

## Special Section - Who will work until 70?

# Gendered Ageism in Australia: Changing Perceptions of Age Discrimination among Older Men and Women\*

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This paper investigates how age and gender interact to shape older jobseekers' experiences of age discrimination within a mixed methods framework. The analysis reveals that there has been a considerable decline in national levels of perceived ageism generally among older men relative to older women. These research findings suggest that the nature of ageism experienced by older women is qualitatively different from men. Currently, one-size-fits-all, business case approaches rely on an overly narrow concept that obscures the gender and occupational dimensions of ageism. Hence, policy responses to ageism need to be far more tailored in their approach.

Keywords: age discrimination, ageism, gender, older workers.

## 1. Background

Increasing workforce participation in later life is one of the major responses to the challenges of population ageing in Australia and other industrialised countries (Australian Government 2015). Successive Australian governments have implemented policies aimed at extending working lives and increasing older employment, including raising the current Age Pension eligibility incrementally from sixty-five to sixty-seven years by July 2023, and subject to legislation, to seventy by July 2035 (Department of Human Services 2014). Despite these measures, there has been an increase in the number of unemployed and underemployed older Australians. In June 2015, almost 248,000 older jobseekers were receiving unemployment benefits (Department of Employment 2015) compared with fewer than 155,000 in June 2008 (Department of Social Services 2009).

Age discrimination is frequently identified as one of the main barriers facing older Australians looking for work (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010; Johnson *et al.*, 2012) and a key reason

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why many older jobseekers become discouraged and leave the workforce early (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre 2011).

Despite labour market discrimination against older persons featuring prominently in policy debates, to date there has been little nationally representative research on the extent and nature of age discrimination experienced by older jobseekers (also see Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015). This paper investigates how age and gender interact to shape older jobseekers' experiences of age discrimination via two key research questions. First, to what extent does the *prevalence* of perceived age discrimination differ by gender among older jobseekers? Second, how do *experiences* of age discrimination differ for male and female mature-age jobseekers?

## 2. Background Literature

Studies suggest older workers face considerable age prejudice, especially during recruitment (Loretto & White, 2006; Taylor, 2011). For example, in the National Seniors Australia survey of over 3,000 older Australians looking for work, more than a third reported experiencing age-related exclusion during the job search process (National Seniors Australia Productive Ageing Centre 2013). In the first national prevalence study of ageism in employment, more than a quarter of participants reported experiencing some form of age discrimination in the workforce, with reports of discrimination higher among those looking for work (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015).

Ageism in employment is often attributed to societal acceptance of a deficit accumulation model of ageing (Loretto *et al.*, 2000) or "master narrative of decline" (Johnson *et al.*, 2012: 6). It manifests in a range of negative stereotypes about older workers: that they "don't like change... are more likely to be forgetful, do not like being told what to do by someone younger, have difficulty learning new things or complex tasks, do not want to work long hours, [and] prefer not to use technology" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013: 38).

Taylor and Earl (2016: 255) argue that ageism is also evident in stereotypically *positive* characteristics ascribed to older workers: that they are "loyal, dependable, experienced and knowledgeable, as well as having wisdom, a good temperament, a strong work-ethic, corporate knowledge, commitment to an organisation, job satisfaction, and stability". Critically, the qualities that older workers tend to be rated more highly on appear to be given less weight during recruitment (Taylor & Earl, 2016), and younger profiles are preferred by employers even in the case of low-status roles (Solem, 2012; Abrams *et al.*, 2016).

Studies have pointed to trends in human resource management, such as the rise in the number of relatively young managers and recruiters, and the potential for age discrimination motivated by in-group bias (Patrickson & Ranzijn, 2003: 59; Tonks *et al.*, 2009; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013: 39). Commentators have also suggested that older workers vulnerability to discrimination can be aggravated during periods of economic recession and high youth unemployment, when there is additional pressure to prioritise the employment of younger workers over the retention of older workers (Taylor, 2011; MacDermott, 2014). In the United States, reports of age discrimination to the Federal Equal Opportunity Commission increased by 29 per cent over the period from 2007 to 2008 (Ekerdt, 2010), with Solem (2012) suggesting this probably reflects "an effect of the financial crisis and the subsequent competition for jobs." Neumark and Button (2014) found very little evidence that stronger age discrimination laws afforded protections for older workers during the Great Recession, in comparison to younger workers. In fact, the study found that higher firing costs associated with stronger age discrimination may be a disincentive to employing older workers during economic downturns. In Norway, Solem's research on managers' attitudes and behaviours towards workers aged fifty and over indicates that there was a small but steady increase from 2007 to 2010 in the proportion of managers in private sector industries – particularly in the commodity trade, hospitality, and transportation and communication sectors – who perceived that older workers were less productive than younger workers (Solem, 2012).

Even when older workers are recruited, negative age stereotypes tend to restrict the willingness of employers to invest in their ongoing education or training in the workplace (Nelson, 2016). Faced with scarce training resources, employers tended to invest more in younger workers than older ones

(North & Fiske, 2016). In another study, Macdonald and Levy (2016) found that perceived age discrimination is associated with lower job retention by older workers.

A common policy response to ageism is to challenge the validity of negative stereotypes about older workers and to highlight the costs to business and the economy that result from discriminating against older workers (Loretto *et al.*, 2000; Weller, 2007). For example, the “Age Positive” initiative aims “to develop a community and awareness campaign that identifies ageism. . . and promotes positive images of ageing” (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013: 13). This reflects a human capital theory approach which assumes that the selection of candidates into jobs is based on judgments about stocks of human capital – knowledge, ideas and technical job skills – relative to price. From this perspective, ageism is seen as irrational and inefficient because it is based on mistaken beliefs about older workers’ productivity and skills that lead to a waste of human capital and sub-optimal recruitment outcomes. One set of characteristically positive age stereotypes is invoked “in order to challenge another” as older workers’ “‘experience’, ‘reliability’ and ‘loyalty’ is promoted over, presumably, that of younger people who are considered to be less experienced, less reliable and lacking loyalty” (Taylor & Earl, 2016: 258).

A second feature of conventional analyses is the tendency to represent ageism as a “gender-neutral phenomenon” (Duncan & Loretto, 2004: 97). For example, following Butler’s (1969) pioneering research on ageism, the Australian Human Rights Commission (2010: 2) defines ageism as “the systematic stereotyping of, and discrimination against people *simply because they are older*” (emphasis added). It has also been argued that what distinguishes age discrimination from other forms of discrimination is the fact “that *we are all* at risk of experiencing it at some point in our lives” (Rippon *et al.*, 2015: 925; emphasis added). However, as feminist and intersectionality approaches emphasise, “people’s bodies are not marked or experienced as “old” in a universal manner. . . rather the perception varies by gender, race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation” (Calasanti, 2005:10). This is highlighted by Rippon *et al.*’s (2015) cross-national research on perceived age discrimination among those aged fifty-two and over in England and the United States during 2010–2011, which found that reports of discrimination were consistently higher in both countries among those with lower socio-economic status. Moreover, in England, older women were marginally more likely than older men to perceive being discriminated against on the basis of age, although the reverse was true in the United States.

Women and men experience ageism in different ways and to different degrees. While relative differences in rates of perceived discrimination between older men and older women vary between countries, there is evidence that women are subject to negative age stereotypes from a younger age than men (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). In one study of local authority workers in London, managers saw women’s careers peaking at the age of thirty-five, a full ten years earlier than men’s (Itzin & Phillipson, 1995). Various studies suggest employers see the ideal age for employees within the female-dominated occupations of clerical, secretarial and receptionist work as around twenty-five and rarely recruit those over forty-five (Handy & Davy, 2007).

Calasanti (2005) attributes this to the heightened importance of bodily appearance as a form of capital for women, who are subject to a “‘double standard’ of ageing” in that they are harshly judged “on the basis of their ability to achieve and maintain the cultural ideal of female beauty” (Clarke & Griffin, 2008: 655). As Twigg (2004: 62) argues, ageing undermines women’s traditional source of power because “their sexual attractiveness [is] seen to reside in youth,” whereas early signs of ageing such as grey hair and wrinkles can signify authority and power for men in high-status occupations such as judges and politicians (Jyrkinen & Mckie, 2012: 65). The loss of a youthful appearance may be particularly damaging for women working in interactive service industries, with Witz *et al.* (2003) research on aesthetic labour suggesting a strong preference among high-end retail and hospitality businesses for hiring workers who *look* young, female and middle-class. The gendered nature of ageing is also highlighted by other studies that suggest that age and “a tradesman-like” masculinity are assets in some retail sectors, such as home improvement and hardware businesses, where customers prefer to be served by men who are seen as having life-long experience in the trade (MacDonald & Merrill, 2009).

While “gendered ageism” has received considerable attention in the research literature in the United States and the United Kingdom, few Australian studies have applied an intersectional lens to older jobseekers’ experiences and perceptions of ageism in employment. An exception was the Australian Human Rights Commission’s (2015) national prevalence survey of age discrimination, which found some differences in the nature, but not the level, of perceived ageism between older men and women. It did not consider whether gender differences in perceptions of ageism also reflected, or intersected, with occupational differences between older men and women. Also, the measure of perceived ageism used in the study was largely limited to negative stereotypes related to older workers’ knowledge, skills and fit with contemporary work cultures. The role of negative stereotypes related to an ageing physique or appearance in mediating older men’s and women’s experiences of ageism was thus largely overlooked.

This study combines quantitative analysis of Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data on perceived age discrimination with qualitative research on older jobseekers’ experiences and understandings of ageism in employment to consider whether – and how – the extent and nature of ageism is experienced differently by older men and women. The use of longitudinal data on perceived age discrimination also enables consideration of whether the extent of perceived ageism has increased or decreased over time in Australia, a question that, as far as we are aware, has not yet been explored in either research or policy studies on ageism in Australia.

### 3. Method and Data

#### 3.1. Method

We implemented a mixed methods framework of enquiry comprising complementary quantitative and qualitative analyses to generate findings and arrive at conclusions. The two research questions of this study related to gendered differences in the *prevalence* of perceived age discrimination and gendered differences in the *experience* of ageism. These questions required a sequential mixed methods design (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), which we implemented in three distinct interactive phases.

The first phase was exploratory in nature. It entailed the collection and analysis of qualitative data that offered insights into the potential existence of differences in the prevalence of ageism by gender. Building from the qualitative results, we conducted a second, quantitative phase to test for the prevalence of perceived age discrimination by gender using data from a nationally representative survey. Hence, this second phase allowed us to confirm the generalisability of the initial qualitative findings. The third phase was designed to “explain” the quantitative findings by shedding light on the extent to which the differences in prevalence of gendered ageism can be attributed to differences in the experience of ageism. Here, we again drew on qualitative data, which provided important detailed contextual information and insights into the experience of ageism that are not available in large-scale national surveys.

We chose to investigate both gender and occupational variations in ageism because gender differences in perceptions of ageism can reflect occupational differences between older men and women (Handy & Davy, 2007; Jyrkinen & Mckie, 2012). Indeed, as indicated in the background literature in the previous section, Warhurst *et al.* (2009) found that issues of “lookism” are much more rife within the female-dominated occupations, such as clerical and customer service work, while Jyrkinen and Mckie (2012) found that early signs of ageing can benefit men in high-status occupations by giving the impression of enhanced authority and power. Hence, we examined gender differences in ageism via direct comparisons between older men and women as well as comparisons across male- and female-dominated occupations.

#### 3.2. Quantitative Data

The quantitative arm of the analysis drew on data from the longitudinal HILDA Survey. The HILDA Survey is a nationally representative panel survey that began in 2001. It contains a comprehensive range of variables on the sociodemographic, family, income, labour market and wellbeing dynamics

of a nationally representative panel of Australians. Of particular importance to this study is a survey question that asks jobseekers whether they have had difficulties securing a job since they started their job search due to discrimination on the basis of their age. While this variable reflects perceived age discrimination, which may in fact deviate from actual age discrimination, it is nonetheless valuable in offering insights into feelings of age discrimination being experienced by jobseekers in Australia.

We selected a sample of jobseekers aged from forty-five to seventy-five years in each year of the HILDA Survey over the period 2001–2013. Jobseekers are defined as those who are unemployed or not in the labour force but marginally attached. The sample of jobseekers was pooled together into a person-period dataset. So for instance, if a man's age was forty-four years old in wave 1 and was job-seeking in waves 1–5, and in employment from wave 8 onwards, he would be included in the sample only between waves 2 and 5, when he is observed to be aged 45+ and a jobseeker.

Table 1 displays the distribution of HILDA respondents by age group and four occupational groups that reflect varying degrees of gender balance. As the sample comprises jobseekers, their occupational characteristics were derived from their most recent reported occupation. The four occupational groupings are:

- High-skilled occupations with a balanced gender distribution (approx. 50–50), i.e. managers and professionals;
- Medium-skilled occupations which are male dominated (approx. 75 per cent males), i.e. technicians and trades workers, machinery operators and drivers;
- Medium-skilled and highly female-dominated occupations (approx. 75 per cent females), i.e. community and personal service workers, clerical and admin workers, sales workers;
- Low-skilled occupations with a balanced gender distribution (approx. 50–50), i.e. labourers.

### 3.3. Qualitative Data

The qualitative component of the research is drawn from semistructured interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014 with 80 older Australians (37 men and 43 women) who were either underemployed – people in jobs “who would prefer, and are available for, more hours of work than they currently have” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014b: 33) – or not working despite wanting a job. These included not only formally “unemployed” older workers but also those considered outside the labour force – because they had not actively looked for paid work in the four previous weeks (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014a: 48) – who reported still wanting to work (marginally attached older workers). Official estimates showing relatively low unemployment rates can often disguise the true extent of labour market exclusion among older workers, as many older jobseekers become discouraged by prolonged unemployment “and drop out of the labour force altogether” (Encel & Ranzijn,

**Table 1.** Respondents in the HILDA Survey, by Age Group and Occupation, 2001–2013, Person-Periods

	Women		Men		Total	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Age group						
45–54	867	39.1	1,387	52.6	2,254	46.5
55–64	879	39.7	883	33.5	1,762	36.3
65+	470	21.2	366	13.9	836	17.2
Occupation						
High-skilled balanced	585	26.7	534	20.7	1,119	23.5
Medium-skilled male dominated	740	33.8	201	7.8	941	19.7
Medium-skilled female dominated	409	18.7	1,280	49.7	1,689	35.4
Low-skilled balanced	458	20.9	559	21.7	1,017	21.3

*Source:* Authors's own calculations from the 2001–2013 HILDA Survey.

2007: 147). In September 2013, more than 78,000 mature age Australians outside the labour force reported being “discouraged workers,” with nearly half citing “being considered too old by employers” as their main reason for no longer looking for work (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014a: 18–19). Underemployment has similarly been highlighted as a key issue for mature-age workers in Australia (National Seniors Australia Productive Ageing Centre, 2009), with more than 244,000 mature-age workers (19 per cent of those working part-time) underemployed in September 2013 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014a: 6). The underemployed older workers in this study were predominantly in casual and short-term jobs and nearly all were looking for other employment and therefore potentially vulnerable to experiencing age prejudice during recruitment. Indeed, eight of the twenty-seven underemployed interviewees were receiving Newstart Allowance while a further three were on the Disability Support Pension.

Interviewees were recruited from three areas – Western Sydney, the Gold Coast and South Eastern Melbourne – with comparatively high mature-age unemployment, using advertisements placed in libraries, employment services, specialist online jobsites and union and advocacy group networks. Prospective interviewees were then screened by age and gender to capture a cross-section of underemployed and non-employed older Australians. The key characteristics of interviewees are captured in Table 2.

Initial semistructured phone interviews were conducted between May and December 2013. Questions focused on the intersection between interviewees’ age and their experiences of work including early career experiences and most recent experiences of joblessness or underemployment. Using a coding scheme developed collaboratively by the authors, transcripts were coded in depth using NVivo software until saturation point – the “point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook” (Guest *et al.*, 2006: 65) – occurred after 46 interviews. A second round of more in-depth interviews was conducted with half the participants (22 women

**Table 2.** *Characteristics of First Round Interview Participants, 2013*

	Women (43)		Men (37)		Total (80)	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Age group						
45–54	21	49	14	38	35	44
55–64	16	37	15	41	31	39
65+	6	14	8	22	14	18
Labour force status						
Unemployed	10	23	11	30	21	26
Underemployed	14	33	13	35	27	34
Marginally attached	19	44	13	35	32	40
Occupation						
High-skilled balanced						
Managers or professionals	14	33	17	46	31	39
Medium-skilled male dominated						
Trades workers and technicians	4	9	8	22	12	15
Machinery operators	0	0	1	3	1	1
Medium-skilled female dominated						
Community and personal services workers	6	14	3	8	9	11
Clerical and administrative workers	18	42	6	16	24	30
Sales workers	1	2	1	3	2	3
Low-skilled balanced						
Labourers	0	0	1	3	1	1

Source: Semistructured interviews 2013.

and 18 men) in late 2014 to further explore key identified themes related to interviewees' perceptions of age discrimination and the attributes required for success within particular labour market contexts. Table 3 reports key characteristics of the second round of interviewees. An initial analysis of the data identified several different types of employment related age discrimination experienced by older workers, ranging from common negative stereotypes about the flexibility and adaptability of older workers to discrimination based upon the ageing of their bodies. Interviewees' reports and perceptions of ageism were subsequently reanalysed through an intersectional lens to consider "the dynamic interrelationships" (Moore, 2009: 657) between social divisions such as gender, class and age in shaping experiences of age discrimination. This analysis focussed not only on what was said but also by whom (gender, class) and in relation to which particular labour market or occupational context.

#### 4. Prevalence of Perceived Age Discrimination: Gender Differences

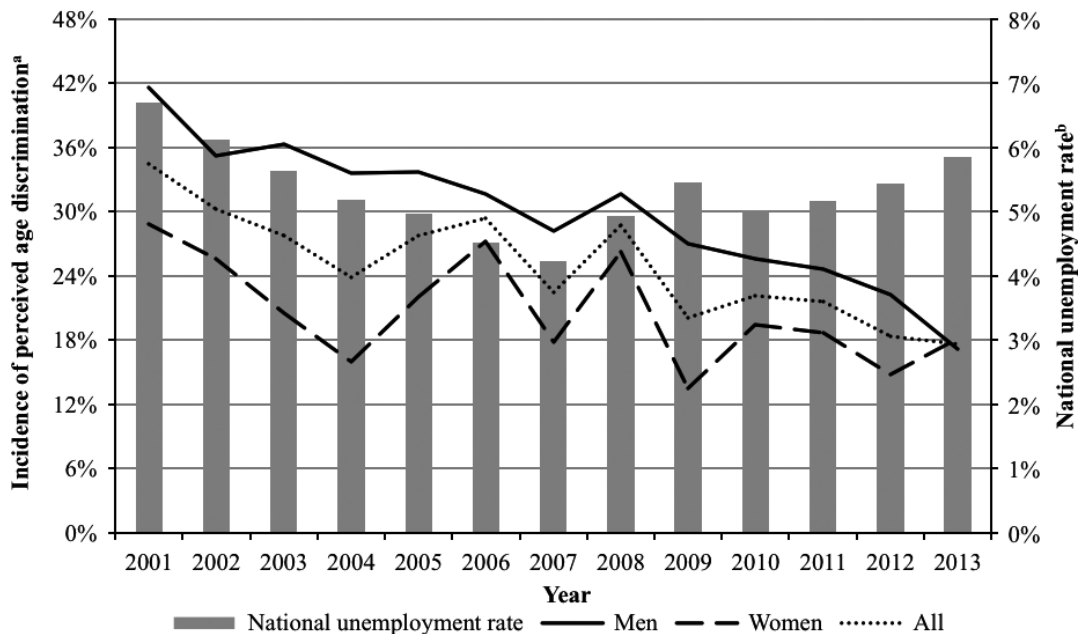
The interview data suggested some gender differences in the level of perceived discrimination. Women were significantly more likely than men to cite ageism as a barrier to finding work. This was particularly true of women aged from forty-five to fifty-four years suggesting that women perceive that they are seen as "old" in the workforce from a younger age than men (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). When asked about the age they would prefer to be, men and women gave divergent responses that suggested a younger prime age for women: the majority of women reported that they would prefer to be no more than thirty-five years of age whereas men gave far more varied responses.

Drawing on these qualitative findings, we used HILDA data to examine trends in the incidence of perceived age discrimination during the period 2001–2013 and, in particular, to assess whether these trends support the observation that levels of perceived ageism in employment diverge between older male and female jobseekers.

**Table 3.** *Characteristics of Second Round Interview Participants, 2014*

	Women (22)		Men (18)		Total (40)	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Age group						
45–54	13	59	9	50	22	55
55–64	9	41	9	50	18	45
Labour force status						
Unemployed	6	27	6	33	12	30
Underemployed	8	36	6	33	14	35
Marginally attached	8	36	6	33	14	35
Occupation						
High-skilled balanced						
Managers or professionals	8	36	7	39	15	38
Medium-skilled male dominated						
Trades workers and technicians	3	14	5	28	8	20
Machinery operators	0	0	1	6	1	2
Medium-skilled female dominated						
Community and personal services workers	3	14	3	17	6	15
Clerical and administrative workers	7	32	2	11	9	23
Sales workers	1	4	0	0	1	2
Low-skilled balanced						
Labourers	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Semistructured interviews 2014.



**Figure 1.** Incidence of Perceived Age Discrimination Amongst Older Jobseekers and National Unemployment Rate, by Gender and Year 2001–2013

Notes: (a) The incidence of age discrimination has been weighted to reflect population estimates. (b) The annual unemployment rate in each year is the average of monthly unemployment rates in the year.

Source: Authors' own calculations from the 2001–2013 HILDA Survey, Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015).

Figure 1 tracks the year-on-year incidence of perceived age discrimination amongst older jobseekers by gender, over the period 2001–2013. The bars in the background depict the unemployment rates over the period of analysis. The figure highlights three key differences between men and women, which point to a need to further explore gender differences in the experience of ageism.

First, older male jobseekers in Australia experienced consistently higher rates of discrimination than older female jobseekers over most of the study period. On average, the incidence of perceived age discrimination was 12.6 per cent for men during 2001–2013 but 10.3 per cent for women, and this difference is statistically significant at the 1 per cent level.

Second, the extent of perceived age discrimination by older male jobseekers appears to have fallen in line with the decline in unemployment during the first nine years or so of the decade, dropping from 42 per cent to 29 per cent between 2001 and 2009 and continuing to dip to below 20 per cent by 2013. By applying population weights to the survey responses, we estimate that this trend represents a decline in the number of older male jobseekers perceiving age discrimination from over 85,000 in 2001 to nearly 47,000 in 2013 – a reduction of some 45 per cent. The trends among older female jobseekers are noticeably different. Over the period of analysis, the extent of perceived age discrimination only declined by 8 percentage points for women. In population terms, this is equivalent to a decline in the number of older female jobseekers perceiving age discrimination from around 74,000 in 2001 to 46,830 in 2013 – a reduction of 36 per cent compared to 45 per cent in the case of men. One possible explanation is that the mining boom in the early 2000s favoured occupations that are male dominated (e.g. technicians and trades workers, machine operators and drivers) rather than female-dominated occupations (e.g. community and personal services workers). Hence, older men's

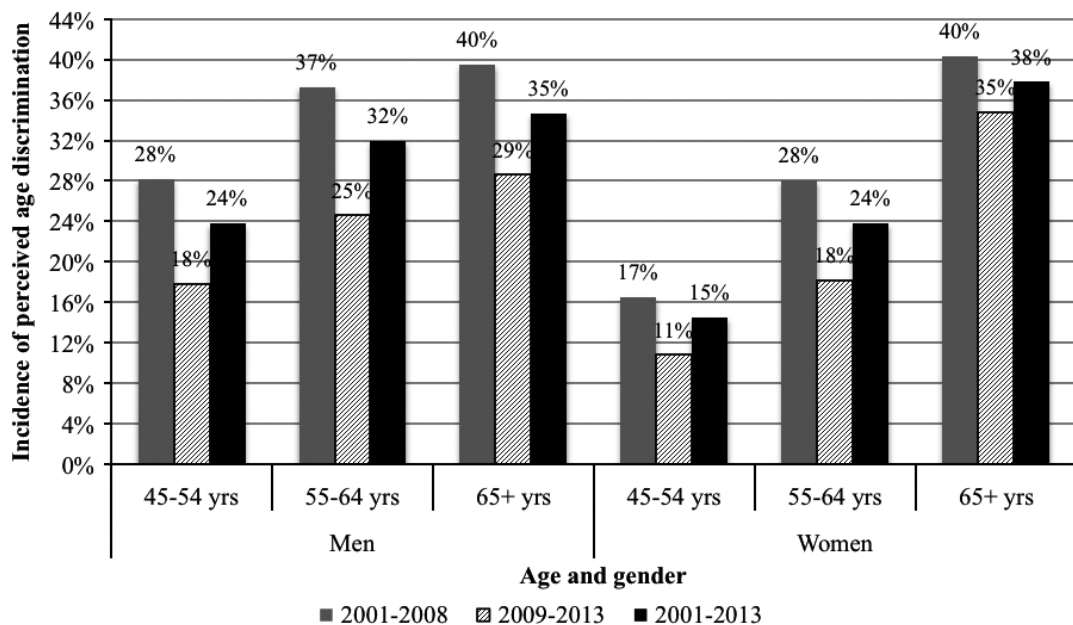


experience of declining age discrimination is strongly correlated with the economic boom; but this is not so in the case of women.

Third, there are two important gender differences in changes to perceived age discrimination subsequent to the implementation of the Age Discrimination Act in 2004. There was a rise in perceived age discrimination among older women in the three years immediately after its introduction, possibly because greater awareness of ageism caused by the passing of the legislation may have lead more jobseekers (and in particular women) to perceive that they were discriminated against because of their age. While the introduction of the Act was followed by a decline in perceived age discrimination among older male jobseekers between 2004 and 2013, perceived ageism among older female jobseekers in 2013 remained similar to 2004 levels. Thus, campaigns to reduce age stereotyping in the labour market appear to have had only a marginal effect on older women.

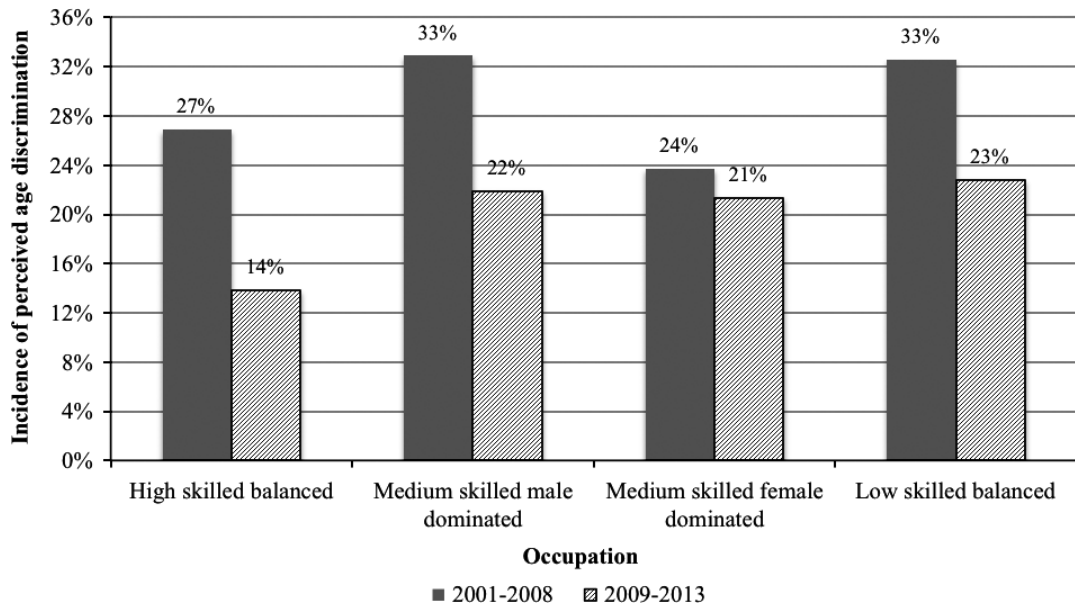
We further investigated differences in perceived age discrimination across narrower age groups within the sample of older male and female jobseekers. We divided the period of analysis into the 2001–2008 boom periods before the global financial crisis (GFC) and the post-GFC recovery period. Figure 2 shows clearly that in the case of both men and women, the incidence of perceived discrimination rises by age. Among older male jobseekers, the incidence of perceived age discrimination over the entire period was 24 per cent among those aged from forty-five to fifty-four years rising to 35 per cent among those aged sixty-five years or over. Similarly, among women the incidence of perceived age discrimination was 15 per cent among the forty-five to fifty-four year olds by 38 per cent among those aged sixty-five years or over. While the incidence of perceived age discrimination fell for male and female jobseekers across all age groups after the GFC, this decline was much greater among men and women aged from fifty-five to sixty-four years than other age groups.

As occupations are heavily gender segregated, we further investigated differences in perceived age discrimination across occupational groups. As shown in Figure 3, between the pre- and post-GFC period, the extent of age discrimination fell noticeably for all occupations with the exception of the



**Figure 2.** Incidence of Perceived Age Discrimination Amongst Older Jobseekers Pre- and Post-GFC, by Gender and Age, Pooled Observations 2001–2013

Source: Authors' own calculations from the 2001–2013 HILDA Survey.



**Figure 3.** Incidence of Perceived Age Discrimination Amongst Older Jobseekers Pre- and Post-GFC, by Occupation, Pooled Observations 2001–2013

Source: Authors' own calculations from the 2001–2013 HILDA Survey.

female-dominated category. Between the pre- and post-GFC years, the incidence of perceived age discrimination dropped by over 10 percentage points within medium-skilled male-dominated occupations. This was over five times the decline witnessed within medium-skilled female-dominated occupations, which showed a meagre 2 percentage point reduction in perceived age discrimination over the two periods.

The HILDA data analysis revealed several interesting findings. While there has been a considerable decline in levels of perceived ageism among older men, the decline in levels of perceived ageism among older women across all occupations has been very marginal. Additionally, the magnitude of the decline in levels of perceived ageism among older jobseekers in the female-dominated occupations has been much smaller than in other occupations. To date, ageism is commonly discussed in a gender-neutral context in the literature and policy debates, which does not adequately address differences in the experience of ageism between men and women. An important question that emerges is therefore whether the ageism experienced by older women and by older jobseekers in female-dominated occupations differs in nature from that experienced by men and by those in other occupations.

### 5. Differences in the Nature of Older Men and Women's Perceptions and Experiences of Age Discrimination

The qualitative data offers insights into the gendered nature of ageism not observable from the HILDA Survey. The understandings and experiences of ageism recounted by interviewees suggested that the nature of ageism, or rather older jobseekers' perceptions of ageism, does indeed vary substantially between older men and women and between older jobseekers from different occupational backgrounds (see also Bowman *et al.*, 2016).

One particular source of difference was the extent to which interviewees' understandings of ageism revolved around the ageing of their bodies and negative stereotypes about an older physique or appearance. For example, the experiences and perceptions of ageism recounted by women seeking

front office or customer service positions suggested that success in these occupations was often based as much around having an attractive appearance as it is was on being able to technically perform job tasks. As Catherine (58), a former teacher who had been unemployed for several years, observed based on her experiences of looking for retail and administrative jobs:

If you look in some of the main shopping centres, they choose women fairly young, slim and good looking. Then in offices there're lots of jobs and they're a type . . . a physical type. I'm not the look or the age. There's an appearance thing.

Other than in care work, an older physique was seen by women as largely "out of sync" with the forms of embodiment valued by employers. Laura, a clerical and administrative worker in her fifties, gave the example of the banking sector as an instance of where employers generally "want someone spruiky [energetic] and young. . . anywhere that's face-to-face." Retail sales and front office positions were other commonly cited examples of where "they want someone young and attractive" (Marina, 48) because "they think that's what's pulling in the people" (Jacinta, 46). Jacinta rationalised this preference for younger retail workers as "probably. . . common sense", elaborating: "to see me dressed up in a Supré [fast fashion store] outfit. . . may not be very appealing." Sometimes although interviewees' accounts suggested that an older appearance could be an advantage in some retail and service sectors. For example, just before the second interview Rita (57) had been offered a job as a sales assistant selling "comfy" shoes. She attributed this to "the type of shop," explaining: "It's a shoe shop and it attends to pretty much all ages across the board. I mean, I couldn't actually see myself working in Supré or somewhere like that." Niall (50), a former real estate agent who had briefly worked casually as a limousine driver felt that his older appearance "was probably an advantage when [he] was looking for work in the limo business" because "they didn't want a twenty or thirty-five year-old driving a \$150,000 car." However, other men who had tried to find employment in the hospitality and service sectors felt that their older appearance precluded them from being considered for jobs where, as Neil (55) observed, "they want young, youthful people, good-looking people."

For older jobseekers (mainly women) looking for customer service, administrative or front office positions, signs of ageing, such as grey hair and weight gain, became particularly problematic when they went for interviews. Several recognised this heightened scrutiny of their appearance as a form of sexism. As Eve (63), who had *gone au natural*, commented: "you become a bit invisible":

I get a lot of comments from people of all ages going "you hair colour is amazing" but when it comes to actually going for a job interview hair colour is a whole new different scenario.

Older men from traditional working class occupations, such as trade workers, labourers, and machinery operators, also grounded their perceptions of ageism in negative stereotypes about an older body, although for them "looking old" had a different connotation. For those from manual and traditional working class occupations, ageism was associated with the perception that workers with an older physique were slower, less fit and more prone to injury. "A lot of [employers] think that we're decrepit," explained a former mechanic in his mid-fifties. These men's experiences of encountering ageism highlighted the need to be able to deploy a "fit and fast" or "muscular masculinity" (Huppertz & Goodwin, 2013: 300) when going for jobs, something that became more difficult as they aged. This was illustrated by Les (61), a former telephony maintenance worker, who described how he had been let go from a recent job installing fans after only a month. He interpreted this experience as "basically [age] discrimination": "He [the employer] wanted someone young. He didn't want to employ someone older. I wasn't quick enough."

The emphasis on bodily fitness and the physical demands of work in these men's accounts contrasted with how older managers and professionals interpreted ageism. For older male managers and professionals, the "deficit" of ageing revolved around a perceived loss of intellectual rather than physical capital. This was typified in the comment of an advertising worker in his fifties who described how his industry "puts a stamp of ages among you even earlier than 40" because of a perception "that good ideas only come from young, fresh *minds*." Hence, in contrast to older men from manual occupations who described being considered "too slow" or "decrepit," older managers and professionals

were more likely to report being told that they were “over qualified” or “not a cultural fit,” which they interpreted as “just code” for ageism (John, 57, financial services). These older workers felt that ageism was driven by a fear among employers that, as relatively senior and experienced workers, they might be less willing to uncritically accept management authority. As Mark, a software programmer in his late fifties, elaborated:

[There’s a perception] maybe this person won’t take direction, or maybe this person will start saying “Well I have seen it done this way before” and they’re going to have to sort of say “I am the boss,” so they want to avoid that.

In a similar way, Tim, a programmer in his early sixties observed that managers in the IT industry were mostly “people a lot younger,” and explained that: “Some people are still uncomfortable that their position might be challenged. . . I’m absolutely convinced that you are seen as a threat to their position.”

Older managerial and professional women also associated ageism with a fear of older workers. Anne, a librarian in her late fifties, emphasised that many people in human resources are “twenty or thirty years younger. . . [and] they’re perhaps a little bit concerned that you might know more than they do and show them up for being perhaps incompetent.”

## 6. Conclusion

This paper illustrates the need for more finely grained considerations of ageism that attend to the intersection between age, gender and occupation in mediating older men and women’s experiences and perceptions of age discrimination. The HILDA data analysis revealed that while there has been a considerable decline in levels of perceived ageism among older men nationally, the same decline among older women has been very marginal. Additionally, the magnitude of the decline in levels of perceived ageism has been much smaller among older jobseekers in female-dominated occupations than among those in male-dominated occupations.

These findings suggest that the nature of ageism as experienced by older women is qualitatively different from that experienced by men. As highlighted by the varied understandings of ageism recounted by interview participants, the relationship between ageing in employment and the stereotyping of older workers is complex and subject to significant occupational and gender variation. In particular, the nature of ageism experienced by older women in clerical, administrative, secretarial and customer service occupations appears to have much to do with issues of “lookism” (Warhurst *et al.*, 2009) that barely feature in the accounts of discrimination reported by older managerial and professional workers (particularly men) whose ageing bodies rarely come into view. While older (male) manual and production workers also perceive ageism as being grounded in negative stereotypes about older *bodies*, they interpreted the importance of “looking young” in the labour market in terms of the apparent capacity for physical work and an increasing requirement for workers to be fit and fast. As Calasanti (2005: 10) observes, although both men and women strive to have healthy bodies as they age, popular culture stresses different components of this health-appearance association for men, where “appearance means looking like one can perform”, and for women, where “appearance in terms of sexual attractiveness prevails.”

Issues of embodiment and employability have been largely neglected in mainstream discourses on ageism, which focus on discrimination based on negative associations between chronological age and the value of older workers’ intellectual and human capital (Clarke & Griffin, 2008: 668). Significantly, age discrimination related to “lookism” and a youthful physique may be less amenable to “business case” approaches and awareness campaigns counteracting the deficit accumulation model of ageing and emphasising the ongoing contributions that older workers can still make.

An implication is that policy responses to ageism need to be more carefully tailored in their approach. Current business case approaches obscure the gender and occupational dimensions of ageism. Policy responses that are framed by such an approach are likely to prove particularly ineffectual in responding to gendered ageism or the “double jeopardy” (Handy & Davy, 2007: 86) of ageism and sexism that woman can encounter as they age. Moreover, in universalising seemingly positive

“qualities,” such as reliability and experience, to champion the recruitment of older workers, such approaches may paradoxically reinforce the exclusion of older workers from some sectors. As Taylor and Earl (2016: 259) observe, “while reliability . . . may be viewed by employers as positive for repetitive and predictable tasks in a routine, it may be perceived unfavourably for flexible, innovative and creative employees”. Similarly, Riach (2009: 1704) points out that favourable connotations of older workers “as reliable and loyal” may tacitly reinforce the negative stereotyping of older workers on other dimensions “as maladaptable to change, new technology or training”.

Hence, policy initiatives and awareness campaigns must go beyond “one-size-fits-all” approaches to acknowledge that not all workers are seen as “old” in the same way. Anti-discrimination campaigns need to target and highlight the links between ageism and sexism rather than adopt a gender-neutral perspective. Employer engagement strategies deployed by employment services will be more effective when they take into account the gendered nature of the labour market and the different ways in which older men and women experience ageism in their job search. It is critical that industry training not only build intergenerational awareness of mature-age jobseekers’ circumstances and skills, but also increase understanding of the intersection between ageism and sexism in the workplace.

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