationalistic story-line that experienced workers are valuable and indeed valued organizational assets. It exposes again the centrality of age in Mike's hidden assumptions about experienced and inexperienced workers and about power relationships at work. The hierarchy of importance in the workplace that is embedded in Mike's story – and that is maintained, reproduced and reinforced by it – puts younger employees at the top of the ladder and older ones at the bottom, irrespective of experience. The disruption in the flow of the narrative that follows clearly exposes and perpetuates the fundamentally ageist and

discriminatory view of the workplace hidden in the text and in Mike's own set of beliefs. Mike stops himself and corrects his own voice: '*Hang on, not that old, you know, but still*'. Here all manners of contradictions are condensed in one single line. By means of the '*hang on, not that old, you know*' Mike is attempting to modify the impression of ageism in the workplace he has created immediately before, while the final '*but still*' reverts to the notion that age matters at work.

Mike's statement of fact '*It's life*' constitutes an attempt to legitimize and validate a situation – Mike's own – by invoking wider societal norms (Fairclough, 1995) about the position of older people and the rights of older workers. By adopting wider societal discourses on successful ageing (Andrews, 1999), Mike tries to claim for himself the aspired-for identity of a 'third-age champion' (Laslett, 1989) and silence any negative feelings of uneasiness and tension. This linguistic strategy allows him to openly acknowledge the fact that he is soon to be no longer in active employment without the stigma of dependency. He remains, in fact, an 'active' member of society, as a retiree rather than a full-time worker: '*And Thank God that I am still young enough and fit enough to keep busy with other things, with my painting and my golf… there is time before I go completely gaga, you know.'* But such strategy is not as effective as it would appear at first

sight and closer scrutiny reveals a few dents in Mike's agential power to fight discriminatory stereotypes.

On the face of it, Mike's decision to retire as soon as possible is the product of free choice and careful planning. However, this choice has been framed and constrained by a complex set of societal norms and institutions, including retirement and state pension regulatory systems. Other limiting factors outside of Mike's control include race, gender and social class (de Vroom and Guillemard, 2002; Kohli, et al., 1991; Phillipson, 2002): as white, male and middle-class, Mike is by default and through no merit of his own in a privileged position when it comes to retirement and to the prospects of a happy 'third-age' (Laslett, 1989). Research has, in fact, shown that 'work' in the commonplace sense of 'stable and continuous employment' followed by retirement is the experience of a limited section of the population, mostly male and middle-class, while others – particularly women and less well-off members of society – are excluded from such opportunities (Ginn, Street and Arber, 2001; Itzin and Phillipson, 1993).

Besides, when drawing on societal discourses on age, Mike participates in the cultural narrative of ageing as a 'problem' of inevitable decline and loss of power (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Gullette, 1997; Tulle-Winton, 1999). Active participation in this 'physical' discourse means that Mike shares in wider societal attempts to minimize

negative age effects by, paradoxically, adopting 'agelessness' as a measure of successful ageing (Andrews, 1999; Coupland, 2007). Such efforts have the opposite effect to that intended: they reinforce – as opposed to counteract – age discrimination, contribute to the further 'medicalization' of old age in society, and ultimately disempower.

Analyzing the alien and taboo

In deconstruction analysis, focusing on what is alien or taboo to a text provides another route to unveil hidden ideological assumptions. In Mike's narrative, the 'alien' element is the presence of the 'gaga' (i.e. the mentally ill) in the workplace. The relationship between illness, especially mental one, and the workplace is an uneasy one in both theory and practice. Indeed, mental illness is still taboo in contemporary Western societies where the mentally ill are often stigmatized, ignored and hidden from view (Schott, 1999). As for theory, the issue of illness in the workplace has been studied from a predominantly psychological or medical perspective, particularly so in the field of industrial and organizational psychology. Great attention has been devoted to stress and stress-related illness (Cooper and Locke, 2000; Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll, 2001). In these studies, illness is generally characterized as an obstacle to the efficient functioning of both the individuals affected (in terms, for instance, of self-esteem, motivation and job-satisfaction)

and the organization in which they operate, as productivity declines. Stress, burnout and similar pathologies are conceptualized as problems that need to be overcome by means of primary methods – that is, by altogether removing the sources of stress – or secondary ones – that is, by enabling individuals to cope with them. Research has also emphasized the cost to the organization of dealing with the problem of illness at work (Conti and Burton, 1994), thereby building a rationalistic 'business case' for investment in activities such as, for instance, employees' medical insurance schemes. By distancing himself from the prospect of being 'gaga' (*there is time before I go completely gaga, you know*). Mike reveals his personal adherence to the notion of illness in the workplace as an objective 'problem' – medical and psychological – that requires a rational solution, rather than as a socially-constructed and relational phenomenon (Harper, 1995; Fee, 1999). His stereotyping contributes towards the maintenance of mental illness as a taboo and the entrenchment of discriminatory practices in the workplace, where managers see mentally-ill employees as a burden to be avoided or, if necessary, managed in the most efficient – that is, cost-minimizing – way.

But Mike's ideological hostility to the 'gaga' is not confined to the workplace, as he is, in his own words, looking forward to many years of active retirement *before* having to face inevitable decline and dependency. In emphasizing such prospects and in claiming an

aspired-to identity as third-age champion (Laslett, 1989), Mike exposes the fundamentally problematic nature of the distinction between work and non-work for identity construction. Volunteering can be, for instance, constructed as 'working identity' (Taylor, 2004) and Mike's claim can be interpreted as an attempt to hold on to some form of 'work identity' whilst apparently professing to happily shedding it. In his identity construction, Mike draws from the wider 'psychotherapeutic' discourse (Nolan, 1998) that frames work in psychological terms rather than economic ones and according to which work is the only viable path to self-fulfillment (Riach and Loretto, 2009: 105). To demonstrate a psychologically healthy and well-adjusted response to exit from work and, to avoid being negatively stereotyped as 'dependent', Mike projects himself into a future of intense and self-fulfilling participation into activities that are fundamentally work-like. This presentation of future self (Goffman, 1959) as still at work if not in full employment in the common understanding of the term is a clue to Mike's hidden ageist beliefs and stereotypes.

Interpreting metaphors

The fifth deconstructive strategy applied to Mike's text is the interpretation of metaphors as a rich source of multiple meanings. As rhetorical tropes through which a less known term is

explained in terms of another, more familiar one (Czarniawska, 2004; Kövecses, 2002), metaphors establish a connection that facilitates interpretation and sensemaking. Mike introduces a key metaphor in his story through the voice of a younger female employee, who states that she *'will feel 'bereaved', like missing her father-at-work figure'* when Mike retires. In articulating a complex emotional experience, this younger female colleague ('*she*') uses three interconnected figures of speech. The first is the explanation of Mike's exit from the workplace in terms of the language of death, with its associated feelings of '*bereavement*'. The second is the second-order explanation of '*bereavement*' as the loss of a '*father-at-work'*, which situates the grief and emotional upset associated with bereavement within the social context of the family. There emerges, therefore, a third more hidden connection which puts the 'family' and the 'workplace' on a relation of equivalence (Fairclough, 1995).

The invocation of death as a metaphor to make sense of an individual's exit from work belongs in a wider discourse on organizational life and demise, the meaning of work and, work identity (Cornelissen and Kafouros, 2008; Reedy and Learmonth, 2011). By articulating her feelings at the prospect of Mike's retirement through the language of death and bereavement, Mike's younger colleague constructs herself as 'grieving' for the meaningful loss of a valued relation at work (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Archer, 1999).

Dealing with grief in a work-related context (for the loss of work, the end of a career or the prospect of unemployment) is typically regulated at the societal level by what Rose (1989) refers to as a 'therapeutics of finitude'. Such 'therapeutics' comprises a set of normative and psychologized stages that guide individuals to work through their grief from initial denial and anger through to final acceptance of loss. By using someone else's voice (a colleague's) in making sense of his own approaching exit from the workplace – that is, his 'death' as an economically active member of society – Mike distances himself from a potentially painful experience. Moreover, in adopting – albeit indirectly through reported speech – the language of death and bereavement, Mike anticipates a sense of final acceptance while, at the same time, lowering expectations concerning his future position. He is, in other words, trying to resolve a distressing identity struggle by demonstrating through language that he has made the 'proper psychological adjustment and successfully managed grief' (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009: 1212). This lowering of expectations is an implicit recognition of Mike's hidden bias against older workers like himself who, given the inevitability of their imminent loss (of work, of physical and mental powers, of economic independence) must resign themselves to progressive marginalization rather than fight for equal recognition (Willmott, 2000).

A second figure of speech in the text is the second-order explanation of '*bereavement*' as the loss of a '*father-at-work'*, which situates the grief and emotional upset associated with bereavement within the social context of the family. Mike's indirect presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) as a 'father' figure for a younger female colleague opens a view into his hidden assumptions on the position of women in the workplace. Behind a veneer of paternalistic indulgence, Mike's claim to the traditional authority of a father effectively confines women to a subordinate position in the network of micro-relations of power that characterizes the workplace. The silence of male colleagues is, in this instance, poignant as younger males constitute potential rivals and competitors within both the organizational settings of the family and the workplace. By silencing their voices and excluding them from the discursive construction of his work identity, Mike is actively trying to resist being discriminated against as an older worker and to re-gain some degree of power. But such tactic operates as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it victimizes women by marginalizing them in the public political arena of the workplace whilst, at the same time, re-iterating and reinforcing the ageist stereotype that sees younger male employees as the dominant actors within this web of power relations. With a single verbal stroke, Mike acts as a persecutor on gender grounds and as a victim of his own ageist assumptions. The relation of equivalence between the 'family' and the 'workplace'

established by Mike – that is, the third interconnected figure of speech he uses in his identity talk – is only superficially representative of a co-operative and harmonious set of relationships at the school. As highlighted earlier, the apparent lack of conflict in Mike's narrative hides the fundamentally gendered and ageist structure of the workplace – a structure that he himself is contributing to maintain and reproduce.

Discussion

The deconstruction analysis carried out above suggests that there are at least two alternative interpretations of Mike's account. The first is linear in that interpretive efforts stop at the uncritical acceptance of Mike's presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) and of the resultant identity of a 'successful' – that is, not discriminated against – older worker. The second is critical in the sense that interpretive efforts – through the application of deconstruction strategies – move beyond Mike's overt presentation of self to uncover the hidden ideologies and taken-for-granted assumptions that inform his identity work (Boje, 2001; Martin, 1990). The critical interpretation developed above fundamentally challenges Mike's linear construction of a coherent and rationalistic representation of the workplace as a harmonious and collaborative network of quasi-familial relations where no discrimination takes place against older workers (Casey, 1999; Gabriel, 1995). It also questions Mike's subject

positioning as a valuable, and indeed valued, organizational member whose imminent exit from the workplace will be experienced as a loss by those left behind, casting doubts on his agentic attempt to resist the identity of an unproductive older worker (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008). Overall, two main insights emerge from the analysis.

First, the study follows in the path of previous scholarship on ageing at work in its intersectional approach but goes further in its focus on the microlevel of analysis, exploring in detail 'how' an individual older worker engages with different categories of identity and investigating the consequences in terms of subjugation and/or resistance to inequality (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008: 403). The deconstruction analysis developed above shows how Mike's apparently linear claim to the subject positioning of a successful older worker relies on the interplay of a multiplicity of discourses, including but not limited to age (Riach and Kelly, 2013). Moreover, it shows how the discourse of age engaged with by Mike is far from unitary and monolithic (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008), but comprises instead the interweaving of potentially conflicting strands, including the societal discourse of 'successful ageing' (Andrews, 1999), the discourse of the 'third-age' (Laslett, 1989) and the physical discourse of age as inevitable decline (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Gullette, 1997; Tulle-Winton, 1999). Intersecting with age in Mike's subjective positioning is the equally paradoxical organizational discourse of 'enterprise' (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008),

with its inherent contradictions (Wasson, 2004) over the value of experience for organizational productivity, innovation and longer-term survival – as the discursive strands of the 'Balkanisation' of labor-markets (Roberts, 2006) and volunteering as work (Taylor, 2004) testify. A third discourse engaged in by Mike in his identity formation is the managerial discourse of the workplace as a 'family' (Casey, 1999). Again, this discourse is contradictory, as the notion of the family in relation to the workplace evokes notions of collegiality, cooperation and support but also, in the opposite direction, of division, competition, conflict and control (Gabriel, 1999). Interwoven with 'family' and 'workplace', the discourse of 'death and grieving' (Reedy and Learmonth, 2011; Rose, 1989) also contributes to Mike's subjective positioning through its connection with the organizational practice of exit from work and the institution of retirement (Riach and Kelly, 2013). Furthermore, the taboo of mental health operates as a societal discourse (Fee, 1999; Harper, 1995) that also interacts with discourses of age and enterprise in Mike's identity construction. This complex interweaving regulates Mike's identity work so that access to a single, univocal identity – such as that of successful older worker he claims for himself – is difficult and problematic.

Second, the deconstruction analysis above shows how Mike, at the intersection of multiple and contradictory discourses, constructs for himself a paradoxical identity that

casts him simultaneously as 'victim' and 'perpetrator' of ageism at work (Riach, 2007). Not only is Mike complicit in his own victimization as an older worker, but he is also actively participating in the reproduction and maintenance of discriminating stereotypes against older and younger workers alike (Aisnworth and Hardy, 2009). This chimes with recent research that has taken an intersectional approach to inequality at work at the organizational rather than the individual level (Collien et al., 2016). In Collien at al.' s conceptualization, the link between the individual level of the single worker and the multi-actor one of the organization is constituted by the notion of age image, defined as the 'entanglement of macro- and micro-level discourses and practices in producing age as an institution' (2016: 780). Based on the analysis of four case studies, Collien et al. argue that the maintenance of ageist images within an organization does not inevitably lead to inequality reproduction and conversely, that the disruption of negative age images can further rather than diminish inequality at work. Besides, they show how the older employees' response to the introduction of new age management practices is shaped by job security, income security and gender, thereby lending support to the advocates of intersectionality in the study of – and fight against – ageism in the workplace.

The deconstruction analysis in this paper, however, goes beyond the victim-perpetrator paradigm in the study of ageism at work in organizational scholarship to

dismantle another false dualism characterizing this field, namely the dichotomy discourse-materiality. The analysis shows how age interacts with a variety of complex and paradoxical discourses of enterprise, family, death and physical and mental health to regulate Mike's identity work and subject positioning. It also shows how at the nexus of these complex discursive interactions, Mike actively participates in the reproduction and maintenance of discrimination at work not only based on age but, in a more open-ended, fluid and fuzzy fashion (Davis, 2008; Holvino, 2010), of a 'bundle' of interacting categories of inequality. In other words, he simultaneously casts himself as victim and/or perpetrator of multiple and intersecting forms of oppression, including age, gender and disability (in the form of physical and mental health) so that the net effect of such kaleidoscopic positioning in terms of advantage or disadvantage is difficult to establish. Ultimately Mike's paradoxical identity mirrors his undetermined and fluid position in the web of power relations that regulate his ability to access the symbolic and material resources that constitute the basis for advantage and disadvantage at work and in society: there is no clarity as to whether Mike is a 'winner' or a 'loser' and as to whether he benefits from privilege more that he suffers from discrimination.

A final point for reflection relates to the intellectual challenge of adopting an intersectional approach to the study of ageism in the workplace that contributes to

development in theory and practice. In my analytical and interpretive efforts, I have drawn from several key literatures – more particularly, ageism in organization studies, intersectionality theory, feminist studies and deconstruction analysis – developing links and connections across them to generate meaning and understanding in a broadly 'intertextual' fashion. This approach also informs my reading of the potential implications of the study. The deconstruction analysis above shows that Mike's subjective positioning and experience of inequality at work is unique. As the product of a particular – in the sense of temporally and spatially 'located' – set of complexities and contingencies of identity and discourse, it cannot be extrapolated to represent an entire category of homogeneous older workers (Harding et al., 2012; McCall, 2005). Moreover, it is extremely difficult to evaluate the net effect in terms of advantage or disadvantage produced by the interaction of the different categories of inequality he experiences and is subject to. As acknowledged within theories of intersectionality (Holvino, 2010), different forms of oppressions are inseparable (Lugones, 2003). Assuming their relation to be linear and additive – as inherent, for example, in the notion of 'double jeopardy' often implicit in the organizational studies of ageism and work from a gendered perspective (Ainsworth, 2002; Duncan and Loretto, 2004; Moore, 2009) – is not only superficial but 'dangerously essentialist because it involves an implicit ranking of disadvantage' (Valentine, 2007: 13). What can, however, be

generalized from the analysis of Mike's unique case is the recognition that each individual older worker, just like Mike, engages with a multiplicity of potentially contradictory discourses in experiencing inequality at work and that such complex subjective positioning enacts material outcomes – ultimately, in the form of a privileged status or marginalization – that are potentially equally paradoxical, open-ended and difficult to evaluate. Critical scholarship should acknowledge such complexity by rejecting false 'binary fundamentalisms' (Knights, 1995), by openly challenging the untenable categorical view of advantage and disadvantage (Bacchi, 1996; Eveline, 1994; Eveline and Bacchi, 2005) dominating research on workplace inequality in organization studies and, by focusing instead on the development of theoretical tools – including deconstruction analysis as suggested here – that are more suited to investigate the complex and nuanced 'system' of inequalities at work (Acker, 2006).

Conclusion

In advocating the need to develop new conceptual tools for the study of age inequality at work, I join forces with scholars who have challenged current debates for their limited focus on an older worker problematic (Riach and Kelly, 2013). My contribution lies in developing further the connection between organizational scholarship on ageism at work

and intersectional theory (Holvino, 2010) through the application of deconstruction as a form of critical analysis (Boje, 2001; Martin, 1990) that goes beyond binary categorizations of disadvantage, overcomes the pitfalls of the victim-perpetrator paradigm (Riach, 2007), exposes the fallacy of the dualism of discourse and materiality and problematizes the issue of agency in terms of resistance and subjection to varied and interacting forms of oppression (Acker, 2006). This challenge has significant implications for organizational practice and policy making in the fight against age inequality in the workplace. As highlighted by Eveline, Bacchi and Binns, the fundamental problem for policy makers is that while in the 'everyday/everynight world' divisions between age, gender, race, and class don't exist, discriminatory 'practices nonetheless divide the world into the two categories of privileged and disadvantaged' (2009: 199). Binary categorization, in other words, is a sociological truism: it creates the need for effective equity policy outcomes while constituting a significant obstacle to the effectiveness of those very same policies that aim to overcome it (Crenshaw, 1991). What should ultimately be under discussion is the successful design and implementation of policies aimed at *one* specific dimension of inequality, such as, for instance, legislation promoting older worker's participation in the labor market and diversity training. In policy, as in research, a greater sensitivity towards the complexities of inequality is called for.

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