Tampere University

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Career choices, normativity and individual agency
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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION
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Perfect is the enemy of good.

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My academic journey started roughly a decade ago, when I first applied to study at Tampere University. And today, I'm proud to say, I didn't get in. Although I may have seen things differently back then, this disruption in the normative path from school to university allowed me to take sidesteps and do something wild and unplanned that eventually led me here, writing and defending this doctoral dissertation at Tampere University. But with more experiences, friends, skills and maybe even wisdom than I could have ever imagined.

Throughout the journey, I've gotten to experience first-hand that there are many ways of achieving one's goal, and when things go awry, they tend to get more interesting, even if it feels chaotic and stressful to say the least. Going back ten years, I ended up in a small Welsh town, Aberystwyth, studying something I knew nothing about but would quickly fall in love with. The years at Aber gave me the opportunity to grow as an academic and grow as a person. Make friends for life, meet people I wouldn't have otherwise met. Fall in love with academic writing and editing, create a love-hate relationship between myself and deadlines, read tons and tons of books, sometimes even the academic ones. However, Aber was just the beginning to a long and rocky road of discoveries. Next, my path took me to Malmö and somewhere along the way I became interested in life-course and individual agency. Of course, at the time, that was related to deviance and criminality. For a freshly graduated criminologist, stepping onto this PhD journey seemed easy, natural, and yet adventurous enough, but throughout the years and setbacks it has become clear that this has been the greatest and most laborious challenge of all. And I could not have done it without the enormous support and feedback from the academic community, friends, and family.

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ABSTRACT

As populations age, the contemporary labour markets are facing a rapidly growing paradox. While political efforts are increasingly encouraging workers to extend their working lives, ageism, deeply manifested in everyday encounters and practices, hinders these efforts. Workers nearing retirement age face situations where they are systematically categorised as "too old", and denied access to employment, training, promotions, and job mobility. This encourages individuals to exit the labour market rather than to continue their careers. These conditions place older workers in a paradox; on the one hand, workers are expected to continue working longer and, on the other, excluded from adequate opportunities to do so.

Despite the changing political environment, the chrononormative life-course is slow to change. People nearing retirement age are often slowly orienting themselves towards retirement days, however, unemployment near retirement disrupts these plans and forces individuals to make career decisions that dictate the course of their working lives. Throughout the life-course, individuals engage in various sets of age normative behaviours that inform us when is the right time to do things and in which order, such as to enrol in education, start a family, work, or to retire. These normative behaviours are further enforced by institutions and practices ensuring that individuals continue following the established, standardized life-course. Working life comprises a large part of this life-course, generally set between the ages of 18–65 years. Individuals within that age range are subjected to a duty to work, a norm that dictates individuals capable of working should remain active and in employment. However, experiencing unemployment near retirement breaks the standardized life-course, as older workers experiencing ageism have longer unemployment periods and face difficulties getting re-employed. Deviating from age specific norms, such as duty to work, may result in individuals feeling out of place, creating a need to explain their behaviour against the standard of correctness. Unemployment in late working life thus easily becomes the least

desirable career option for many, shadowed by loss in income and pension, precarity, experiences of ageism and the need to explain one's unemployment status.

Approaching age, life-course and ageism as social constructs, my focus in this dissertation is on the dynamics of unemployment, ageism, and individual agency in late life unemployment. Through a scoping review and three qualitative longitudinal sub-studies, I investigate experiences and encounters with ageism over time and how and why individuals experiencing unemployment near retirement often come to perceive exit from the labour market as the least problematic career option. With these overarching questions, this doctoral dissertation seeks to answer, what are the roles of age(ism) and temporality in career decisions during late life unemployment.

The research is based on a review article and three empirical studies. The three latter are based on qualitative longitudinal research conducted over a three-year period during which 40 Finnish workers aged 50-67 years were interviewed multiple times following a job loss from the state-owned postal service, totalling at 183 audio-recorded interviews. Using qualitative longitudinal methodology and discursive approaches as the guiding framework, these total to four scientific publications, each investigating and contributing to the overarching and central questions.

The first publication is a comprehensive review article that scopes the existing discursive research on ageism in working life. Following an established protocol for scoping reviews, it maps the field of ageism studies since the coinage of the term and tracks the emergence, popularity, and trends of discursive gerontology in the research realm. Addressing the lack of unified definition for ageism, the article analyses 39 research articles with discursive approach to ageism in working life, and summarises previous research on experiences of ageism, social construction of age and ageism, and strategies to combat ageism. The second publication starts the empirical research that addresses the gaps in the field identified in the scoping review. It is a methodological exploration that sheds light on the contributions of qualitative longitudinal methodology on ageism research and policy. Deconstructing the widespread assumption that people sharing the same age are

homogenous, this article investigated ageism in the lived experiences of becoming unemployed after a long career among four individuals of the same age (58 years). Using researcher-constructed case profiles and case histories, the publication demonstrated how career decisions in late life unemployment and experiences of ageism differ between individuals, questioning the use of arbitrary age limits in policymaking.

The third publication examines older jobseekers' everyday interactions with the labour market and how older jobseekers develop discursive strategies over time in response to ageism. Using a relational typology for identifying social agency as the guiding framework, the publication analysed qualitative longitudinal interview accounts with 18 jobseekers narratively. The analyses identified various discursive strategies individuals developed through trial and error in response to ageism over time. These strategies either helped jobseekers to adapt to ageism through internal negotiations or reworked the conditions of their employability.

The fourth publication investigates how unemployed individuals choosing early exit frame their career decisions. Questioning whether extending working life policies and practices support also individuals experiencing unemployment near retirement, this article shed light on the limbo between unemployment and retirement in late working life. The publication focused on the qualitative longitudinal interview accounts of individuals on the Finnish early exit scheme and used position theory informed narrative analysis to better understand the reasons why individuals continue to choose early exit despite political efforts to extend working life.

This doctoral dissertation integrates these study findings to answer the overarching questions and connects them to wider discussions on career choices, normativity, and individual agency in late life unemployment. Yielding novel information on the role of ageism in career decisions over time, I discuss how and why exiting labour market near retirement is constructed the least problematic option for individuals experiencing unemployment in late working life. Finally, I provide practical insights on how to combat ageism in late working life and produce policy recommendations on how to create more inclusive and flexible policies to support the extension of working life both in Finland and globally.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Työmarkkinoiden muutosten varjoissa piilee nopeasti kasvava paradoksi. Yhtäältä työntekijöitä kannustetaan työurien pidentämiseen vastauksena väestörakenteellisiin muutoksiin ja eliniän pitenemiseen, toisaalta ikään liitetyt stereotypiat ja ikäsyrjintä hankaloittavat yhteiskunnallisia tavoitteita lyömällä kapuloita rattaisiin. Kuitenkaan yhteiskunnan arkipäiväisiin rakenteisiin, käytäntöihin ja vuorovaikutuksiin juurtuneesta ageismista ei juurikaan puhuta, sillä se toimii standardisoidun ja krononormatiivisen elämänkulun portinvartijana. Sen myötä eläkeikää lähestyvät työntekijät saattavat joutua jatkuvasti tilanteisiin, missä heidät luokitellaan "liian vanhoiksi" ja sen perusteella evätään pääsy työllisyyteen, koulutukseen, ylennyksiin ja erilaisiin työn joustoihin. Työelämän mahdollisuuksien vähentyessä, tulee työmarkkinoilta poistumisestakin yhä houkuttelevampi vaihtoehto.

Vaikka työuria on jo pitkään pyritty pidentämään eläkeuudistuksin ja erilaisin työvoimapoliittisin keinoin, muutokset asenteissa ja krononormatiivisessa elämänkulussa vaativat aikaa. Elämänkulun varrella noudatamme erilaisia ikäsidonnaisia käyttäytymismalleja, jotka määrittävät oikeaikäisyyttä ja -paikkaisuutta. Näin määrittyvät muun muassa yhteiskunnallisesti jaetut ymmärrykset ja normit työikäisyydestä ja työvelvoitteesta. Työelämässä vietetyt vuodet käsittävät suuren osan elämänkulusta. Työelämään astutaan nuorena ja sieltä poistutaan eläkeikäisenä. Työttömyys työuran loppupuolella rikkoo kuitenkin normatiivisen ajatuksen työelämästä jatkumona eläkepäiviin asti, työntää yksilöt pois ennalta määritellyltä polulta ja pakottaa tekemään urapäätöksiä, jotka määrittävät jäljellä olevan työuran pituutta ja sisältöä. Tähän ilmiöön pohjautuu myös väitöskirjan otsikko, sivuaskelia.

Työelämän ulkopuolelle joutuminen ennen eläkeikää tuo yksilöille kokemuksia vääräikäisyydestä ja -paikkaisuudesta ja luo moraalisen selitysvelvoitteen. Samalla ikääntyneet työnhakijat kokevat työnhaussaan ageismia ja ikäsyrjintää, jolloin työttömyysjaksot pitenevät. Työelämän muutoksista huolimatta työttömyys työuran

loppupuolella luo häpeän kokemuksia ja työntää työnhakijoita kohti ennenaikaista eläköitymistä. Tuloksettomat työnhaut, kokemukset ikäsyrjinnästä, sekä moraalinen selitysvelvoite näin ollen tekevät työelämästä poistumisesta suotuisan, ja vähiten ongelmallisen vaihtoehdon.

Tässä väitöstutkimuksessa tutkin kartoittavan kirjallisuuskatsauksen ja laadullisen seurannan keinoin, mitkä ovat iän, ageismin ja ajallisuuden roolit työurapäätöksissä työuran loppupuolella koetun työttömyyden aikana. Kirjallisuuskatsaus kehystää empiiristä tutkimusta ja sen tulokset korostavat tarvetta tässä väitöskirjassa raportoivalle tutkimukselle. Väitöskirjan empiirinen tutkimus perustuu Kohti Kaksitahti-Suomea? – hankkeen tuottamaan laadulliseen seuranta-aineistoon vuosilta 2015–2018. Hankkeessa seurattiin neljääkymmentä Postin yhteistoimintaneuvotteluiden kautta työttömäksi jäänyttä yli 50-vuotiasta työntekijää ja heidän ura- ja eläköitymispolkujaan. Tutkimuksessa keskityn ajan myötä muovautuviin työttömyyden, ageismin, ja toimijuuden dynamiikkoihin neljän tieteellisen artikkelin voimin.

Ensimmäinen julkaisuista on kartoittava kirjallisuuskatsaus (eng. scoping review), joka tutkii vakiintunutta protokollaa seuraten, miten julkaistu diskursiivinen tutkimus on lähestynyt ageismia työmarkkinoilla diskursiivisten lähestymistapojen keinoin. Artikkeli nostaa esiin ageismin määritelmän ongelmallisuuden ja tiivistää aiemman diskursiivisen kirjallisuuden kontribuutiot, jotka selittävät miten ikä, ageismi, ja kokemukset ageismista rakentuvat, sekä millaisia toimia tarvitaan ageismin selättämiseen. Toinen julkaisuista on metodologiapainotteinen ja valottaa laadullisen seurantatutkimuksen kontribuutioita ageismin tutkimiseen ja siihen kohdistuviin poliittisiin suosituksiin. Artikkeli käyttää laadullisen seurannan kerryttämää materiaalia ja haastateltavien piirtämiä elämänkarttoja, sekä rikkoo käsityksiä homogeenisistä työurapoluista ja -valinnoista työuran loppupäässä. Lisäksi se osoittaa tapausprofiilien ja -historioiden avulla, miksi työvoimapoliittisia päätöksiä ei tulisi perustaa enenevästi mielivaltaisiin ikäsidonnaisuuksiin. Kolmannessa artikkelissa lähestyn työttömyyttä työttömien työnhakijoiden näkökulmasta ja tarkastelen, millaisia joustoja yli 50-vuotiailta työnhakijoilta vaaditaan työuran jatkamiseen. Artikkelin pääpainona on työnhakijoiden toimijuus, ja se kokoaa narratiivisen analyysin keinoin erilaisia diskursiivisia strategioita, joita työnhakijat kehittävät vastauksena kokemaansa ageismiin ja ikäsyrjintään

työmarkkinoilla. Neljäs ja viimeinen julkaisu tarkastelee työttömyyttä työuran loppupuolella eläkeputkeen päätyneiden silmin. Artikkeli tutkii positiointiteoriaa ja narratiivista analyysia hyödyntäen, miten työmarkkinoilta ennenaikaisesti poistuvat selittävät työurapäätöksiään ja kuinka he itse positioivat itsensä työmarkkinoilla ajan kuluessa.

Tässä artikkeliväitöskirjan yhteenvedossa kehystän edellä esiteltyjen tieteellisten julkaisujen teoreettismetodologista taustaa ja tuloksia, sekä keskustelen laajemmin artikkeleiden tuottamien tulosten ja politiikkasuositusten yhteyksistä ja kontribuutioista yhteiskuntatieteellisiin ja -poliittisiin keskusteluihin.

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ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

Publication I   Previtali, F., Keskinen, K., Niska, M. & Nikander, P. (2022) Ageism in Working Life: A Scoping Review on Discursive Approaches. *The Gerontologist* 62(2): e97-e111.

Publication II   Keskinen, K. & Nikander, P. (2023) Researching time and ageism: Applications of qualitative longitudinal research to the field. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 42(6): 1335-1344.

Publication III   Keskinen, K., Lumme-Sandt, K. & Nikander, P. (2023) Turning Age into Agency: A Qualitative Longitudinal Investigation into Older Jobseekers' Agentic Responses to Ageism. *Journal of Aging Studies* 65.

Publication IV   Keskinen, K., Lumme-Sandt, K. & Nikander, P. Submitted. Early exit decisions in Finland: Investigating the limbo between unemployment and retirement.

1   INTRODUCTION

The increasing tendency towards seeing people in terms of one dominant 'identity' ('this is your duty as an American', 'you must commit these acts as a Muslim', or 'as a Chinese you should give priority to this national engagement') is not only an imposition of an external and arbitrary priority, but also the denial of an important liberty of a person who can decide on their respective loyalties to different groups (to all of which he or she belongs)."

— Amartya Sen, The Idea of Justice (2009: xiv)

Much of the working life in 21st century centres a common dilemma, freedom of choice. In line with Amartya Sen, we may ask, to what extent can we decide the duties and commitments we engage in during our working years. Although on the surface the original quotation refers to understanding multiculturalism in a given society, at a deeper level it connects us to the understanding of intersecting engagements, everyday norms and social expectations, and how these come to guide our socially constructed life-course. When we consider working life and our role in it, we often denote our roles to workers, setting aside any other roles, duties and engagements that contribute to our identities as individuals.

Being labelled "old" in the labour market adds an additional layer to how individuals are expected to think and behave as they get closer to the retirement age threshold. No longer are we considered as workers, but as older workers with "old" becoming the defining label that informs us how to do things and what is expected of us. When thinking about age and different age groups, such as children, young adults, older adults, and so on, there are certain expectations attached to each one of them. Just as children are expected to go to school, young adults are expected to complete education and start working, and older adults are expected to vacate their positions, and eventually retire. These age-specific behaviours guide our decision-making throughout the life-course, as we follow them in a specific order, just as different stages of life come after another.

Deviating from the age norms or falling off from this normative path can create feelings of being in the wrong place at the *wrong time* and being the *wrong age*.

This sets the foundation for the research I report here. Using findings from a scoping review and qualitative longitudinal interview accounts from individuals experiencing redundancy near retirement age, I look at everyday experiences and decision-making processes in the labour market when individuals feel or are told they are the wrong age. This dissertation also describes a methodological exploration into everyday decision-making and lives of people caught in a paradox. Using data generated through qualitative longitudinal methodology, this research sheds light on the roles of age, ageism and temporality in unfolding career decisions during late life unemployment. Capturing experiences, work-life transitions, and individual negotiations, it provides important insights into the decision-making processes near retirement and how these decisions are actualised.

Separating the concepts of *time* and *temporality* from one another, I look at how, on the one hand, individual lives unfold over time, and on the other, their temporal experiences characterize feelings of being stuck either in place or out of place. Hitherto, only a handful of studies have investigated ageism using qualitative longitudinal data and even fewer have investigated the dynamics of ageism and temporality. In this sense, this doctoral dissertation is a methodological journey uncovering the contributions, possibilities and challenges the methodology has to offer to the field.

And lastly, this dissertation entails a story of personal and professional development deeply intertwined with the research process and results unfolding on the pages of this dissertation. It portrays a story of reflective research processes, insights, personal growth, editing and rewriting. Drawing from and contributing to different fields of study under social sciences, the dissertation offers a multidisciplinary investigation into ageism and temporality in late working life. It is a story of sidesteps, taking a step, not forwards or backwards, but to the side to avoid dealing with something problematic. In this dissertation, I look at the unfolding dynamics of unemployment, ageism, and individual agency during late life unemployment in Finland. With the contributions from four scientific publications and this integrative chapter, I answer the question, what roles age, ageism, and temporality are given in career decisions during late life unemployment.

1.1 Starting points for research

Interest in ageism has grown intensely over the past few years, as COVID-19 pandemic amplified the existing manifestations of ageism worldwide (Previtali, Allen & Varlamova, 2020). As a response, the World Health Organization (WHO) released a Global Report on Ageism in 2021, increasing awareness of the issues ageism poses to the wellbeing of individuals and societies worldwide. Despite being fairly unknown to the wider public, research on ageism dates back to 1969, when American physician, psychiatrist and gerontologist Robert N. Butler first coined the term, defining it as "prejudice by one age group towards other age groups" (Butler, 1969:243). What makes raising awareness on ageism even more challenging today, is that there is no single definition of ageism that researchers can agree on (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018). Throughout the years, research on ageism has expanded. A commonly used definition of ageism follows the tripartite model of ageism, defining ageism as "stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination towards people on the basis of age" (WHO, 2018: 295). Inclusive to all ages, ageism can be distinguished on individual, societal and institutional levels, and can be perceived both negatively and positively (Palmore, 2015).

Unlike other forms of discrimination, ageism often goes unchallenged due to its pervasive nature (WHO, 2021). It manifests within societal structures and everyday practices, and is considered socially acceptable and normal, both at explicit and implicit levels (Calasanti, 2005; Levy, 2017). Despite the existing legislation on both national and European Union levels prohibiting age discrimination in the labour market, age and ageism are still used and mobilised in everyday interactions, including recruitment practices (e.g., Previtali, 2023), employment services (e.g., Bowman, et al., 2016), access to education (e.g., Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015), access to job mobility (e.g., Kosonen, et al. 2021; Krekula 2019) and retirement decisions (Kosonen, et al. 2021; Pärnänen, 2012; Pietilä et al., 2020).

The research I report here started under a European Union funded network, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Innovative Training Network EuroAgeism. Although interest in researching and addressing ageism has expanded vastly both among researchers and policymakers (cf. Higgs & Gilleard, 2019), we still have a lot to learn about ageism. As an example, recent scoping reviews mapping the field on ageism and older workers identified that there is a need for more qualitative studies and longitudinal studies investigating ageism through time (Harris et al., 2018).

Grounded in these findings, my research here addresses the identified gaps in the literature and provides both methodological and practical knowledge on ageism in late working life.

1.2 Key concepts

In addition to ageism briefly introduced above, there are some key concepts I refer to throughout the dissertation. As these concepts may have more than one definition and understanding, I briefly outline what I mean by each one of them. First, my research takes place in the context of late life unemployment. By this, I refer to unemployment, whether characterised by activity, inactivity, or non-activity in the labour market, occurring in the years preceding retirement. Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich (2021) define late (or later) life unemployment in their research as "unemployment occurring at age of 50 and later" (p. 3). As this definition is in line with most of the research on older workers, defining workers aged 50+ years (Harris, et al. 2018), I too, have adopted this age categorisation in my research. This said, when I refer to older workers, old age, or older jobseekers, I refer to their age in relation to their remaining time in the labour market, rather than their chronological age.

Second key concept I address in my research is agency. I see individual, or human agency as "the capacity to act, to interact, to make choices, to influence the shape of one's life and the lives of others" (Neale, 2019: 9). Understanding agency as more than what meets the eye, my research agrees with Archer (2007) in that even if actions look passive or unagentic from the outside, individuals, on the inside, are engaged in various agentic actions and discursive strategies through reflective processes guiding the decision-making processes.

Third, in my research I make multiple references to (chrono)normativity. Originating from queer studies (Freeman, 2010), chrononormativity refers to the temporal order through which individuals carry out their lives (Leonard, Fuller & Unwin, 2018; Riach, Rumens & Tyler, 2014; Ylänne & Nikander, 2019). Operating similarly to a guiding framework, it informs individuals when is the right time to engage in certain actions, such as enrolling in education or having children (Leonard, Fuller & Unwin, 2018; Ylänne & Nikander, 2019) and in which chronological order.

1.3 Structure of the dissertation

In this dissertation, I summarize the paradoxical complexities of late life unemployment, ageism, and individual agency in ten chapters. In the Introduction, I outlined the main goals of the dissertation, touching upon different aspects surrounding the research topic, and introduced the central concepts used in this research.

The second chapter sets the scene by reviewing existing research on older workers, transitions and expectations of retirement, and political goals to extend working life. In the third chapter I move on to a more theoretical standpoint and discuss the constructions of ageism, unemployment, and the individual agency and how these are socially constructed and reproduced in everyday interactions. I then continue this in Chapter 4, by discussing the analytical and theoretical stances in my research.

In chapter 5, I introduce the scoping review that laid the foundation for the research reported here together with research processes and questions. Through chapters 6 and 7, I focus on the data, research setting and qualitative longitudinal research. In the sixth chapter, I outline the data and the labour market context. Chapter 7 then introduces readers to qualitative longitudinal research and methodology, reviewing its strongpoints and weaknesses, followed by analytical processes and discussions on the used methods, potential ethical issues, and limitations of this research. In Chapter 8, I give an overview of the research results and how each of the sub-studies contributed to them. I then continue this in Chapter 9, where I discuss the results in relation to existing research. Based on these results and discussion, I end the dissertation with Chapter 10. This final chapter offers policy implications and solutions on how individuals could be better supported in attempts to extend working lives and what should we do about ageism. Finally, the dissertation ends with concluding remarks and future directions for research.

2 TOO OLD TO WORK, TOO YOUNG TO RETIRE

"Paradoxes are nothing but trouble. They violate the most elementary principle of logic: something can't be two different things at once. Two contradictory interpretations can't both be true. A paradox is just such an impossible situation, and political life is full of them." (Stone, 2012: 2)

While political efforts are increasingly encouraging older workers to extend their careers through pension reforms and policy incentives, many older workers still find it challenging if not impossible to continue working at their age. They face a number of issues and challenges in the labour market, including issues in recruitment processes, at workplaces and getting access to training, promotions and job mobility (e.g., Harris et al., 2018; Krekula, 2019). This chapter sets the scene and introduces the paradox my research tackles. First, I discuss literature on older workers, how they are defined in both research and policymaking, and what problems older workers face in the day-to-day interactions in the labour market. I then continue to introduce the other end of the spectrum, retirement. Looking at how retirement and transitions to retirement are perceived by policymakers and individuals, I discuss the ideological and cultural images of retirement. I then end the chapter with a discussion on the extending working life agenda, its central goals, and ideologies behind it.

2.1 Growing old in the labour market

The working age population (20–64 years) is projected to decrease by 10% in Finland between 2020 and 2060 (OECD, 2019). As populations age, the share of workers over the age of 50+ is expected to grow intensely in the upcoming years, while the number of younger workers decreases. Despite expanding body of research investigating older workers (e.g., Harris, et al. 2018), there is no consensus over at which chronological age workers become 'old' (Harris, et al. 2018; McCarthy, et al., 2014). In research, the social category of older workers is often conceptualised as workers aged 50 years and over (Harris, et al. 2018). The

grouping is rather problematic, because it fails to portray the heterogeneity among the group it captures (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2020; Laliberte Rudman & Alrich, 2021). In contrast, policies surrounding retirement and extending working life tend to define older workers as workers aged 55 and over, or 65 and over, depending on the policy context (McCathy, et al. 2014). What makes these open-ended categorisations based on arbitrary age limits increasingly problematic is that this type of homogenisation and grouping of older workers can easily depict an ideological image of the older worker (Krekula & Vickertaff, 2020).

Workers perceived as 'old' in the labour market may encounter additional issues in their efforts to maintain and continue careers because of their age. Studies comparing the hiring practices between younger and older jobseekers have shown that implicit age stereotypes affect older jobseekers negatively. Older applicants are expected to have work experience and education that matches their age to avoid ageism in hiring practices (Dormidontova et al. 2020; Zaniboni et al. 2019). Moreover, multiple age stereotypes operate negatively against older workers. They are considered less productive, unable to use new technology, not interested in training and career development, less motivated, less trusting, less healthy, resist change and need more time off because of their family circumstances (Harris, et al. 2018; Ng & Feldman, 2012). In their scoping review, Harris et al. (2018) reminded that the negative age stereotypes about older workers were not only detectible among the employers, but also present in the studies investigating internalized ageism among the older workers themselves.

In addition to negative stereotypes, Abrams et al. (2016) show that even the age stereotypes that portray older workers positively are viewed less favourably in hiring decisions. Similarly, Berger (2006) shows how older workers are othered by employment services through positive stereotypes of older workers that depict them as flexible, loyal, and calm, passable for downgraded and precarious entry-level positions that require no experience and have minimum hours. Stemming from the social construction of the normative life-course, older workers are then separated through othering practices from other groups of workers because of their age (Riach, 2007). Berger (2006; 2009) shows that to navigate the working life, older jobseekers develop discursive strategies to counteract employers' ageist stereotypes. To support these results, Lyons et al. (2014) suggest that older jobseekers are aware of age-related biases that operate against them in hiring practices. As a result, they engage in strategies to conceal their age by misleading or

avoiding bringing up their age during job search. Similarly, Berger (2009) illustrates how older workers attempt to maintain skills and conceal their age through alterations to their language use, appearance and resumés to counteract the employers' ageist stereotypes in hiring practices.

In addition to age stereotypes complicating older workers' employment, education in late working life also presents challenges. A pertinent issue for older workers today is the lack of up-to-date education or training and inadequate digital and job search skills (e.g., Phillipson, 2019). However, individuals choosing to engage in education at age of 50 and over need to negotiate their positions and identities, as they may face ageism or be denied access to education due to nearing retirement age (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015; Leonard, Fuller & Unwin, 2018). Thus, digital illiteracy and competence barriers can hinder career changes in late working life, as older jobseekers may not be able to access the necessary courses and resources to update their skills due to age-specific policies in place (Kadefors & Hanse, 2012). Therefore, being labelled old, adds an additional layer to the existing issues in working life.

2.2   Retirement ≠ old age

As the borders between unemployment, employment and retirement have become blurred (Hallqvist & Hydén, 2014; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000), individual trajectories are now more heterogeneous than ever. Simultaneously, responsibility for career continuation and termination has shifted towards individuals who now have increasing freedom to decide on their careers (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019; Laliberte Rudman & Alrich, 2021). Discussions on career and retirement trajectories have long attempted to unravel the decision-making processes behind retirement and career continuation decisions. Individual factors such as health, income and unemployment have been attributed to retirement intensions and actions (Nivalainen, 2022), whereas for instance, enjoyable work environment, education and higher income are associated with career continuation thoughts (Simova, 2010).

However, lesser attention has been directed towards understanding whether these career decisions are in fact, up to the individuals to decide. Individuals nearing or past retirement age may be pressured or pushed to choose retirement (Ebbinghaus

& Radl, 2015; Kosonen, et al. 2021; Laliberte Rudman, 2015; Pietilä et al. 2020; Vickerstaff, 2006). Nevertheless, the dominant, homogenous assumption about older workers is that they actively choose to retire for more leisure time. This assumption has to some extent led the political discussions to blame older workers for not extending their careers further into old age, framing them as selfish and unwilling to cooperate (Krekula and Vickerstaff, 2019; Niska & Nikander, 2021).

Although retirement appears to be more individualised (Vickerstaff, 2006), Gardiner et al. (2007) demonstrate how exiting employment continues to be an institutionalised experience in the United Kingdom, especially for older workers. In their study, they interviewed Welsh steel workers aged 50 and over, who were made redundant through factory closing. Although only a few had planned their work exit, having crossed the 50 years-threshold, all these workers could gain access to their pensions, and most of them chose to retire. Furthermore, in their study of Finnish metal workers and engineers, Pietilä et al. (2020) suggest that class mandates control over retirement. They indicate that whereas engineers perceive control over their health and retirement decisions and have more part-time job opportunities available to them, metal workers are more likely to feel that their retirement decisions are directed by external forces and anticipate their retirement either as a result of health issues or downsizing decisions. However, to contradict this, Hallqvist and Hydén (2014) demonstrate that when redundancies hit white-collar workers, they are equally subjected to unwanted career transitions.

Nevertheless, the general assumption is that early exit is taken to enjoy more time on retirement, even when this period can be overshadowed by poverty in older age (Vickerstaff, 2006). Ideas of retirement have become polarised, with retirement days being perceived either as an economically comfortable period, or time characterised by financial struggles. Well-off retirement days and activities as pictured by third age are a treat for only a few (Calasanti, 2002; Gilleard and Higgs, 2000). Yet, there is a need for research that would investigate individuals caught in between these two polarised examples.

There is, however, a noticeable shift in how retirement is framed in policymaking. The former social construction of retirement is giving way to more fractured and diverse forms of retirement, coloured with options such as bridge employment, part-time work and retirement opportunities and early exit (e.g., Phillipson, 2019) For example, Moulaert and Biggs (2012) highlight that currently dominant

narratives of 'active ageing' are attempting to shape retirement into a time period characterised by work or work-like activity. Along the same lines, Taylor and Earl (2016: 252) note that today "the concept of retirement is in the process of being transformed from a reward bestowed by societies on individuals at the end of their so-called 'productive' years to something more akin to a kind of unemployment."

2.3   The extending working life paradox

As a response to demographic changes in populations, countries globally are increasingly invested in extending working lives (Ilmarinen, 2012; OECD, 2020a). Accompanied by a powerful narrative on how ageing populations are likely to cause significant pressures on welfare societies and shortages in labour force, the extending working life agenda relies on workers to do what is morally right and continue working to fix the issue (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019; Phillipson, 2019).

In addition to pension reforms tightening the eligibility criteria to exit the labour market, governments are developing policies designed to prolong careers. Characterised as 'supporting' and 'encouraging', these policies tend to shift responsibility for career continuation on individuals and expect them to comply (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019; 2020; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021).

While pressures from the ageing societies are unquestionably used to support the political agenda (Phillipson, 2019), the narratives surrounding the cause construct a sense of obligation for older workers to act accordingly and avoid becoming 'old and dependable' (Taylor & Earl, 2016; cf. Higgs and Gilleard, 2019). Supported by political ideas of active and healthy ageing, Phillipson (2019: 633) raises the concern that the extending working life agenda centres the assumption that older workers are generally a "healthier group released from demanding occupations, able to control technology and experiencing more options for work-ending." What makes the assumption increasingly controversial, however, is that it is more often seen as a fact rather than a topic of investigation.

Surrounded by moral obligations to keep working and stay active, the policy arguments tend to frame older workers unwilling or unable to continue working as the problem (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2020; Niska & Nikander, 2021; Phillipson, 2019). This older workers' 'attitude problem' however, has multidimensional and

complex roots beyond being selfish (Niska & Nikander, 2021). One of which is that disadvantaged workers and older unemployed are largely missing from the extending working life debate, while policies are aimed to support only individuals in employment (Heisig & Radl, 2017; Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019; Lain & Phillipson, 2019; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021).

3 CONSTRUCTING AGEISM, UNEMPLOYMENT AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

Although discursive approaches to ageism in working life are still underrepresented in the field, previous constructionist studies have investigated ageism and older workers in educational settings (e.g., Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015; Leonard et al. 2018; Romaioli & Contarello, 2021), at the workplace and in recruitment practices (e.g., McVittie, McKinlay & Widdicombe, 2003; Niemistö, Hearn & Jyrkinen, 2016; Riach, 2007) and during unemployment (e.g., Berger, 2006; 2009; Bowman, et al. 2016; Bowman et al. 2017; Handy & Davy, 2007; Kadefors & Hanse, 2012; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021; Riach & Loretto, 2009). While studies often refer to agency and potential consequences of ageism, investigations into the dynamics of age(ism), unemployment and individual agency are still lacking in the field. In this chapter, I broadly discuss the literature and theoretical roots surrounding ageism, unemployment, and individual agency, highlighting the areas in which there are gaps that this research addresses.

3.1 Understanding ageism

In my research, I approach ageism from a discursive perspective (see Chapter 4.2), conceptualising it as a social construct nested within societies and reproduced and reinforced by both formal and informal institutions in place that maintain ageist ideologies (Bytheway, 2005). This means that to fully understand ageism and its manifestations in the society, there is a need to understand how it takes place on individual, interactional and institutional levels.

Institutional ageism itself has received scant attention in relation to its prevalence. Wilkinson and Ferraro (2002: 34) separate institutionalised ageism from its other forms as "a bias in actions inherent in the operation of any of society's institutions, including schools, hospitals, the police and the workplace." In the context of labour market, statutory and fixed retirement ages have been raised as key

examples of existing institutional ageism, classifying individuals as 'too old to work' after having a set number of birthdays (Stypinska & Nikander, 2018). This statistical way of categorising people based on chronological age can lead to both social and economic inequalities, as age discriminatory policies control access to employment and retirement in specific age groups (Bytheway, 2005; Heisig and Radl, 2017). Nonetheless, age barriers remain deeply embedded within social structures and institutions, as individuals accept these ageist practices as matter-of-facts and exclusion from the social world based on one's age continues to be the 'normal' (Calasanti, 2005: 8). Institutional ageism embedded in the institutions overseeing the progression of working life can also shape occupational possibilities, career options and limit available resources, especially for older workers (Laliberte Rudman, 2015; 2010).

The ageist discourses, maintained and reinforced by institutions and organisational practices then, guide how ageism takes places in interactions. Individuals draw on these readily available and accepted discourses to explain their and others' behaviour and to 'do ageism' (See Previtali, 2023). For example, Previtali and Spedale (2021) show how employees mobilise institutional ageist discourses to account older age for negative performance in performance reviews at the workplace. Ageism, then, takes place in labour market interactions when individuals or groups of people are constructed as the wrong age. These interactions take place for instance in hiring processes, gaining access to training, promotions, and internal job mobility, in downsizing decisions, career endings and in retirement transitions (Harris, et al. 2018; Krekula, 2019; Naegele, et al. 2020; Pärnänen, 2012). Encounters with ageism within employment services may lead to abandoning the use of such services, reinforce internalized ageism and push older jobseekers towards early exit from the labour market (Bowman, et al. 2017; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021; Riach & Loretto, 2009).

Internalised ageism is a contested topic, with some researchers framing it as self-sabotaging rhetoric (e.g., Romaioli & Contarello, 2019). Individuals internalise ageism when they interact with the institutions and different actors of the society maintaining ageist ideologies and discourses. As an example, stereotype embodiment theory suggests individuals internalise ageist discourses and position themselves accordingly within the frames of self-fulfilling prophecies (e.g., Calasanti 2015; Minichiello, Browne & Kendig, 2000; Phelan, 2018). These internalising processes occur throughout the life-course (Levy, 2009), and when

individuals become old, they become to actively contest the label and the assumptions that come with it (Minichiello, Browne & Kendig, 2000; van der Horst, 2019). However, apart from a few studies (e.g. Wilińska, 2013) research on ageism has focused largely on how ageism is used to 'other' older workers, disregarding how older workers themselves employ ageism in interactions to 'other' themselves, validate their behaviour and to accomplish things.

3.2   Stigmatising unemployment

Researchers have long agreed that unemployment scars people. While the argument put forward is that unemployment carries a strong social stigma because it deviates from the shared duty to work (e.g., Wilinska, Rolander, Bulow, 2021), unemployed individuals tend to negotiate their identities and position to avoid the stigmatised label (Radl, 2012; Roex & Rözer, 2017). As an example, in the case of late life unemployment, workers nearing retirement age or eligible to retire may choose to exit the labour market, as unlike unemployment or disability, retirement does not carry a social stigma (Radl, 2012). Thus, institutionalised definitions of unemployment contribute to how individuals position themselves, as "categories such as 'employed', 'unemployed', 'retired', or 'disabled' are regulative fictions that construct expectations and commitments" (Baxandall, 2004: 215).

Unlike retirement or duty to work, unemployment is not a fixed time period in the normative working life, but rather a temporal and transitional in-between state through which individuals usually transition toward retirement or employment (cf. liminality by Van Gennep, 1960; Daslaki & Simosi, 2018). Conceptualising unemployment as a liminoid phenomenon brings an additional dimension to understanding how individuals struggle to construct and maintain identities during these periods (Daskalaki & Simosi, 2018). However, recent debates on liminality within labour studies have suggested that the word 'limbo' could better describe the labour market conditions during which individuals feel that they are 'locked-in' to uncomfortable labour market conditions that they are unable change (e.g. Bamber, Allen-Collinson & McCormack, 2017).

Apart from strong stigma, unemployment in late working life presents additional challenges, as unemployment periods in late working life tend to last longer, and older jobseekers have greater difficulties finding employment (Simova, 2010).

Worryingly, as unemployment periods grow longer, the opportunities and choices for employment decrease, regardless of the jobseeker's age (Beck, 2018). Moreover, unemployment in countries that offer no or low support for unemployed workers may force them to accept any job, regardless of its quality (Fervers, 2021). When individuals become unemployed in late working life, there is an increasing need for support, as individuals may be unclear about their rights, duties, and opportunities, and in need of updating their skills. However, researchers investigating employment services practices with older workers convey an ageist reality. There is a pattern of 'carelessness' and systematic indifference towards older workers in employment services, seeing older jobseekers merely as members of the "50+ age group" with lower chances of finding employment (Berger, 2006; Bowman, et al. 2016; Kadefors & Hanse, 2012; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021).

Originating from the intersection of unemployment stigma and ageism, older unemployed workers may be "othered" from other members of the age group because they have fallen off the normative working life (Riach, 2007). When individuals become stigmatised, they are easily "reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1990: 12). However, the dynamics of age, ageism and unemployment remain understudied and undertheorized, indicating a need to better understand the two constructs and how they are constructed to validate one another in everyday interactions.

3.3   The problem of everyday agency

Agency is a controversial and contested concept, widely studied under social sciences. Nevertheless, hitherto, there is no consensus over how to define the construct. Studies investigating agency most often date theoretically back to two different theories developed in the early 1980s; Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1984) that introduced a dualist relationship between individual's agency and the structure, and Albert Bandura's (1982) theories on both self- and collective efficacy focusing on the individual and group dynamics. Traditionally, researchers have been divided between these two theories, with psychologists leaning towards Bandura's way of thinking and sociologists supporting Giddens' theoretical assumptions. More recently, new approaches to agency have also emerged. For example, ageing researchers Romaioli and Contarello (2019) took up the challenge of bridging Taoist philosophy with French concept disponibilité (disponibility),

drafting a multimodality approach to agency in late life within the social constructionist framework. They define modalities as building blocks to construct agency in old age, which is often described as reductive and oppressive, especially among older people (Romaioli & Contarello, 2019). What is common among the theories, however, is that agency is only perceived as actions (or inactions) against oppressive elements, rather than acknowledging the everyday choices and negotiations surrounding individual agency.

Kohli (2019) addresses this issue, by looking at how agency takes place in temporal settings where future expectations are matched together with past experiences. He draws a distinction between everyday oriented and life-time oriented agency, suggesting that everyday decisions are based on repeated patterns, habits, and thoughts of continuity, whereas life-time decisions draw from ambitions and goals set for longer periods of time. In my research, I have adapted a definition of agency as "temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 970). Offering flexibility and grounded in situational circumstances, the definition allows investigating agency situationally and through time both in everyday conversations and decisions, as well as decisions dictating the course of one's remaining life-course.

4 THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL STANCES

My research is grounded in social constructionism (Burr, 2015; Holstein & Gubrium, 2007; 2013). Although social constructionism is used as an umbrella term to describe a variety of approaches and there is no clear consensus over its definition, a common characteristic is to analytically direct focus on the social processes and interactions whereby meanings, interpretations and realities are constructed (Niska, et al., 2024). In the steps of discursive approaches, my research focus is more directed on the understanding the social realities individuals and actors construct through language rather than the objective understandings of reality (Willig, 2003). In this chapter, I turn my focus on the theoretical and analytical stances that guided my research journey. Narrowing down from social constructionism to theories explaining individual agency and agentic actions (see Figure 1), I summarise and discuss the interconnectedness of the theoretical frameworks used to guide the analyses reported in this doctoral dissertation.
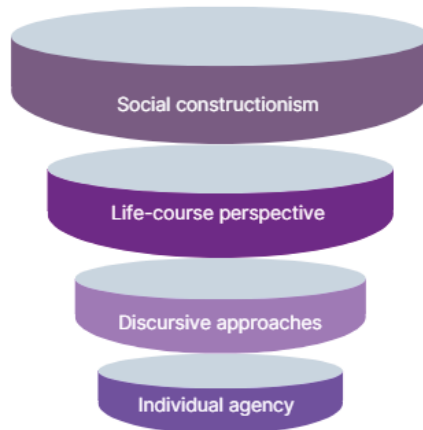
Figure 1Illustrating the theoretical and analytical framework used in this doctoral work.

4.1 Institutional and age-appropriate life-course

Hitherto, there is no consensus over a life-course theory (George, 2013). The umbrella term gathers a variety of scholars under it, including both qualitative and quantitative researchers. However, life-course researchers tend to share common five principles: emphases on socio-historical context, linked lives, human agency, timing of lives and life-long ageing and developmental processes (Bengtson et al., 2005; Giele and Elder, 1998).

Approaching research from a life-course perspective allows researchers to understand how the accumulation of advantages and disadvantages during the life-course shapes future expectations and experiences (Swain et al., 2020). For instance, accumulated resources, wealth, and education shape the unfolding experiences of unemployment in late working life into different directions. This means that to understand the individual life-course, researchers need to understand the historical, social, and cultural contexts surrounding the individual, the previous experiences that shape future decisions as well as which decisions the individual makes during their lifetime and when.

Social constructionists see the life-course as something that "does not simply unfold before and around us; rather we actively organise the flow, pattern and direction of experience…" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000: 182). However, the approach acknowledges that individuals often experience the life-course as something consisting of temporal transitions, stages, and unfolding patterns (Gubrium, Holstein & Buckholdt, 1994). Age categories then, are treated as fluid, expandable, contractable, and malleable, shaped by individuals and reinforced by institutions and policies (Neale, 2015). And adapting the understanding of fluidity, not only to ageing and age categories, but also to life-course, allows researchers to examine how individual lives unfold at different speeds and in different orders than expected (e.g. Neale, 2021b). For a long time, the dominant understanding was that the life-course consists of three stages, each characterised by an institutionalised engagement individuals were ought to attend. This standardised and institutionalised understanding of education in youth, working life in adulthood and retirement in old age (Kohli, 1986), however, started to give way to more individualised pathways after the Second World War (e.g., Nikander & Keskinen, 2024).

Although the institutionalised life-course is in flux, individuals continue to behave in a similar pattern (Radl, 2012). Radl (2012) suggests that behind this behaviour is the individual tendency to follow the normative life-course. In light of extending working life policies encouraging workers to change their retirement behaviour, there is an emerging mismatch between societal expectations and everyday actions: policies change faster than norms. This cultural lag (Riley, 1987) between normative and cultural images of the life-course and policies then, creates a paradox where individuals are forced to weigh their options and position themselves between social and societal expectations.

Despite changing policies and increasing number of opportunities to choose from, individuals draw on age-specific norms, behaviours and engagements informing them when it is fitting to engage in certain actions, a trend that is visible for instance in retirement behaviour (Radl, 2012). As individuals engage in these given activities at age-appropriate timings, they simultaneously shape the normative life-course, reinforced, and supported by the formal and informal institutions and policies (Nikander, 2002). Not only is there a fitting age for each engagement, but these engagements also follow a socio-temporal order (Krekula, 2019).

Grounded in the socially shared idea that there is the 'right' time to engage in different actions, chrononormativity upkeeps the orderliness of individual age-appropriate behaviours such as engaging in education (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015; Leonard, Fuller & Unwin, 2018) or retiring (Vickerstaff & Van der Horst, 2021). By doing so, chrononormativity reinforces age-segregation by establishing possibilities and obstacles for each group (Nikander, 2002; Previtali, 2023; Ylänne & Nikander, 2019). As a result, individuals breaking from the normative order may feel being in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and obligated to explain themselves (Nikander, 2000).

4.2   Discursive approaches to age, agency and ageism

The research I report here follows discursive gerontology, defined loosely as research reflecting the understanding that language use, whether in written or spoken format, plays an active role in the construction of reality. Approaching age and ageism from a discursive perspective allows us to look at everyday interactions and practices, and how individuals enact their agency to accomplish things.

Traditionally discursive research into ageism has identified two forms of ageist discourse. The first looks at how discourses of ageism refer to ageist practices and policies that complicate or deny access to rights and opportunities based on age, while the other describes how ageist discourses are applied, given meanings, and used in talk to construct age and older persons (Coupland & Coupland, 1999; Phelan, 2018). Similarly, the tradition to research ageism through the discursive lens has been roughly divided between (critical) discourse analysis and discursive psychology, with the former researching how inequalities are constructed, maintained, and reproduced on the macro level (e.g. societal, political decision-making), and the latter focusing on the micro level and how individuals actively construct reality and narratives themselves (Phelan, 2018). Focusing on the language individuals use in ordinary conversations, the perspective sheds light on how people choose their words to accomplish things (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Theoretically grounded in the assumptions that language constructs reality rather than mirrors it, discursive investigations look at how meanings are given and constructed through language.

Seeing age and ageism as social constructs, shaped and constructed through social interactions and discourses, detaches age from being a mere chronological number and a background variable (Taylor, et al. 2016). Although chronological age is to a day, a yearly changing number, it is given meaning in various contexts, including institutional policies and practices, encounters and social interactions, and individual negotiations and decision-making processes (Nikander & Keskinen, 2024). Researchers have for instance, approached age and ageism as social constructs deriving from negative perceptions of ageing, culture of youthfulness and active ageing (e.g., Laliberte Rudman, 2015; Romaioli & Contarello, 2019); normative construction of the life-course and chrononormativity (Berger, 2006; McVittie, McKinlay & Widdicombe, 2008; Romaioli & Contarello, 2019); and organisational ageist ideologies and practices (McVittie, McKinlay & Widdicombe, 2003; Riach, 2007). Focusing on the language individuals use becomes increasingly important in cases when individuals fall off the normative life-course and rupture expectations for continuity. It is in these moments when individuals make sense of the unfolding events through storytelling and language (Riessman, 2008:10).

When individuals accomplish things with words, they position others and themselves with respect to the shared norms and duties (Harré, et al. 2009). These acts of positioning and repositioning are discursive processes during which

individuals establish their own position through interaction and construct an image of themselves and others. According to the Foucauldian approach to ageism, ageist discourses are produced within the frames of knowledge and what can be spoken at the time, tying them to the time and space of its context (Phelan, 2018). These discourses then produce positions that individuals occupy, and that inform them what linguistic tools (such as narratives, storylines, images, and metaphors) are relevant for their positions (Davis & Harre, 1990; Phelan, 2018). Developed from discursive psychology, positioning theory sheds light on the opportunities and normative constraints taking place situationally (Harré & Langenhove, 1999; Harré, et al., 2009). By focusing on "bringing to light the normative frames within which people actually carry on their lives, thinking, feeling, acting, and perceiving – against standards of correctness" (Harré, et al., 2009: 9), the theory is concerned with what people may or may not do.

4.3   Agentic strategies

Over the years, the concept of agency has been under a lot of scrutiny with one central debate concerning whether passivity and inactivity can be categorized as a form of agency. While scholars characterise the concept as expressing individual choice and exercising one's will, whether it is expressed in the form of activity or passivity in certain situations (Flaherty, 2011; Pirhonen & Pietilä, 2018), agency offers a window into the complexities of individual decision-making, reflexivity, and negotiations (Archer, 2007).

In my research, I conceptualise individual agency as a complex, situationally constructed concept that sheds light on the reflexive processes and perceptions of a given actor. That is, individuals construct their own agency through language, whether it is an internal conversation (Archer, 2007), or in interaction with others. Looking at the unfolding stories of children growing up in developing and globalising environment in Sudan, Cindi Katz (2004) constructed a relational typology for identifying social agency and agentic actions. Classifying strategies through which individuals exhibit their agency against capitalist structures, Katz conceptualises three categories of strategies, resilience strategies, reworking strategies, and resistance strategies (See Table 1 for definitions and examples).

Resilience strategies describe internal negotiations and strategies developed to cope with the oppressive and difficult circumstances, without challenging them. These everyday strategies are employed to 'make do' with the available resources and may require individuals to renegotiate their identities and reposition themselves. Whereas resilience strategies cope with existing resources, reworking strategies include actions that alter and improve, or are expected to improve, the surrounding oppressing conditions. Changing the conditions under which individual lives unfold, reworking strategies attempt to avoid oppression altogether.

Agency	Defined as	Example actions
Resilience strategies	Everyday strategies individuals employ to cope with difficult situations, "make do" with the available resources	Focusing job search on lower level positions; changing the meaning of work;
Reworking strategies	Actions aimed to improve the conditions by altering them	Creating a modern CV; engaging in (further) education; migration
Resistance strategies	Actions that challenge the oppressive systems in place	Filing an age discrimination complaint to the authorities; demonstrations; strikes

Table 1 demonstrating Cindy Katz's typology and potential examples on how individuals encounter ageism in late working life based on study 3.

Finally, resistance strategies, characterised as ultimate actions challenging the existing systems, confront the oppressive constraints. Based on ethnographic research following the changes and developments the decline of manufacturing jobs and increasing need for educated workers had on children growing up, the typology acknowledges the multifaceted and complex temporal and spatial dimensions of individual agency. In my research, I approach these categories as intraindividual resilience strategies, interactional reworking strategies and resistance strategies based on collective actions.

5   RESEARCH PROCESSES AND QUESTIONS

As I was a new to the research field and topic, my doctoral research process started from getting to know the literature around ageing, ageism, unemployment, and working life. I began with literature reviews and mapping existing research to narrow down and define how my research could contribute to these fields of study. To support this process, my first publication was done in collaboration with researchers who shared similar research interests around ageing, ageism and working life. Together we collaborated on a scoping review that serves as a foundation for the empirical research I report in this dissertation. In this chapter, I describe the scoping review process, its results and how they helped in shaping and formulating the subsequent research processes and questions.

5.1   Scoping review

Before embarking on the journey of empirical research, I collaborated on a scoping review that investigated the contributions of discursive research to the study of ageism in working life. With this scoping review, we were able to map the field of existing research and identify gaps in research that we would later address in our following studies. The scoping review offers a flexible and scientific approach for identifying and reviewing relevant published literature in a chosen area of research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Unlike full systematic reviews, it does not require a quality assessment of the articles and is considered faster and more affordable choice to summarise previous research (Mays, Roberts & Popay, 2001). In addition, it can be used to investigate fields that are yet to be established and examine developing trends in research (Mays, Roberts & Popay, 2001; Previtali, 2023). Four researchers took part in the actualisation of the review and its processes followed the scoping review protocol by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). The central research question for the review was, *how have discursive approaches contributed to the study of ageism in working life since the coinage of the term in 1969?*

5.1.1 Review protocol

Our review followed an established protocol by Arksey and O´Malley (2005) to ensure rigorous retrieval, selection, and analysis of scientific articles. The protocol comprises of five stages.

1. Defining the research question,
2. identifying relevant existing research,
3. selecting the research contributions,
4. charting/extracting the data,
5. collocating, summarising, and reporting the results.

However, these stages did not always come in order, as the process sometimes required going back and forth. This meant for instance, redefining the inclusion and exclusion criteria based on initial searches through the databases. For the review, we chose to run seven electronic databases (PsycINFO, Web of Science, Social Science Premium Collection, Sage Journals, Wiley Journals, Academic Ultimate Search [EBSCO], and Scopus) with the search terms (Ageism OR Agism OR Ageis* OR Agis*) AND (discours* OR communication* OR 'social interaction*' OR narrative*). With the help of an information specialist, the first author of the scoping review retrieved 851 scientific texts that we screened together following the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

We chose to include scientific texts, if they were peer-reviewed, scientific articles, written in English, had a discursive approach, focused on working life, were published after 1969, and used data source dating earliest in 1969. Consequently, we excluded contributions that were reviews, included an intervention, self-reflection or biography, or did not focus on ageism. After removing duplicates from the retrieved texts, we were able to screen the contributions by first going through the titles and abstracts of each text, followed by more thorough full-text screening and assessment on the remaining articles. Following the full-text assessment, 25 articles matched our criteria. We then returned to stage 2 to hand-search the key journals and references to identify contributions that did not appear in the database search, adding 14 additional scientific articles to the group of selected articles.

A total of 39 articles were included in the scoping review. Next, we extracted data from these articles, charting the author(s), publication year, country context, study population, aim of study, research design, main results, and how ageism was defined in the study. Our aim was to be more inclusive than exclusive, and we adapted a flexible definition of discursive approaches as an "umbrella term" that describes a variety of theoretical traditions, methods, and methodologies (Nikander, 2000). After mapping the descriptive category of how ageism was defined, we employed a data-driven qualitative thematic analysis to identify common themes, gaps in research and how the results have informed the political and academic landscapes (Levac, Colquhoun & O'Brien, 2010).

5.1.2 Selected articles

From the selected articles, we could identify a slowly growing interest in using discursive approaches to research ageism in working life. The research dated back to mid-1990s, following the discursive and qualitative turns in gerontology and social sciences (Gilleard & Higgs, 2015; Gubrium, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). We did, however, acknowledge that older sources may have been excluded from our scope due to our inclusion and exclusion criteria, as we focused on electronically available sources and research articles, excluding books and journal articles available only in print.

Furthermore, the articles conveyed a variety of ways to define and approach ageism, with majority of articles investigating older workers, categorised between the ages of 40 and 80 years. However, researchers were reluctant to discuss the social construction of older workers in their articles, merely defining them as old based on reaching an arbitrary number of birthdays. Finally, the majority of the research designs followed a descriptive or thematic analysis of research-generated interview data from a single time point, while some articles approached qualitative datasets using narrative and discourse analyses. Nevertheless, narrative, and discursive methods were underrepresented in the results, identifying the need to develop more robust research delving into the dynamics of age and ageism in working life.

5.1.3 Central findings and gaps in research

The thematic analysis on the selected 39 articles resulted in three main themes that shed light on the contribution of previous research to the field. The themes were 1) experiences of ageism; 2) social construction of age and ageist ideologies; and 3) strategies to counteract or dilute ageism. Because a significant majority of the articles were descriptive in nature or described a thematic analysis, the first theme describes how participants, in other words, older workers themselves, described and reported their experiences of ageism. This theme thus investigated how individuals perceived, made sense of, talked, and adapted to ageism in working life.

The second theme, social construction of age and ageist ideologies, approaches macro-level discourses through a micro-level investigation. It identifies four ideologies that individuals and workplaces draw on to sustain ageism in working life. These are:

1. seeing ageing as a hindering process,
2. normative construction of the life-course,
3. othering older workers, and
4. organisational ageist discourses.

Lastly, the third theme describes different coping strategies that individuals engage in when encountering or expecting to encounter ageism. Describing identity negotiations and rhetoric counternarratives, the theme identifies how individuals actively lessen or dilute ageism in their talk by emphasizing their individual agency.

In line with the literature and policy issues I highlighted in earlier chapters, most of the studies adapted a definition of older workers as a category of including both individuals in and out of employment. While few of the studies investigated ageism in recruitment practices and among employment services, these studies were underrepresented in the mix. Simultaneously studies investigating inactivity in late working life and exit decisions, almost always portrayed older workers as the victims of ageism, without considering whether exit from the labour market was something the workers themselves desired. In addition, our review concluded that there were clear methodological limitations in the existing articles, as age was often

not problematised but rather seen merely as a number, and the ideologies we identified were not deconstructed, but seen as unwavering matter-of-facts.

Using these findings and gaps in knowledge as a basis for my research, I was able to conduct research that directly addresses these gaps and brings practical, political, and methodological advances to the field. I continue discussing these review results together with results from other publications in Chapters 8 and 9.

5.2 Research questions

Following the results from the scoping review, I continued the work with three sub-studies, each contributing to the understanding of career decisions, ageism, and individual agency in late working life. Varying in participants, approaches, and methods, they illustrate the diversity of life situations and career decisions among individuals experiencing job loss near retirement age.

In these studies, I investigated:

1) the potential contributions of qualitative longitudinal methodology to ageism research and policy by examining the unfolding narratives through which individuals "do", "undo" and "challenge" ageism in interview dialogues over time. *What are the contributions of qualitative longitudinal methodology to ageism research and policy?*

2) the role of time and temporality in older jobseekers' interactions with ageism in the labour market by analysing the discursive strategies developed to overcome and counter ageism in jobseekers' interview accounts over time. *How older jobseekers develop discursive strategies to overcome ageism in their everyday interactions with the labour market?*

3) the dynamics of early exit decisions, age(ism) and duty to work by delving into the narratives of individuals choosing early exit near retirement age. *How individuals nearing retirement age frame their early exit decisions in late life unemployment?*

In this dissertation, I provide new insights on how the dynamics of unemployment, age(ism), and individual agency unfold over time during late life unemployment

and discuss, how and why exit is often framed as the least problematic, if not most desirable career option after job loss near retirement. By integrating the results from the above scoping review and these qualitative longitudinal studies, this dissertation answers the overarching question:

What are the roles age, ageism and temporality are given in career decisions during late life unemployment?

5.3   Research processes

After identifying a gap in ageism research in our scoping review (Publication I), I decided to create an explorative, methodological contribution to the growing field of ageism research and methodology. I describe working with the data and the analyses from these publications in more detail in Chapter 7. Although I did not have a role in generating the qualitative longitudinal data analysed in this dissertation, we agreed with my supervisors and coauthors that we would report this research as qualitative longitudinal research, rather than qualitative secondary analysis, as the coauthors for studies 2-4 were actively involved in the data generation processes. I discuss the choice between qualitative longitudinal research methodology and qualitative secondary analysis in more detail in chapter 7.

Study 2 was based on in-depth researcher-constructed case profiles (7.3.1) and case histories (7.3.2) that illustrate the diversity in experiences and life-courses among individuals of the same age. The study was aimed at stakeholders and researchers to better understand and acknowledge the contributions QLR can make in the field of ageism studies and practice. Study 3 investigated individual agency and pressures of job search in late life unemployment. Employing theory informed narrative analysis (7.3.3), it focused on the everyday interactions and encounters with ageism during job search and identified discursive strategies through which individuals changed the conditions of their situation or adapted to ageism in the labour market. Targeted at stakeholders, employers and employment services, the article highlights the negotiations and processes individuals go through to remain active in the labour market when facing ageism.

To understand both sides of late life unemployment, study 4 examined the individuals who took early exit from working life. Using position theory informed

narrative analysis (7.3.3), the study analysed how exit was framed as the best available career option in late life unemployment in interview conversations over time. Aimed at Nordic stakeholders and decision-makers, the study highlights the multiple mechanisms in place that together create a limbo near retirement that ends when individuals become the right age to retire permanently from working life. Together these studies create a holistic image of late life unemployment in contemporary Finland and the everyday challenges, negotiations and interactions unemployed individuals have with ageism and the labour market. In the following chapters, I introduce the qualitative longitudinal data and its context (Chapter 6), give an overview of qualitative longitudinal research and qualitative secondary analysis, and discuss my methods of analysis (Chapter 7), followed by results from these studies in Chapter 8.

6 DATA AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

A central component in understanding ageism in the labour market is to comprehend how the structural and institutional components operate and regulate the labour market behaviour. Individuals navigate the labour market within these structures, and their actions are often guided, encouraged, or limited by the institutional walls around them. Thus, to understand their actions as active agents we need to understand the institutional framework around them and how they perceive it. I start the chapter with an introduction to the data, its origins, research settings and types of data, followed by an overview of the participants. I then I explain the systems in place guiding the formation of Finnish career and retirement trajectories.

6.1 Towards a two-speed Finland?

The data used in this research originates from Towards two-speed Finland? Longer Working Life, Retirement Pathways and Inequality project (henceforth: 2tS). The 2tS project started in 2015 at Tampere University, aiming to shed light on the everyday life, agency, and experiences of individuals experiencing unemployment near retirement. This nationwide 3-year long project, funded by the Kone Foundation, focused on workers aged 50 and over who worked at the Finnish state-owned postal service, Posti Group Oyj. The project entails both qualitative longitudinal and quantitative components, including surveys sent to postal workers (both current and former workers) and qualitative data generated with individuals over the age of 50 using qualitative longitudinal methodology (Niska, et al., 2020). In my research, I focus on the qualitative data.

A central question for 2tS is to understand whether the current shifts, changes and policies in the labour market are in fact dividing pensioners and creating inequalities as not all workers are able to extend their working lives and may now be facing the risk of pension or old-age poverty.

6.1.1   The Finnish postal service as research setting

The Finnish postal service serves as an example of an organisation that has experienced the many shifts and changes taking place in the labour market. Traditionally known as an esteemed employer, famous for its job stability and opportunities to advance, the postal service offered its workers long-lasting careers, financial security, and a sense of community (Luomanen, et al. 2018). Although organisational shifts and changes in the workplace were nothing new to workers inside the organisation, globalisation, digitalisation, and a sharp decline in paper mail challenged the postal service in unprecedented ways.

In the 2010s, the Finnish postal service went through restructuring, resulting in a high number of redundancies, a trend that was also visible in postal services around Europe (Dieke, et al., 2013). In Finland, redundancies follow a specific legislation and are publicly announced. The decisions are then made based on collective agreements in a process called co-operation negotiations (Finnish: yhteistoimintaneuvottelut). In the 2010s, the Finnish postal service was frequently criticised in the news as they announced redundancies almost every year.

Depending on the timing of the redundancy decision, some employees were given the option to choose a severance package programme Uusi polku (Eng. new pathway). This meant that the employee voluntarily resigned from their position and was in exchange given three to six months' pay. The programme was established in the beginning of 2014 to support postal workers interested in re-education, entrepreneurship or finding a new career (Postin vuosikertomus, 2015). During this time, the resigning employees were given access to tailored services helping them to continue their careers. This softened the post-redundancy transitions as employees choosing to resign were subjected to 90 days mandatory waiting period during which they were not eligible for unemployment security. I continue the discussion on Finnish labour market and pension policies in section 6.2.

6.1.2   Data generation and types of data

The data generation period took place in Finland between 2015-2018, including both rural and urban areas in different parts of the country. Two researchers were recruited for the project and they each followed 20 participants for approximately

two years. An example of the interview schedules for each participant is illustrated in Figure 2. As is customary for qualitative longitudinal research (see Chapter 7 on qualitative longitudinal methodology and research), the project generated different types of data. This included audio-recorded and transcribed face-to-face and phone interviews (183), biographical maps on overall life satisfaction, work-life satisfaction, and economical satisfaction (111) and video diaries (242). In my research, I focus on the face-to-face and phone interviews (studies 2-4) and utilize the biographical maps in one study (study 2).

Figure 2 Exemplifying interview schedule with a participant, adapted from interviewer's notes.
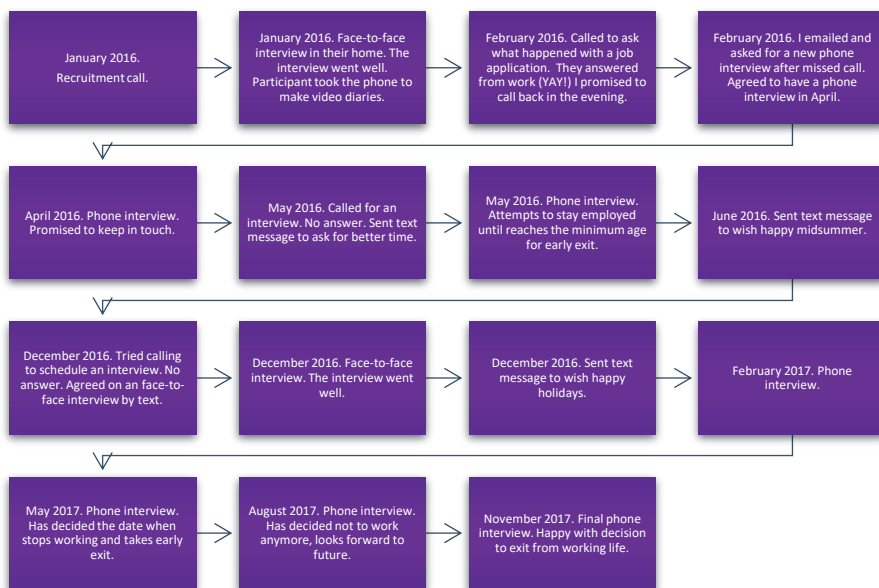
The face-to-face interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview guide provided in Table 2. During the first wave of data generation, the interviews started with the interviewer explaining the project and its aims, data anonymity, use and archiving, as well as the content of the consent form. After verbal consent from the participant, the interviewer started audio recording the interview. The interview questions covered six main themes: 1) experiences of downsizing and job loss, 2) career histories and current life situations, 3) daily life on unemployment, 4) subjective health and wellbeing, 5) future views and career plans, and 6) thoughts about extending working life agenda and potential experiences of discrimination. If the participant had no questions, the interviewer explained the follow-up process and offered the participants the opportunity to create video diaries for the project

using a smartphone. The interviews concluded with the participant signing a written consent form.

Table 2 shows the interview guide used in face-to-face interviews.

Theme	Example questions for first interview	Example questions for second interview
Downsizing and job loss	When did it happen? How did you feel when you heard about the decision? Did you choose to leave or was your contract terminated?	
Career trajectories and life situation	When did you first start working at the postal service? What has been the meaning of work in your life? What is your life like? Relationships, family? Asked to draw biographical maps of personal and working lives.	Based on what we discussed before, how are you now? Discuss previously drawn biographical maps.
Everyday life as unemployed	How has unemployment changed your daily life? How confident are you in your financial situation? Have you changed your thinking about unemployment over time?	Draw biographical maps of financial situation and life satisfaction. Is your financial situation what you expected?
Health and wellbeing	How do you feel now? How does your situation make you feel? What are your thoughts about the future?	How is your health now? What is your situation now? Are there any good things or challenging things in your life?
Future and employment	How do you see your future? Are you still planning on applying for jobs? What kind of challenges or obstacles are you expecting to face? Would you like to study something? Any wishes for retirement? Do you think age or gender matter?	How do you see your future now? Can you tell a bit more about your plans? Have you been in contact with your former colleagues?
Extending working life and experiences	What do you think about the political actions and discussions on extending working lives? Have you experienced age discrimination or ageist attitudes?	Is there anything you would like to add? Do you want to comment the research process, interviews?

The interviews took place in participants' homes or other places they preferred such as cafés and public libraries. During these interviews, the participants were asked to draw biographical maps of their adult life-course. First introduced on narrative interviews, the biographical maps work as guiding tools that facilitate memory work (Schubring, Mayer, Thiel, 2019). By providing a timeline and visual cues, the maps helped participants to retrieve key life and work-life events that acted as turning points in their life-course and to narrate their life-course in a chronological order. In their first interview, participants drew two maps describing their life satisfaction throughout their adult life-course, one focusing on their life events and one solely on work-life events. During the second face-to-face interview, participants were shown the biographical maps they had drawn previously and were asked to draw a similar map of their life satisfaction and financial situation during adulthood. In the research reported here, I used the biographical maps from the first interview round to facilitate mapping the key life-

course and work-life events in individuals' lives. A graphically edited example of the biographical maps of life and work-life satisfaction is shown in figure 3.

Figure 3 Illustrates a graphically edited example of the biographical maps participants were asked to draw during the first interviews.
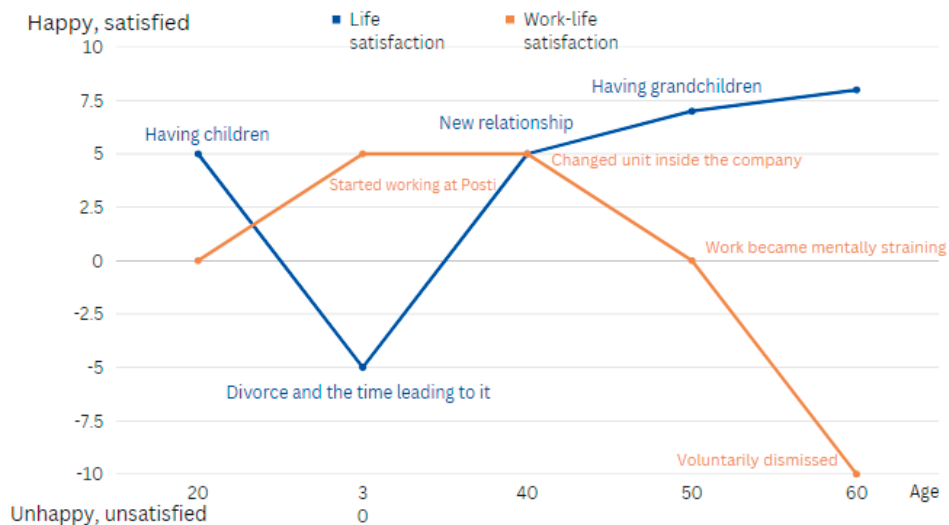
After first round of interviews, the researchers kept in touch with the participants through phone calls, emails, and text messages. Qualitative longitudinal research conducted over time often requires researchers to establish a relationship with the participants and to maintain contact with them (Neale, 2019). As shown in Figure 2, this meant that researchers engaging with the data generation sent the participants wishes during holidays and were interested in hearing how different events unfolded in the lives of the participants. Depending on their availability and interest, each participant took part in one or more phone interview during the follow-up period. The participants were also offered an opportunity to record their everyday feelings and make video diaries for the project with memory cards and smart phones that they could borrow from 2tS. In the beginning of every interview, the participants were asked to give consent to audio recording the interviews and phone calls either verbally or in writing. All participants were given pseudonyms, and the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by an external company. The research followed the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019) and did not require and ethical review. I continue discussing ethical considerations of this research in section 7.4.

6.1.3 Participants

Potential participants were invited to take part through contact lists from their former employer, the postal service. In addition, few participants were contacted and recruited through snowballing, as recruited participants referred the researchers to their former colleagues and friends who were interested in taking part in the research. Overall, 40 participants were recruited from both urban and rural settings to the qualitative longitudinal data generation. Twenty-five of the participants were women and fifteen men. The participants were aged 50-65 years and the average age was 58,4 years in the beginning of the data generation period. This meant that roughly half of the participants were able to retire through old-age pension or access early exit to retirement. Finland as a country represents a fairly homogeneous country in regard to ethnicity, and to our knowledge all participants identified themselves as white.

Traditionally, the postal service had served as an organisation considered with high employability and job stability, where workers had built strong identity and community as postal workers (Luomanen, et al., 2018). Among the participants, many had joined the postal service at young age, gaining their work experience and sometimes even their education on the job during their working life. This also meant that their positions did not necessarily reflect on their educational levels but rather the opportunities they had to move inside the organisation during their working years. Twenty-four participants had worked in blue-collar positions and sixteen in white-collar positions, with varying job titles including for instance drivers, customer service agents, IT workers and administrative workers. More detailed information on the participants can be found in the individual publications at the end of this dissertation.

After redundancy, the participants followed diverse career pathways. While others had planned to leave the organisation for a while, some fought to keep their workplaces until the branches were closed permanently. The participants made career choices and transitioned to new phases in their lives at different speeds. Few participants were able to transition smoothly from employment to retirement, whereas the younger participants were caught between deciding between unemployment, early exit, employment and (re-)education. In this doctoral work, I focus on late life unemployment and the unfolding dynamics of unemployment, age, ageism, and individual agency over time. Thus, I chose not to investigate the

accounts from individuals who transitioned smoothly from employment to retirement (6) or were in the process of getting fulltime disability pension (2). Excluding the interview accounts of 8 participants, the number of participants under investigation here is 32, with a total of 144 audio recorded and transcribed interviews over time.

6.2   The Finnish system

Although Finland has slowly succeeded in extending working lives among its older workers, the unemployment rates among workers aged 55 and over continue to be the highest in the Nordic countries (OECD, 2020b). A central explaining factor for the high number of unemployed in the 55+ age group is the Finnish early exit option *unemployment pathway to retirement* (henceforth: unemployment pathway). Despite the promising name towards retirement, individuals choosing this option are officially registered as unemployed jobseekers and are expected to fill in forms every month confirming their unemployment status until they reach retirement age. The data and its generation described in this chapter took place at a time when the Finnish labour market and pension policies were in flux. At the time, a pension reform was in motion, eligibility age for unemployment pathway was increased, and workers out of employment were encouraged to apply for more jobs, as a new "activation model" (Finnish: aktiivimalli) was introduced for jobseekers.

6.2.1   Redundancy and unemployment in Finland

Unlike many Western countries, Nordic countries base larger redundancy decisions on collective agreements and negotiations (Jolkkonen et al., 2012). Although these processes follow specific regulations, in Finland these negotiations have gained an ageist reputation, with the public opinion claiming these procedures as "cleansing the company of its older workers". For instance, Pietilä et al. (2020) note that older workers are often asked to leave voluntarily in situations of personnel reductions or feel pressured to take an early exit. Whereas some older workers are willing to take early retirement through the unemployment pathway, a number of workers feel pressured to retire earlier than they want (Pärnänen, 2012; Kosonen, et al. 2021).

In the Finnish labour market, compensatory measures such as severance pay (in our case Uusi polku programme described in 5.1.1) have given way to more pro-

active measures supporting fast re-employment and retraining after redundancy (Jolkkonen, et al. 2018). Unemployment in late working life poses a problem as careers in Finland end in one of three options: unemployment, disability, or retirement. Although unemployment and disability do not directly mean career ending, based on sequential analyses of Finnish retirement trajectories Riekhoff (2018:97) characterises both unemployment and disability in late career as "almost always a dead-end". This could mean that for the unemployed older workers or those on disability pension, transitions to old-age pension are more realistic and realisable than getting back to employment. When looking at who transitions from work to old-age pensions and who does not, educational level and work position have important roles in career characteristics. Järnefelt, et al. (2014) shows that a noticeable proportion of Finns with lower levels of education and working in lower positions transition to old-age pension from disability pension or unemployment.

Simultaneously, options to exit from the labour market have become more limited and difficult to access (Jolkkonen, et al. 2018; Nivalainen, Tenhunen & Järnefelt, 2020). For instance, the number of rejected disability pension applications has increased steadily from 21% to 37% between 2016-2021 (Finnish Centre for Pensions, 2022). This means that a higher number of workers remain unemployed, as options to exit are removed.

Unemployed were further addressed in policymaking during the time period, as from the beginning of 2018 the government introduced an activation model aimed to encourage unemployed individuals to accept short-term and precarious job opportunities or alternatively take part in retraining or apprenticeships (Kyyrä, et al., 2019). The model required unemployed individuals to engage in 18 hours of paid work, partake in five days of retraining or apprenticeships, or to earn a set sum of income through entrepreneurship within three months' time. Failing to meet the conditions led to monetary sanctions lasting three months. The model, however, was quickly deemed ineffective, and removed in 2020. Although the model was introduced towards the end of the data generation, the preparation of the model was widely discussed in the media in the years preceding the implementation, and these discussions are strongly reflected on in the decision-making processes and interview accounts under analysis here.

6.2.2 Extending careers through pension reforms

As a response to demographic changes and ageing populations, governments in the globalised world have introduced actions and reforms in the labour market (OECD, 2020a). In Finland, two major reforms have taken place during the 21st century. Described as carrots and sticks, the reforms in 2005 and 2017 made changes to the pension system, retirement ages and exit options (Nivalainen, Tenhunen & Järnefelt, 2020). Key changes from these reforms on pension types and eligibility ages are listed in Table 3. A central goal in the 2005 pension reform was to delay transitions to retirement by 2-3 years. This was done by changing the standard retirement from one set number to a flexible age range during which individuals could retire, while continuing longer was rewarded financially. A few years later, an ambitious goal was set to increase expected effective retirement age to 62,4 years by 2025. However, despite the changes the expected effective retirement age was not increasing fast enough. Without the 2017 reform, these goals could not have been realized (Kannisto, 2019).

Pension type	Before 2005	2005 reform	2017 reform
Old-age pension	Lowest eligibility age 65 years.	Flexible retirement age between 63-68 years. Financial incentives to continue working longer.	Lowest age limit increased by 3 months every year until the lowest eligibility age reaches 65 years for cohorts born between 1955-1965.
Early retirement	Eligibility between 60-64 years.	Lowest eligibility age increased to 62 years.	Pension type discontinued.
Unemployment pension	Lowest eligibility age 60 years.	Pension type discontinued.	
Unemployment pathway to retirement	Lowest eligibility age 55 years for cohorts born before 1949.	Lowest eligibility age 57 years for cohorts born between 1950-1956.	Lowest eligibility age 61 years, increased by 3 months every year for cohorts born between 1957-1965.

Table 3 Listing the key changes during 2005 and 2017 pension reforms to the pension types and unemployment security in late life unemployment. Partial pension solutions are not reported in this table.

The 2017 reform was a central event during the data generation, not only because the changes unfolded alongside the lives of our participants at the time, but also because these changes directly affected the group of people under investigation.

The reform addressed individuals born after 1955, increasing the lower end of the retirement age range by three months annually until reaching 65 years (Nivalainen, Tenhunen & Järnefelt, 2020). In other words, the reform changed the terms of retirement for individuals who were under the age of 62 when the reform was implemented. For individuals born after 1965, retirement age was tied to life expectancy and will be determined later in their life-courses.

The reform also added a new type of pension, years-of-service pension, from the beginning of 2018. This pension was designed for workers needing to exit working life after long and straining career. Despite lengthy careers among the participants, to our knowledge, there was no awareness among the workers of this pension type and their eligibility for it. This in turn speaks to the need to increase pension literacy through public debates and conversations in the media (Komp-Leukkunen & Rantanen, 2023).

6.2.3 Careers and early exit

When looking at Finnish careers, there is diversity in career beginnings, durations and endings. The average Finn spends close to 40 years in employment before transitioning to old-age pension, with the 2019 statistics showing a median of 39,1 years for career duration (Finnish Centre for Pensions, 2020). However, in comparison to other Nordic countries, Finland's effective retirement age still lags behind (OECD, 2020b). Pensions at a glance report 2019 reveals that when comparing the average effective age of labour market exit and normal retirement age (65 for Finland), Finnish men exit workforce at 64,3 years whereas women exit at 63,4 years (OECD, 2019). From the Nordic countries only Finland and Denmark position under Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in effective retirement. One explanation for the popularity of early exit in these countries is the availability of early exit options. Whereas in Finland workers over the certain age can choose early exit through unemployment pathway following job loss, in Denmark a voluntary allowance (efterløn) allowed workers to retire up to four years before reaching the retirement age (Svalund, 2015; Valkonen, 2020). Despite the trends to abolish early exit options, Nordic countries continue to have interest in systems protecting the older unemployed financially to prevent pension poverty and early exit from the labour market (ISF, 2021).

The Finnish unemployment pathway to retirement, or unemployment pathway as I call it here, has existed since the 1970s, and has overgone major changes during its time (Pakkala, 2014). Traditionally, the pathway has secured unemployed people financially for up to 500 days, given they have worked at least five of the preceding twenty years (Kosonen et al. 2021). However, given the goals to extend working lives and address the number of unemployed in the 55+ age group, access to the pathway has been gradually limited and this early exit option was removed from age groups born after 1965 (Finnish Centre for Pensions, 2023). This means that the individuals under investigation in this research are the last age cohort to access unemployment pathway.

7   RESEARCHING THROUGH TIME

In recent years, ageing researchers have become increasingly interested in the benefits of researching through time (Nevedal, Ayalon & Briller, 2019). Although longitudinal and follow-up studies in the field of ageism and working life exist, they mainly use register data and questionnaires (cf. Griffin, Bayl-Smith & Hesketh, 2016; Viitasalo, 2015). Hitherto, majority of studies investigating ageism in working life have used quantitative methods (Harris, et al. 2018), and to my knowledge this doctoral work is among the very first to address ageism in the labour market from a qualitative longitudinal standpoint.

Qualitative longitudinal methodology is yet to be recognised within temporal, life-course, and longitudinal studies (Neale, 2019). Loosely defined as qualitative research including two or more data generation time points over a period of time (Nevedal, Ayalon & Briller, 2019), the methodology offers various opportunities to investigate the dynamics of individual lives (Neale, 2019) but also different aspects of ageing (cf. Nevedal, Ayalon & Briller, 2019 for a review). In this methodological chapter, I introduce readers to qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) and qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) and discuss their benefits and challenges in reflection with my own research process. I then move on to discussing my own research on existing qualitative longitudinal data, analyses, methods and ethical considerations.

7.1   Qualitative longitudinal research (QLR)

Unlike quantitative longitudinal studies, QLR originates from the interpretivist tradition (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Neale, 2019). This means that in addition to mapping events, it digs deeper into the causal mechanisms and decision-making processes behind individual actions and transitions. As such, it provides tools for investigating the interconnectedness of agency and external pressures as well as the micro and macro dimensions (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003). Neale (2019:9) notes

that at the core of qualitative longitudinal methodology "lies a concern with the dynamics of human agency – the capacity to act, to interact, to make choices, to influence the shape of one's life and the lives of others." Although QLR involves researching through time, time itself is rarely the object of investigation (Hollstein, 2021). Rather, studies may focus on changes in "practices, perceptions and orientations of actors and how these relate to certain events or situational, historical, and institutional circumstances (contexts) and possible changes in these circumstances" (Hollstein, 2021:8). In essence, QLR sheds light on "the 'interior logic' of lives, discerning how change is created, negotiated, lived, and experienced" (Neale, 2019:9).

QLR should always be interpreted in relation to its context, as individual responses, actions, and narratives are shaped by the time and place they live in. This also means that the subjective accounts individuals give can change over time as they 'rework' their past to fit the overall narratives that comprise their life-course and stories (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003; Holland & Thomson, 2009). The QLR process is often characterised as 'walking alongside' (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003), uncovering answers to questions why and how lives unfold in certain ways. Because of its longitudinal nature, QLR tends to investigate the same people or collectives (such as households, groups, etc.) as their lives unfold (Neale, 2019). This means that the research gives in-dept insights into how a group of people understand, explain, and change what is happening in their everyday lives.

While QLR can take place over long periods of time, a vital part of QLR is understanding time not only as a fixed passing of time but also as fluid temporal journey (Neale, 2021b). This also means recognising that despite the existing structural obstacles and opportunities, individuals construct their lives and life-courses through lived experiences, interactions, agency, and choices (e.g. Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Neale, 2021b). In other words, an essential part of QLR is to acknowledge that individual lives are messy and do not always follow a certain chronological or temporal order.

QLR is also flexible to different methodologies, data sources and methods. In a methodological review of QLR, Neale (2017) lists four commonly used methodologies in qualitative longitudinal data generation. These are ethnographic research, participatory research, interview-based research and re-purposing archived data sources and documentaries. Being open to different types of data,

QLR allows creating a holistic image of a given time, supported by different types of data from various sources. However, generating large amounts of data may lead to "death by data asphyxiation" (Pettigrew, 1995:111), as larger datasets can be overwhelming and chaotic to analyse qualitatively.

7.1.1   Strengths and weaknesses of QLR

Interest in QLR has sparked various reviews and discussions on its benefits and pitfalls (cf. Thomson & Holland, 2003; Millar, 2007; Neale, 2019; Neale, 2021a, 2021b; Nevedal, Ayalon & Briller, 2019; Hollstein, 2021). Here, I review some of the key strengths and weaknesses of the research methodology. For more comprehensive reviews, please see the references above.

First, QLR offers a unique opportunity to capture the unfolding transitions and trajectories, answering questions such as why and how these pathways occur in a group of people (Neale, 2019). Unlike other qualitative methods, it allows investigating both 'snapshots' in time and changes through time. However, QLR also requires time, resources, commitments, and funding. Qualitative longitudinal studies can be more expensive to conduct than qualitative studies including single visits to the field. Not only do they require commitments from funders and researchers, but also from the participants (Neale, 2019). This highlights the importance of establishing and maintaining relationship and interest in partaking with the participants. An example of this is for instance the greetings sent by text message to participants of the 2tS project during national holidays as shown in figure 2 on page 54. Qualitative longitudinal accounts also present a challenge with data anonymisation as they generate larger amounts of data on a small number of individuals, making identification of the individuals easier.

Second, while qualitative longitudinal research enables researchers to go back in time on participants timelines and revisit earlier moments, these revisits to one's future or past may be emotionally heavy, if participants encounter topics or ideas of themselves that they wish to abandon or forget (Neale, 2013). On the other hand, some participants may find revisiting the topics therapeutic, as shown on phone interviews with nurses (Mealer & Jones, 2014). Thus, qualitative longitudinal researchers need to be cautious and understanding of these issues. For instance, among the participants described in this research, some informed the researchers

that they do not want to be contacted in the future, as they looked forward to moving on in their lives and leaving the unemployment experience in the past.

Third, QLR methodology has received critique for being too obscure and flexible, as there is no clear consensus or definition how QLR should be conducted, analysed, or reported (Hollstein, 2021; Neale, 2019, 2021b; Nevedal, Ayalon & Briller, 2019). On the other hand, the methodological freedom, various data sources and methods of analysis are a great starting point for research and should be appraised for their flexibility, but on the other, the range of choices and decisions may also complicate in-depth analyses, which may be a reason why a combination of QLR and discursive studies is generally a rare find.

Finally, QLR has potential to provide profound insights on the changes that occur between two or more time points, and it can be used to follow the impact policies have on people's lives (Millar, 2007). Despite the ability to delve deeper into the causal processes and 'what works?' in policymaking (Neale, 2021a), qualitative longitudinal studies take time and do not always provide quick solutions, even if preliminary results can be observed during the data generation (Neale, 2021b). For instance, in the case of 2tS, the data generation ended roughly six years ago, and since then some of central policies and exit opportunities mentioned here, such as the unemployment pathway, have already been modified, removed or are currently under new scrutiny. This speaks to the need to develop both research that provides quick, snapshot solutions and investigates the long-term changes and effects policies have on individuals' lives. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, this research is among the very first to investigate the dynamics of ageism and late life unemployment in the Finnish labour market and as such, offers a valuable example and contribution to the field even if retrospectively. However, even retrospective enquiries and using legacy data have value and can provide useful information, not only for socio-historical researchers but also to policymakers on continuity and change, and to researchers aiming to build new or comparative studies based on previous knowledge (Neale, 2021b).

7.2   Qualitative secondary analysis (QSA)

Simplistically put, qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) refers to the use of existing data (e.g., Neale, 2021b; Tarrant & Hughes, 2021). It entails both the use of

archived and legacy data as well as analyses conducted by researchers who were not involved in data generation. Although common practice in the United Kingdom (Bishop & Kuula-Luumi, 2017), there is still bickering whether primary research is more privileged in comparison to secondary analysis that is sometimes characterised as 'second best' (Irwin & Winterton, 2012; Neale, 2021b). However, amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and restricted use of the social world for data generation, researchers globally have become increasingly aware of and interested in using pre-existing data (Tarrant & Hughes, 2021). As is the case for QLR, there are also many ways for conducting QSA. Hughes, Hughes and Tarrant (2022) discuss three forms of engagement for qualitative secondary analysts, continuous QSA, collective QSA and configurative QSA. The first asks new questions from existing data, the second generates comparisons and linkages between different data, and the last connects existing data to broader theory and research, often through temporal changes. In recent years, literature on QSA has expanded vastly and there are multiple resources available (see for instance, Hughes & Tarrant, 2020; Largan & Morris, 2019).

Against the commonly held assumptions that QSA would be faster, easier, and less expensive than empirical research visits to the field (cf. Largan & Morris, 2019), QSA may require even more work, resources, and time than primary data generation and analysis (Hughes & Tarrant, 2020). In many cases, secondary analysts need to spend a lot of time to 'wade through' the data to find and select what they need for the analysis (e.g. Neale, 2021b on use of legacy data). As an example, in addition to audio-recorded and transcribed face-to-face interviews, the 2tS project (see Chapter 6.1) generated large amounts of written field notes, observations, biographical maps and video diaries. Secondary analysts approaching (especially unanalysed) datasets this large are often required to select chunks of data for analysis (Irwin & Winterton, 2011), summarise data and construct descriptive tools and profiles to help them manage, select, and analyse the available data. I continue this discussion on analysing qualitative longitudinal data in chapter 7.3.

7.2.1 Reflections of secondary analysis

As the first author of three publications utilising pre-existing data, I encountered issues that researchers should acknowledge when considering the use of existing data or discussing (secondary) interpretations of qualitative longitudinal data. In

this section, I briefly discuss some of the challenges of secondary analysis I encountered during my journey.

First, balancing and deciding between QLR and QSA. While we reported the research under QLR, for me the experience was somewhere between QLR and QSA. On the one hand, I had access to all the 'raw' data (the recordings, transcripts, drawings, notes, etc.), the data generation had ended the same year I started working with the data and I was able to work with primary investigators from the project. On the other, I was not involved in designing the methodology, questions or interviewed/met any of the participants (I will discuss this issue further in the following paragraphs). What made the choice even more problematic was the question of primary and secondary analysts. While some researchers see secondary analysis as analysis on any pre-existing data (cf. Heaton, 2004), Moore (2007) points out that qualitative data generation is a process or co-producing and co-constructing the data, in which case, any analysts outside the data generation are in fact, recontextualising and reconstructing the data and in doing so, engaged in secondary analysis. Although I identified myself as a secondary analyst by not being involved in the research design and data generation, I was the first researcher to familiarise with the whole data and analyse it longitudinally. Nevertheless, had I reported and published the research alone, I would have named it QSA.

Second issue I faced was not being able to ask (follow-up) questions. Coming from a novel perspective to the data, the interview guide questions did not always match nor answer the questions I had. As an example, this meant that I was unable to delve deeper into the dynamics of ageism, gender, and ableism in the labour market. I discuss this and other possible limitations at the end of this chapter. Nevertheless, not having questions designed to investigate ageism may have been a blessing in disguise, as it allowed identifying naturally occurring instances of ageism in interview conversations which speaks to the pervasiveness of ageism in our everyday talk and interactions (cf. Previtali, 2023). Furthermore, as Alasuutari (2011) notes, not asking direct questions about the topic under investigation can also increase the reliability of the results, as the data then provide indirect information on the phenomenon.

Finally, understanding and knowing the time and space the research took place in. Although now, almost a decade since the beginning of the data generation we can agree that this research is retrospective to a point, the timeline was not always that

clear. Although the data generation ended the same year I started, as a Finn who had been living abroad prior to her doctoral research, I had not been following closely the political debates, pension reforms or the news on redundancies in the Finnish postal service. This made hearing questions such as "what do you think of what's happening in the postal service right now?" or "any thoughts on the political debates at the moment?" during interviews challenging, as the entire conversation could happen without either of the individuals in conversation mentioning what was being discussed. Following this confusion, I found myself getting to know the Finnish pension system and its reforms, looking into the political debates about extending working life in Finland, reading news articles, and doing a secondment at Finnish Centre for Pensions.

Nevertheless, our interpretations depend on the information that is available to us. While discussing the participants, analyses, and data with other researchers, I quickly noticed that we interpret the participants' talk and actions differently based on how familiar we are with their interview accounts and demographic information. For instance, individuals adamant on career continuation in their first interview may have chosen early exit by their second interview and vice versa. This also speaks to the power of qualitative longitudinal enquiry, as my results also contradict some of the earlier publications from my fellow researchers who have utilised the same dataset but focused only on the first round of interviews (e.g., Kosonen et al. 2021; Niska et al. 2020; Niska & Nikander, 2021).

7.3   Analysing qualitative longitudinal data

When I started my doctoral research the data generation had already finished couple of months before. Coming to the project, I signed an agreement with the project's Principal Investigator Pirjo Nikander to secure my right to use the data for my doctoral research and was given computer access to a secure cloud location, where the data were stored. I was fortunate to liaise with primary researchers from 2tS, as both my supervisors were part of the project. Because of their central roles in the project and generating the data, we decided to report this research as qualitative longitudinal research, rather than as secondary analysis (see 7.2.1 for discussion). Avoiding issues with data sampling in secondary analysis (cf. Irwin & Winterton, 2011), I started the research by listening and reading through the entire interview data. After writing down initial notes and creating a table of the

participants, their career pathways, and central themes in their interview accounts, I compared my notes with the researchers' notes who took part in the data generation. Filling in the gaps, I created short summaries for each participant and categorised them under five groups depending on their career choices and directions after job loss. I called these groups jobholders (individuals able to find employment during the follow-up period), scholars (individuals improving their employability or changing careers through re-education), misfortuned (long-term unemployed individuals actively seeking employment), inbetweeners (individuals who were waiting to reach the retirement age), and retirees (individuals who enjoyed retirement days). Based on these categorisations, I was able to select participants for each study.

Research reported to international audience is typically translated into English. Data existing in other languages than English then become vulnerable to translation errors and lost meanings. These errors may lead to unwanted misinterpretations of the data and the meanings behind discourses. Translations to English is one largely overlooked question within qualitative methodological research (Nikander, 2008). To avoid issues with misinterpretations, I analysed the data in its original language, Finnish, which is also my native language. This allowed understanding nuances, idioms and discourses in talk that could have otherwise been missed. For publications, I translated data extracts into English. Where possible, data extracts in original language were submitted to journals together with the translations.

As qualitative longitudinal research tends to generate large amounts of data on a smaller group of people, the risk of identifying individuals increases. To ensure anonymisation, each participant was given a pseudonym and a number code that allowed identifying data from the cloud. Neale (2013) discusses the issues of confidentiality and authenticity, as anonymisation can remove defining characteristics such as accents, surroundings, and personal experiences from the data. When anonymising data for publications, I chose to report locations either as major cities or rural towns, altered specific job titles to more generalised ones for all studies, and reported previous education solely based on its level.

The study questions, theoretical frameworks, participant selection, and analyses for the qualitative longitudinal publications (studies 2-4) are summarised in Table 4. While qualitative longitudinal data can be analysed with a variety of methods, the large amounts of data may nudge researchers towards more descriptive and grouping methods, such as thematic and content analyses. In my research, I utilised researcher-constructed case profiles and case histories (study 2) and narrative analysis (studies 3 and 4), guided by theoretical frameworks on agency and positioning.

Table 4 summarises the research question, theoretical framework, participant selection and analysis for *studies 2-4.*

	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
Research question	What are the contributions of qualitative longitudinal methodology to ageism research and policy?	How older jobseekers develop discursive strategies to overcome ageism in their everyday interactions with the labour market?	How individuals nearing retirement age frame their early exit decisions in late life unemployment?
Theoretical framework and central themes	Qualitative longitudinal methodology, life-course perspective, discursive approaches	Relational typology for identifying social agency, discursive approaches	Duty to work, normativity, position theory, discursive approaches
Selection of participants	Participants aged 58 years at the time of the first interview. (N = 4)	Participants actively engaging with the labour market through job search, re-education and re-employment (N = 18)	Participants in the Finnish early exit scheme (N = 14)
Number of interviews	20	84	60
Methods and analysis	Case profiles and case histories	Narrative analysis	Narrative analysis

7.3.1 Researcher-constructed case profiles

Researcher-constructed profiles are a useful tool when handling large amounts of data. Using interviewers' field notes and interview transcripts, I constructed longitudinal participant summaries, each approximately the length of 1-2 pages. These researcher-constructed case profiles provide detailed images of how cases unfold over time, capture both the participants' future views and important life events chronologically, and facilitate further case comparisons, enabling finding relevant snapshots during later analyses (Neale, 2019; Thomson & Holland, 2003).

As researcher-constructed tools, these descriptive profiles include not only the participants' own interview accounts, but also notes and observations from the interviewers and researchers interpreting the data and constructing the cases.

7.3.2 Case histories

Whereas the case profiles described above mapped the important changes, transitions and events occurring during the participants' life-course, case histories delve deeper into the interpretative realm. Developed from case profiles, case histories have the potential to map key events and turning points in individual storytelling, identify recurrent themes and phrases in talk and examine how individuals frame their actions and motives (Thomson, 2007). This also allows narrowing the research focus and investigating the accounts for specific narratives and unfolding patterns.

7.3.3 Narrative analysis

Traditionally, narrative analysis refers to a group of methods that investigate talk or texts that have a storied form (Riessman, 2008). This means that narrative analysis is a flexible tool and can be approached from different perspectives, investigating both what is said and how things are told. Narratives are used by both individuals and organisations to establish goals, and as such narratives function as tools that are purposeful, functional, and strategic (Riessman, 2008).

The narratives individuals construct in their talk reflect who they are and what kind of image they want to give to their audience. Narratives can be used to cue

memories, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain or to deceive an audience (Bamberg & McCabe, 1998), but also to assemble, disassemble, accept, and contest an identity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

I chose thematic narrative analysis as the method for studies 3 and 4 due to its characteristics and flexibility. First, using thematic narrative analysis allows keeping the unfolding individual cases and stories intact by "theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases" (Riessman, 2008:53). In doing so, I was able to investigate the changes and continuities over time, both in the ways in which individuals develop strategies in response to ageism (study 3) and in the ways individuals justify their early exit from the labour market (study 4).

Second, thematic narrative analysis allows using prior theory as a resource for interpretations of the data. In study 3, I adapted a relational typology for identifying social agency as the guiding framework that allowed to identify and categorize strategies and how they were developed. Similarly, in study 4, I applied positioning theory informed thematic narrative analysis to investigate both how individuals justified their early exit decisions and how they used narratives to position themselves and others.

Finally, narrative analysis takes into account the time and place of narration. This allows researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the existing discourses and power relations present in each narrative. Riessman (2008) notes that most narrative analysts historicize narrative accounts, connecting them to the historical times and places from which they originate and reject the ideas of generic explanations. This thought fits well with my research, as it allowed me to focus on the unfolding roles of age, ageism and temporality in a given time and space.

7.4   Ethical considerations and limitations

Ethical considerations often classify people vulnerable based on their age. Well-used examples of these age-based classifications are children and older persons, two age groups often protected by higher ethical standards (Nikander & Zechner, 2006). As all the participants in this research recently exited fulltime or part-time employment and were what we would call working age, there was no immediate need to classify them as vulnerable. Nevertheless, instead of age, we could argue

that the unexpected transitions to unemployment placed them in vulnerable positions. Generally, guidelines for research conducted on a sensitive or emotional topic such as job loss or ageism require higher level of caution to the ethical principles (Rapley, 2007).

Old age is also something that many researchers have yet to experience, and this 'lack of experience' may also influence the research process from forming the research questions to reporting the results. Although this research does not deal with old age per se, I too, have encountered the dilemma of lacking experience, and lacking knowledge. As a young researcher with more than two decades to go until reaching the 50 years threshold, there have been times when I have picked up the phone and called a family member belonging to the age group to ask about the history of Finnish educational systems among other things. Understanding that researchers' attitudes, perceptions, and skills all influence the way in which they report the phenomenon they investigate (Nikander & Zechner, 2006), I investigated these interview accounts and unfolding stories with curiosity and reflexivity to better understand the generation of workers and their experiences.

The research I report here followed the guidelines provided by H2020 and EuroAgeism Grant Agreement (Article 34), The Finnish National Board of Research Integrity (TENK) and National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (2019). As this doctoral work utilises existing data, an ethical review was not required.

7.4.1 Limitations

My focus here is on the entire research project as an entity. The limitations of each publication are discussed individually in the published articles and methodological limitations in earlier sections of this chapter (7.1.1 for QLR, 7.2.1 for QSA). However, there are some limitations and shortcomings I want to address also here.

First, although scoping reviews are well-established literature reviews with robust protocols in place (Arksey & O´Malley, 2005; Levac, Colquhoun & O'Brien, 2010), any scoping review, aimed to examine the extent, range and nature of previous research, does not always work in identifying relevant research. For instance, in our publication, 14 out of the 39 included papers came from outside the database search. However, this could also be due to the problematic nature of ageism and

defining it, rather than a methodological issue, as our keywords looked especially for contributions that explicitly mentioned ageism in the research. Furthermore, the scoping review had a wider scope of working life, whereas studies 2-4 focused on unemployment and experiences near-retirement. While it would have been interesting to conduct the empirical research of this dissertation more generally on working life, I chose to focus on the issues of unemployment that have been largely overlooked and ignored in both research and policymaking.

Second, studies 2-4 are situated at a crossroads of changing policy environments and labour market shifts. Taking place at a certain time and space, they provide context-specific insights into the policies and everyday experiences of late life unemployment in Finland. Thus, my research results are not directly generalisable for international contexts or audiences, even if some general recommendations for policy implications can be made (Chapter 10). Another issue was having a relatively small number of participants scattered across the country. This limited analysing regional differences in practices in Finland, as the participants resided both in rural and urban areas. As Finland is set to roll a new reform on employment services starting in 2024 (TE2024), developing equally accessible services should receive more attention from decision-makers. Unfortunately, with this research I was only able to demonstrate and highlight some of the issues individuals experience in late life unemployment. Thus, I encourage future studies to investigate the magnitude of these issues and develop effective evidence-based solutions to address them.

Focusing specifically on the qualitative longitudinal interview accounts of 32 individuals, I acknowledge that the number of participants is small in comparison to larger quantitative studies. However, in qualitative longitudinal research, even a small number of cases can involve large volumes of data density and intensity (Thomson, 2007), creating more in-depth knowledge and insights into temporality. My focus here has been on 32 individuals, excluding 8 interview accounts from my research. While including these accounts would have given a more holistic view of experiences after job loss, as explained in section 6.1.3. their experiences were more complex due intersectional elements such as disabilities and care responsibilities, as well as their ability to retire to old-age or disability pensions. Thus, including these accounts in the research would have shifted the focus of the research from the dynamics of unemployment, ageism, and individual agency to more complex dynamics and denoted their roles in this research. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, various social positions and pressures contribute to the

ways in which individuals perceive their agency. Therefore, I hope to be able to continue working with the data, further develop this research and analyse the remaining interview accounts in conversation with the research reported here. While this research has opened the discussion on the roles of age, ageism and temporality in late life unemployment by focusing on the dynamics of unemployment, agency and ageism, it should be continued with further investigations into the dynamics of age, gender, race and (dis)ability and the multiple -isms surrounding them.

8 RESULTS

In this doctoral dissertation, I look at the unfolding dynamics of unemployment, ageism, and individual agency during late life unemployment in Finland. By looking at how these constructs intersect and interact in interview conversations, I shed light on the roles age, ageism, and temporality are given in career decisions during late life unemployment. In this chapter, I synthesise the findings from the four studies (described in detail in chapters 5 and 7) and discuss how these results converse with one another to construct an image of contemporary late life unemployment and its unfolding dynamics over time.

8.1 Agency and career decisions in late life unemployment

Career decisions in late life unemployment are complex and require individuals to weigh their options, negotiate and develop agentic actions. Late life unemployment depicts a life-stage which unlike employment and retirement, does not fit the standardised life-course and does not come with a readily available guidebook on actions and behaviours. Individuals adjusted to late working life, may have already planned the remaining years of their working life, however unplanned unemployment disrupts these plans and forces individuals to reassess their situation and make compromises. Depending on social positions and resources, individuals have varying degrees of agency over their career decisions in late life unemployment. Furthermore, as discussed in study 1 the category of "*older workers*" becomes problematic when assessing different career options. The category often entails both individuals *old enough* to exit the labour market through early exit and retirement, as well as individuals who are *too young* to exit working life, with more than a decade of working years left.

Study 2 investigated the life-courses and career decisions of four individuals of the same age, 58 years. Together these individual case histories represent the diversity in career options and decisions among older workers experiencing redundancy, as

among them, one transitioned from unemployment to part-time employment, one juggled between short-term employment contracts, one exited the labour market unintentionally and one had planned her exit. Analysing the role of ageism, the article revealed that individuals who followed the chrononormative life-course and exited working life near retirement experienced less ageism than individuals attempting to extend their careers, confirming the cultural lag between chrononormative life-course, and extending working life agenda. This also resonates with the findings from the scoping review (study 1), as individuals redo and reinforce the ageist ideologies of normative life-courses.

In a similar vein, study 3 started from the assumption that individuals wishing to enter employment and education during late life unemployment face ageism, as they go against the chrononormative and culturally defined notions of the life-course. This study investigated the various discursive strategies older jobseekers developed over time in response to ageism in the labour market. We identified strategies through which individuals adapted to ageism and changed the conditions under which they experienced ageism. These strategies included both internal negotiations (lowering expectations, engaging in identity work, perseverance) and actions attempting to improve employability (seeking help with job search and modern CV, using social contacts and networks in job search, enrolling in education, and moving to more populated areas with more job opportunities). These strategies in turn, added to the identity negotiations and use of rhetoric counternarratives as coping strategies identified in the scoping review, and shed light on how these strategies were developed and tested over time. Although few participants were able to find jobs fast, individuals with longer unemployment periods had more encounters with ageism and with time, changed their orientations from extending careers to coping until minimum early exit age. In the following extract jobseeker Raimo, 54, explains to the interviewer his future plans, and how ageism disrupts them.

Extract 1 First interview with Raimo (man, 54 years)

Haastattelija: Miten sä oot nyt miettiny tulevaisuudesta että, mitä sä meinaat tehä?

Raimo: No eipä siis tässä ei nyt, voi sanoo et ihan päivä kerrallaan mennään mutta, kuukaus kerrallaan. Saa aina huolehtii että saako ees laskut maksettuu, nyt maksoin just tänään tossa mut ei, en viittiny ees kaikkii maksaa kun mä aattelin et pitää jäädä rahaa elämiseen. [miettii 6 s] … Eipä siinä ite sitten omalla aktiivisuudella vaan pistää tuota, hakemusta vetämään mutta tänäänkin oli just hyvä joku, no se oli vielä olikse joku diplomi-insinööri et se oli 300 hakemusta laittanu ja, oliks sit 20:een tullu kutsu haastatteluun ja ykskään kerta ei oo napannu. [naurahtaa]

Haastattelija: Niin et tuntuuks vähän...

Raimo: Tuntuu et taistelis tuulimyllyjä vastaan.

Interviewer: Do you have any thoughts about the future, what are you going to do?

Raimo: Well, can't really say day by day but, month by month. There's always the worry whether you have enough to pay the bills, today I paid some but, I didn't even feel like paying them all because I thought I need to have save some money for living. [thinks 6s] … Just need to be active and send those [job] applications. But even today I heard that I think it was someone with masters in engineering, had applied for 300 jobs and got, was it 20 interviews, and none of them got him the job. [laughs]

Interviewer: So it feels a bit like…

Raimo: It feels like tilting at windmills.

In our analyses, we did not identify acts where individuals would have consciously resisted or challenged ageism and age stereotypes imposed on them. We suggested that this could be due to the pervasive nature of ageism. Ageism, deeply manifested within everyday practices, structures, customs and language, can be described as "*an invisible enemy*" (Keskinen, Lumme-Sandt & Nikander, 2023:6), making the fight against ageism feel as efficient as tilting at windmills.

While study 3 established that career continuation requires jobseekers to develop strategies, study 4 investigated how individuals choosing early exit framed and justified their career decisions. Using positioning theory as the guiding framework, it analysed how individuals continued to discursively position themselves over time against duty to work and extending working life agenda to justify their exit decisions. Here the chrononormative life-course, age norms, and proximity to retirement age were frequently used to justify early exit, as individuals drew on ageism and lengthy careers to validate their accounts. However, early exit was not experienced as an early start to retirement, but characterised as an insecure limbo where individuals were forced to remain until they reached their lowest retirement age.

When comparing the results, I was able to identify the same four ageist ideologies we discovered in the scoping review. Individuals drew on ageing as a hindering process, normative construction of the life-course, and organisational ageist discourses to justify their unsuccessful job search and exit decisions. At the same time their descriptions of employment and recruitment practices voiced the existence of final ageist ideology, othering older workers. Looking at the unfolding

dynamics between ageism and individual agency, I want to raise three central points. First, individual agency is emphasised when individuals sidestep from the chrononormative life-course and are forced to make uninformed decisions that dictate the direction of their career. Second, ageism restricts the available opportunities for career continuation in late life unemployment and as a result, individuals develop various strategies over time to cope with ageism. Third, exiting working life is the least problematic career option for individuals *old enough* to access the unemployment pathway. Although individuals draw on ageism to validate their decisions, at the same time, they separate ageing in the labour market from biological markers of ageing, choosing to be *old enough* but not *old*.

8.2   Shameful unemployment or earned inactivity?

Although working life has undergone major changes in the past decades, most of the participants still held beliefs that a good worker would be hired as long as they applied for a job. These assumptions together with the cultural lag in labour market policies thus created conditions under which the unemployment period in late career was considered a shameful experience for many and required individuals to morally explain and rebrand their status. This meant both internal negotiations and facing the stigmatisation of unemployment in their everyday life and interactions. In the studies discussed here, the focus was primarily on ageism, but the analyses simultaneously allowed identifying diverse strategies through which individuals refused the unemployment stigma and status, much like the jobseekers did by developing strategies in response to ageism in study 3. Over time, age and ageism were employed as the central resources frequently used to validate unemployment and its duration. A trait that was common in the interview accounts among both jobseekers and individuals choosing early exit.

In all studies, participants referred to a shared obligation, duty to work. This was visible in the ways in which individuals constructed unemployment as a shameful period while discursively positioning themselves as good workers. In the following extract, Raija, 53, reproduces a shared understanding of unemployment as shameful and positions herself as a good worker by characterising herself as work-oriented.

Extract 2: First interview with Raija (woman, 53 years)

Raija: Mä olin kesällä siinä kun ne iski ne kaikki fiilikset ja, sillon itse asias ekaa kertaa, mulla käväs semmonen ajatus mielessä että luuseri. Mä oon kyllä hyvin semmonen työorientoitunu ja, myönnän kyllä että kyl mä oon varmaan joskus jostain työttömästä ihmisestä ajatellu et no kyllä sitä töitä saa jos hakee. Mä myönnän näin, ja mä luulen et se on varmaan aika monilla, tulee helposti semmonen ajatus. //
Raija: During the summer, the feelings hit me, and then for the first time I had a thought 'loser'. I am very work-oriented and, I admit that I must have been thinking that unemployed people would get jobs if they only applied. I admit this, and I think quite many share the same thoughts.

In addition to internal negotiations, individuals reported that after becoming unemployed, they were treated differently. In study 3, jobseekers reported that over time, unemployment had shaped their relationships, hobbies, and leisure. As a result of this social stigma, other social positions became more lucrative. Eeva-Liisa, 53, started as a jobseeker and after encouragement from employment services, enrolled in re-education during the follow-up. In the following extract, she shares how the unemployed engaged in full-time re-education were treated differently from other students at the educational facility.

Extract 3: Third interview with Eeva-Liisa (woman, 53 years)

Eeva-Liisa: Me oltiin täyspäiväisiä opiskelijoita mut me ei saada opiskelijakorttia. Me oltiin siel opiskelijoina ihan yhtä paljon kuin ne muutkin oppilaat mut me ei saatu siit ruokailusta mitään, opiskelija-alennusta. … Me ei saada matkalipuista mitään, [alennusta] koska me ollaan, emmä tiiä miks ei. Me ollaan opiskelijoita. … me koetaan se nahoissamme siinä, et me ollaan kaikessa sit viiminen ryhmä. //
Eeva-Liisa: We're full-time students but they won't let us have student cards. We're students there just as much as the others but we don't get student discounts from food. … We don't get discounts on travel tickets, because we are, I don't know why. We are students. … we feel it in the ways that we are treated like we're at the end of the line.

Whereas individuals actively engaging in the labour market were able to occupy positions such as 'jobseeker', 'employee' and 'student', individuals choosing early exit were more conflicted in their available options. In study 4, we employed positioning theory informed analysis to better understand how individuals choosing early exit perceived themselves and their decisions against duty to work. Choosing the 'early retiree' position was not a straightforward choice, as for many it carried the stigma of becoming old. Positioning oneself thus became a choice between ageism and unemployment. Individuals characterising themselves as unemployed felt morally accountable to explain their early exit, whereas individuals identifying themselves as early retirees were engaged in time work, separating themselves from the old label.

In line with the average length of career in Finland (39,1 years), many participants shared the idea that reaching 40 years of working earned them a right to inactivity. The participants described how ideally, careers at the postal service ended in retirement after a long career and the retiree would get cake, a party, and a golden watch to mark reaching the threshold. 40 years at the postal service was generally considered an esteemed milestone and some participants shared how their 40-year anniversaries had looked like. Lengthy careers then became a readily available and acceptable resource to draw on and they were frequently used to construct exit decisions as something individuals with long working histories were entitled to. In the following extract, I share an example of how Leena, 62, explains why she chose redundancy.

Extract 4: First interview with Leena (woman, 62 years)

Leena: Mä tein kyl ihan hyvän päätöksen. Ei mul ollu ainakaan mitään, jälkikäteen semmosta et voi voi kun on... Tai no tietysti pieneltähän se eläke, koska se ei kerrytä eläkettä tämä puolen vuoden paketti. Mutta taas toisaalta se ei mua, mä ajattelin et se on kuitenki mulle semmosta laatuaikaa. Täytyy kyl myöntää että nyt mä oon vasta makustellu sitä vapautta, kun sitä on kuitenki, mulla on yli 45 vuoden, tai noin 45 vuoden työsarka takana. Sen Postin lisäks. Kyl sitä ihan mielellään jo lähti.
//
Leena: I made a good decision. I haven't had any second thoughts. Well, of course the pension is small, because the half a year on Uusi polku doesn't accrue pension. But then again, I thought that it's quality time for me. I have to admit I've only been feeling what it feels like to be free, when I do have, I have over 45 years, or around 45 years of work behind me. When you add postal service to it. I was quite pleased to leave already.

Based on these results, there are three central points to make about the unfolding dynamics of unemployment and age(ism). First, late life unemployment is a period characterized by moral accountability and stigma. Individuals experiencing unemployment in late career, felt a continuous need to explain their unemployment status and position themselves as *good workers* against duty to work. The social stigma unemployment carries thus makes other positions in the labour market more favourable (Radl, 2012). This may also explain why some participants accepted work positions that did not match their skills or experience to avoid the unemployment stigma.

Second, career decisions in late life unemployment required individuals to constantly position themselves and their age. Individuals choosing early exit repeatedly resisted being *old* in their interview accounts, highlighting the different activities they were engaged in and emphasising that they were not *old enough* to retire even if they were *old enough* to exit. Similarly, jobseekers stressed that they were *young enough* to have years if not even more than a decade left until retirement

age while drawing on positive stereotypes of older workers, constructing themselves as reliable and experienced professionals.

Third, when individuals validated their unemployment status, they relied on readily available resources that supported their decisions, externalising responsibility and maintaining their positions as *good workers*. Studies 2, 3 and 4 show how age and proximity to retirement were used to justify inactivity in the labour market and unwillingness to change careers or enrol in further education. Jobseekers actively engaged in the labour market, used their experiences and expectations of age discrimination and proximity to retirement to validate longer unemployment periods, accepting lower-level and part-time positions and to end job search once they reached the early exit age. Likewise, individuals choosing early exit used their age and lengthy careers to construct entitlement to inactivity, and in doing so, deconstructed the stigma of their unemployment. Age, ageism, and proximity to retirement were thus actively and repeatedly used as socially acceptable explanations that validated unemployment and its length in late life unemployment.

8.3   In the wrong place at the wrong time

Utilising qualitative longitudinal data allowed looking at not only what happens over time but to understand the experiences of temporality and how individuals experienced time. The analyses showed that we individuals sidestepping from their career pathways often experienced feelings of idleness, being stuck or in the wrong place, and most of all, being the wrong age. These results reflect how strongly the chrononormative life-course is embedded in the way individuals perceive their situations and how moral accountability takes place in interview accounts explaining deviations from the norm. Furthermore, they reveal how experiences of ageism reinforce internalised ageism and create feelings of misplacedness.

Study 2 highlighted how individuals who were eligible for early exit felt morally accountable to explain their career decisions whether they were to exit or to continue in working life. In both studies 2 and 3, individuals continuing in working life used ageism to explain why they were in the wrong place being jobseekers at their age. In the following extract from study 2, Kari, 58, expresses that after months of unsuccessful job search, he is ready to accept that the labour market is not a place for someone his age anymore.

Extract 5: Second interview with Kari (man, 58 years)

Kari: … nyt vois sanoo että nää mahdolliset, potentiaaliset paikatki mitä, töitä hakenu ni, ne on jotenki kyllä vähentynykki. Että niin paljoo ei oo ollu haettavana mutta, edelleen täs on se sama onkelma varmaan että, aikuisena taikka sanotaan nyt tänkin ikäsenä kun ammattia ryhtyy vaihtaan ni, kun just ei oo sitä alan työkokemusta ni, se varmaan siinä vaa'assa painaa kaikista eniten, ikä ja sitte se alan kokemuksen puute. Kyl mä pikkuhiljaa rupeen uskoon siihen että, työmarkkinat ei täällä Suomessa oo enää, lähelle kuuskymppisiä ihmisiä varten. Ihan harmi.
//
Kari: … you could say that now, the possible, even the potential openings, jobs I've applied for, they've somehow disappeared. There haven't been that many openings but, I guess it still seems to be a problem that, as an adult, or let's say even at this age you start changing professions, without the work experience what weighs in the most are age and lack of experience from the field. Little by little I'm beginning to believe that the labor market here in Finland is no longer a place for people nearing their sixties.

(Keskinen & Nikander, 2023:6)

Whereas jobseekers felt othered in the labour market and believed they were in the wrong place, individuals choosing early exit faced internal negotiations against duty to work in their decisions to exit. Study 4 highlighted how individuals experienced the time they spent on the unemployment pathway as an insecure limbo characterised by precarious conditions, uncertainty, idleness, and frustration, as individuals felt they were not able to achieve or do anything. This "out of place" experience was voiced by many participants who referred to feelings of shame and not knowing what to do. Among the participants, early exit was often unplanned and perceived as the least problematic option. These decisions to exit were further enforced by the systematic indifference towards older jobseekers in the employment services practices (Kadefors & Hanse, 2012). In the following extract, Jyrki, 60, shares how he discovered the employment services were not going to contact him even if they were legally obliged to do so.

Extract 6: fifth interview with Jyrki (man, 60 years)

Haastattelija: Elikkä joo, sulla on se CV siellä ja sit ei ne mitään soittele perään?

Jyrki: Ei soit-, joo se onki muuten mielenkiintonen. … Mulla kävi viimeks siten että siellä luki että otetaan yhteyttä. Mä soitin sitte viikko sen jälkeen, se oli marraskuussa. Mä soitin viikko kaks sen jälkeen et mitä varten teillä lukee täällä et te otatte yhteyttä muhun, eihän tänne oo kukaan soittanu mulle eikä laittanu sähköpostia eikä mitenkään muuten. "Ei se oo, se on vaan sen takia että lain kirja toteutuu. On periaatteessa laitettu että suhun on otettu yhteys." Mä että ai jaa, selvä. Ihan oikeesti.
//
Interviewer: So, you have your CV there and then they won't call you?

Jyrki: No call-, actually that is interesting. … Last time, it said they will contact me. I called them a week later, it was in November. I called them one or two weeks later to ask why it says here that you're going to contact me when no one has called me, emailed me, or tried to otherwise contact me.

"It's not, it's just to fulfil the legal requirement. We just marked down that we've contacted you." I just responded alright. Seriously?

There was a clear confusion as to where and what the individuals on the unemployment pathway should be and do. While they were required to register as unemployed jobseekers, show activity, and fill in forms monthly confirming their unemployment status, they were treated indifferently as if they were somewhere they should not be. In study 4, we reported how individuals felt lack of belongingness, left alone with their responsibilities and were afraid to book holidays and engage in different activities. In the following quote from study 4, Kaisa, 59, summarises her experience of the unemployment pathway.

Extract 7: fourth interview with Kaisa (woman, 59 years)

Kaisa: Joo, se on vieläkin se sama haahuilu päällä että minä en oo saanu oikeesti otetta, niinku mihinkään.
Haastattelija: Mut toi on tosi mielenkiintoista sillai et mistä sä luulet et se johtuu?
Kaisa: En mä [naurahtaa], sen kun minä tietäisin niin minä voisin ottaa siitä kiinni mutta kun en oikeesti tiiä. En tiiä. Siis minua ei kiinnosta sillai mikään mitä minä voisin alkaa tekemään kun mä kaikkea kyllä mietin että, mitä vois alkaa tekemään mutta kun ei, mua ei kiinnosta.

Kaisa: Yeah, I'm still wandering around, I haven't got a grip – well on anything really.

Interviewer: But it's really interesting in a way, why do you think that is?
K: I don't [laughing]. I wish I knew so I could get over it, but I honestly don't know. I don't know. I am not interested in anything I could do; I think a lot about everything I could do, but I'm not interested.

(Keskinen, Lumme-Sandt & Nikander, submitted manuscript)

As shown in the above extracts, individuals caught in the wrong place at the wrong time experience time differently. In Kari's case, months of unsuccessful unemployment made him feel that the labour market was no longer a place for him despite having a 38-year work history. Similarly, individuals exiting early such as Jyrki and Kaisa reported having lost track of time as the employment services were indifferent to their activities. I conclude this chapter with three key concerns on the dynamics of unemployment, ageism, agency, and temporality.

First, individuals caught in unplanned work-life transitions require support and guidance to continue in the labour market. Decisions to exit or to continue in the labour market were not final, but constantly negotiated over time against duty to work, ageism and one's financial situation. Unemployment following redundancy places individuals in vulnerable positions and creates feelings of being out of place.

During this time, experiences of ageism may exacerbate these feelings and further push individuals towards the least problematic career option, early exit.

Second, although some participants criticized employment services and called for focusing the resources better on the younger generations and those who want to work, some individuals expressed being unsure about their exit decisions and waited to discuss their career options with an employee from the employment services. In these cases, waiting three months, six months or not being contacted at all by the employment services seals the fate of one's career. As time progressed, individuals who had family members to care for, hobbies or other leisure activities, replaced paid work with other meaningful engagements, made do with their available resources and abandoned the idea of returning to work.

Finally, ageism paired together with the indifferent treatment from both employers and employment services creates a hostile environment for career continuation. In our studies, we show how individuals change their career plans and choose early exit after continuous exposure to ageism. Although in study 3 we reported ways in which individuals developed different strategies over time in response to ageism in the labour market, these strategies did not prevent individuals from exiting the labour market as soon as they reached an eligible age for exit.

9   DISCUSSION

The results from the studies reported here portray an image of the current conditions under which individuals make career decisions in late life unemployment. Unlike retirement decisions, the decisions described here were not final, as most of the individuals under investigation were not old enough to officially retire at the time of the data generation. Being under the old-age pension age, was often considered being under the retirement age, and thus meant that the individuals under investigation here were simply *too young to retire*. The longitudinal interview accounts voiced continuous negotiations and internal debates as individuals made decisions about their career continuation. In this chapter, I discuss the career options and how the results resonate with similar literature from the field.

9.1   Who carries the responsibility over career continuation?

The prevailing theme in contemporary discussions around late-life employment persists: Who oversees ensuring sustained career opportunities in the late working life? As the results here confirm, extending working life policies are not aimed at individuals out of employment (Heisig & Radl, 2017; Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019; Laliberte Rudman & Alrich, 2021).

Consequently, unemployed individuals responsible for their career continuation often lack direction, and sometimes even unwillingly and unintentionally end up exiting the labour market (Fournier, et al. 2011; Gardiner et al., 2007; Henkens and Schippers, 2008; Swain, et al. 2020). Despite expressing strong support for the political efforts to extend working lives, in my research, the unemployed individuals nearing retirement age positioned themselves outside the reach of these policies, while glorifying those who decided to continue working. Thus, when given the opportunity to decide, individuals nearing retirement continue to exit the labour market. Not because they are selfish or unwilling to work, but simply

because exiting continues to be the least problematic and natural career option in late working life.

Although the issues older workers face are extensively covered in previous literature (e.g., Harris, et al. 2018; Study 1), the research agenda often expects that older workers are willing and interested in continuing work, as long as the conditions of that employment are made adequate and adjustable. At the same time, the political arguments put forward portray older workers unwilling or unable to continue working as the problem (Niska & Nikander, 2021; Phillipson, 2019). This in turn speaks to the need to conduct research that detaches older workers from their age and these expectations, and understands workers as a heterogeneous group, with differing needs, wants and abilities to continue working.

9.2   Ageism in everyday working life

Ageism is employed in everyday talk and interactions by different actors in various settings in the labour market. In this research, I portrayed previous and novel examples of individuals experiencing ageism and age discrimination from others in employment services, recruitment processes and access to education. But also examples of individuals internalising ageism and individuals drawing on ageist discourses to explain their labour market behaviour. Ageism, thus, is not something individuals only experience. Individuals actively employ age norms and ageist discourses in their everyday talk and interactions to make sense and validate their decisions and behaviour (Previtali, 2023; Wilińska, Rolander, Bulow, 2021) Hitherto, majority of studies have conceptualised ageism either as negative or positive (Palmore, 2015), focusing on the harmful consequences ageism has on individuals or societies (see WHO, 2021 for global report on ageism). In our scoping review, we identified a lack of unified understanding of ageism, and that ageism was often perceived as something employers engage in to discriminate older workers. Seeing ageism as a social construct detaches the negative and positive meanings and allows investigating the construct from the perspective of the agentic constructing actors. For instance, in the case of individuals choosing early exit drawing on ageist discourses rooted in the chrononormative life-course allowed to deconstruct moral accountability arising from the extending working life paradox and validate their career decisions and accounts (cf. Wilińska, Rolander & Bulow, 2021 on age-negotiated duty to work).

Nevertheless, in line with previous research, ageism was also used to exclude individuals from gaining access to employment services, employment, and training. Results from the studies reported here, show similar patterns of othering and indifference towards older jobseekers to those previously conducted in Sweden, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (Berger, 2006; Bowman, et al. 2016; Kadefors & Hanse, 2012; Laliberte Rudman & Alrich, 2021; Riach, 2007). Kadefors and Hanse (2012) suggest that this originates from grouping older workers merely as members of the 50+ age group and attaching the ageist assumptions to that age group. These assumptions were also voiced in my research, as individuals talked about the decreasing number of job opportunities and callbacks after reaching the 50-year threshold, referenced to discourses that claimed 50+ women as poisonous in the labour market, and shared how recruiting companies either directly or indirectly told them they are 'too old to work.'

Similarly, jobseekers frequently employed age and ageism to explain unsuccessful job search and to validate and maintain their positions as *good and competent workers.* In a similar vein with Berger's (2006; 2009) studies, older jobseekers developed discursive strategies to cope with age barriers and rework their situations in response to perceived and experienced ageism. Despite the developed strategies, after continuous encounters with ageism and prolonged, unsuccessful job search over time, even the individuals who were adamant to continue their careers, changed their retirement plans and started to consider exit as the best available career option as soon as it was possible.

9.3   Constructing exit as the best available option

Although extending working life policies increasingly persuade workers to do the right thing and extend their careers (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019), the current conditions in the labour market often construct exiting and sidestepping as the least problematic option. The social stigma of unemployment is strong among older workers (Radl, 2012) and this was also visible in the ways in which individuals in my research talked about unemployment, attaching feelings of shame to it, and positioning themselves outside the unemployment stigma.

Despite expressing interest in working, even if part-time or short-term, individuals choosing early exit were reluctant to engage in paid work after experiencing

bureaucratic difficulties that sometimes resulted in cuts or losing their unemployment benefits. In line with previous research, precarious conditions, financial insecurity, increased work demands, age discrimination and jobs that did not match their education or work experience, each contributed to the construction of working life as undesirable (e.g., Lain, et al. 2019; Laliberte Rudman & Alrich, 2021). With stigmatised unemployment and limited access to employment, exit quickly becomes the least problematic, if not the best available option in late life unemployment.

Although individuals choosing to exit were able to draw on the very same ageist discourses that institutions and employers use to validate their age discriminatory practices, individuals felt morally accountable to constantly validate their exit decisions over time until reaching the retirement age set for their age cohort. This resonates with the results from Wilińska, Rolander and Bulow (2021), who studied how age was used to negotiate duty to work among individuals in work rehabilitation. Exiting early thus presents a moral dilemma, but it can be deconstructed by drawing on competing discourses or by appealing to long career histories, reaching 40 years of work (Niska & Nikander, 2021).

10 POLICY IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

Unemployment in late working life poses a problem for the wellbeing of both individuals and societies. While policymakers are actively attempting to create effective measures to activate the unemployed workforce, there are a few points to consider apart from creating more financial sanctions and disincentives. By embracing a comprehensive approach involving legislation, campaigns raising awareness, training and collaborative efforts from central actors, the labour market can be made more accessible and lucrative option for older workers deliberating on their career continuation. In light of the research reported here, I now move on to discussing potential policy implications for both local and international policymakers and conclude the dissertation with future directions for research.

10.1 Supporting or forcing extension of working life?

While policies are in place to ensure that older workers can keep working, these policies are often aimed only at healthy individuals in employment. The agenda needs to acknowledge the heterogeneity of workers and their situations and admit that extensions of working life is not necessarily achievable for everyone.

Although the research reported here did not investigate transitions to retirement per se, there are a few lessons to learn from the results. First, my results show that encounters with ageism and prolonged unemployment periods detach individuals from the labour market and push them towards early exit. While removing the early exit options, as already done in some countries (cf. OECD, 2020b), can prevent employers from using eligibility to exit as a ground for age discrimination, removing the options may also do harm. Based on the research I report here, individuals see early exit as an escape route to flee from bad working conditions, precarious work, unstable income, and ageism. Therefore, before moving on to remove early exit options from the future generations of older workers, I urge

policymakers to pay attention to the labour market and workplace conditions. This could potentially lessen and prevent overworking the public and private employment services and ensure that the income and future pension gaps between individuals in and out of work near retirement age do not expand further.

Whereas downsizing decisions and redundancies will continue to happen in the future, the constant changes at the workplace, increasing demands and shifts in the labour market, stress workers and may kill their interest in work. Thus, employers should invest more in employee wellbeing and creating flexible and supportive working conditions even in ambiguous times. Individuals experiencing redundancy in late working life, may be reluctant to continue working if their most recent experiences of working have been stressful and negative.

Furthermore, supporting career continuation in late life unemployment requires policymakers to address crucial issues older jobseekers face in the labour market. That is, unemployed individuals should have equal access to resources and employment, including access to public employment services, training, and education, as well as both short-term and long-term part-time and full-time work opportunities. As illustrated in study 3, older jobseekers have varying educational and skill levels. I propose that supporting job search and digital skills, as well as offering additional training and opportunities to update outdated education protects older workers from experiences of ageism in the labour market (cf. Dormidontova et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, policymakers should aim to minimise bureaucratic issues and support combining part-time and short-term work opportunities with pensions and social benefits such as unemployment benefits. My research shows that individuals choosing early exit were interested in working short-term jobs, however, the bureaucratic difficulties and fear of losing financial security prevented them from engaging in future work. Individuals unsure of their rights and duties as older jobseekers should be able to access this information and be met at the employment services if they so wish at the same frequency and intensity as jobseekers of any other age. My research here reports that in Finland, employment services employ similar patterns of "carelessness" and systematic indifference towards older jobseekers as reported in Australia (Bowman, et al. 2016), Sweden (Kadefors & Hanse, 2012) and Canada (Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021).

Finally, policymakers should acknowledge that extending working life is not a realistic goal for everyone in the labour force. Currently, unemployed individuals remain largely unaddressed in the extending working life agenda, as policies and 3833incentives to continue working target workers in employment (Heisig & Radl, 2017; Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021). Simultaneously, job mobility may not be available for all workers in late working life (e.g., Krekula, 2019). Workers in manual and physically straining jobs may not be able to continue working as long as white-collar workers, especially if no amendments to the work and working conditions are permitted. In addition, as portrayed in study 2, individuals nearing retirement often have other engagements in their lives, such as informal care needs from family members, stressing the need to acknowledge unpaid work as work (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019) and create flexible opportunities for individuals to balance work with other engagements.

10.2 National recommendations for Finland

The Finnish labour market, in addition to those abroad, would benefit from establishing secure, functional, and easily accessible channels through which individuals in and out of employment can report age discrimination.

In 2020, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) issued a country report for Finland, highlighting the central issues Finland needs to address in the labour market. Echoing the voices of reports from previous years, the report suggests that Finland should restrict and remove access to early exit to reduce the number of unemployed in the 50+ age group (OECD, 2020b; 2019).

Although policymakers have already decided on the discontinuation of the unemployment pathway, the research reported here shows that on the one hand the pathway contributed to the construction of early exit as the least problematic option, and on the other, offered financial security for workers experiencing ageism in the labour market. What strikes as noticeable from the results, however, is the lack support unemployed individuals received during late life unemployment. Despite being under the retirement age, the participants faced ageism and blatant age discrimination in their job seeking efforts and were continuously told they are too old to be employed or re-educated by both private and public employment services employees. In addition, employment services showed systematic

indifference towards older jobseekers for instance by neglecting their legal obligation to contact unemployed jobseekers.

To date, reporting ageism and age discrimination at the workplace and in recruitment practices has largely been ignored in the Finnish policymaking. Although age discrimination can be reported through a form online, there is no standardised practice how this information is processed and what are its potential consequences. To acknowledge, recognise and address ageism, I suggest collaboration between workplaces, trade unions, Regional State Administrative Agencies (Finnish: Aluehallintovirastot) and the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman (Finnish: Yhdenvertaisuusvaltuutettu). There is an eminent need to develop a unified set of guidelines to address ageism for authorities overseeing the practices, as well as for workplaces and individuals in and out of work. In addition, these actions should come together to establish confidential and easily accessible channels through which individuals experiencing age discrimination and ageism can report their experiences and take action. In light of the evidence pointing the carelessness in employment services, I urge policymakers to organise trainings for employment services to deconstruct the ageist ideologies maintained and reinforced by the institution and its workers.

I end this section on national recommendations with a final thought on retirement age and extending working life. In Finland, retirement age was tied to life expectancy for future generations during the 2017 pension reform. Looking at the diversity of career histories and individuals taking part in this research, it is evident that older workers represent heterogeneity in many ways. In line with ageism researchers internationally, the question emerges whether linking retirement age with average life expectancy constructs more inequalities among older populations as those unable to continue working until retirement may be forced to exit early and are likely to have lower pensions (cf. Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019).

10.3 Addressing the ageist elephant in the room

Ageism is deeply rooted in the everyday language, practices, and policies in the labour market. In my research here, I gave examples of how individuals experienced, internalised, and used ageism, and how these and individuals' labour market behaviour and retirement plans changed over time. As I suggest above for

Finland, societies globally would benefit from establishing guidelines for age equality in working life. This would mean creating a holistic framework that addresses ageism and age discrimination in the labour market by

- Creating a shared set of principles and guidelines for individuals, employers, and authorities to recognise age discriminatory practices, policies, and actions.
- Organising training and evaluations for authorities to monitor and address age discrimination in the labour market.
- Establishing secure and easily accessible channels through which individuals in and out of employment can report age discrimination.

While policy reforms can offer protective frameworks for individuals experiencing discrimination in the labour market, they alone are insufficient measures to tackle ageism. To address ageism at its core, societies need to change the way we think about age, ageing and life-course. This can be done through a multitude of actions ranging from campaigns raising awareness of ageism and advocating for age diversity in working life to having everyday interactions with individuals from different age groups to deconstruct age stereotypes and prejudice (see for example Previtali, 2023). In addition, the scoping review (publication I), summarised coping strategies, discursive strategies, and organisational strategies to address, counteract and dilute ageism that support the need for holistic measures. What is important, however, is to acknowledge ageism, address it, and continue the conversation both societally and in everyday interactions to slowly shape and reinforce new and more flexible ways to approach age, ageing, and the life-course.

10.4 Conclusions and future directions

In conclusion, late life unemployment presents a problematic time period that breaks the chrononormative life-course and forces individuals into paradoxical situations. Despite having interest in continuing work, over time, unsuccessful job search, lack of support, financial insecurity, bureaucratic difficulties and encounters with age discrimination and ageism limit the number of available career options and construct exit as the least problematic career option. Duty to work, was strongly internalised among this cohort of older workers and failing to continue working was something individuals attempted to either explain or avoid. Therefore,

rather than framing older workers unwilling to extend their careers further into old age as selfish, policymakers should pay more attention to the conditions that contribute to these decisions.

Within the pages of this dissertation, I portray multiple unfolding stories of sidesteps, career choices, normativity, and individual agency together with a multifaceted image of late life unemployment in a contemporary Nordic labour market. Through a scoping review and qualitative longitudinal research, the results here reflect the need to create effective and timely policies to address ageism and to support individuals both in and out of employment. Rather than being able to continue forward in working life, late life unemployment forces individuals to take sidesteps while being stuck in the temporally never-ending limbo. However, the ongoing societal and cultural changes to both working and personal lives may be changing the meaning of work and how future generations of (older) workers experience duty to work.

My research here has only scratched the surface on the potential contributions of temporal and qualitative longitudinal studies on ageism research, practice, and policy. Moreover, there is still much to be done. Despite acknowledging that approximately half of the population fosters ageist discourses (WHO, 2021) apart from a handful of studies, studies on ageism have been reluctant to investigate ageism as something individuals in the labour market actively construct and employ to accomplish things. Rather than framing older workers as the victims of ageism, I suggest future research to approach ageism as something anyone can 'do', 'undo' and 'challenge' in and out of the labour market.

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PUBLICATIONS

PUBLICATION
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Ageism in Working Life: A Scoping Review on Discursive Approaches

Previtali, F., Keskinen, K., Niska, M. & Nikander, P.

Review Article

Ageism in Working Life: A Scoping Review on Discursive Approaches

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: This review investigates the contribution of discursive approaches to the study of ageism in working life. It looks back on the 50 years of research on ageism and the body of research produced by the discursive turn in social science and gerontology.
Research Design and Methods: This study followed the 5-step scoping review protocol to define gaps in the knowledge on ageism in working life from a discursive perspective. About 851 papers were extracted from electronic databases and, according to inclusion and exclusion criteria, 39 papers were included in the final review.
Results: The selected articles were based on discursive approaches and included study participants along the full continuum of working life (workers, retirees, jobseekers, and students in training). Three main themes representing the focal point of research were identified, namely, experiences of ageism, social construction of age and ageism, and strategies to tackle (dilute) ageism.
Discussion and Implications: Discursive research provides undeniable insights into how participants experience ageism in working life, how ageism is constructed, and how workers create context-based strategies to counteract age stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Discursive research on ageism in the working life needs further development about the variety of methods and data, the problematization of age-based labeling and grouping of workers, and a focus on the intersection between age and other social categories. Further research in these areas can deepen our understanding of how age and ageism are constructed and can inform policies about ways of disentangling them in working life.

Keywords: Aging policies, Discourses, Older–younger workers, Workforce

Background

This scoping review explores the contribution of discursive approaches to the analysis of ageism in working life. Robert N. Butler coined the concept of ageism in 1969, defining it as "prejudice by one age group towards other age groups" (Butler, 1969, p. 243). Fifty years later, ageism has gained primary importance in the field of gerontology, as well as in work-life studies (de Medeiros, 2019). Currently, ageism still goes unchallenged, compared to other forms of discrimination, and is socially accepted, both at explicit and implicit levels (Levy, 2017).

Ageism, as a concept, has expanded and a common agreement exists today that ageism is (a) directed toward all ages; (b) composed of affective, cognitive, and behavioral

components, which can be distinguished between personal, institutional, and societal levels; and (c) either positive or negative (Palmore, 2015). The phenomenon has raised major attention in policy organizations, and in 2016, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018, p. 295) instituted a campaign to fight ageism, defining it as "the stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination towards people on the basis of age." Previous research shows that negative age attitudes influence individual daily life, for example, lowering the possibilities for social integration (Vitman et al., 2014). Ageism also affects national economies: it might cause an estimated loss of 63 billion USD per year to the U.S. health system (Levy et al., 2020). The cost of ageism is computable also for employers and employees and it was estimated that, in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, the Gross Domestic Product would increase 3.5 trillion USD if the employment of persons aged older than 55 would increase (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [UNECE], 2019).

Discursive Approaches to Ageism in Working Life

Over the past 50 years of research, the scientific literature on ageism has shifted in emphasis and approaches adopted. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the qualitative turn in social gerontology (Gubrium, 1992), rise of critical gerontology, and discursive turn in social science (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) contributed to the creation of a new corpus of research. On the one hand, the rise of critical approaches in gerontology challenged the mainstream practices of research and questioned the normative conceptualizations of the life course; the intersection of age, gender, and ethnicity; and the overreliance on quantitative analysis. On the other hand, the discursive turn encouraged social scientists to examine the role of language in the construction of social reality (Willig, 2003). Within this framework, discursive approach is an "umbrella term" that includes an extensive diversity of methods to analyze text and talk (Nikander, 2008). These approaches are often divided into macro and micro. Whereas macro approaches are interested in power relations and focus on the implications of discourses for subjective experiences (Willig, 2003), micro approaches examine how people use language in everyday life, not to "mirror" reality but to accomplish things (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In this article, our focus is on both micro and macro approaches, as long as the study design reflects the understanding that the use of language, whether text or talk, plays an active part in the construction of reality. In the past few decades, the much broader, theoretically grounded qualitative turn in gerontology was rapidly followed by the diversification of strategies within the qualitative inquiry, discursive gerontology framing one such tradition. Not all discursive research is qualitative by nature and not all qualitative research is discursive by nature, quantitative data sets can also be used within this tradition. Mere focus on text and talk does not make a study discursive. The purpose of the discursive inquiry is firmly grounded in the theoretical assumption that language does not reflect reality but rather constructs it and is part and parcel of all meaning making in social interactions.

In aging research, there is a growing body of literature interested in the relational and discursive nature of ageism in the context of working life (Spedale, 2019). These types of approaches have received scant attention and still need formal recognition, especially compared with research that uses age as a mere chronological and background variable (Taylor et al., 2016).

Literature Reviews

Wide-ranging reviews have been published on ageism. Most of them are centered on variables and quantitative methods. Although some of these reviews have included qualitative studies, to the best of our knowledge, no review exists with a specific focus on discursive approaches in the field of ageism and working life. Summarizing the previous literature, Levy and Macdonald (2016) published an extensive review on ageism, while Nelson (2016) focused on ageism in health care and the workplace. Harris et al. (2018) analyzed stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminative behaviors associated with older workers. Regarding older workers' retention, reviews exist on age diversity and team outcomes (Schneid et al., 2016); the ability, motivation, and opportunity to continue working (Pak et al., 2019); workplace interventions (Truxillo et al., 2015); and workplace health promotion for older workers (Poscia et al., 2016).

These studies demonstrate that ageism is present in the workforce, produces barriers in recruitment, career advancement, training opportunities, retirement decision, and in the relations between managers, or employers, and employees (Harris et al., 2018). Although the focus of research in this area is primarily on older workers, age discrimination is experienced along all life stages and is especially reported by employees younger than 35 and older than 55 years old (UNECE, 2019). Older workers have gained the most attention, as this age group is a policy target for the national goal of prolonging working life. In this context, ageism may hinder wide-ranging policy efforts by guiding the perception of specific age groups as problematic.

Objective

Looking back at 50 years of research since the term *ageism* was introduced, and focusing on the growing interest in ageism as a relational and discursive phenomenon, the aim of this review is to highlight the contribution of discursive studies and to discuss potential gaps in knowledge and directions for future research in the field of ageism and working life. The review focuses on work-related studies, as discursive approaches have been previously utilized in

this area and they have proven able to problematize open questions, such as the social construction of older workers as a group, the hidden ideologies in the labor market, and the strategies that workers use in everyday lives to counteract ageism.

Research Design and Methods

This scoping review follows Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) protocol (see Supplemetary Material for Prisma Checklist). This typology was chosen because it allows for the investigation of gaps in knowledge in a field of research that is not clearly established. The review strictly follows the five-step framework, which comprises the following: (a) defining the study purpose, (b) study identification, (c) screening process, (d) data extraction, and (e) summarizing the retrieved data. After the completion of the screening process, a qualitative thematic analysis (Levac et al., 2010) of the selected paper was carried out to examine ways in which overarching topics were conceptualized. This review follows an established protocol and discussions regarding review methodology are beyond the scope of the study.

Step 1: Study Purpose

The guiding research question was: What are the contributions of discursive approaches to the literature on ageism in the working life, since the coinage of the term in 1969, and what insights are provided by different types of discursive approaches? Through this work, we acknowledge the ability of this approach to enhance our understanding of participants' experience, meaning making, and negotiation strategies regarding age stereotypes in working life. Through a comprehensive synthesis, we show possible further directions for research and gaps in knowledge. According to the scoping review protocol, our research question was open and the process data driven. Moreover, the open issue of defining ageism (Palmore, 2015) led the reviewers to analyze which definitions are utilized by researchers.

Step 2: Study Identification

To identify the relevant papers for our review, terms related to ageism and discursive perspective were used to search seven electronic databases (PsycINFO, Web of Science, Social Science Premium Collection, Sage Journals, Wiley Journals, Academic Ultimate Search [EBSCO], and Scopus). The keywords used were as follows: (Ageism OR Agism OR Ageis* OR Agis*) AND (discours* OR communication* OR "social interaction*" OR narrative*). The search string linked to the discursive approach was intended to capture types of discourses and not to retrieve specific methodology and/or methods at this stage. The decision of using only "ageism" as a search term, and not its synonyms, was made to retrieve only papers that clearly

contribute to the knowledge around this specific concept and not related phenomena, such as social exclusion or age discrimination. Moreover, no search terms were defined regarding "working life," but this was used as an inclusion criterion in the next step to ensure that no relevant paper was missed. Likewise, no limitation was defined regarding the participants' age, hence the review does not focus solely on older workers but addresses ageism across all stages of working life.

The databases were selected with the help of an information specialist as relevant for contributions in the field of Social Sciences. The search was carried out in March 2019. A record of all the results in each database was kept allowing the reproduction of the review strategy. During the process, the reviewers consulted senior experts and information specialists to optimize the quality of the search method.

Step 3: Screening Process

First, an agreement on the general inclusion and exclusion criteria was reached by the reviewers (Table 1). This helped define the relevant studies for the first step of the screening based on titles and abstracts. Contributions were included if they were published in English in peer-reviewed, international journals and available electronically in full text. The papers chosen focused on working life, including all types of transitions—from study to work, work to retirement, work to unemployment, unemployment to reeducation, and unemployment to employment/self-employment. All work settings were accepted and papers were included in case they analyzed work-related experiences, practices, and contexts. Therefore, health care settings were also included as one type of workplace where ageism unfolds, along with companies, job centers, recruitment agencies, and educational environments. The review focuses on 50 years of research hence the time limit for publication year and data collection was set to 1969, the coinage year of the term *ageism* (Butler, 1969). Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method papers on the text and spoken communication were included if they demonstrated the adoption of discursive study design and a discursive understanding of language.

However, the screening process quickly ran into problematic cases due to the variety of definitions of

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Written in English	Review
Peer-reviewed articles	Intervention study
Discursive approach	Self-reflection/biography
Data source not older than 1969	No focus on ageism
Papers published after 1969	
Focus on working life	

"discourse" and "discursive approach." For example, some authors consider the methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) part of discursive approaches (McKinlay & McVittie, 2009) because it is utilized to study not only subjective experiences but also the construction of shared meanings and social reality (Smith, 1996; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Hence, to make the review inclusive rather than exclusive, studies that represented IPA were accepted.

An objective screening was used, as shown in Figure 1: Retrieved papers were screened separately by two reviewers, while the third one resolved conflict when an agreement was not reached. First, the reviewers screened papers by the title and abstract: of 851 papers, 202 passed this step. Second, the reviewers screened the full texts, and a resulting 25 papers were selected. Third, an independent screening process of the references was conducted from the final group of selected papers. The reference lists of the retrieved papers were screened to ensure that all papers of interest were included. Fourth, senior scholars were consulted for recommendations on missing papers. After the third and fourth steps, 14 papers were added. The papers added through hand-screening of references suggest that, within gerontology, discursive approaches are used by a rather small-scale group of authors who tend to cross-reference each other. The addition of papers from experts demonstrates the challenge to pinpoint discursive studies within literature databases via electronic search. Given that defining discourses has proven problematic in the empirical and theoretical literature within the discursive tradition, the same problem is reflected by challenges in the review process at hand. We trust, however, that the final steps taken as an integral part of the scoping review protocol endure its comprehensiveness.

Finally, 39 articles were included. Discussions were held throughout the process to ensure a common understanding, and senior scholars were involved to examine complex scenarios. The reviewers used Covidence (www.covidence.org) as software to facilitate the screening process.

Step 4: Data Extraction

A template was defined through which data were extracted from selected papers. A descriptive-analytic method was chosen to report and collect standard information of the selected studies. The data were charted through the Excel database program, including the following attributes: authors, year of publication, study location, study population, aim of the study, research design, and main results. Per the protocol, a trial extraction was conducted by all reviewers on three randomly selected papers. This procedure ensures the clarity of the template and a common understanding of the categories. Then, the contributions were evenly divided among the reviewers, and each extracted data independently. Once the procedure was complete, reviewers compared results and discussed incongruences.

Step 5: Collocation, Summarizing, and Synthesis

Once the final group of papers was defined, a qualitative thematic analysis of the paper was performed, according to the scoping review protocol (Levac et al., 2010). Here, the analysis employed a data-driven approach to answer the research questions presented, similar to other published scoping reviews (Grenier et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2018). The aim of the present review is to highlight and discuss the contribution of discursive studies to ageism in working life, to highlight the main contents, and to demonstrate the gaps in the knowledge, with no interest in comparing evidence and results. Therefore, papers were not submitted to quality evaluation. The researchers used an iterative approach to perform the analysis. Each of them reviewed one third of the papers and developed categories and themes. The themes were presented and discussed, then presented to a senior expert, after which divergences were debated and final themes defined (Figure 2). Once the reviewers reached an agreement, they reviewed together all the papers to assure the representativeness of the themes. As given in Table 2, papers can include more than one theme. The thematic analysis was the foundation for suggesting gaps in the knowledge, implications, and future lines of research. This method aligns with the qualitative thematic analysis proposed by the protocol (Levac et al., 2010).

Results

Descriptive Summary

Thirty-six papers used a qualitative design, and three used mixed methods. The data sources were as follows: verbal communication (36) and textual material (3). In the articles using spoken communication, the most prevalent method of data collection was interviewing single participants (24 studies), while among the articles using textual material, one paper analyzed a collection of articles and promotional texts, one used newspaper articles, and one investigated a tribunal judgment report. Table 2 presents a description of the selected papers. Although we focused on discursive studies, there was a significant variation in the methods of analysis adopted in the papers. The methods of analysis ranged from descriptive content analysis and thematic analysis to detailed analysis of membership categorization.

Despite the time limit for publication was set to 1969 as an inclusion criterion, studies were published relatively recently: 15 of 39 studies were published after 2015, 7 in 2010–2015, 11 in 2005–2010, and the remaining 6 in 1995–2005. The publication dates are consistent with the discursive turn that happened in the early 1990s in social science and gerontology. Most of the studies were developed in Western world regions: Europe, 21 (of which 15 were in the United Kingdom); Canada, 7; the United States, 4; Australia, 2; Hong Kong, 1; India, 1; Israel, 1; New Zealand, 1; and South Korea, 1.

Table 2. Descriptive Characteristics of Included Studies (*N* = 39)

First author (year), country	Setting and participants (age, if reported)	Research design		Themes
		Method of generating data	Approach/method of analysis	
Allen (2006), the United States	Headquarters of a U.S. manufacturing company; 39 (all women) IT employees, 30 to older than 40 years	Focus group	Descriptive approach and revealed causal mapping (RCM)	1
Ben-Harush (2017), Israel	Health care setting; 20 physicians, 5 nurses, 4 social workers	Focus group	Thematic analysis	
Berger (2006), Canada	Employment office; 30 unemployed individuals actively searching for jobs; 45–65 years old	Semi-structured interviews	Symbolic interactionist perspective	1, 2, and 3
Billings (2006), the United Kingdom	Health care setting; 57 staff members and volunteers been working with older people for at least 3 months	Focus group	Thematic analysis	1
Bowman (2017), Australia	80 unemployed or underemployed people with different occupations (blue and white collar), 45–73 years old	Interviews	Narrative approach	1
Brodmerkel (2019), Australia	Creative advertising agencies, 32 workers, 32–53 years old	In-depth interviews	Discursive approach	1, 2, and 3
Crăciun (2018), Germany	23 unemployed Russian and Turkish immigrants, 40–62 years old	Episodic interviews	Thematic analysis	1
Dixon (2012), the United States	60 workers with different occupations, 19–65 years old	Active interviews	Hermeneutic phenomenology and thematic analysis	2
Faure (2015), France	140 recruiters, mean 41 years old	Mixed method, written statements about job applicants	Discursive psychology	2
George (1998), the United Kingdom	Educational setting; 11 women training to be teachers, 33–50 years old	Interviews	Thematic analysis	1
Gould (2015), Canada	Educational setting; 20 nursing students (third year)	Focus group	Thematic analysis	2
Granleese (2006), the United Kingdom	Academia; 48 academics aged younger than 30 to older than 50 years	In-depth interviews	Content and interpretative phenomenological analysis	1
Grima (2011), France	Several sites of the same company in the field of production of studies; 12 managers and 40 employees, older than 45 years	Biographical narrative interviews	Case study on organizations and descriptive analysis	1 and 3
Handy (2007), New Zealand	Recruitment agency; 12 unemployed women and 5 recruiters, 50–55 years old	Interviews	Feminist studies and thematic analysis	1 and 2
Herdman (2002), Hong Kong, China	Health care setting; 96 nursing students, 19–22 years; 9 professional nurses, 24–36 years old	Mixed method, interviews	Content analysis and discourse analysis	3
Higashi (2012), the United States	Health care setting; 10 teams of physicians-in-training	Semi-structured interviews, group discussion, participant observation, and auto-ethnography	Narrative analysis	1 and 2
Kanagasabai (2016), India	Print media and TV company; 17 (all women) journalists in their 20s, 30s, and 40s	Interviews	Feminist studies and descriptive approach	1

Table 2. Continued

First author (year), country	Setting and participants (age, if reported)	Research design		Themes
		Method of generating data	Approach/method of analysis	
Klein (2010), Canada	Health care settings; 16 occupational therapists, 2–28 years of work experience	Focused written questions and semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis and constant comparative analysis	1
Laliberte-Rudman (2009), Canada	72 newspaper articles on work and retirement	Textual material	Critical discourse analysis	2
(Laliberte-Rudman 2015a), Canada	30 workers and retirees, 45–83 years old	Interviews	Narrative analysis	2
Laliberte-Rudman (2015b), Canada	17 retirees, mean age 58.6 years	Two-step narrative interviews	Critical narrative analysis	1 and 3
Maguire (1995), the United Kingdom	Educational setting; 7 older women working in education	Unstructured interviews (5) and written accounts (2)	Descriptive approach	1
Maguire (2001), the United Kingdom	Educational setting; 7 women teachers, 49–65 years old	Biographical narrative, in-depth interviews	Descriptive approach	1
McMullin (2001), Canada	Garment industry; 79 individuals, retired, displaced and employed workers, age not defined	Focus group	Thematic and categories analysis	1
McVittie (2003), the United Kingdom	12 human resources managers or recruitment managers of 23 medium to large enterprises operating on a U.K.-wide basis, in their 20s–50s	Semi-structured interviews	Discourse analysis	2
McVittie (2008), the United Kingdom	Employment office; 15 unemployed or nonemployed people, aged older than 40 years	Interviews	Discursive psychology	1 and 2
Moore (2009), the United Kingdom	33 workers (all women) or unemployed, older than 50 years	Interviews	Intersectional and narrative approach	1
Niemistö (2016), Finland	9 Finnish companies in growth sectors; 53 workers at different levels	Survey and interviews, qualitative fieldwork	Case studies, discursive approach	2
Noonan (2005), the United States	37 workers or actively seeking jobs; 56–77 years old	Interviews	Thematic content analysis	1
Ojala (2016), Finland	23 working-class men, 50–70 years old	Sequential thematic personal interviews	Discourse and membership categorization analysis	2
Phillipson (2019), the United Kingdom	Local government and train operating company; 82 participants, including human resources professionals, line managers, and older employees (aged 50 to older than 65 years)	Documentary evidence, focus group, semi-structured interviews	Case study approach, thematic analysis	3
Porcellato (2010), the United Kingdom	56 economically active and inactive people, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, older than 50 years	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis	1 and 2
Quintrell (2007), the United Kingdom	Educational setting; 30 teacher trainees, older than 35 years	In-depth and semi-structured interviews and questionnaire	Thematic analysis	1
Riach (2007), the United Kingdom	8 articles and promotional texts of one company's recruitment campaign	Textual material	Critical discourse analysis, interpretative repertoire analysis	2 and 3
Romaioli (2019), Italy	78 economically active and inactive adults, 18–85 years old	Episodic interviews	Narrative and content analysis	2 and 3
Samra (2015), the United Kingdom	Health care setting; 25 medical students and doctors	In-depth and semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis	1 and 2

Table 2. Continued

| First author (year), country | Setting and participants (age, if reported) | Research design | | Themes |
		Method of generating data	Approach/method of analysis	
Spedale (2014), the United Kingdom	Employment tribunal's final judgment statement on age discrimination case	Textual material	Critical discourse analysis	2
Spedale (2019), the United Kingdom	1 male teacher in late career life	Interview	Intersectional approach and deconstruction analysis	2
Yang (2012), South Korea	34 workers (bridge workers) and nonworkers (permanent retirees), 50–70 years old	Semi-structured and in-depth interviews	Descriptive approach	1 and 2

The organizational contexts vary from health settings, to private companies, to public job centers. The age of participants selected varied greatly (see details in Table 2). In 16 of 39 studies, participants were selected on the basis of age to represent the older workers' group. Age thresholds varied greatly among these studies, with a range between 40 and 80 years old. The fact that most papers were not just about older workers is coherent with the definition of ageism (to be noted that all participants were older than 18 years). Nevertheless, the amount of papers interested in setting an age limit shows how the field is still primarily oriented toward older workers.

In the following sections, the main findings of the analysis are presented: first, an outline of how the term ageism is defined in the accepted papers is provided, followed by the results of the qualitative thematic analysis.

Definitions of Ageism

Definitions of ageism easily influence researchers' perspective, which is especially important when dealing with discursive approaches, as reflecting the meaning-making process of social phenomena. The definitions presented in the papers are given in Table 3, warning that not all authors explicate it. Synthesizing the definitions of ageism also contributes to the open discussion on the phenomenon, which is still largely subject to disagreement.

Butler's (1969) original definition of *ageism* was cited in 6 of 39 papers (Bowman et al., 2017; Grima, 2011; Higashi et al., 2012; Laliberte-Rudman, 2015b; McMullin & Marshall, 2001; Ojala et al., 2016). However, even when the researchers did not specifically cite Butler, they often defined ageism as stereotypical beliefs and discriminating behavior based on age (Brodmerkel & Barker, 2019; Faure & Ndobo, 2015). The tripartite definition of ageism promoted by the WHO (2018), comprises "stereotypes, prejudice and discriminatory behaviors on the base of age," was utilized only by Ben-Harush et al. (2017, p. 40).

Nine papers focused on gendered ageism (Granleese & Sayer, 2006; Handy & Davy, 2007; Kanagasabai, 2016;

Table 3. Definition of Ageism

Ageism (n. 6)	Prejudice of one age group towards another.
Tripartite ageism (n. 1)	Stereotypes, prejudice and discriminatory behaviors on the basis of age.
Gendered ageism (n. 9)	Age and gender are regarded as systems that interact to shape life situations in ways that often discriminate against women.
New ageism (n. 4)	Discursive strategy in policies that, while promoting inclusion of older people, tend to marginalize and categorize them.
New ageism (n. 1)	The shift from fear of aging toward fear of aging with disability, stressing the fear of functionality loss often associated with aging.
Social ageism (n. 1)	Systematic stereotyping leading to age discrimination.
Organizational ageism (n. 1)	A less visible form of gendered ageism that is linked with the different features of generations in the work context and management's difficulties to acknowledge them.

Note: 17 papers of 39 do not present a clear definition of ageism.

Maguire, 1995, 2001; Moore, 2009; Niemistö et al., 2016; Ojala et al., 2016; Spedale et al., 2014). This term was introduced to prevent the discursive dominance of ageism over sexism in the analysis of stereotypes toward women (Spedale et al., 2014). It is noteworthy that only one paper refers to gendered ageism by analyzing a specifically male perspective (Ojala et al., 2016). Niemistö et al. (2016) define the concept in the organizational context and call it "organizational ageism"—one of the less visible forms of gendered ageism that is linked with the different features of generations in the work context and management's difficulties to acknowledge them.

New ageism is another extension of the ageism concept (Laliberte-Rudman, 2015a; Laliberte-Rudman & Molke, 2009; McVittie et al., 2003; Riach, 2007), which is utilized with two different meanings. First, it refers to a discursive strategy of marginalization based on age that increases inequality under the apparent cover of egalitarianism (McVittie

et al., 2003). Under this concept, authors show that diversity policies, which are produced to promote older workers' inclusion, have a side effect of categorizing and separating this age group from others, highlighting its perceived homogeneity and negative common features. Second, (Laliberte-Rudman 2015a) described new ageism as the shift from fear of aging toward fear of aging with disability, stressing the fear of functionality loss often associated with aging.

Figure 1. Flow chart of the screening process.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

The analysis revealed three main themes, which are as follows: (a) experiences of ageism, (b) social construction of age and ageist ideologies, and (c) strategies to counteract (dilute) ageism. Each paper presents one or more of these themes, as given in Table 2. A representation of themes and subcontents is shown in Figure 2.

Experiences of ageism

This theme includes papers where researchers give voice to participants to describe their experiences of stereotypical treatment and discrimination because of their age. These studies document how ageism takes place in participants' accounts of their everyday working life. The subcontents included in this theme are context, subjects and intersectionality, and causes accounted by participants (individual meaning-making process).

Context.—Thirteen studies reported that workers experience ageism in various contexts, including access to training and promotion opportunities compared with younger colleagues (Grima, 2011) and reeducation and job search (Brodmerkel & Barker, 2019; George & Maguire, 1998; Maguire, 2001; McVittie et al., 2008; Moore, 2009; Noonan, 2005; Porcellato et al., 2010; Quintrell & Maguire, 2007; Yang, 2012). Two studies specifically looked at the environment of the unemployment agency (Berger, 2006; Handy & Davy, 2007) and one focused on
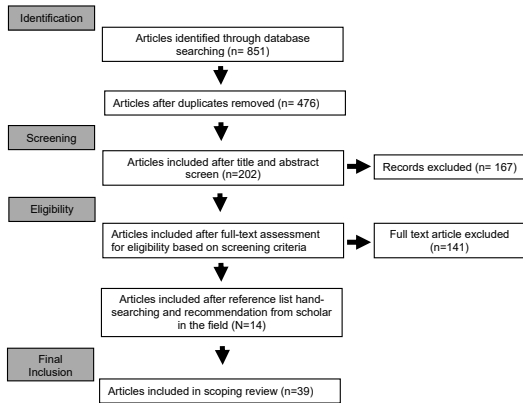

Figure 2. Description of themes.

the occupational possibilities near retirement age (Laliberte-Rudman, 2015b).

Subjects and intersectionality.—Women's experiences receive major attention in the selected papers because the intersection between gender and age increases the vulnerability of the group to stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination. Experiences of ageism are reported by women of all ages: Young women report being perceived as incompetent by male colleagues in information technology jobs (Allen et al., 2006), while older women sustain that looks and unattractiveness represent a major reason for discrimination (Granleese & Sayer, 2006, Handy & Davy, 2007; Kanagasabai, 2016; Maguire, 1995; Moore, 2009). Regarding male experience, Ojala et al. (2016) analyzed how men are not totally immune to ageism, but rather, experiences and interpretations of ageism are structured by the interactional context in question. Acts and expressions interpreted as discriminative in one context become defused in others, for example, in family contexts, positive ageism represents a naturalized order of things within intergenerational relations. The intersectional perspective on ageism highlights that, besides age and gender, class and ethnicity also influence people's working lives (Bowman et al., 2017; Moore, 2009). In health care settings, the intersection of ageism and loss of functionality is referred by participants as an incentive to stereotypical treatment (Billings, 2006; Higashi et al., 2012; Samra et al., 2015).

Causes.—In the work-life accounts, research participants often explain ageism with reference to their personal attributes, such as slowing bodies (Bowman et al., 2017), decreased work ability (McMullin & Marshall, 2001), increased health problems (Crăciun et al., 2018), and low skills and ability to learn new things (Crăciun et al., 2018; McMullin & Marshall, 2001). Beyond these negative attributes, research participants have explained ageism in relation to their overqualification and the expensiveness that comes with experience (Brodmerkel & Barker, 2019; Noonan, 2005) or expertise that enables them to resist management's authorities (Bowman et al., 2017; Moore, 2009).

Working life experiences of ageism are not only related to workers' age but also the age of the clients that professionals encounter. In health care settings, professionals report a shared stereotypical perception of older patients as low value, difficult, and boring. This results in professionals working with older people experiencing structural ageism in resource allocation among patient groups (Klein & Liu, 2010; Samra et al., 2015).

Social construction of age and ageist ideologies

Discourses and ideologies regarding age are collaboratively constructed in our society, and they become tangible in social interaction. In this section, the included papers are synthesized regarding the type of construction researchers provide about age, workers, and ageism in society. The grounding of this theme is in the social constructionist perspective (Burr, 2015), through which age—and consequently, ageism—is understood as socially constructed through discourses and social interactions. The contents included in this theme represent different types of ideologies and social construction regarding ageism in the working life: aging as a hindering process, the normative construction of the life course, the "othering" of older workers, and the organizational ageist discourses.

Aging as a hindering process.—Numerous papers claim that ageism derives from the social construction of aging as a hindering process and the obsession of our society to be ageless and aspire for perpetual youthfulness and beauty (Brodmerkel & Barker, 2019; Laliberte-Rudman, 2015a; Laliberte-Rudman & Molke, 2009; Romaioli & Contarello, 2019; Spedale, 2019; Spedale et al., 2014). Spedale et al.'s (2014) analysis of an age discrimination case law report from a U.K. tribunal showed that youth ideologies are reified in the workplace and used to justify rejuvenation discourses and practices. Handy and Davy (2007) showed that the internalized ideology of youthfulness sustains female recruiters' fear of growing old and provokes repulsion toward older jobseekers. Through a discourse analysis of recruiters' accounts, Faure and Ndobo (2015) found that, if professionals rate applicants similarly on a scale, their discourses unfold gender- and age-based discrimination, although these phenomena are overtly condemned. Through an analysis of Canadian newspaper articles, Laliberte-Rudman and Molke (2009) showed that governmental policies related to "active aging" contribute to the idea that older persons need to be perpetually active and healthy; this will help meet neoliberal governments' economic need. In health care settings, negative beliefs about age influence career trajectories of nurses, doctors, and therapists, who become reluctant to specialize in gerontology (Gould et al., 2015; Higashi et al., 2012; Samra et al., 2015).

Normative construction of life course.—Another societal discourse that fosters a negative attribution of aging is the normative construction of the life course and the connected fear of failing to meet the career stages that society has established for each social group. Failing to achieve the expectations associated with each age group (education, work, family, and retirement) or trying to deviate from a fixed pattern (e.g., starting education in older age) engenders feelings of self-exclusion, marginalization, and negative self-identity (Berger, 2006; Dixon, 2012; McVittie et al., 2008; Romaioli & Contarello, 2019).

"Othering" older workers.—The social construction of the normative life course contributes to the construction of older workers as a specific category, "othered" from alternative age and work groups. Older workers who have lost their jobs face greater difficulties in reentering the job

market because they deviate from the traditional career path that assumes an uninterrupted progression until retirement. To facilitate the transition from unemployment to employment, job centers' professionals group and label older workers, attributing to them features that would make them, supposedly, more appreciable by employers. According to Berger (2006), older workers are depicted as calm, elastic, and loyal. These features match the types of positions available for them in the present job market, which are entry-level soft jobs that require no expertise. This characterization is used strategically to downgrade older workers to these types of jobs; however, it contradicts common stereotypes related to older people, who are usually described as inelastic and not prone to change (Berger, 2006; Handy & Davy, 2007; Laliberte-Rudman & Molke, 2009; Riach, 2007). In unemployment center practices, professionals reify negative stereotypes when they create separate training for seniors (Berger, 2006). Through the discursive strategies of depicting older workers as calm, flexible, and loyal, organizations and institutions justify the downgrading of precarious jobs in late career stages. Therefore, ageism creates structural constraints for older people, reducing their actions and choices within labor markets (Yang, 2012). This analysis sustains that labor force policies, especially in the Western world, are generally constructed for healthy, White, middle-class men, which problematizes the intersections of age with gender, disability, and social class.

Organizational ageist discourses.—In organizations, ageist ideologies are reified in the systematic preference of younger groups in training and promotion, as discussed in the previous section. This imbalance reinforces the discourse proposed by management that senior employees are less creative and physically and cognitively unable to keep up with firms' dynamics (Brodmerkel & Barker, 2019; Faure & Ndobo, 2015; Porcellato et al., 2010; Yang, 2012). Even when organizations have inclusive policies in place, these can be used to "other" older workers (McVittie et al., 2003). In recruitment, the preference for younger workers is justified by the "team fit" discourse, through which older workers are denied access to jobs because they would not fit the young climate of organizations (Riach, 2007). The social meaning and construction of age and generations in the work context were analyzed by Niemistö et al. (2016). It was found that workers use different discourses to talk about age and generations at work: older workers emphasize physical hindrance due to age, retirement trajectories, missing generations within the workplace and age gaps, and organizational silence about age diversity. Inside the studied organizations, age was collectively constructed with both positive (experience) and negative (embodied physical difficulties) features. Likewise, generations were mental states built both on personal experiences and collective features of memory as organizational groups.

Strategies used to counteract, or dilute, ageism

This theme synthesizes the strategies that individuals, as well as organizations, implement to counteract ageism. In the previous themes, structural barriers and societal ageism were addressed while here, we emphasize the negotiation that might happen at a more intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Nevertheless, systemic ageism is present, and personal strategies take place within a workplace that enables or hinders them. The micro and macro levels are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, discursive approaches are always context based and influenced by the societal discourse and ideologies, presented in Theme 2. The contents analyzed in the included papers comprised the following: coping strategies that participants proposed as their solution to fight ageism; discursive strategies used in interaction, through which participants negotiated ageism and rejected negative attribution in talk; and organizational strategies that addressed the phenomenon.

Coping strategies.—The main coping resource reported by research participants is social support (Berger, 2006; Grima, 2011). Grima (2011) shows that older employees use social support to increase the sense of membership to the work community and personal value. Unemployed adults use social support outside work, from family or unemployment classes, as a resource to fight ageism: It reduces the stress associated with the loss of a job and social contacts (Berger, 2006). Hence, the author suggests that the creation of support groups is strategic for unemployment offices. In their everyday work, older workers claim to use three different strategies—accepting the discrimination and focusing on positive aspects of life outside work, overtly fighting the discrimination in the workplace, and valuing their contribution to the organization (Grima, 2011). Another coping strategy reported by research participants is maintaining a youthful appearance (Brodmerkel & Barker, 2019).

Discursive strategies.—Regarding discursive strategies, Romaioli and Contarello (2019) mentioned rhetorical strategies used by people at different ages to counteract the detrimental narrative of being "too old for." They described three counter-narratives based on willpower, denial of aging, and discovering the potentiality of aging. Through these measures, dominant discourses on ageism may be adapted, negotiated, or resisted. In the employment center, negotiating a new identity is another strategy to counteract ageism used by people when they perceive that they are getting older or others label them as such. Berger (2006) shows that, when faced with age stereotypes in retiring, older workers either maintain their work identity and reinforce its value or tend to shift toward a new identity, that of retirees. Laliberte-Rudman (2015b) looked at how older people position themselves regarding their age and noted that internalizing ageism changes older workers' relation to work, facilitating labor market detachment. These studies highlight how identity negotiation might be affected by

internalized and subconscious ageist attitudes, which are reinforced by the institutions.

Brodmerkel and Barker (2019) studied older workers in the advertising industry and found that, to combat ageism in the field, older workers developed "resigned resilience." Older workers continued to try to make a living in the advertising industry while acknowledging the ageist structures of their field. Employing discursive strategies, they positioned themselves as having "mature strategic experience" compared with the youthful creativeness of younger workers.

People who work with older people also use strategies to dilute ageism. Herdman (2002) showed that nursing students can challenge ageist discourses by portraying themselves and their career choices in ways that value positive features associated with aging and the value of working with older patients.

Organizational strategies.—Organizations develop strategies to counteract ageism in the workplace. In contrast, equality policies can have a detrimental effect as they may increase managers' fear of behaving inappropriately toward older workers, and therefore, enhance their exclusion (Phillipson et al., 2019), sustaining and reifying ageist ideologies. Managers can be too afraid of acting in the wrong way toward older workers, not enacting the values of respect and inclusion; as a result, they prefer to avoid managing such employees.

Discussion and Implications

This scoping review set out to synthesize the distinct contributions made by discursive studies on ageism in working life. The analysis pronouncedly highlighted the selected approach's ability to advance knowledge in the field of ageism and the gaps in the knowledge on two levels, namely, topic and research approach.

Despite some existing reviews published on ageism and work, this is the first, to the best of our knowledge, to zoom in on the specificity of discursive approaches along the continuum of working life. Most studies in the field of ageism in the workforce have given major attention to quantitative research and older workers. Within the tradition of discursive research, the papers selected provide additional and innovative information on the construction of age and ageism as a social category and how this construction is embedded in the social practices within and outside the workplace. The discursive investigation unfolds the hidden ideologies in working life which constituted the grassroot of ageism; these ideologies connect the organizational level to the societal one, demonstrating the interlinks among micro, meso, and macro levels. This connection is especially visible in Theme 2, while the reification of ideologies and discourses is visible in Themes 1 and 3, in the application to experiences and strategies. Theme 1 is more descriptive, but, compared to previous reviews, still interestingly emphasizes the portrayal of ageism solely as perceived by workers, highlighting the importance of giving voice to participants. Thanks to this point of view, this study brings to light how workers create a justification for ageism and how they give both external and internal attribution to age discrimination, demonstrating the impact of internalization of ageism also in the labor market. Compared to other reviews, this study demonstrates how work-based relations and discourses engender ageism and its reproduction at a personal as well as organizational level and how discourse is rooted in societal ideologies. This finding is valid both for younger and older workers; in fact, it is supported by the diversity of participants' age, underscoring that ageism affects all persons. Moreover, chronologically old as well as young participants use the discursive strategies, presented in Theme 3. This finding shows that age and ageism are contextual, and feeling old or young is not defined by year of birth but is a part of personal identity, which is fluid and influenced by social relations, environments, and actions. Persons do things with words, they can do ageism as well as undo and challenge it: These dynamics can be studied mainly through discursive approaches, as this review highlights.

Implications

The included papers are part of a stream of research that supports a shift in analyzing the phenomenon of ageism and provides novel insight into policymaking. On the one hand, the mainstream literature often considers older workers as an assigned category based on chronological age and a group victim of a perpetual process of discrimination enacted by employers. On the other hand, the discursive approach carefully unpacks the dynamic connection between age and identity, looking at how workers reject or negotiate age-based labels. In this field, researchers view ageism as enacted in the social process—how it is created, maintained, and reproduced in interactions, considering the use of age and its meaning in the work context (Spedale, 2019).

The review showed that workers, of all ages, adapt to ageist discourses available in society. These are rooted in a youthfulness ideology and reinforced by a normative life course (Romaioli & Contarello, 2019). This study highlighted how some policies that aim at fighting ageism fail in their mission because they originate from the same ideology which they want to combat (Laliberte-Rudman, 2015a, 2015b; Laliberte-Rudman & Molke, 2009). In working life, persons are labeled as older or younger when they enter a certain chronological age. This labeling attaches a predefined identity to a single person and thus reinforces negative age self-stereotypes.

This review yields views on how negative attitudes attached to age are both enforced and challenged in and through situated interactions. The analysis of discourses sheds light on the negotiation of positive age identity in

the work context and shows how persons can respond to ageism in their everyday lives, freeing themselves from the normalized life stages and focusing on the positive aspects of aging. The contribution of the discursive approach is to highlight how persons do and undo ageism in situ, with no intention of neglecting macro- and meso-dynamics, while bridging macro and micro approaches in gerontology (Nikander, 2009). The results will inform policymakers and practitioners that counteracting ageism in the everyday accounts of working life is possible, but it is important to create an enabling environment that does not exclude people based on their age and that deconstructs the ideology that depicts aging as negative. To achieve this goal, further research is needed that engages in different approaches and methods. In the next section, future directions for research are outlined.

Gaps in the Knowledge

Our review shows that the field clearly needs to continue tackling the notion of ageism in novel and inventive ways while remaining reflective on the choice of methodology and limitations therein. We identified areas that we suggest need improvement, which are as follows: studies on intersectionality beyond female gender and age; heterogeneity of age groups, from young workers to different subgroups in older workers; definitions of ageism; and deconstruction of the ageist ideology. Studies focusing on the first theme, "experiences of ageism," report the ability of discursive studies to give voice to participants and unfold the situated dynamics of individually encountered aspects of ageism in working life. One aspect that clearly needs further research is intersectionality, including a wide range of social categories. Whereas the double jeopardy of age and gender faced by women has been extensively analyzed, male perceptions of ageism in the workforce form the core of just one paper in this review (Ojala et al., 2016). While social dimensions such as ethnicity, culture, class, ability, functionality, and their intersection with age and gender do, to a degree, feature in the selection of papers studied here, future research could enhance our understanding of the diverse and increasingly aging workforce.

One further point concerns the clear need for a more detailed problematization of the category age itself. It is noteworthy that even when the approach is discursive, very few papers deconstruct the category "older workers" itself (Spedale, 2019). Various authors, following the standard research process, sample their participants based on chronological age, labeling the ones older than 50 years old as older workers. This is congruent with the literature and policies on old age in the workforce (starting at 50 or 55 years old), but it does not allow us to understand how organizations or individuals construct this categorization. Subsequently, there is a lack of research on ageism and younger workers, or even more, studies that investigate age along its continuum. This is incoherent and inconsistent

with the definition of ageism—a phenomenon directed toward all age groups—but it is consistent with previous critiques about the conceptualization of older people as an open-ended category in gerontology (Bytheway, 2005). Hence, further studies in this vein could tap into the complexity of the phenomenon of ageism on different levels (individual, group, organization, and society) and elucidate its different features (cognitive, affective, and behavioral).

Within research methods, the main gap we identified was the lack of diversity in data generation and analysis in the discursive field. The accepted papers predominantly utilized interviews (24 of 39 papers). Hence, inside the discursive perspective, there is clearly room for research based on a wider range of data, such as naturally occurring encounters (recordings, video recordings, and textual material) or quantitative discursive studies. For example, the analysis of talk in interaction would enhance the understanding of ageism not as a natural category but as accomplished in situated social communications (Krekula et al., 2018). This approach has received recognition in the study of age and aging (Aronsson, 1997; Krekula et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2014), but empirical studies on ageism in everyday work encounters are still rare.

From a methodological standpoint, there is a clear absence of longitudinal studies. Although qualitative longitudinal data sets are not traditionally approached from a discursive perspective, this is an open direction for further research. It has already been highlighted that investigations based on longitudinal studies are needed to understand how ageism can be experienced in transitions in later life (Bytheway, 2005; Harris et al., 2018; Levy & Macdonald, 2016).

Limitations

This scoping review has carefully followed a systematic step-by-step approach, but some limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the definition of search terms, which are always limited as is the nature of a scoping review, sets an initial barrier to the certainty of retrieving all the relevant contributions. Accordingly, the screening of reference and consultation with senior experts are a fundamental integrative step that helped to include relevant literature. Second, the choice of databases sets an objective limitation on the retrieval of published papers. Third, the inclusion of only electronically accessible papers in English is a constraint for the review regarding the publication date, as older publications may not be uploaded in electronic databases, and the country of origin, as relevant papers may have been published in languages other than English. Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first review focusing on the discursive approach in the field of ageism and working life. The retrieved papers clearly show the substantial contribution of the discursive turn in social science and of the cultural turn in gerontology (Twigg & Martin, 2015), as well as the ability of the included approaches to

expand the understanding of the nuances of ageism while challenging some of the mainstream conceptualizations.

In conclusion, ageism research has clearly flourished since the coinage of the term, and the discursive turn helped produce a notable shift in approaches, data sets, and analytic stances. Numerous research areas, topics, and fresh research designs remain to be developed and taken up. Further problematization of age, its intersectional aspects, and the difference between chronological and socially constructed age—young or old—remains a beneficial framework that yields nuanced knowledge on the everyday conceptualization and meaning making related to age and ageism in the work context.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary data are available at *The Gerontologist* online.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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PUBLICATION
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Researching time and ageism: Applications of qualitative longitudinal research to the field

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Researching Time and Ageism: Applications of Qualitative Longitudinal Research to the Field

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Abstract

Interest in ageism research has grown immensely since the term was coined. Despite methodological innovations to study ageism in different settings and the application of different methods and methodologies to the topic, qualitative longitudinal studies investigating ageism are still underrepresented in the field. Through qualitative longitudinal interview data with four individuals of the same age, this study explored the applications of qualitative longitudinal research on ageism, highlighting its potential benefits and challenges to the multidisciplinary study of ageism and to gerontological research. The paper presents four distinctively different narratives through which individuals "do," "undo," and "challenge" ageism in their interview dialogues over time. Doing this underlines the importance of understanding the heterogeneity and intersectionality among encounters, expressions, and dynamics of ageism. The paper concludes with a discussion of the potential contributions that qualitative longitudinal research makes to ageism research and policy.

What this paper adds
- Introduces readers to qualitative longitudinal research in the study of ageism.
- Undermines ageism by investigating heterogeneous life courses.
- Evaluates how qualitative longitudinal research informs future policies and practices addressing ageism.

Applications of study findings
- Challenges the use of arbitrary age limits in policy-making by showcasing the heterogeneity among individuals sharing similar life courses.
- Encourages further research on ageism through time to better understand the developments and processes through which ageism is constructed.
- Provides practical insights into how ageism can be studied through a qualitative longitudinal methodology.

Introduction

Throughout the life-course, individuals engage in sets of age-appropriate behaviors shaping the normative life-course, reinforced by the formal and informal policies and institutions in place (Nikander, 2002). Not only do they define right time to do things, such as having children (Ylänne & Nikander, 2019), but they also teach us how deviating from age-appropriate behavior creates a moral obligation to explain oneself (Nikander, 2000). This paper approached ageism from a discursive perspective, seeing it as a social construct manifested deep within societies, and reproduced and reinforced by institutions that maintain ageist ideologies (Bytheway, 2005). Focusing on the dynamic interplay between individual identifications, organizational practices, and

social structures allowed us to investigate how individuals "…do things with words, they can do ageism as well as undo and challenge it…" (Previtali et al., 2022. p. 11) in their everyday encounters and accounts. Ageism is often experienced when individuals step out of cultural, normative

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life-course timings and go against shared norms, expectations, and ideas of how and when to do things in life. Therefore, breaking "suitable" age codes and norms, such as when to have children (Ylänne & Nikander, 2019), engage in education (Leonard et al., 2018), or retire (Vickerstaff & Van der Horst, 2021) can all be seen as *wrongly timed actions, given your chronological age.*

By following the lives of ordinary people across time, we can better understand how individual experiences of aging are constructed to follow normative life-course and match age-appropriate guidelines. Qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) has the potential to track and closely examine the changes, transitions, and temporality in individual lives, as well as the meanings and interpretations individuals give to each of these changes. Recently, scoping reviews on ageism have underlined the need to research ageism longitudinally in different settings, such as in working life (Harris et al., 2018; Previtali et al., 2022), and during historical events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Werner & AboJabel, 2022). Despite the long-standing interest in qualitative longitudinal studies in gerontology, longitudinal studies investigating ageism have been predominantly quantitative in nature. However, the results from existing qualitative longitudinal studies have already shed light on the value of their contribution to the field. For example, a qualitative longitudinal study from Taiwan investigated the experiences of perceived ageism among older patients following hip fracture and found that over time, perceptions of experienced ageism changed from positive to negative (Huang et al., 2014). Although patronizing ageism was perceived as positive and caring during the first interview, these experiences were later characterized as turning points when individuals were deprived of their autonomy and power. Therefore, to create effective solutions that address ageism in different areas of life, researchers need to better understand the nature of ageism, especially in relation to time.

First, this paper begins with a discussion of the potential benefits and challenges of QLR on ageism. Second, it provides a practical example of how everyday experiences of ageism can be studied using QLR. Finally, it considers the contributions that qualitative longitudinal studies can make to the growing field of ageism research and policy.

Benefits and Challenges of Qualitative Longitudinal Research

QLR, characterized as qualitative research involving two or more data generation time points over a period of time (Nevedal et al., 2019), QLR offers an opportunity to research not only the dynamics of individual lives (Neale, 2019), but also the various important areas of aging and gerontology (see Nevedal et al. (2019) for a review of qualitative longitudinal studies in gerontology). As the general benefits and challenges of QLR have already been

discussed widely elsewhere (e.g., Hollstein, 2021; Neale, 2019; Thomson & Holland, 2003), our focus here is on the benefits and challenges of QLR on ageism research and policy.

The key complication for qualitative studies on ageism seems to be the lack of a unified definition of ageism, which, on the one hand, renders creating a unified theory more difficult, and on the other, offers freedom to methodological advances in the field (Previtali et al., 2022). Although QLR has received criticism for being obscure and too flexible in terms of its methodology, data sources used, and methods of analysis (Hollstein, 2021; Neale, 2019; Nevedal et al., 2019), its flexibility is particularly useful when investigating nuances of complex concepts such as ageism. At the core of QLR "lies a concern with the dynamics of human agency—the capacity to act, to interact, to make choices, and to influence the shape of one's life and the lives of others" (Neale, 2019, p. 9). Therefore, it offers an excellent tool for investigating how individuals experience, challenge, undo, and do ageism in time and over time. Taking into account key events, turning points and accumulating experiences, QLR also offers a unique way to holistically understand the life-course and origins of ageism. In addition to individual accounts of ageism, qualitative longitudinal studies often collect various other forms of data, including newspaper articles, policy documents, observations, field notes and diaries that connect the researched timespan into its spatio-temporal context and allow researchers to investigate ageism and its origins in a more comprehensive manner.

Because our everyday experiences of age and ageism are constructed in their spatio-temporal contexts, researching ageism through time also presents challenges. It requires researchers to travel through time between past, present, and future interpretations, understanding ageism and experiences of it as both situationally constructed and shaped through time. Addressing change over time through QLR creates challenges, which is why ageism researchers have been reluctant to approach qualitative longitudinal datasets, for instance, from a discursive perspective (Previtali et al., 2022). In addition, QLR typically generates large amounts of data, which can prove overwhelming and lead to "death by data asphyxiation" (Pettigrew, 1995, p. 111), further complicating the research process of pinpointing ageism in the data.

Qualitative longitudinal studies also require resources, time, and commitment from funders, researchers, and the participants, which may be challenging to achieve. Although QLR has the potential to delve into the shaping causal processes and "what works?" in policy-making (Neale, 2021), qualitative longitudinal studies are more expensive than cross-sectional studies and do not always provide quick solutions. This means that the results of the research are available only after policymakers have decided on the continuance of the researched policy. However, investing resources into examining ageism in policy and practice through QLR offers a valuable opportunity to uniquely understand

and address the hidden mechanisms and dynamics that produce and reproduce ageism over time.

Data and Research Process

This paper explored the additional value that the QLR design can bring to the study of ageism. To achieve this, we utilized qualitative longitudinal interview data from a nationwide longitudinal project titled "Towards Two-Speed Finland?" This project investigated the lived experiences of individuals aged 50 years and over who experienced job losses after working for the same employer for a long time and examined their everyday lives, career choices, and agency after exiting long-term employment. In this article, we focused longitudinally on four (4) individuals of the same age (58 years) who lost their jobs after a long career, totaling at 20 interviews under analysis, generated throughout the research process. In QLR, studying a small number of cases can also involve large volumes in terms of data density and intensity, as the number of interview waves and different forms of data contribute to the insights achievable from the data (Thomson, 2007).

The overall data was generated by two researchers who interviewed the participants between three and eleven times from 2015 to 2018 through face-to-face and phone interviews. A total of 183 interviews were conducted. The research process and its timetable are illustrated in Figure 1. Potential participants were contacted and recruited through name lists provided by their employer, the Finnish Postal Service. Additional participants were found through snowballing, as participants referred the researchers to their former colleagues and friends who were also interested in taking part,

resulting in a total of 40 participants from different parts of the country. The research followed the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019) and did not require an ethical review.

Each participant was first interviewed face-to-face in their home or in other places they preferred such as public libraries or cafés. Prior to each interview, the participants consented to recording the interviews, either in writing or verbally during the following interviews. The face-to-face interviews were semi-structured and attempted to capture the biographical work and life events that the participants considered important during their life-course. The participants were asked various questions, such as: *What has been the meaning of work in your life? How has your life changed now? How do you see your future?* To structure and facilitate memory work during the biographical interview, each participant was asked to draw two biographical maps of their adult lives, one each from their working life and private life, highlighting the life satisfaction they experienced at various life events. Introducing visual methods into qualitative interviewing not only facilitates memory work, but also allows illustrations of nonlinearity and multidimensionality during a life-course (Schubring et al., 2019), creating a more nuanced image of an individual's life. Biographical maps, such as those used here, also work as interview props that can be referred to and used throughout the interviews.

Participants were then contacted through phone calls and emails during the follow-up period, depending on their availability and interest, resulting in one or more phone interviews. Toward the end of the research process, participants were invited to take part in final face-to-face interviews in
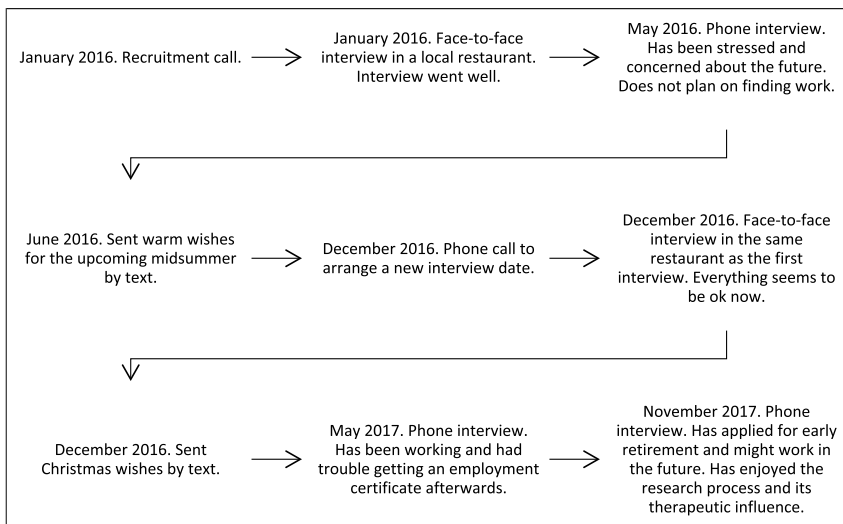

Figure 1. Illustrating the research process and timetable with one participant during qualitative longitudinal research.

their homes or preferred public spaces. During the final interviews, the interviewers reflected on the longitudinal interviewing processes with the participants and revisited and reflected on their first interviews. Using the previous biographical maps as guiding tools, the participants were asked to draw biographical maps of their financial situations during their adult life-course. All participants were given pseudonyms, and their interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Participants

Traditionally, postal service has been considered an organization that provides long careers and job stability. However, because of digitalization and a sharp decline in paper mail, there have been some organizational shifts during the past years, resulting in changing work demands and a high number of dismissals. Most of the participants had joined the postal service at a young age, gaining most of their education on the job during their working years. The four selected participants were all aged 58 years during their first interviews, and the lowest possible age at which they could receive an old-age pension was set to 63 years and 6 months. However, with a 6-month severance bonus from their previous employer, the participants were able to access an early exit through the unemployment pathway to retirement, a scheme established to secure income during unemployment near retirement (Kosonen et al., 2020). This meant that they were financially secured until they could apply for an old-age pension at a lowered age of 62 years. We selected the participants because despite sharing the same chronological age, they represented the diversity in the data regarding career choices and experiences following job loss. General information about the four participants is summarized in Table 1.

Methods and Analysis

The initial phases involved familiarizing with the data and participants by listening to the audio recordings of the interviews and reading through the interview transcripts many times. Together with the researchers' field notes, the transcribed face-to-face and phone interviews were then summarized into researcher-constructed case profiles (Neale, 2019; Thomson & Holland, 2003) that chronologically captured both the participants' future views and important life and working-life events. These tools provided a nuanced image of how the cases unfolded over time and facilitated case comparisons that enabled finding relevant snapshots of the data during later analysis (Neale, 2019, p. 112).

Following Thomson (2007), the case profiles were used as a starting point to construct more in-depth and focused case histories. Case histories are developed from descriptive case profiles and examine how actions and motives are framed, what the recurrent themes and phrases in talk are, and pinpoint the key events and turning points in the storytelling (Thomson, 2007). The interview accounts were then analyzed individually with a theoretical focus on normativity and ageism taking place in the emerging narratives. For each participant, this was combined with their key events, motifs, and framings creating longitudinal case histories. The constructed case histories are discussed in relation to ageism in the following sections.

Findings

Through QLR, we investigated ageism among four people sharing the same age and job loss from the same employer. In the following sections, we provide case histories of the participants, with a focus on whether and how ageism is

Table 1. General Information About the Participants During the Research Process. Age Was Reported as the Age at the First Interview.

Participant Pseudonyms	Vuokko, Woman	Kari, Man	Laura, Woman	Iida, Woman
Age during first interview	58	58	58	58
Previous work position	IT specialist	Delivery	Customer service	Customer service
Educational background	Comprehensive school	Post-secondary education	Post-secondary education	Comprehensive school
Family situation	Married, no children	Married, children, grandchildren	Married, children, grandchildren and parents needing care	Married, adult child, older parent needing care
Health status	No issues mentioned	No issues mentioned	No issues mentioned, less stress after giving up work	Mobility issues and long sick leaves preceding job loss
Length of career	38 years	38 years	40 years	40 years
Location	Major city	Major city	Rural town	Rural town
Work-life transitions during the data generation	From unemployment to part-time employment	Long-term unemployment with short contracts in between	Unplanned early exit	Planned early exit

present in their narratives. To better understand the life-courses behind each interview account, we provide illustrations, and explanations of the biographical maps of work-life and overall life satisfaction during each participant's adult years.

Vuokko, 58

Vuokko, 58, had worked in various positions during her 38 years with the postal service. During her adult life, she had experienced some downfalls, as portrayed in Figure 2, the biggest of which were not being able to have children of their own with her husband, and the death of her parents later in life. Not having children had made her dedicated to work, but the recent death of her parents made her undermine the importance of work in life. During her years at the postal service, she received in-house training and was able to advance between positions, which accounted for variability. However, because of the organizational shifts in the 2 years preceding her job loss, she had started to feel less and less satisfied at work. Her boss had changed, and her work demands had increased. In the end, her job contract was ended, and she was given 6 months' pay.

> I'm done with the postal service; now, it's time for something new. But I don't know what that something new is yet. Of course, I've applied for positions, but at least for now, I think it's because I don't know how to do it. I don't know how to market myself because I've never needed to do that.

Vuokko had previously worked in information and communication technology, but having had only in-house training for the job, she lacked the formal education for positions that matched her experience. During her job search,

she felt inferior, as most job openings required some level of higher education, something she lacked. Although she wanted to find a job, she had already started to consider replacing paid work with volunteering and other activities with her retired husband. A couple of months after the first interview, Vuokko heard from her friend about a job opening in a small company that was not publicly advertised. She applied for and got the job.

> I feel great. Let's just say, I finally found a company where age was not a problem [laughing]. Because it's mostly been the issue—it always goes, "yeah, you're too old, this is not going to work out." They don't use these words, but that's essentially what it is.

Drawing from a commonly held understanding that older jobseekers are discriminated against in hiring practices, Vuokko ascribed her unsuccessful attempts to find a job to her age. In her previous interviews, she attributed her unsuccessful job applications to her lack of education and the know-how of applying and marketing herself as an employee. However, after a couple of months, her perception changed. Vuokko had originally hoped for a full-time job, but having talked with other jobseekers in her position, she had concluded that "*50+ women are poisonous*" in working life, which for her meant taking even the part-time job she was offered. Simultaneously, she looked back at her unemployment period as a positive experience during which she got to "*practice retirement*" with her husband. During her last interview, Vuokko shared her views on aging and the future.

> At the same time, aging scares and doesn't scare me. I'm disgusted that health worsens, but I hope to stay fit enough to cope. And, of course, by doing things for your own mobility, taking
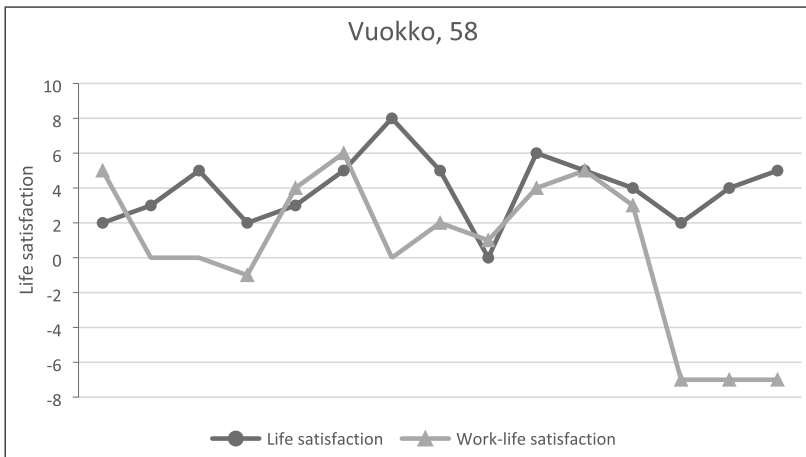
Figure 2. Vuokko's biographical map of life and work-life events and life satisfaction in adulthood as drawn during the first interview.

care of your health. Wearing glasses sucks. I don't like these; these are the things I find boring about becoming old. I'm not worried about wrinkles—these kinds of things—but losing an ability. That's not nice. But at the same time, I hope there will be more leisure time of your own. That's what I'm waiting for. But, we've always been an active couple; we like to do and organize things even for others. It's always us who organize. If not all of it, at least part of it [laughing]. I hope it continues the same way. I could easily learn a new language still because I like languages and find them easy, even now. Something like this, some kind of a hobby is a must.

Despite having a retired husband at home, it was clear to Vuokko from the beginning that she wanted to continue working longer. In her interview account, she drew on the belief that old age equals decline, vulnerability, and loss of functionality, fueled by her own recent experiences of losing her parents to illness. Although she did not mind looking older, as long as she could continue doing the things she enjoyed, Vuokko detested her own aging process and saw staying active as a means to avoid aging and the inevitable loss of functionality—something she found *disgusting* and *boring*.

Kari, 58

Kari, 58, worked for the postal services for 38 years before he chose to leave his job during downsizing. Looking back at his life, he was content with the things he had accomplished, as shown in Figure 3. A couple of years prior to resigning, he had lost motivation to work for the postal service due to increasing work demands and enrolled in adult education while working. He and his wife owned a house near a large city and had children and grandchildren they wanted to financially support. Kari graduated shortly after his work contract was terminated and hoped to start working right after, but he soon found out there were no matching jobs available. However, he was hopeful about his re-employment after obtaining a new degree.

> I had this idea then, with the career. When I was working for the postal service, the motivation was what **it** was, especially in the end. I thought that if I ever retire from that company, I won't work a day more than I have to. But now, after the re-education, and with my wife being five years younger, I was thinking I could easily work another ten years, as long as health allows, so easily until 68.

Over the months, Kari started to feel that finding a permanent job was unlikely and thought about setting up his own company. He noticed that many companies hired independent contractors rather than permanently employed workers. Despite being an active jobseeker and constantly looking to improve his qualifications, Kari managed to find only short-term contracts. This meant having to constantly look for the next job opening and juggling between employment and unemployment.

> … You could say that now, the possible, even the potential openings, jobs I've applied for, they've somehow disappeared. There haven't been that many openings, but I guess it still seems to be a problem that, as an adult, or let's say even at this age you start changing professions, without the work experience, what weighs in the most are age and lack of experience from the field. Little by little, I'm beginning to believe that the labor market here in Finland is no longer a place for people nearing their sixties.

Eventually, constant job searches and stress wore him down. Kari had previously hoped to work until the age of 68, but the idea
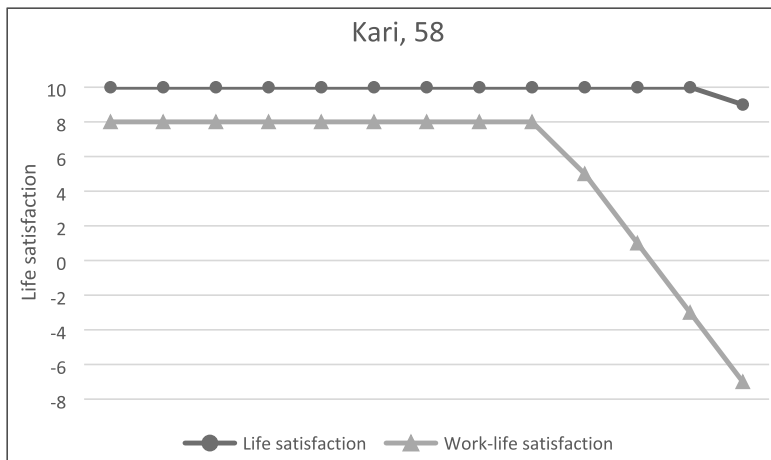

Figure 3. Kari's biographical map of life and work-life events and life satisfaction in adulthood as drawn during the first interview.

started to seem distant over time. Like Vuokko, Kari characterized his age as a problem in his job search. Rather than challenging the idea that the labor market is no place for people nearing their sixties, Kari seemed to accept it as a fact. After encountering precarious and uncertain working conditions, Kari planned to retire as early as possible, not to withdraw from the labor market but to secure his finances for the rest of his working years and continue working on retirement.

> I've been thinking, since I'm part of the last blessed age cohort, if I don't work in between, I get extended unemployment benefits until I'm eligible for old-age pension. There's a possibility I could retire at 62. I've been thinking about it. It's a bit less than two years from now, and if things won't change, I'll retire. And the other thing is that if you're on retirement, you can still work without having to worry about its effects on unemployment benefits. But once I'm retired, nothing will affect my pension. I could work a lot more, maybe even become an entrepreneur.

In the end, Kari felt that because of his age, the policies in place encouraged him to retire rather than continue working, undermining the commonly shared political goal of extending working lives. Instead of explaining his career decisions through ageism in the labor market, he perceived retiring as the most favorable option, enabled by the labor market policies that offered him a less problematic solution. In line with Vuokko, Kari's perception of the future and retirement was filled with activities, in his case, working until his younger wife could also retire.

Laura, 58

Laura, 58, had worked at the postal service for 40 years before her contract was terminated due to downsizing. She and her husband owned a house together in a small city where she had

worked all her adult years. Laura had received most of her education on the job and was able to change positions and develop inside the company during those years. Having older parents to care for and small grandchildren, she had been concerned about her own coping and considered applying for a part-time pension a couple of months before the company announced its downsizing decisions. Laura described her adult life as happy despite the stressful years when her children were small and when she was promoted to a supervisory role in her forties, as shown in Figure 4. The stress following her promotion influenced both her personal and working lives, and finally, she decided to request her previous position. Looking back at her previous stressful experiences, she attempted to keep her stress at a minimum.

> The one thing I hoped from work was that I could cope with it all. And, of course, needing some kind of relief, somehow, I felt that I was just exhausted. And thinking at the same time, Mom, and Dad are still alive. I need to have energy to spend time with them. They're both over 80 now. And then there's the small grandchildren, having the energy to be with them and do stuff.

Having her everyday life filled with caring for her family members, Laura was happy that her income was secured until retirement through her early exit. As the months passed, she had noticed she slept and felt better than in years, and in some way, the job loss had been a blessing in disguise, as it allowed her to spend more time with her family. She was interested in learning a new language and joining different volunteering activities, but as time passed, her parents needed more and more help.

> Now that things are possible, when you're no longer in working life, I'm really interested in learning something new or doing

Figure 4. Laura's biographical map of life and work-life events and life satisfaction in adulthood as drawn during the first interview.

something, or joining an activity, but I have to say now it has been so busy. As I said, Mom, and Dad, and now with grand-children and everything so, I haven't even had the time to think about what I want to do.

At the end of the data generation period, Laura had applied for an early part-time pension, and her everyday was filled with informal care responsibilities. She no longer felt sad about losing her job even though she missed the interactions she had with customers. From the beginning, it was clear to Laura that she would not want to apply for jobs. She had worked a couple of days during the elections, which had resulted in a large amount of paperwork and clarifications— something she wished to avoid in the future. The experience made her realize that getting back to working life would be more problematic than retiring, similar to Kari's experience.

Iida, 58

Iida, 58, had worked for nearly 40 years at the postal service when her workplace was closed due to downsizing. She described her life as happy; having children and meeting her current partner were especially joyous moments in her life, as illustrated in Figure 5. She had always enjoyed work until she started having health problems that had caused problems for both her work and her personal lives. Preceding her job loss, she had taken many lengthy sick leaves due to health problems. Fortunately, she was just the right age to access early exit because soon after she lost her job, her mother's health began to worsen, taking a sizable portion of her time.

> … Time is flying. I haven't missed work, and the biggest reason for that right now is mostly that our mom, she's been in quite a bad shape most of the spring and winter, so basically during the

days, I've been almost like a full-time caregiver. Siblings take care of the evenings, nights, and weekends, but I've had things to do.

Eight months later, Iida and her siblings found an assisted-living facility for their mother, and she finally had time to think about the things she wanted to do now that she was out of work. She and her recently retired husband had long planned on a holiday in their cabin, and they looked forward to taking the time to rest.

> Now that I think about the upcoming summer, already last summer I thought we get to spend it at our cabin, not needing to leave the place more than once a week for groceries, so now, in principle it might even work now that Mom is in good care, I have time to myself with no rush. It's the, I don't need any travels or extreme [laughing]. I'm just happy when I get to rest and knit socks.

A year after the first interview, Iida reflected on her career at the postal service, a place she had considered her second home for 40 years. For her, it was clear from the beginning that she would not look for another job, as her work identity had been built around being a postal worker. As a sign of ending her career, she had planned to burn her work uniform and start a new chapter in her life.

> … I know that I have full right to live on unemployment benefits, I don't have a guilty conscience or feel that I should, that I'd be obliged to do something else. I've just thought, I have unem-ployment security; I am the fitting age and been working enough years. In my case, I don't feel bad about not being an active jobseeker. I've internalized that feeling of freedom now. I can leave as I want, do what I want, of course, within the financial
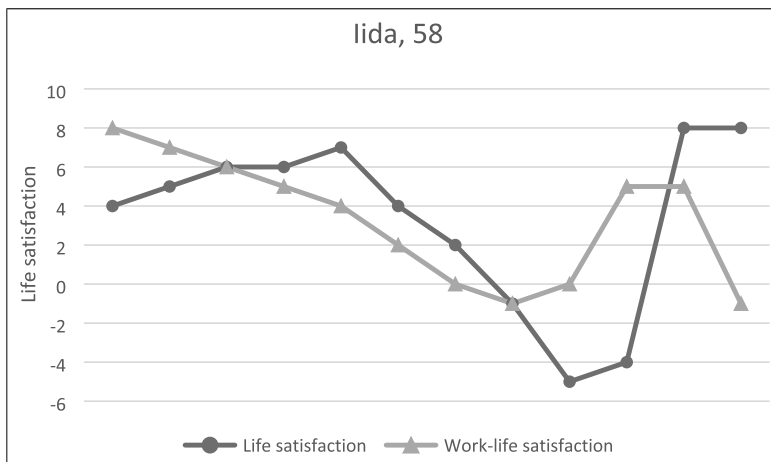
Figure 5. Iida's biographical map of life and work-life events and life satisfaction in adulthood as drawn during the first interview.

constraints that allow, but it doesn't oblige me to leave home at a certain time. The only things with schedules now are dentist and optometrist appointments; the rest I can do as I please.

Similar to Laura's situation, Iida also replaced paid work with informal care. After finding her mother an assisted-living facility, Iida could no longer explain her work exit, drawing on the belief that women should take on informal care of their older parents. Instead, she drew on her long working career and age, which enabled her early exit from working life. However, acting against the political goals of extending her career until she attained the age of 63 years and 6 months still pressured Iida to defend and explain herself, as if she was wrong for choosing to retire at her age.

Discussion

We employed a qualitative longitudinal methodology to re-search ageism in the interview accounts of four individuals who shared the same chronological age and former employer. Despite sharing these characteristics, the life stories and decisions of each individual following job loss differed greatly, undermining the use of homogeneous concepts and arbitrary age limits in policy-making that time life events and transitions. Individuals drew on ageism to explain their un-successful job search, their need to stay active, and their decision to retire earlier than planned. Even though the participants fitted the age to exit early, there was a need to explain deviations from the political goal, whether it was through continued activity on retirement, informal care, or through a long career. Simultaneously, old age was detested and perceived as a decline in health and activities, something the participants wished to avoid in the future.

This paper has only scratched the surface of what QLR has to offer in the field of ageism. Despite the existing challenges, QLR provides novel and promising perspectives for the rapidly expanding field of ageism research. First, QLR has the potential to answer questions such as when, why, where, and how ageism unfolds and is experienced through time and life-course, and as such provides a comprehensive and versatile methodology able to uncover ageism in everyday life, pol-icies, and practices. Second, QLR contributes to the under-standing of ageism and life-course by underlining how life events and accumulated experiences contribute to the inter-nalization and perceptions of ageism. Third, QLR provides tools for political efforts and policy programs concerning age and for addressing short- and long-term effects and potential ageism.

Given the pervasiveness of ageism and age inequality, qualitative longitudinal studies yield crucial insight into the dynamic interplay between individual pathways and deci-sions, organizational practices, and social structures, and how ageism operates within and between them. Furthermore, understanding key life events and cumulative effects taking place during the life-course is crucial to understanding why individuals engage in ageist behavior and exclude themselves from certain activities in later life. Therefore, more research that engages with ageism using QLR designs is urgently required.

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PUBLICATION
III

Turning Age into Agency: A Qualitative Longitudinal Investigation into Older Jobseekers' Agentic Responses to Ageism

Keskinen, K., Lumme-Sandt, K. & Nikander, P.

Turning age into agency: A qualitative longitudinal investigation into older jobseekers' agentic responses to ageism

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ABSTRACT

Despite existing laws prohibiting age discrimination in employment and hiring practices, ageism creates inequalities between jobseekers because of their age. Deeply manifested ageist practices take place in everyday interactions within the labor market, complicating changes in career trajectories during late working life. Bringing the time dimension into studies on ageism and individual agency, we narratively examined qualitative longitudinal interviews with 18 older jobseekers from Finland to better understand the role of time and temporality in agentic practices that older jobseekers employ to counteract forms of ageism. Older jobseekers exhibited various resilient, and reworked strategies in response to ageism depending on their diverse social and intersectional positions. As their positions changed over time, jobseekers employed different strategies, highlighting the relational and temporal dimensions of individual agency in labor market decisions. The analyses suggest that acknowledging the dynamics between temporality, ageism, and labor market behavior is vital for creating effective and inclusive policies and practices to tackle inequalities in late working life.

Introduction

Ageism poses a considerable challenge in all areas of life, including access to income in late working life. Workers classified as "too old" face additional barriers to attaining and maintaining employment as they face discrimination based on their age in different contexts, including hiring processes, access to training and promotions, internal job mobility, firing decisions and retirement transitions (Harris, Krygsman, Waschenko, & Laliberte Rudman, 2018; Krekula, 2019; Naegele, De Tavernier, Hess, & Frerichs, 2020; Pärnänen, 2012; Previtali, Keskinen, Niska, & Nikander, 2022). Although policies are in place to support the extension of working lives, these are often targeted only towards the employed portion of the population (Heisig & Radl, 2017; Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2020; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021). This means that when older workers become unemployed, they often face longer unemployment periods, greater difficulties to find full-time employment, and may be "othered" into accepting precarious positions that do not match their skill, expertise, and experience (Previtali et al., 2022; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021).

The social category of older workers is somewhat problematic and generally described in research as an open-ended category starting from the age of fifty years (Harris et al., 2018; Previtali et al., 2022). The open-endedness of group membership entails not only all workers who have passed the arbitrary fifty-year threshold, but also all forms and extents of activity in the labor market including the unemployed, part-time employed, apprentices, and individuals working on retirement as well as formal and informal work. This type of grouping and homogenization of older workers easily depicts an ideological image of the older worker that fails to portray the multistranded reality of contemporary working life (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2020). Therefore, to understand the heterogeneity and the multiple pressures at play, it is important to draw a distinction between aging individuals in and out of employment. In this article, we use the term 'older jobseeker' to describe individuals who are actively looking for employment at the age of 50+ years. By adopting this term, we attempt to draw a distinction between individuals actively looking for employment and individuals who have decided to withdraw from employment. Although it is challenging to define who is active and who is not, this distinction is important as policy arguments drawn to support extended working lives tend to homogenize the older generations as the problem, unwilling to support the continuation of welfare systems rather than understanding the diversity of the group it captures (Krekula & Vickerstaff, 2019; Krekula &

Vickerstaff, 2020).

In this article, we investigate older jobseekers' agentic responses to ageism in everyday job-seeking practices over a three-year period in Finland. Our findings are threefold. First, older jobseekers employ various discursive strategies to rework their situations and cope with everyday ageism. Second, these discursive strategies vary depending on the intersectional social positions individuals hold and their available resources. Third, individual response strategies may change over time after continuous exposure to experiences of ageism in the labor market. Consequently, our research sheds light into the complex dynamics of ageism and individual agency in labor market decisions and contributes to the methodological advances and literature on ageism.

Older jobseekers and everyday ageism

Multiple existing stereotypes of older jobseekers contribute to their job-seeking practices. Age stereotypes are actively reproduced in organizational interactions by both employers and employees themselves (Previtali & Spedale, 2021). Although the debate on the overemphasized role of age stereotypes in personnel decisions has been raised due to inconsistencies in research findings (Murphy & DeNisi, 2022), both conscious and unconscious age bias take place in organizational settings (Cadiz, Brady, Yaldiz, Zaniboni, & Truxillo, 2022). Older jobseekers are considered less productive, less able to learn and use new technology, uninterested in training and career development, less motivated, trusting, and healthy, as well as resistant to change and needing more time off because of their family circumstances (Harris et al., 2018; Ng & Feldman, 2012). In addition to negative stereotypes, Abrams, Swift, and Drury (2016) show that even positive age stereotypes of older workers are viewed less favorably in hiring decisions, creating an even more challenging environment for older jobseekers.

The role of supportive employment services becomes crucial in late life unemployment, as people may face job searches even after decades of working under the same employer. Bowman et al. (Bowman, McGann, Kimberley, & Biggs, 2016:655) delved into the emerging pattern of "carelessness" in the jobseeker/job-provider relationship within employment services in Australia and described the job-seeking processes as "ticking the boxes" from the jobseekers' side, whereas job providers tended to be systematically indifferent in their efforts to help the older jobseeker. Kadefors and Hanse (2012) suggest that reasons behind this type of systematic indifference originate from the shared understandings among employment agency officials who easily perceive older jobseekers merely as members of the "50+ age group", rather than facing the jobseekers as individuals.

Instead of challenging existing ageism, employment services tend to be indifferent and advise jobseekers to adapt their expectations to the ageist reality in the labor market (Bowman et al., 2016; Kadefors & Hanse, 2012; Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021). For instance, Berger (2006) shows how employment services use positive stereotypes of older workers that depict them as flexible, loyal, and calm to justify downgrading older jobseekers to precarious entry-level positions that require no experience and have minimum hours. In addition, studies comparing the hiring practices between younger and older applicants have shown that implicit age stereotypes negatively affect the older job applicants, and to avoid ageism, older jobseekers are expected to have education and experience that matches their age, which is difficult if they have breaks or changes in careers in late working life (Dormidontova, Castellani, & Squazzoni, 2020; Zaniboni et al., 2019).

In order to counteract and disarm ageist practices and stereotypes in job-seeking practices, older jobseekers develop various discursive strategies (Berger, 2006, 2009). Examining the identity work older jobseekers engage in during their job search after being labelled 'old', Berger (2006) found that older jobseekers can successfully maintain and negotiate their identities by drawing on available resources such as worker programs and social support, changing their identities and thoughts about aging, and by maintaining important roles in their life,

such as previous work roles. In her 2009 study, Berger investigated different age-related management techniques to counteract age discrimination and found that older jobseekers engage in skill maintenance, changing expectations about their employment and concealing their age through alterations to their language use, appearance, and resumés. Moreover, Lyons, Wessel, Tai, and Ryan (2014) suggest that older jobseekers are aware of age-related biases that operate against them in hiring practices and, as a result, mislead or avoid bringing up their age during job search. Navigating the labor market thus requires older jobseekers to employ various strategies to counteract the existing barriers in place.

Theoretical framework

In this article, we investigated different strategies through which older jobseekers face ageism in their everyday practices. Ageism manifests deep within societies and is reproduced and reinforced by social institutions maintaining ageist ideologies (Bytheway, 2005). Ageism occurs when individuals interact with social structures and institutions as well as with each other. Through these encounters, individuals internalize, apply, and enact ageism and ageist discourses in their everyday talk, actions, and choices. Since the discursive turn in social sciences, the discursive approach has been employed as an "umbrella term" to describe a variety of methods that analyze how social realities are constructed through language (Previtali et al., 2022; Willig, 2003). Approaching age and ageism from a discursive perspective allows us to investigate everyday practices and how individuals have the agency to "…do things with words, they can do ageism as well as undo and challenge it…" (Previtali et al., 2022:11). However, few studies have investigated the discursive strategies older jobseekers develop in response to ageism and hitherto, none we are aware of have investigated the development of the strategies through time. Individual agency is often mentioned or teased out in these studies, however, most have not placed it in center stage.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in policymaking towards individual agency in labor market decisions (Laliberte Rudman & Aldrich, 2021). Agency is a contested concept that has been widely studied in the social sciences to understand the dynamics at play between individual actors and the structural components regulating individual actions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The study of agency allows us not only to understand the pressures individuals experience but also to critique and disarm the existing stereotypes of aging (Jyrkämä, 2008; Tulle, 2004). Moreover, agency takes place in a temporal setting in which both past experiences and future expectations meet (Kohli, 2019). In a similar vein, Kohli (2019) draws a distinction between two types of individual agency orientations in relation to temporality. He argues that while making decisions about their lives, individuals resort to either everyday orientation or life-time orientation in their individual agency. Everyday orientation refers to repeated patterns and expecting every day to be the same as the one before, whereas life-time orientation focuses on goals and ambitions set on a longer time period, such as working life or the life-course. In this article, we have adopted the definition of agency as "temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 970). Individual decision-making practices are thus informed by an internalized predisposition to act in certain ways (Shilling, 1993), "the social field" including coordinates such as education, class, gender, politics, lifestyle, geography (Strauss, 2009: 308), and most importantly, age and timing of the events (Jyrkämä, 2008; Keskinen & Nikander, 2023). These coordinates then construct and regulate the spatio-temporal arena in which individual agency operates through restricting and enabling certain actions at given time points.

To examine agency among older jobseekers through time, we have adopted a relational typology for identifying social agency from Katz (2004) as our guiding framework. Katz bases her typology on longitudinal ethnographic research among children growing up in a globalizing world, focusing on how developmental shifts such as decline of manufacturing jobs and increasing need of educated workers transforms the grounds on which children transition into adulthood, allowing a multifaceted understanding of the spatial and temporal dimensions of individual agency. This typology has been widely used in previous studies examining collective and individual labor agency (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Katz (2004) suggests that there are three relational strategies through which individuals exhibit their agency against capitalist structures: *resilience, reworking* and *resistance*. Acts of resilience are classified as everyday strategies actors employ to cope with difficult situations without challenging the actual cause of the situation. This is when individuals "make do" with their available resources. Acts of reworking aim to improve the conditions set by the given structure, that is, the actions alter or are expected to alter the conditions in which individuals live their lives. Whereas reworking strategies can sometimes undermine and reorganize the constraining components of life, the acts of resistance are the ultimate acts that challenge the systems in place (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011). These actions are conscious actions to confront the oppressing constraints, often in the form of activism and unionizing in the work life. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the classifications are relative to the agency relationship under investigation. In other words, the actions need to be grounded to a specific context, as acts of resistance in one context may be classified as acts of resilience in another and vice versa.

Data and study context

The data used originate from a nationwide qualitative longitudinal research project Towards a two-speed Finland. The project was created to investigate everyday life, class- and age-based inequalities, and agency of older persons experiencing unemployment near retirement age (Tampere University, 2021). For this purpose, 40 people aged 50–65 experiencing job loss from the state-owned postal service were recruited to take part in the project. The Finnish postal service served as an example of a company where globalization and digitalization had resulted in a number of dismissals in recent years. The majority of participants were approached through name lists provided by the postal service, and others were recruited through snowballing. The data generation period took place between 2015 and 2018, during which two researchers followed the participants for approximately two years

following job loss. The research conducted here has received funding from the Kone Foundation and from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant. The funding sources have no involvement with the data and findings reported here.

The participants came from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds and held both white- and blue-collar positions during their employment at the postal service. Each participant took part in 3–11 face-to-face and phone interviews during the follow-up period depending on often they wanted to be contacted. The participants followed diverse career pathways after job loss leading either to continuation of or withdrawal from working life (Keskinen & Nikander, 2023; Kosonen, Keskinen, Nikander, & Lumme-Sandt, 2021). This also meant that while some of the participants continued in the working life, others had chosen to withdraw from active job search or to retire. In this study, we were especially interested in experiences of job-seeking practices in late working life and thus, selected participants from the data who expressed interest for continuing working life after job loss through active job search, re-education, and re-employment, resulting in 18 participants (Table 1).

We posit that individuals enact their agency by employing various strategies during their careers and transitions between work, unemployment, and retirement in a tangled order. To better understand the decision-making processes behind these transitions, Neale and Flowerdew (2003) note that the interconnectedness of agency and external pressures as well as the micro and macro dimensions can only be understood better through qualitative longitudinal research. At the core of qualitative longitudinal methodology "lies a concern with the dynamics of human agency – the capacity to act, to interact, to make choices, to influence the shape of one's life and the lives of others" (Neale, 2019:9). In our research, we were especially interested in the dynamics between ageism and individual agency through time. Thus, we utilized all available interview data from all time points collected from our 18 participants totaling 84 audio-recorded and approximately 700 pages of transcribed face-to-face and phone interviews.

Our 18 participants represented a cohort of workers who mostly started working at the postal service at a young age and built an impressively lengthy career inside the company once famous for its job stability and in-house training and promotion opportunities. Ten of the 18 participants resided in an urban area and eight in a rural area, with <50,000 inhabitants. All participants were eligible to receive unemployment benefits and depending on their career length and year of birth, participants over the age of 59 were able to access an early exit scheme "unemployment pathway to retirement", old-age pension, or

Table 1
Description of participants (gender, age, previous position, education, and family situation).

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Age	Previous position, years in the company	Educational background	Family situation*
Kristiina	Woman	50	Administrative, 20 years	Tertiary education	Married, children at home
Markku	Man	50	Controller, 29 years	Tertiary education	Single, no children
Eva	Woman	51	Administrative, 30 years	Post-secondary education	Lives with partner, adult children
Raija	Woman	53	Planner, 30 years	Post-secondary education	Married, no children
Helena	Woman	53	IT worker, 17 years	Tertiary education	Married, adult children
Eeva-Liisa	Woman	53	Controller, 30 years	Vocational education	Married, children at home
Stina	Woman	54	Customer service, 36 years	Comprehensive education	Married, adult children
Raimo	Man	54	Planner, 33 years	Comprehensive education	Divorced, children at home
Kaarina	Woman	56	Customer service, 35 years	Post-secondary education	Married, children and grandchildren
Aki	Man	57	Driver, 18 years	Vocational education	Married, children and grandchildren
Janne	Man	57	Customer service, 40 years	Vocational education	Married, adult children
Vuokko	Woman	58	IT worker, 38 years	Comprehensive education	Married, no children
Kari	Man	58	Delivery, 38 years	Post-secondary education	Married, children and grandchildren
Marketta	Woman	60	Customer service, 36 years	Post-secondary education	Divorced, adult children
Liisa	Woman	61	Customer service, 42 years	Upper secondary education	Single, no children
Siru	Woman	62	Finance manager, <10 years	Tertiary education	Married, adult children and grandchildren
Ilmari	Man	62	Service manager, 45 years	Comprehensive education	Married, no children
Juho	Man	63	Delivery, 40 years	Vocational education	Married, children and grandchildren

* For this study, we chose to report whether the participants had children/grandchildren and omitted the exact number of children each participant had. Where participants' status is reported as single or divorced, they were the sole earner in their household.

other part-time pension solutions to further financially support themselves.

The data generation period took place at a time when the Finnish labor market was going through major changes and reforms. At the time, educational opportunities during unemployment needed to be approved by the public employment services. The Finnish government engaged in several ways to activate unemployed workers through financial (dis) incentives (see Nivalainen, Tenhunen, & Järnefelt, 2020 for a review). Depending on their location and job loss situation, some of our participants were able to utilize private employment and career services and educational courses offered by their previous employer. Our focus here was on the different strategies older jobseekers developed and employed in response to ageism in the labor market during their job-seeking efforts.

Analysis

In this paper, we analyzed qualitative longitudinal interview accounts from 18 Finnish older jobseekers to better understand the agentic practices jobseekers developed and employed to counteract ageism in their everyday job-seeking practices. Our analysis was guided by qualitative longitudinal methodology, investigating both "snapshots" and "through time" (Neale, 2019). We first read through the interview accounts multiple times on ATLAS.ti to familiarize ourselves with the data. We then analyzed the interview accounts narratively with Katz (2004) relational typology for agency as the guiding analytical framework, looking for distinct, small stories of resilience, reworking and resistance in job-seeking practices. Narrative analysis was identified as the best-fitting method, as it has the potential to capture experiences and unfolding events through time (Riessman, 2008).

We identified multiple small storylines over time from individual interview accounts, marking a change in agentic responses. Once a chosen response strategy was deemed ineffective, individuals developed new response strategies to continue their job-seeking efforts. We also found differences in how individuals responded to structural ageism in comparison to ageism originating from interactions with others. Ageism originating from individual actors, including employers and employment services officials, was challenged, and resisted in interview accounts, whereas structural forms of ageism were less contested, and more often accepted as "matter-of-facts". Developing various response strategies to ageism required older jobseekers to utilize their various social positions and available resources to overcome the expected and encountered barriers. These strategies were: changing expectations about future employment, identity work, accepting short-term precarious job contracts, applying for entry-level jobs, creating a modern resumé, using one's own social networks in job searches, investing time in education, and moving to a new area with more job opportunities. In the analytic section to follow, we discuss these strategies in more detail with data extracts.

Results

Resilience strategies

All older jobseekers employed different resilience strategies in their everyday lives to cope with unemployment and job-seeking. In our analyses, we identified actions as resilience when individuals internally negotiated their position in the labor market through adjusting expectations about future employment, engaged in identity work, and chose to continue their job-seeking practices with existing resources rather than changing the conditions of their employability. As the older jobseekers entered the labor market following job loss from long-term paid employment, they had high expectations for fast and easy re-employment. However, jobseekers quickly realized that the reality did not match these expectations. Here, Liisa, a 61-year-old woman with nearly 42 years of customer service experience, voiced her and many others' experiences from visiting the employment services where she was told that finding employment would be very unlikely in her situation.

> I asked at the employment services 'what is the situation, do I stand any chances [for re-employment],' and without knowing my age, the lady answered that even 10 % would be too much a promise. Then she said that there are so many young people, and when it comes to me, re-education is definitely out of the picture.

For Liisa, a single woman living alone, working was not necessary to support herself financially, as she was able to transition to early retirement and continue her job search while receiving pension. However, this was not the case for all our participants, and some voiced their need to continue working to support their families financially. Hearing the news from employment services, Liisa no longer perceived the same options for career continuation she had prior and changed her attitude from wanting to work to working only if the employer could not find anyone else to hire. Ageism in the form of excluding access to education and limiting employment was viewed as more acceptable when supported by the normative order of life-course timings (Keskinen & Nikander, 2023). In Liisa's case, this was present in the way she was excluded from re-education and employment opportunities with the justification of making room for younger generations in the labor market, a notion supported by both employment services and jobseekers themselves. News on low chances of re-employment were often not contested despite lengthy career histories but rather were seen as matter-of-fact warnings issued by the actors familiar with the system. A year later, Liisa shared during an interview how she had already given up the idea of working, but then, her former manager asked her to come back for seasonal work.

> My former manager called me during the fall that his manager had said "you need to ask the old ones". And so they did, and I was .. the only one who promised from the three of us, I said "I'll come". So he called me again in October asking "are you serious, are you coming?" I said "if you have someone younger, take them instead". Soon, it was end of November and he calls me again, "I've already scheduled your hours".

Devaluation of career histories and drops in income were not the only adjustments older jobseekers faced when transitioning from paid work to unemployment. The transition also required adjusting one's expectations in terms of available jobs. When finding a job in their previous field of expertise proved challenging, older jobseekers shifted towards applying for any job they could do rather than targeting the jobs based on their expertise and work history. This was the case for Raija, a 53-year-old woman. Having previously worked in an expert position in finance, she expected to get a job as an assistant easily but now found herself applying for cleaning jobs. Over time, her expectations of future employment changed. All she now wanted to be and remain employed. Although Raija still applied for positions that matched her previous career, she was not too hopeful about her chances of re-employment in the same sector.

> The call I just received was about a cleaning job. It's interesting how your thinking changes. When I lost my job, I thought that surely I can become a financial assistant somewhere. I had this thought that it should be enough because I'm done, I've been a well-paid expert before. Then I decided I'm not trying to go for the same job as before, because I know the job is being outsourced all the time. … Somehow, I'm very grateful that I was given the chance to work 30 years in a row and good jobs. … I have still, I checked the pension reform and the earliest I get to retire is when I turn 65. But if I want a full pension, it's 66 years and 10 months. So quite a way still…

Raija's example also portrays the experience of other older jobseekers in our study, as many found themselves applying for jobs that they thought were below their experience and previous position. The trend was also visible in Berger's (Berger, 2006; Berger, 2009) studies, where

she identified changing expectations about future employment as one of the discursive strategies older jobseekers employed in their job-seeking practices. In Raija's case, her expectations changed during the job-seeking period, whereas for some jobseekers it was clear from the beginning that they would not apply for positions that matched their expertise and work history. One defining factor in her story was realizing how many years she still had left before reaching retirement age. For many, unemployment carried a social stigma that required internal negotiations about one's identity as a worker and as an older jobseeker (see Riach & Loretto, 2009). This was the case for Raija also, who had to revisit her ideas of unemployment after experiencing it firsthand following job loss from her expert-level position. Few months later during a follow-up interview, Raija was re-employed in her own field and explained how unemployment changed her own views about her self-worth and her relationships.

I guess it's because you've been in permanent employment for so long, so now, I'm extremely happy I have a job. It's funny how quickly it goes. Last fall, I was taking courses, I had an active life, but then this year, it's been only job search. Somehow it started getting to me even though it was only a couple of months, it's already affected my sense of self-worth. And at the same time, you started seeing changes in attitude in some people, unemployment after all is a big thing, and a bit of a hot potato. It somehow quickly gets to your relationships too.

Raija was conflicted since, for her, work had not been just a source of income, but also a permanent structuring factor in her life around which to organize her relationships and leisure life. Having established that employment does not simply come by applying for jobs, the older jobseekers employed and engaged in various resilience and coping strategies to overcome the intersectional stigmatization they faced both because of their age and their unemployment status. Over the years, for instance, Janne, a 57-year-old man with decades of work experience from postal service, had developed his own coping strategy after experiencing downsizing decisions firsthand many times in his career. He had decided that he would bounce between the company branches until they stopped offering him even short-term or part-time contracts. During his first interview, Janne shared his reasoning for staying with the same employer, even with such precarious work contracts.

It's, I'm starting have so many years under my belt that studying is not that, if you think about going back to school for a couple of years, then retirement age starts to be so close it's not worth it. Then when it comes to me, my tasks are the kind that not many companies have in Finland, if any apart from postal services, there isn't another place where I could use my skills.

In Janne's case, proximity to early exit was the key, as he focused on getting by until he reached the early exit age two years later and was able to take early retirement. Juggling precarious contracts meant not always knowing whether he would have a job next week and where that would be. It also meant that despite being employed, he was constantly looking for a job. Janne's case was not an isolated incidence, as these patterns of precarity and downward job mobility among older jobseekers have also been reported in the United Kingdom (Riach, 2007) and more recently in internal job mobility in Sweden (Krekula, 2019).

Precarious job conditions and devaluation of older jobseekers' work histories had also convinced 56-year-old Kaarina to take the first job she was offered. She had been adamant from the beginning that she would continue working regardless of the employment offered. Working as a cleaner with nearly four decades of customer service experience, she summarized that although there are employment opportunities available to people in their fifties and over, these opportunities are rarely lucrative and do not support career development.

It's a common misconception, a general opinion that over 50s don't get jobs. They do. I've shown that now that for sure they do. But

maybe not so smart and flashy things anymore, but I'm not even trying, I'm not, I have my own hobbies, I don't need, any career-... Those who want to build a career can do it for all I care.

Kaarina's case exemplifies the resilience strategies older jobseekers adapted to find employment. This meant having to accept jobs that were not "so, smart and flashy" and did not meet the skill level or previous work experience. For Kaarina, her resilience strategy was replacing her career with hobbies and seeing work merely as a mean to gain income. Simultaneously, her stories reflect internalized ageism and the need to follow the normative life-course when saying it is acceptable that jobseekers in their 50s are not offered good jobs anymore despite having more than a decade until retirement age. Overall, the resilience strategies were in Kohli (2019) terms "everyday oriented" acts designed to get by until reaching the retirement age or another option for exit from working life.

Reworking strategies

In addition to resilience strategies, our analyses identified four reworking strategies through which our respondents changed the existing conditions of job-seeking at age 50 and over. These strategies included utilizing external help with applications and resumés, using one's own social contacts to get past externalized recruitment systems, enrolling in education to update and improve qualifications and domestic migration to areas with more job opportunities.

Navigating the job-seeking practices was challenging for most older jobseekers, especially with the digitalized systems in place, each with their own unique instructions on how to fill in the job applications. Older jobseekers referred to the early days of their careers when the practice was to walk up to the workplace and ask for a job and start the next day. Working for decades under the same employer had allowed them years of job mobility and advancements within the company ranks to new positions. Having learned that most companies have outsourced their recruiting processes to external recruiters with complex application systems, the older jobseekers developed strategies to improve their applications, for instance, through utilizing publicly available resources targeted at jobseekers. In the following extract, a 60-year-old woman, Marketta, with a lengthy career in sales and customer service shares her confusion of the job-seeking practices today.

Actually, I have to show you, I went straight away before midsummer and started filling in the employment services forms, I started well in advance even though I knew I didn't have to before September. But they said you should be prepared to start filling these things in early, so I did pages of questions, I answered, for instance, that contemporary CV is something I can't do. It must be electronic and with images. I have education in economics, I know accounting, I mean knew accounting, but today it's not good enough for anything. Back in the day, I did my CV on a typewriter, I have applied for jobs before and been to job interviews, but it's been 36 years in between.

Finding help to navigate the labor market was easy for Marketta in the end, as employment services offered her help with creating a modern resumé and taking pictures for her profile. Creating a modern resumé facilitated the application processes, as she now knew what her strengths were and what companies were potentially looking for. The services participants were offered varied vastly depending more on their location rather than age, with some jobseekers gaining coaching sessions and others a mere call asking whether they had thought about retiring already.

For those receiving less attention from the employment services, personal social contacts and networks became a vital tool in job-seeking practices. Jobseekers who hoped to continue in the same line of work relied more on their existing contacts, as advertised jobs on different websites were mostly entry-level or lower positions than they had hoped. Here, a 54-year-old man, Raimo, shares how he decided to use

his previous social contacts to get past the external hiring processes that do not seem to favor older applicants.

> Sure, there are jobs out there, but I've tried more to use my own old contacts. When you go to the employment services and recruitment websites, I go there too. But as an example, I've worked in logistics for around 30 years, I know all the managers from our competitors because I've worked together with them. I've contacted all of them last summer already.

Given his career history, Raimo was able to get many interviews, but having finished only comprehensive school, he lacked the necessary education for the positions he had previously filled. This was a common story also portrayed in research conducted by Dormidontova et al. (2020) in Italy. Another reworking strategy we identified was gaining assets through re-education. To study while on unemployment benefits, older jobseekers needed to apply for approval from the employment services that the new career path they had chosen would be deemed as employable. However, jobseekers needed to gain the study places first before the approval process, which itself was not an easy process. After creating a modern resumé, Marketta visited a recruitment fair in her area to find vocation courses.

> I was interested in gardening, but the recruiter instantly said at the recruitment fair that there's more than a hundred applicants and only 25 get it. So I said, "so an old wench like me has no business there then," and he just laughed [laughing], but so, then he told me that there are a few spots open to study agriculture in a program that's just started. So I could get electives in gardening in what interests me. And suddenly, my hobby became my educational direction. Many ask me what I'll be when I grow up, but honestly, I still don't know.

When deciding whether re-education would be an option, older jobseekers often considered their age and proximity to retirement, as re-education can take years off working life. These decisions also resonated with Kohli (2019) argument on life-time orientation, with the working life being the timeline in relation to which individuals scaled their actions. Another topic for consideration was whether re-education was deemed acceptable at a later stage in life, as it challenged the standardized life course and its chrononormative ideas of which order things are done in life and at what time point (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015; Keskinen & Nikander, 2023; Leonard, Fuller, & Unwin, 2018). Among our participants, the jobseekers embarking on new education tended to be closer to their 50s than their 60s, with some 15 years left before reaching their set retirement age. However, participants closer to their 60s, such as Janne, were aware of the nearing possibility to exit early through unemployment and often considered it as a more favorable option if they could not find a job in their own field.

Sometimes, however, available job opportunities in their area were scarce and motivated a move to another location with more potential job opportunities. This was the case for Aki, a 57-year-old man, who had worked as a driver for all his career. He managed to get few months of employment from local employers around him after job loss but soon noticed that employers were constantly conveying the same message of "we want someone younger." Aki soon noticed the lack of job opportunities in his hometown.

> Interviewer: So, was there anything left to do around there, did you contact the employers?
>
> Aki: Yeah, I don't understand, I was constantly contacting them, the same jobs, I can name the companies [company names], and whatnots, month after month they're looking for a driver, but they won't employ you. I was even ready to take a lower pay if they only offered me a job, but no. I guess there are people for the job, I understood that it's all about the age.

In Aki's case, the blatant ageism from local employers preferring only younger applicants limited the number of job opportunities in the area.

During his job search, Aki noticed that employers who recruited drivers preferred younger, non-unionized drivers who were expected to settle for less money than their unionized, more experienced counterparts. In his experience, rather than admitting ageism, the employers justified their preferences through the cost-effectiveness of cheap labor. As the job opportunities became scarce, Aki grew more motivated to move to a larger city with more job opportunities. Migrating across the country in hope of employment in late working life is a complex decision and dependent on many situational factors. For Aki and his wife, the move was also motivated by moving closer to family members and the possibility of paying off their remaining mortgage. In comparison, other interviewees, like single parent Raimo, also considered moving but hesitated, as he still had children living at home. This highlights the need to acknowledge the overlapping social positions limiting and enabling different agentic actions in late working life.

Resistance

In our analysis, we classified actions as acts of resistance when individuals challenged the ageism they faced through conscious actions that would contest the age stereotypes imposed on them. We could not find any overt acts of resistance among our participants, although many voiced clear dissatisfaction with ageism, age discrimination and the pension reforms and unemployment policies in place at the time. In these cases, however, ageism was not challenged, rather the jobseekers questioned whether the decision-makers pushing for extension of working lives in an ageist labor market were in fact the right people for the job. Nevertheless, many of the older jobseekers had actively resisted the closures of their previous workplaces and their dismissal decisions through their labor unions and organized work-communities. We offer three possible explanations as to why we could not identify acts of resistance among the interview accounts. First, in contrast to workers, jobseekers are less likely to be organized, as unions traditionally represent current workers, indicating a need for a platform to connect and group jobseekers together for peer support. Second, the nature of ageism makes it difficult to resist. Ageism manifests deeply within the labor market practices, structures, customs and everyday language and habits. By interacting with ageism, individuals come to internalize ageism and apply it to themselves and their situations (Keskinen & Nikander, 2023). It therefore makes an invisible enemy, as there is not one clear actor who mobilizes it to attain power. Third, rather than forcing our data to fit the framework, we have reported here findings from two out of three possible agentic strategies categories. Katz (2004) herself argues that finding the pioneering type of resistance has become more challenging in the contemporary era. Even if somewhat ideological, keeping the three forms of the strategies is essential to describe the historical labor movements that resisted oppressive labor conditions.

In sum, our analyses indicated that there are various discursive strategies through which older jobseekers act agentically and respond to ageism in the labor market. We categorized actions based on their motivations rather than the outcomes of those actions. That is, we were more interested in the discursive strategies older jobseekers developed in response to ageism rather than their effectiveness against ageism in job-seeking practices, as the effectiveness of the strategies varied vastly. We identified both acts of resilience and reworking in our participants' stories. The strategies of resilience through which individuals coped during their job-seeking practices were changing expectations about future employment, identity work, accepting precarious working conditions and applying for entry-level jobs. We also identified reworking strategies through which individuals aimed to improve their positions as older jobseekers in the labor market, namely, creating a modern-style resumé, using personal assets and social networks in job search, enrolling into re-education and ultimately, moving across the country for better job opportunities. In our longitudinal analysis of change over time, we identified patterns of trial and error. Once older jobseekers deemed their strategies inefficient, they developed both new resilience

and reworking strategies in response to ageism. However, despite clear indication of resistance strategies being everyday agency oriented and reworking strategies life-time agency oriented, individuals shifted through these two types of strategies over time in an incoherent manner. We discuss these findings and their implications further in the following section.

Discussion

In this article, we were interested in the different agentic strategies older jobseekers develop and employ in response to ageism in the labor market. Through qualitative longitudinal interviews and narrative analysis as our guiding framework, we discovered different discursive strategies to counteract ageism, either through changing the job-seeking conditions (reworking) or through providing the jobseeker perseverance to continue their job search (resilience). Like previous studies investigating discursive strategies in late life unemployment, we found older jobseekers to demonstrate resilience strategies, such as changing their expectations about future employment, engaging in identity work to overcome the negative images of unemployment and being an older jobseeker (Berger, 2006, 2009; Riach & Loretto, 2009). Our findings on reworking strategies were also consistent with previous literature, as the older jobseekers counteracted ageist stereotypes through enhancing their applications and resumés with the help of available services and resources, drawing on social support and networks to advance job search and engaging in skill maintenance through re-education, as reported in Berger's studies (Berger, 2006; Berger, 2009). In addition to these previously reported strategies, we also found that older jobseekers adapt to ageism in the labor market as a resilience strategy through applying to and accepting precarious and entry-level positions that do not match their experience or skill level.

Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich (2021) characterize this trend to result from individualization practices within employment support provisions, where the responsibility for career continuation in late life unemployment is shifted towards individuals while the barriers restricting access to career continuation remain unaddressed. It is thus important to highlight that not only are older jobseekers expected to continue working, but they are also required to continuously negotiate the terms of their agency against ageism while doing so. Ageism embedded in everyday practices and talk contributes to how individuals perceive their available opportunities and resources to continue working. Thus, to create effective measures and opportunities to encourage continuation of work among older workers and jobseekers, policymakers need to take action to address the existing age stereotypes and discrimination in various labor market locations preventing individuals from engaging in the labor market.

Furthermore, we urge further research to also consider the social positions individuals hold and their contributions to individual agency and career decisions in late working life. In this article, our main focus has been on the intersection of age and unemployment status. Our analyses found no differences in the ways in which older jobseekers employed strategies to counteract ageism between men and women, rural and urban inhabitants, sole household earners and double income households or different educational levels. However, individuals with social contacts in the field were more likely to rely on their social circles than employment services for support in job search.

Our second interest was on the effects of time and temporality on the agentic responses. Through qualitative longitudinal analysis, we found first that the developed strategies to counteract ageism were dynamic, and individuals tested their strategies through trial and error in their efforts to find employment. Second, the developed strategies were connected to institutionally established age limits, such as the proximity to early exit from the labor market and set retirement age. Therefore, our findings confirm that agency is a spatio-temporally located, relational concept and supports calls for more nuanced understanding of agency and its guiding coordinates in future studies.

Our analyses have only scratched the surface on understanding temporality ageism and individual agency in late working life. The research was grounded in the assumption that ageism manifests deeply within the labor market structures and practices, and although it was not the target of our investigation in this study, we uncovered similar instances of ageism preventing or challenging access to employment and education in late working life as reported by previous studies on ageism (see Harris et al., 2018; Previtali et al., 2022). Ageism took place in employment services when older jobseekers were labelled as too old for employment and re-education, in hiring practices when employers clearly expressed their preference for younger applicants and in interview conversations when individuals applied internalized ageism to justify their labor market decisions. Subsequently, we suggest that further qualitative longitudinal investigations into ageism in late working life have the potential to unravel the complex processes through which individuals challenge ageism and turn their age into agency.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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PUBLICATION
IV

Early exit decisions in Finland: Investigating the limbo between unemployment and retirement

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