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Journal:	*Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*
Manuscript ID	QROM-10-2020-2051.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	late career, narrative study, senior, nurse, sustainable career, Finland

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The extended late career phase – examining senior nursing professionals

Purpose: By relying on sustainable career perspective and recent studies on senior employees' late career phase, this study examines senior (50+) nurses' late career narratives in the context of extending retirement age. Given the current global nursing shortage, there is a pressing need to find ways on how to promote longer and sustainable careers in the healthcare field. Yet, there is limited knowledge about the extended late career phase of senior nurses.

Design/methodology/approach: Empirical data were derived from 22 interviews collected among senior (50+) nursing professionals working in a Finnish university hospital. The qualitative interview data was analysed utilizing a narrative analysis method. As a result of the narrative analysis, four career narratives were constructed.

Findings: The findings demonstrated that senior nurses' late career narratives differed in terms of late career aspirations, constraints, mobility and active agency of one's own career. The identified career narratives indicate that the building blocks of sustainable late careers in the context of extending retirement age are diverse.

Originality: So far, few studies have investigated the extended late career phase of senior employees in the context of a changing career landscape.

Research limitations: The qualitative interview data was restricted to senior nurses working in one university hospital. Interviews were conducted on site and some nurses were called away leaving some of the interviews shorter than expected.

Practical implications: To support sustainable late careers requires that attention be based on the whole career ecosystem covering individual, organizational and societal aspects and how they are intertwined together.

Keywords: late career, nurses, senior, sustainable career, retirement reform, Finland

Introduction

As workforces in many countries are aging, the slowing down of workforce growth is leading to labour shortages in certain areas in the long run. This development has been especially evident in some labour-intensive sectors, such as healthcare, where staff shortages are highlighted as a current problem in several countries (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019a). One way to address this shortage is by prolonging work careers. Recently, many of the OECD countries have introduced pension reforms and a subsequent increase in pension eligibility ages (OECD, 2019b). For example, because of recent retirement reforms in Finland, there has been a slight positive trend in terms of an increased retirement age. In 2017, the average retirement age was 61.2. Similarly, the number of senior Finnish individuals participating in working life is slowly growing (Finnish Centre for Pensions, 2018). Still, the labour market participation among senior employees in Finland is lower compared to other Nordic countries (Riekhoff and Järnefelt, 2017).

While individuals' careers are extended due to the increasing retirement age, they are also becoming more unpredictable, fragmented, and multidirectional than ever before (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). Thus, along with societal and organizational level actions to extend the late career phase of senior employees (Veth *et al.*, 2018), it is equally important to understand the ways in which senior employees themselves experience prolonging the late phase of their careers. Although, there are several studies on the changing nature of careers, there is limited theoretical knowledge about the building blocks of a sustainable and successful late career phase in the context of prolonging working life (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017; Hennekam, 2015; Kooij, 2015; Zacher, 2015). Thus, a nuanced understanding regarding the late career phase of senior employees and transition to retirement is needed (Ferraro *et al.*, 2018; Prahash *et al.*, 2019).

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It has been argued that prolonging the late career phase demands resilience, continuous learning, and active agency of one's own career from senior employees (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017; Salminen, von Bonsdorff and von Bonsdorff, 2019). However, during the late career phase, senior employees may face several challenges such as decreasing physical health and fluid cognitive abilities, such as information processing (e.g. Salthouse, 2012). Prolonging the late career phase can be particularly challenging for senior employees in certain fields and jobs, which are physically burdensome by nature (Riekhoff and Järnefelt, 2017). Thus, physical work may pose a concrete barrier to work later in life (Beehr, Glazer, Nielson, and Farmer, 2000; Prakash *et al.*, 2019; Schlosser, Zinni, and Armstrong-Stassen, 2012). For example, senior nursing professionals face both physical and psychological demands at work (Clendon and Walker, 2016). Given the current global nursing shortage, there is a pressing need to find ways on how to promote longer and sustainable careers in the healthcare field (Merkel et al., 2019; Price and Reicher, 2017). For healthcare organizations, it is of the utmost importance to understand how they can support an extended late career phase of their senior nursing professionals. So far, however, there is little knowledge about nurses' needs and expectations during the late career phase (Price and Reichert, 2017).

The objective of this study is to take an individual level perspective and explore senior (aged 50+) nursing professionals' late career narratives in the context of prolonging the late career phase. Theoretically, this inquiry relies on new career theories and especially a sustainable career model. Empirically, this study relies on qualitative interview data collected among senior nursing professionals aged 50+, defined as 'senior employees', because labour market participation traditionally decreases from age 50 onward (see e.g. OECD, 2006). This threshold has also been commonly used in previous studies focusing on senior nursing professionals (see e.g. Clendon and Walker, 2016) as well as other senior employees (Prakash *et. al.*, 2019).

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Data for this study was collected among 22 senior Finnish nursing professionals in December 2016. This coincides with the latest retirement reform, which came into act at the beginning of 2017 in Finland (Pension Reform, 2017), less than a month after the interviews were conducted. Because of the reform, the official retirement age was raised - a change which concerned many of the studied senior nursing professionals. From 2017 onward, the retirement age in Finland increases by three months per year until it reaches 65 years. Furthermore, for those born in 1965 or later, the retirement age is determined by their life expectancy (OECD, 2019b). This is significant especially for those employees, such as nursing professionals, whose work is both mentally and physically demanding. Continuing to work many years longer than their planned retirement age may prove to be impossible. In fact, the positive connection between poor mental and physical health and early retirement intentions has been widely documented (Sejbaek, Nexo and Borg, 2012; Topa, Depolo, and Alcover, 2019; von Bonsdorff *et. al.* 2010a). As such, the retirement reform provides an interesting context for this study.

This study contributes to previous studies in the following ways. First, this research inquiry investigates the diverse late career experiences and trajectories in the context of an extended late career phase, which has thus far received little attention (Duberley and Carmichael, 2016). Further, the research on the changing nature of careers has primarily focused on younger generations, leaving the opportunity to refocus on how the changing and prolonging of careers are perceived by senior employees (De Vos & Segers, 2013; Salminen and von Bonsdorff, 2017), where much less is currently known. Moreover, senior employees have often been studied as passive objects of organizational practices and less attention has been given to their active agency in terms of managing their own careers during the late career phase (Kooij, 2015). By relying on the concept of a sustainable career, this study aims to further the understanding of the building blocks of sustainable careers in the context of an

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extended late career phase (cf. De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017, Kooij, 2015). Second, quantitative approaches have been the dominant methodology employed in studies related to senior employees' late career and transition into retirement (Riekhoff and Järnefelt, 2017; Schlosser *et. al.*, 2012; Veth *et. al.*, 2018). This study employs a narrative approach for analysing the qualitative interview data and provides nuanced understandings of diverse late career trajectories in the context of an extended late career phase. Finally, the Finnish pension reform which came into place in the beginning of 2017 acts as an interesting contextual element in this study.

This paper is organized as follows. After the introduction, new career models and the sustainable career model are discussed in relation to an extended late career phase. Next, a description of the data collection, main characteristics of the informants and the narrative analysing process will be discussed. In the results section, the four career narratives constructed from the analysis are presented. In the discussion and conclusion, the main findings are discussed relative to the theoretical framework and previous studies. The paper ends with practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical framework

Changes in the labour market and in society influence contemporary careers and employees at different career phases (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017; Veth *et al.*, 2018). As a result of societal-level changes such as retirement reforms, globalization and technological changes (e.g. digitalization), careers are not only changing and becoming longer, but are also becoming more unpredictable, non-linear and unique (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). In traditional career models, careers are often illustrated as a steady and linear movement inside one organization representing an organizational career (Clarke, 2013). Similarly, the late career phase in traditional career theories (e.g. Super, 1980) is usually characterized as a

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gradual decline ending at retirement (Lytle *et al.*, 2015). However, over the years, the traditional view of careers as a linear and unbreakable path from graduation to retirement has been replaced by more diverse views of careers (Clarke, 2013; De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017). This means that instead of a gradual decline and withdrawal from working life, a late career phase can include new and diverse career movements (Lytle *et al.*, 2015; Veth *et al.*, 2018; Wang and Schultz, 2010). Thus, the transition from work to retirement is getting blurrier than before (Salminen and von Bonsdorff, 2017). For example, there is a growing tendency to return to work after being retired (Kojola and Moen, 2016; Schlosser *et al.*, 2012). So-called bridge employment refers to all kinds of work after retirement including part-time, full-time and temporary work (Feldman and Beehr, 2011; Veth *et al.*, 2018). Bridge employment can be defined as a flexible work arrangement whereby bridge employees have an ongoing (i.e. non-temporary) relationship with the pre-retirement organization, or as contingent bridge employment where employees have a temporary work arrangement with their former or another organization (Mariappanadar, 2013; Schlosser *et al.*, 2012).

The changing career landscape has resulted in several new career models, such as boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994), protean career (Hall, 2004), and Kaleidoscope career (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Each of these new career models provides a particular viewpoint on how careers have recently changed or are changing (Salminen and von Bonsdorff, 2017). For example, a boundaryless career underlines career mobility (Arthur, 1994) including physical movements inside and outside organizational boundaries, but also psychological mobility is related to mobility referring to individuals' abilities for career movements (Clarke, 2013). Whereas, a protean career is illustrated as a career, in which an individual can reshape his or her competencies and skills as a means to remain employable (Clarke, 2013). The protean career highlights an individual's adaptability and active agency

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of one's own career (Hall, 2004). A Kaleidoscope career, on the other hand, underlines an individual's constant search during his/her career for a balance between work and non-work demands (Cohen *et al.*, 2009; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Each of these career concepts focuses on specific elements needed from individuals to survive and thrive under the new career landscape (Salminen and von Bonsdorff, 2017). In particular, they underscore the importance of employability throughout the career as well as the increasing responsibility of individuals for managing their own careers compared to traditional, organizational careers (Clarke, 2013; Kooij, 2015).

The new career models have also received some criticism. For example, it has been argued that traditional, organizational careers still exist along with the new career models (Clarke, 2013). Furthermore, there are only a few studies which have investigated the new career models from the late career perspective (Salminen and von Bonsdorff, 2017). Also, minor attention has been given to the dark side of new careers (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). For example, there can be several individual factors, such as deteriorating health, low career capital and unemployment, which may inhibit individuals' abilities for career movements, active agency of one's career or the possibilities to find a balance between work and non-work demands (Kooij, 2015; Salminen & von Bonsdorff, 2017; Tempest and Coupland, 2016). Furthermore, there can be organizational and societal level factors, such as age-related stereotypes and age discrimination which can inhibit career mobility during the late career phase (Ferraro *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, a more holistic perspective on changing careers and on the interconnections between individual, organizational and societal level is needed (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019).

Recently, a sustainable career model has been introduced (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019; De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017; McDonald and Hite, 2018). It stresses the importance of safeguarding and developing human capital at the individual, organizational and societal level

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over time and thereby fosters continuity (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017). According to this model, individual careers should be understood as a part of a larger career ecosystem (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017). For example, Baruch and Rousseau (2019, p. 92) have defined career ecosystem as "*a social system of employment and career-related development and opportunity that emerges from interdependencies among actors or entities, including individuals, networks, firms, and social institutions*". The sustainable career model acknowledges that there are different top-down and bottom-up processes which shape individual careers (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). Retirement reform is one example of a top-down process which has a direct impact on senior employees' late career phase. Whereas, in a bottom-up process, the career ecosystem is developed by individuals, who evaluate and modify their connections to the career ecosystem through legal and psychological contracts (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019).

Conceptually, the sustainable career shares some similar elements with the boundaryless, protean and Kaleidoscope career models (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017; McDonald and Hite, 2018). For example, McDonald and Hite's (2018, p. 350) definition for the sustainable career states: "*the variety of paid and unpaid work experiences that provide continual growth and renewal and that intersect multiple life contexts resulting in meaning and well-being for individuals over time*." In accordance with the boundaryless career, sustainable career highlights career movements across different types of context (De Vos and van der Heijden, 2017). In line with protean career, sustainable career emphasizes that careers are driven by the person rather than by the organization. However, the sustainable career model acknowledges that there can be vulnerable groups, which may not have adequate career competencies to manage one's own career (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017). Similar to the Kaleidoscope career, the sustainable career also emphasizes career choices that meets one's personal needs, allows work and family life to be successfully combined, and promotes the continuous

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development of skills and competencies and a sufficient feeling of security and continuity in the labour market throughout one's career (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017; McDonald and Hite, 2018).

In the context of an extended late career phase and successful ageing at work, a sustainable career relates to individuals' abilities to preserve their resources and thereby their ability to maintain health, motivation and workability (Kooij, 2015). Several key characteristics have been associated with sustainable careers (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017; Kooij, 2015; McDonald and Hite, 2018). McDonald and Hite (2018) have identified longevity, resilience, interdependency and social justice as essential elements of sustainable careers. Longevity refers to career longevity and acknowledges individuals' needs to work later in life (McDonald and Hite, 2018). However, during the late career phase, individual differences in career capital and abilities to respond to career changes are likely to influence individuals' abilities to continue working (Tempest and Coupland, 2016).

Resilience describes an individual's ability to bounce back from adversities faced during one's career (McDonald and Hite, 2018). An extended late career phase may entail different adversities, such as career plateau, ageism and unemployment (Salminen and von Bonsdorff, 2017). Furthermore, work-related hardships can occur along with non-work-related hardships such as illness or death of a loved one (Salminen et al., 2019). For example, the study by Salminen et al. (2019) showed that adversities (such as health problems, death of a family member) were rather common among senior nursing professionals and the level of resilience was positively related to their intentions to continue working until their official retirement age and even beyond.

Interdependency as an element of sustainable career, highlights the influence of multiple work and non-work-related elements on an individual's career (McDonald and Hite, 2018). For example, during a late career phase, there are not only a number of diverse factors,

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such as physical health, financial needs and family responsibilities, but there is also the attractiveness of leisure time which is likely to have an impact on senior employees' late career decisions, such as bridge employment (Beehr and Bennett, 2015; Schlosser *et al.*, 2012; Wang and Schultz, 2010). There can also be gender differences in late career paths and retirement intentions (Duberley and Carmichael, 2016; Foster and Walker, 2013; August, 2011).

Finally, the social justice element of sustainable careers stresses the need for a more inclusive organizational and societal culture as a means to cultivate sustainable careers (McDonald and Hite, 2018). Along with pension reforms and other societal level actions, prevailing attitudes, norms and perceptions regarding ageing and prolonging working careers at the societal level can influence organizational practices that influence on older employees' late careers (Rudman, 2015; Salminen *et al.*, 2018). Age-sensitive and inclusive organizational practices and career opportunities can be considered especially important in the context of an extended late career phase, because senior employees may encounter a career plateau and ageism during their late career (Salminen and von Bonsdorff, 2017). Together, individual, organizational and societal factors form intertwined combinations, which are likely to produce diverse late career paths (Kojola and Moen, 2016).

Promotion of sustainable careers is particularly timely in the healthcare field, where mid-and late-career nursing professionals form a major cohort of the nursing workforce (Price and Reichert, 2017). Due to a global shortage of nursing professionals (Armstrong-Stassen *et al.*, 2015), several studies have investigated organizational practices, such as human resource management (HRM), (Salminen et al., 2019) as well as nurse managers' role in retaining senior nursing professionals for as long as possible (Armstrong-Stassen et al., 2015). Further, there is evidence that certain HRM practices, such as training and development opportunities are important across career phases, which highlights the

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significance for professional growth also during the late career phase (Price and Reichert, 2017). Additionally, studies have found that senior nursing professionals' value flexible work arrangements, such as reduced working hours, control over schedules, job sharing and shift selection during the late career phase (Clendon and Walker, 2016; Kojala and Moen, 2016). However, there are few studies which have examined the changing landscape of older nursing professionals and their active agency during an extended late career phase.

Data collection and analysis

As a career can be defined as sequences of a person's work experiences over time (Arthur *et al.*, 1989), narratives can be considered significant for making sense of individual careers (Bujold 2004, Cohen and Mallon 2001). In this study, qualitative data was collected among senior nursing professionals by interviewing 22 senior (aged 50+), registered nursing professionals in December 2016. All interviewees worked in a large university hospital in Finland. There are 15 central hospitals, as well as five (5) university hospitals in Finland (Keskimäki *et al.*, 2019) where the most demanding treatments are completed. Permission to conduct this study was received from the hospital's ethics committee. An invitation was sent by e-mail by the hospital's HR department to all senior registered nursing professionals working at the hospital. The nursing professionals who were willing to participate in the study were asked to contact the researcher directly by e-mail. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in person, except for one interview, which was conducted by phone.

The age of the interviewees varied from 50 to 64. The mean age of the interviewees was 56 years. One of the interviewees had already retired and returned to work with a short-term contract. Another one was retiring during the interview process. The age-range can be justified by the notion that nurses work experiences and career expectations are seen to be related more on the career stage than on their chronological age (Price and Reichert, 2017).

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Furthermore, as individuals age, the increased variation between the levels of work ability, for example (Ilmarinen, 2009), may be reflected in the diverse career paths we typically find in the late stages of work careers. The interviewees worked in different medical care units in four different locations. They represented diverse wards covering intensive care, internal medicine, radiology, surgery, endocrinology, urology, cardiac, psychiatry, and neonatal intensive care unit. Five of the interviewed nursing professionals were male. In 2017, over 90 per cent of the nursing professionals were female and less than 10 per cent male in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2017).

The semi-structured interviews covered four broad themes: 1) career history, 2) transition into retirement, 3) challenges related to late career phase and, 4) learning and development. First, the senior nursing professionals were asked to describe their career history from their graduation to the current phase. Second, interviewees' feelings, thoughts, plans and expectations regarding retirement were probed. Third, interviewees were asked to reflect on what kind of factors enabled or hindered their abilities to continue working at a senior age. The fourth theme focused on changes in the current job, needs for continuous learning and opportunities to develop oneself.

The length of the interviews varied from 16 to 60 minutes (Table 1) and were conducted on the hospital premises in a confidential area. The nurses were able to participate in the interview during working hours, resulting in some nurses having less time than others to be interviewed due to busy schedules. Content-wise there was not a great difference between shorter and longer interviews. This might be explained by the fact that the nurses who were interested in participating in the study were provided with detailed information about the content of the interviews prior to the interviews. To protect the identity of the interviewees, we have provided a pseudonym in our narrative, noting their respective age.

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Saturation had been achieved after about 15 interviews. Saturation is defined as reaching that point of diminishing returns where the interviews add nothing new to the understanding of the subject (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Having the additional interviews further confirmed the results, allowing for a richer analysis. All interviews were tape-recorded with the assurance of confidentiality. After the interview process, the tape-recoded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in Finnish. The preliminary analysis was made in Finnish and materials used for the in-depth analysis were translated into English.

[insert Table 1 around here]

In this study, a narrative study approach was adapted for the purpose of analysing the qualitative data. Narratives are a central form of knowledge by which individuals give meaning to their actions (Bruner 1986; Polkinghorne 1988). Furthermore, careers are often expressed by using metaphors and stories (Inkson, 2004). Stories like late career narratives, are not only interesting because of the content, but also because they convey emotions and meanings (Hyde, 2008). Narratives illustrate how individuals make sense of the world in which they live (Souto-Manning, 2014). Furthermore, a narrative study approach highlights contextuality (Josselson, 2011) and a retrospective reflection (Freeman, 2015). In other words, human experience has a crucial narrative dimension, and it is organized along a temporal, sequential order of "first this, then that", "befores and afters" (see Czarniawska, 2004; Schütze, 1987, p. 15). The narrative study approach can also be justified by the fact that narratives can be used as a tool in sense-making of lived experiences (Casey *et al.*, 2016), because it enables the researchers an opportunity to uncover, for example, meanings and characterizations that would be otherwise remain unexplored (Hyde, 2008). For example, recently, a narrative analysis in a health care context was used in a study by Hahn *et al.*, (2021) when they examined joy and meaning of nurse managers' work. Therefore, the

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narrative study approach enables researchers to uncover the nuances of the complex career landscape which influenced and shaped senior nursing professionals' late career phase in previous studies (Kojola and Moen, 2016).

Narrative research can be carried out in different ways (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). For example, Polkhorne (1995) distinguishes between analysis of narratives and narrative analysis (see Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). The former concerns the analysis of collected stories, whereas the latter refers to analysing data in a way that one or more narratives is formed based on the analysing process (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). In this study, the latter approach was chosen. Narrative analysis as a process includes: 1) overall reading of the data, 2) multiple readings from different perspectives and components, 3) iterative reading and, 4) conversation with theoretical literature (Josselson, 2011). At the heart of narrative analysis is how to interpret stories, and more specifically, the texts that tell the stories (Patton 2002, p. 118). The narrative analysis requires 'creativity and craftsmanship' (Tengblad *et al*., 2005).

According to Riesmann (1993; 2004), a narrative analysis can focus on the content, structure, interaction or performative aspects of the narratives (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016, p. 222). This study focused on the content of the narratives, in other words, "*what is told*" (see Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016, p. 222; Riesmann, 2004) was the focus of the analysis instead of how the narrative is told or the dialogue between an interviewee and the researcher (Riesmann, 2004). The purpose was to concentrate on nurses' late career experiences in the context of delayed retirement age. The analysis started by carefully reading the transcribed narratives several times over to become familiar with the interview data. Notes were also made during the review. The thematic approach to the narrative analysis was adapted so that we could categorize the different late career experiences. These narratives were contrasted against the theoretical pre-understanding regarding senior employees' late

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career phase and changing nature of careers. In addition, attention was paid on the main differences and similarities of the late career narratives. Several iterations of the analysis took place to identify the main elements of different late career narratives. Two researchers independently reviewed the narratives and met on three separate occasions to arrive at a consensus on the overarching narratives. As a result of this analysis, four narratives were constructed: 1) "*struggle with finding a balance*", 2) "*flexible work arrangements*", 3) "*to the end*" and 4) "*unleashing the full potential*". The iterative nature of the analysis process, achieved over time, resulted in producing a nuanced understanding of the late career phase among senior nursing professionals.

Findings

Each of the four narratives found in our analysis are discussed in turn below.

"Struggle with finding a balance"

In the first late career narrative, deteriorating health and workability framed the late career narrative. There was a constant struggle to find a balance with deteriorating individual resources and work demands. For example, one nursing professional had experienced several health problems in recent years due to poor indoor air in her workplace. Her deteriorating health had resulted in her questioning whether or not she would be able to continue working full-time until the official retirement age: *"I have struggled a lot with whether I should save myself… I really enjoy working here… but my health is at stake…",* 'Miranda, 54'.

Further, working full-time until official state-sanctioned retirement was often considered difficult due to health-related problems. The constant struggle with deteriorating work ability complicated the late career phase for some of the senior nursing professionals and forced them to find alternative ways to continue working. For example, 'Rose, 61', had applied for a partial old-age pension so she could cope with the multiple health-related problems, which

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emerged in a short period of time: *Everything [illnesses] hit at once… and it felt like everything falls on [my shoulders]. Now, I have applied for a partial old-age pension….*

Another issue of finding balance was that the transition from work to retirement was mainly seen as a relief of the constant burden at work. There was an obvious disappointment regarding extending the retirement age, as noted by 'Theresa, 56': *"Well, of course I waited for [the retirement] and I wish that the retirement age will not be raised anymore"*. In this career narrative, possibilities for a lightened workload during the late career phase, for example, in the form of part-time work, were often desired among the senior nursing professionals.

In some cases, the struggle with health problems and deteriorating workability were worsened by other hardships, such as a death of a family member or caregiving responsibilities to immediate family members. For example, another nurse just entering retirement, had confronted several, non-work-related adversities during their late career phase. But she had also experienced a great joy of her newly born grandchild. These non-work-related factors had influenced her decision to work part-time before her actual retirement:

> *There were many overlapping issues… and then I felt totally exhausted. It felt that… I need to have a break, and I told a doctor that I will not return to work before I feel that I can again confront a patient which needs me…I was already at that age, that I thought that I will not return to a full-time job… and then there was the grandchild and I felt that I have enough resources for my private life, that I want to also have my private life. It [part-time job] was a good solution for me.*
>
> 'Olga, 64'

Another nurse, taking a career break in the form of a sabbatical leave, achieved relief from stressful work that enabled her to devote time and energy for her grandchild:

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These problems [here] with indoor air have been tremendous. And last summer… my daughter-in-law asked if it is possible for me to take time off from work and take care of the grandchildren… It was what I had been dreaming about… I took a year off from work…It felt so good [having sabbatical]…. I felt myself refreshed [after the sabbatical]. 'Miranda, 54'

Along with non-work-related hardships, there were also work-related factors such as constant changes at work which were seen to complicate the extended late career phase. For example, a nurse described the situation in the following way:

I have to say that it is perhaps hard to find work motivating …the work itself is challenging… and there are dozens of heavy lifts to be performed several times of day… so I feel that I am not able to work full-time until the retirement age. 'Theresa, 56'

Another example of work-related hardship is short-term, temporary contracts, which overshadowed one senior nursing professional's career narrative. For 'Linda, 57', short-term, temporary contracts together with health-related problems had resulted in career insecurity as she was forced to move from one organization to another causing an extra burden on her career: "*…they [temporary contracts] were short, one following another…I have always had to search for a job… it has been a necessity*".

An accumulation of setbacks, such as health problems, a divorce, a death of a loved one or difficulties in one's own work characterized some of these late career narratives where the nurses struggled to find a balance. Some of the hardships experienced made it difficult to continue full-time work during the late career stage. Due to the adversities experienced during the late career phase, many of the senior nurses had actively searched for ways to ease their burden and find balance. For them, a part-time job, a sabbatical leave or an early retirement were ways to handle the adversities and struggles during the late career phase.

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Furthermore, positive aspects outside the work context, such as grandchildren and freedom from work demands and constant changes at work acted as a pull factor towards retirement.

"Flexible work arrangements"

Work-related factors framed the second late career narrative. Both positive (such as content of the work, flexible work arrangements, good work community and supervisory support) and negative (such as heavy workload, fast tempo and workplace bullying) work-related factors characterized senior nursing professionals' late career narratives. The motive to continue working until retirement age was closely related to the characteristics of one's own work. For example, the positive work atmosphere was considered to be a motivator during the late career stage. Furthermore, confidence in one's own competencies as well as the competence of the colleagues provided meaningfulness and feeling of empowerment among the senior nurses. For example, a male nurse describes his thoughts in the following way:

> *Well, this is a good workplace and [we have] a big, competent work community…*
>
> *It is an empowering issue. And then the work is, from the most part, meaningful...*
>
> *But, from time to time, the workload is tremendous as well as the flow of patients.*
>
> 'Hans, 59'

The senior nursing professionals representing this career narrative felt that an extended late career phase was largely contingent upon the policies of their employer. They also felt that the delayed retirement age was not currently given enough consideration by the employer. They posited that the organisation was not prepared enough for the growing number of senior nursing professionals who would require flexible work arrangements to allow them the ability to continue working until the official retirement age. Senior nursing professionals representing this career narrative perceived that the organization is responsible for taking into consideration the needs of an aging workforce:

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…there is [so much] ageing employees, and their workload needs to be lightened. Who is going to do that work…? 'Violet, 57'

Those [managerial practices] should be reciprocal, conversational…Some [senior nursing professionals] are healthier and some not that healthy, but when one ages, and if you have done shift work for 30 years, it is a long time. There will be problems with health… 'Betty, 54'

Although the senior nurses had not yet experienced major health problems, they perceived that over the coming years they were going to need some work adjustments so that they could continue to work until the official retirement age. For example, 'Sara, 53', was worried that the organisation may not provide enough possibilities for a flexible work arrangement during the final years of her career: *"…it has not been thought [of at the organization]… if I have to change my job and do something else, because I will not be able to cope with my old job. A more sustainable career should be found."*

In this narrative grouping, the senior nursing professionals actively utilized the existing HR practices available to promote their workability. For example, several organisational practices were considered to improve their abilities to continue working until the official retirement age. There were already some flexible work arrangements in use at the workplace, which enabled them to adjust their resources with the work demands. Examples of these flexible work arrangements were a timebank and an autonomy in scheduling shifts:

One good thing is that I take part in the organizations' timebank…I have always one holiday week [in the timebank] … so I can take one day off if there are enough people at work… It is a good way to help you continue to work. 'Dorothy, 56'

…we have autonomy in terms of scheduling our shifts, so you are able to influence your own shifts….. for me, mornings are difficult, because I have joint

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pain and stiffness…. So, I prefer doing evening and night shifts,…it fits well to my current situation. 'Nathalia, 55'

Now I do two shifts. I stopped the night shifts approximately five years ago. [Because] I could not no longer recover from the night shifts and I was not my best anymore in the night shifts. 'Violet, 57'

Senior nursing professionals appeared to look for organizational practices which would bring flexibility to the late career phase and increase their ability to continue working until the official retirement age.

"To the end"

Cautious intentions to continue working until the official retirement age and beyond characterized the third late career narrative. For example, one of the male nursing professionals had decided to return to work after being retired for a short time, and he had prudent intentions to continue the bridge employment: *…I think always half a year ahead and then I evaluate [whether or not to continue bridge employment], that is wise to do*. 'Gabriel, 61'.

In this narrative grouping, the extended late career phase was not considered problematic and the senior nursing professionals felt that their own physical and psychological abilities allowed them to continue working until the official retirement age. For instance, 'Whesley, 52', was irritated by the negative discourses in his workplace regarding the extended late career phase: *"Some people yearn for… retirement. I am sick and tired of that… I have joked that I will be here as long as I can…"*.

Although, the senior nurses in this narrative had firm intentions to continue working until the official retirement age, they also acknowledged that deteriorating health may cause problems during their late career phase. One senior nurse contemplated how the possible changes in physical and mental resources may affect her ability to continue working:

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Well, yes, I have thought about it whether I am able [to continue working until retirement age]… because our work is physically very hard. And in our work, also attentiveness, sensitivity and meticulousness are required… So, am I able to be attentive and meticulous enough and how is my memory going to function, for example. So, I have pondered those kinds of things. 'Emily, 54'

In contrast to the first and second narrative groupings, these 'to the end' narratives gather together those narratives where senior nurses shared that they did not have any work-related obstacles or difficulties. For example, Kathy (57) felt that her current career phase was rather easy, because her personal life did not include any major burdens such as having to provide caregiving to immediate family members:

Well, the family-related issues need to be in shape [in order to be able to continue working until retirement age]… [now] everything is going well with my son and my husband. And my parents are still alive… And me and my siblings visit them [parents] in turn. 'Kathy, 57'

Also, some of our interviewees noted that work-related issues, such as the content of the work, work environment or managerial practices were not considered particularly problematic in terms of continuing to work until retirement age. Some of the nurses had confided in us about one particular problem at their workplace. Bullying was raised as an important organizational issue; some senior nurses chose to 'alienate' themselves from such negative practices, as a way to safeguard their mental health. Wesley, 52, for example, maintained that he had actively tried to avoid being in the "*inner circle*" of negative events at the workplace.

Despite our interviewees' abilities and willingness to continue working until retirement age, intentions and plans regarding the final years of their careers in nursing were dealt with cautiously in this narrative grouping. For instance, there was no great interest towards making

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job changes or prospecting new career opportunities among these senior nursing professionals even though the finiteness of the working career was acknowledged. As noted by Amelia, 55: "*When you think 10 years back, three years is nothing, it is a short time, but when you think 10 years forwards…you just need to keep up with the constant [hurry]…".*

Furthermore, some of the interviewees emphasized that they were happy with their career and its trajectory. For example, Emily, 54 described how she had been satisfied in her career under the same employer. She indicates, "*I have loved this work so much and I have not felt it [studying futher] necessary*".

"Unleashing the full potential"

The fourth and final career narrative grouping resembled new possibilities and opportunities during the late career phase. For instance, one of the nursing professionals dreamt about entrepreneurship during the final years of his career. Continuous learning and a strong sense of professional competence characterized his career narrative:

> *I feel that my professional competence has become stronger so much that I am confident that I can do my work well… and I have also lots of responsibilities. I attend training also all the time… It is a signal for me that I can handle my work…* 'Frans, 59'

The senior nursing professionals representing this career narrative did not feel major challenges in their work ability. They were motivated and engaged with their work and working after retirement was considered one option among others. This sentiment is expressed by 'Paul, 50': *"I like working and I have worked since a young age, so I don't have anything against it [bridge employment]…".* Work-related issues, such as technological changes were perceived by some as a challenge. 'Jane, 57', described her response to technological changes in the following way: "*You just have to jump on board, and I have done that…*".

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Active agency in one's own career and a search for new experiences were evident in this career narrative. Consequently, senior nurses felt that the late career phase provides meaningful career experiences. Ines,'56', had worked for a long time as a nurse, but she had also earned another degree from a totally different field and she was actively trying to find ways to fulfil her potential during her late career phase:

> *Well, my official retirement age is 64, because I was born in the 1960s. But I don't really think about my retirement age… I think that during the final years at work, I can do something meaningful for myself and others. I could use my strengths and feel enthusiasm and joy of the work that I do….* 'Ines, 56'

Even mobility over organizational boundaries was viewed as a possible option during the late career phase:

> *I get easily excited about new things. I sometimes wonder, is this [the job] I really want to do? Is there something else? Should I study more? …I still wonder what I could do in the future, because there is still over 10 years of work before retirement.* 'Cecilia, 53'

Some obstacles were seen to hamper career progress to be able to achieve their potential. For example, ageism in the labour market was considered one obstacle:

> *After the age of 40, it is much harder to get a job, especially a permanent job… Inside this house [hospital] there are some [job] opportunities…but outside, I have tried a few times, there were 30 to 50 other applicants each time, and I was in the top three every time…but I did not get the job….* 'Frans, 59'

Possibilities for new career movements inside and outside organizational boundaries as well as active agency of one's own career characterized this particular career narrative.

Discussion

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Less is known about the extended late career phase under the new career landscape that includes changing careers and other similar models (Kooij, 2015; Salminen and von Bonsdorff, 2017). This study answered the call to take a nuanced and detailed focus on the late career phase and transition into retirement among senior employees (Ferraro *et al.*, 2018; Lytle *et al.*, 2015). We investigated senior nursing professionals' late career narratives in the context of the extended late career phase in Finland. Four late career narratives were constructed by means of the narrative analyses process. In these career narratives, the different aspects of the career ecosystem, such as organizational practices as well as the changing individual resources and individual aspirations were intertwined together resulting in diverse understanding of late career paths in nursing.

The first late career narrative highlighted personal constraints. Notably, deteriorating health hampered some senior nursing professionals' abilities to continue working until their postponed official retirement age. In this career narrative, we also found that earlier career setbacks and family issues intertwined and influenced late careers. The findings of this study reinforce suppositions noted by Feldman and Beehr (2011) that senior employees evaluate their work experiences, personal resources and their aspirations when they plan the transition into retirement. Our results are also in line with the study by Duberley and Charmichael (2016), who also found that cumulative life experiences, both positive and negative, influenced senior nurses' expectations towards retirement.

Longing for flexibility characterized the second narrative grouping. Insufficient organizational practices were seen as a possible risk to prolonging the late career phase. From the perspective of sustainable careers, it seems that there are older nursing professionals who feel there are not enough elements in their organization which would have supported their opportunities for flexibility and preparing for changes during the late career phase (cf. McDonald and Hite, 2018). At the same time, existing HRM practices, such as a time bank

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and autonomy in scheduling own shifts, were in active use for some and were considered useful tools to ease and maintain workability during the late career phase. In line with previous studies (Clendon and Walker, 2016; Kojala and Moen, 2016; Prakash *et al.*, 2019), flexible work arrangements, such as reduced working hours, control over schedules, job-sharing and shift selection are significant factors influencing senior employees' extended late career phase and timing of retirement.

In the third career narrative, the late career intentions were somewhat prudent and in flux, providing support for previous studies (e.g. Kojala and Moen, 2016). However, there was also a demonstration of resilience and determination to continue working until the official retirement age. There is some evidence from previous studies that supports the notion that resilience is positively related to senior nurses' intentions to continue working until the official retirement age (Salminen et al., 2019). In this career narrative, the need for organizational practices to support an extended late career phase was not deemed to be as important compared to the second narrative grouping. Also, there were also some active attempts to avoid negative aspects of the work, such as workplace bullying. In the healthcare field, workplace bullying is rather common (Mortensen et al., 2018) and may act as push factor for early retirement. It may also speak to the resilience of nurses as previously mentioned.

In the fourth career narrative, the late career phase was characterised by active agency of individuals. For some, the late career phase was seen to offer new career opportunities and prospects leading us to the conclusion that the fourth career narrative resembled most of the new career concepts, such as sustainable career (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017). Similarly, Duberley and Charmichael (2016) in their study identified a group of senior female employees called 'enabled', who demonstrated active agency in terms of managing their own late career choices. However, although the late career stage was seen as a potential phase for

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personal growth and career renewal (Wang and Shi, 2014), it was also acknowledged that societal and organizational factors, such as age discrimination, can hamper one's career progression during the late career phase (Hennekam, 2015).

Practical Implications

Due to the ageing workforce and delayed or abolished retirement age, there will be a growing number of senior employees in the labour market in the future. Thus, the number of senior employees working in many organizations will increase. Consequently, organizations need to put more effort than before to find ways to safeguard their human capital and retain their senior employees (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017). The findings of this study indicate that some senior employees, working in physically demanding jobs, are likely to benefit from flexible work arrangements such as reduced number of shift work, the use of time bank and shorter working hours. However, there are also senior employees who do not feel a need for age sensitive HRM practices during the late career phase. For some senior employees, an extended late career can mean a flourishing career phase. For them, opportunities for career advancement and career renewal can act as push factor for continuing to work until retirement age and even beyond. Hence, for HR professionals and managers, it is important to understand the diverse late career aspirations among senior employees as well as the longer career trajectories behind senior employees' late career intentions and decisions.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study relied on qualitative interview data collected among senior, mainly female, nursing professionals in Finland. The number of the interviews limits the generalisation of the results.

Due to busy schedules, and interviews on site, some nurses were pulled away from our interviews, with the potential loss of information. Lengthier interviews could have possibly

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resulted in a more detailed and nuanced data. Consideration for interviews away from nurses' immediate work area would be recommended.

Possible gender differences were not analysed in this study. Thus, investigating the diverse late career path of senior female and male nursing professionals provides an interesting avenue for future studies.

Finally, the data for this study was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the healthcare sector and nursing professionals were under great pressure. Thus, investigating the career narratives of senior nursing professionals after the pandemic and how it may have changed their thoughts regarding the extended late career phase could provide an interesting avenue for future studies. This would provide an opportunity to conduct a longitudinal study with the same participants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings and our analysis indicate that the building blocks of sustainable late careers in the context of prolonging working life are diverse (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2017; Hennekam, 2015; Zacher, 2015). The extended late career is shaped by multiple aspects of the multi-level career ecosystem (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019). In Finland, the extended late career phase is a result of top-down measures aiming at narrowing the sustainability gap caused by the ageing population. From the voices of individual nurses heard through the narrative themes, the extended late career phase requires resources to maintain their workability and employability during the final years of their careers. Healthcare organizations, on the other hand, need to find ways to navigate through budgetary constraints and the increasing need for healthcare services due to the ageing population. At the same time, the nursing shortage is worsening due to the aging of senior nurses and the occupational turnover of younger nurses (Ensio et al., 2019). Human resources management,

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as an organizational resource, has an instrumental role to play in this respect through their practices aimed at an extended late career phase. Due to the increasing cohorts of mid- and late-career nursing professionals (Price and Reichert, 2017), a detailed understanding of this complex career ecosystem is required to ensure support and to safeguard sustainable careers in the context of an extended working life of this valuable health care resource.

Acknowledgements

The first author has received funding from the Foundation for Economic Education (grant number 10-5090) and the Finnish Cultural Foundation (30.01.2017). The second author has received support from the Academy of Finland (grant numbers 294530/307114, 320367/326992).

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Table 1 The Interview Data

Pseudonymized names	Age	Gender	Length of the interview (minutes)	Number of transcripted pages	Career narrative
Amelia	55	Female	16	5	3
Betty	54	Female	42	7	2
Cecilia	53	Female	39	11	4
Dorothy	56	Female	58	11	2
Emily	54	Female	25	8	3
Frans	59	Male	45	12	4
Gabriel	61	Male	31	8	3
Hans	59	Male	40	11	2
Ines	56	Female	55	12	4
Jane	57	Female	37	9	4
Kathy	57	Female	35	9	3
Linda	57	Female	61	9	1
Miranda	54	Female	52	12	1
Nathalia	55	Female	69	16	2
Olga	64	Female	42	8	1
Paul	50	Male	46	12	4
Queenie	56	Female	60	11	4
Rose	61	Female	45	12	1
Sara	53	Female	53	14	2
Theresa	56	Female	39	10	1
Whesley	52	Male	39	9	3
Violet	57	Female	32	8	2

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