

BANKWEST CURTIN ECONOMICS CENTRE

# WORKING PAPER SERIES

16/01: A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF AGE  
DISCRIMINATION AMONG OLDER JOBSEEKERS IN  
AUSTRALIA

Michael McGann, Rachel Ong, Dina Bowman, Alan Duncan, Helen  
Kimberley and Simon Biggs

This report was written by researchers affiliated with the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre ('the Centre'). While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this document, the uncertain nature of economic data, forecasting and analysis means that the Centre, Curtin University and/or Bankwest are unable to make any warranties in relation to the information contained herein. Any person who relies on the information contained in this document does so at their own risk. The Centre, Curtin University, Bankwest, and/or their employees and agents disclaim liability for any loss or damage, which may arise as a consequence of any person relying on the information contained in this document. Except where liability under any statute cannot be excluded, the Centre, Curtin University, Bankwest and/or their advisors, employees and officers do not accept any liability (whether under contract, tort or otherwise) for any resulting loss or damage suffered by the reader or by any other person.

The views in this publication are those of the authors and do not represent the views of Curtin University and/or Bankwest or any of their affiliates. This publication is provided as general information only and does not consider anyone's specific objectives, situation or needs. Neither the authors nor the Centre accept any duty of care or liability to anyone regarding this publication or any loss suffered in connection with the use of this publication or any of its content.

#### Authorised Use

© Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, March, 2016

Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Working Paper Series

ISSN: 2202-2791

ISBN: 978-1-925083-50-7

Michael McGann<sup>1</sup>, Rachel Ong<sup>2</sup>, Dina Bowman<sup>3</sup>, Alan Duncan<sup>2</sup>, Helen Kimberley<sup>3</sup>, Simon Biggs<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Melbourne

<sup>2</sup> Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, Curtin University

<sup>3</sup> Brotherhood of St Laurence

#### Suggested Citation

Michael McGann, Rachel Ong, Dina Bowman, Alan Duncan, Helen Kimberley and Simon Biggs, 2016 "A Gendered Analysis of Age Discrimination among Older Jobseekers in Australia," Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Working Paper 16/01, Perth: Curtin University.

# **A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF AGE DISCRIMINATION AMONG OLDER JOBSEEKERS IN AUSTRALIA**

Michael McGann, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne  
Rachel Ong, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, Curtin University  
Dina Bowman, Research and Policy Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence  
Alan Duncan, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, Curtin University  
Helen Kimberley, Research and Policy Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence  
Simon Biggs, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne

**Abstract:** 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 levels of perceived ageism among older men nationally relative to older women. These findings suggest that the nature of ageism experienced by older women is qualitatively different from men. Hence, policy responses to ageism need to be far more tailored in their approach because present, one-size-fits all, business case approaches rely on an overly narrow concept that obscures the gender and occupational dimensions of ageism.

**Keywords:** Age discrimination, ageism, gender, older workers

**JEL code:** J01, J16, J71

**Acknowledgements:** This work was funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) under grant number LP120100624. The paper uses unit record data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. The HILDA project was initiated and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) and is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied and Economic and Social Research (MIAESR). The findings and views reported in this paper are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the ARC, DSS or MIAESR.

## **1. Background**

Increasing workforce participation in later life is one of the major responses to the challenges of population ageing by Australia and other industrialised countries (Productivity Commission 2013; Treasury 2015). Successive Australian governments have implemented policies aimed at extending working lives and increasing older employment. The current Age Pension eligibility age of 65 years is being raised incrementally to 67 years by July 2023. A recent budget measure has proposed further increasing this eligibility age to 70 by July 2035 (Department of Human Services 2014).

Despite these measures, there has been an increase in the number of unemployed older Australians. In June 2015, almost 248,000 older jobseekers were receiving unemployment benefits (Department of Employment 2015c) compared with fewer than 155,000 in June 2008 (Department of Social Services 2009). The average duration of unemployment among older jobseekers is 16 months (Department of Employment 2015a) and almost half of older jobseekers registered with Centrelink in June 2015 had been registered for two years or more (Department of Employment 2015b).

Age discrimination is frequently identified as one of the main barriers facing older Australians looking for work (AHRC 2010; Johnson *et al.* 2012) and a key reason why many

older jobseekers become discouraged and leave the workforce early (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre 2011). In September 2013, half of the estimated 78,000 'discouraged' older jobseekers outside the labour force had stopped looking for work because they perceived that they were 'considered too old by employers' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014:18).

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 (although see AHRC 2015). Furthermore, despite the well-known fact that men's and women's work participation patterns can diverge substantially across the life course, there tends to be a neglect of gender differences in studies on workforce non-participation (Austen & Ong 2013).

This paper investigates how age and gender interact to shape older jobseekers' experiences of age discrimination. The paper addresses two key research questions. Firstly, to what extent does the *prevalence* of perceived age discrimination differ by gender among older jobseekers? Secondly, how do older women jobseekers' *experiences* of age discrimination differ from men?

## 2. Background literature

Studies suggest older workers face considerable age prejudice throughout the employment cycle, especially during recruitment (Duncan 2003; Loretto & White 2006; Taylor 2011). An early Australian study of employer attitudes by Steniberg *et al.* (1996) found that employers had minimal interest in recruiting anyone over 45 years of age and preferred to recruit younger employees for most employee categories (cited in Johnson *et al.* 2012:6). This finding is supported by more recent research on older jobseekers' perceptions and experiences of age discrimination in employment. More than a third of participants looking for work in a National Seniors Australia survey of over 3,000 older Australians 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 levels of perceived ageism higher among those looking for work and lower income earners (AHRC 2015).

Ageism in employment is often attributed to societal acceptance of a deficit accumulation model of ageing (Loretto *et al.* 2000; Kossen & Pederson 2008) 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' (AHRC 2013:38). In their study of employer attitudes among 20 Australian companies and organisations, Ranzijn *et al.* observe an apparent paradox in the attitudes of employers towards older workers: whereas organisations value the experience of their own older employees, older workers in general are regarded 'as inflexible, fussy, and unwilling to adapt to new technology and changing work conditions' (2004:560).

Commentators have suggested that older workers vulnerability to negative stereotyping and discrimination can be aggravated during periods of economic recession and high youth unemployment, when 'there is additional pressure to favour younger workers over an older generation, and retaining and sustaining older workers becomes less of a priority' (see also

Taylor 2011; MacDermott 2014:85). Others 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). For example, in their qualitative research on the perceptions of younger managers and older workers towards each other, Tonks *et al.* (2009) found that younger managers 'were suspicious of older workers' intentions' and felt that 'older workers resisted change.' Similarly in an AHRC study, younger managers and recruiters were more likely to believe negative stereotypes about older workers, with around half of business decision makers under 35 holding predominantly negative attitudes towards older workers (AHRC 2013:39).

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). This is the message conveyed by the 'Age Positive' initiative, which aims 'to develop a community and awareness campaign that identifies ageism ... and promotes positive images of ageing' (AHRC 2013:13). The underlying message of such 'business case' approaches is that ageism is 'inefficient for firms, the economy and society' (Weller 2007:418). This reflects a human capital theory approach to understanding ageism. As Weller (2007:419) argues, 'human capital theory emphasises the skills and attributes that workers bring with them to the labour market.' It 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.

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 AHRC (2010:2) defines ageism as 'the systematic stereotyping of, and discrimination against people *simply because they are older*' (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).

Women and men experience ageism in different ways and to different degrees. Studies suggest that women are subject to negative age stereotypes from a younger age than men (Itzin & Phillipson 1995; Duncan & Loretto 2004). Calasanti (2005) attributes this to the heightened importance of bodily appearance as a form of social capital for women. 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). In one study of local authority workers in London, employers viewed women as reaching the peak of their careers at 35, ten years earlier than men (Itzin & Phillipson 1995). Other studies suggest employers see the ideal age for employees within the female-dominated occupations of clerical, secretarial and receptionist work as around 25 and rarely recruit those over 45 (Handy & Davy 2007:86). Bennington's (2001) analysis of job advertisements for non-specialist secretarial positions in Victoria found that over 90 per cent of advertisements were targeted at workers in their early 20s to late 30s.

In her study of temporary agency employment in Japan, Gottfried (2003:37) attributes the preference for recruiting young women into secretarial and administrative positions to firms' desire for 'qualified female workers who embody certain sexualised body traits and gendered organizational norms.' Warhurst *et al.* find evidence of a clear preference for employing young, middle-class women among high-end retail and hospitality businesses in the UK (Witz *et al.* 2003; Warhurst & Nickson 2007) while Williams and Connell (2010) observe a preference among similar US retailers for employing those who are perceived as middle-class, conventionally gendered and white. This is supported by Walker *et al.*'s (2007:43) research on gendered ageism in the UK, in which older professional women reported feeling pressure '[t]o look feminine and youthful, [and] to remain unchanged' if they wanted to advance in their careers.

While 'gendered ageism' has received considerable attention in the research literature in America and the UK, few Australian studies have applied an intersectional lens to older jobseekers experiences and perceptions of ageism in employment. The recent national prevalence survey of age discrimination did find some differences in the nature, but not the level, of perceived ageism between older men and women. Women were more likely to report being 'perceived as having outdated skills, being too slow to learn new things or as someone who would deliver an unsatisfactory job' whereas men were more likely to feel excluded from training and promotion opportunities (AHRC 2015:51). However, the study 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 and women's experiences of ageism was thus largely overlooked.

The present study combines quantitative analysis of 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.

### **3. Method and data**

#### *Method*

We implement 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 have, firstly, to do with gendered differences in the *prevalence* of perceived age discrimination and secondly, gendered differences in the *experience* of ageism. These questions require a sequential mixed methods design (see Creswell & Plano Clark 2011), which we implement in three distinct interactive phases.

The first phase is exploratory in nature. It entails the collection and analysis of qualitative data that offer insights into the potential existence of differences in the prevalence of ageism by gender. Building from the qualitative results, we conduct a second, quantitative phase to test for the prevalence of perceived age discrimination by gender using a nationally representative survey. Hence, this second phase allows us to confirm the generalisability of the initial qualitative findings. The third phase is 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 draw from qualitative data once more, which provide important detailed contextual information and insights into the experience of ageism that are not available in large-scale national surveys. Below we offer further details on the quantitative and qualitative data employed in this study.

### *Quantitative data*

For the quantitative arm of the analysis, we exploit the longitudinal Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, spanning the period 2001–2013. The HILDA Survey is a nationally representative panel survey that began in 2001 by interviewing 7682 households comprising approximately 14000 adult responding household members. These adults were then re-interviewed annually, so that changes in their characteristics and circumstances can be tracked over time. Currently, there are 13 waves of data available, allowing analysis spanning the period 2001–2013.

The HILDA Survey contains a comprehensive range of variables on the socio-demographic, family, income, labour market and housing dynamics of a nationally representative panel of Australians. The survey also offers a myriad of indicators that allow data users to observe the subjective wellbeing, personality traits and attitudes of survey respondents in various spheres of life including in work and parenting domains. Of particular importance to the present 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 select a sample of jobseekers aged 45–75 years in each year of the HILDA Survey over the period 2001–2013. In the context of the present study, jobseekers are defined as those who are unemployed or not in the labour force but marginally attached. The sample of jobseekers is pooled together into a person-period dataset. So for instance, consider the example of a man age 44 years old in wave 1 of the survey. Suppose this man was jobseeking in waves 1 to 5 of the survey, and then in employment from wave 8 onwards. Based on the age and jobseeker criteria, the man 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 occupation. As occupations are heavily gender segregated, we classify them broadly into four occupational groups that reflect varying degrees of gender balance. As the sample comprises jobseekers, their occupational characteristics are 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 predominantly male dominated (approx. 75% males) i.e. technicians and trades workers, machinery operators and drivers;
- Medium skilled and female dominated occupations (approx. 75% 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.

**Table 1: Respondents in the HILDA Survey, by age group and occupation 2001–2013, person–periods**

	Women		Men		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Age group</b>						
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%
<b>Occupation</b>						
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%

*Qualitative data*

The qualitative component of the research is drawn from narrative interviews conducted in 2013 with 80 older Australians (37 men and 43 women) who were either underemployed or not working despite wanting a job. Participants were recruited from three areas—Western Sydney, the Gold Coast and South Eastern Melbourne—with comparatively high older unemployment, using advertisements placed in libraries, employment services, specialist online jobsites and union and advocacy group networks. Prospective participants were then screened by age and gender to capture a cross-section of underemployed and non-employed older Australians. Participants ranged in age from 45 to 73 years and came from a wide range of occupational backgrounds. However, male participants were more likely to work in managerial or professional occupations whereas women were more likely to be clerical and administrative workers.

**Table 2: Participants in the narrative interviews, by age group and occupation 2013, persons**

	Women (43)		Men (37)		Total (80)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Age group</b>						
45–54	21	49%	14	38%	35	44%
55–64	16	37%	15	41%	31	39%
65+	6	14%	8	22%	14	18%
<b>Occupation</b>						
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%

Initial semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with all participants between May and December 2013. Questions focused on the intersection between participants' age and their experiences of work. The interviews also sought to build a narrative history of participants' experiences of growing up, 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

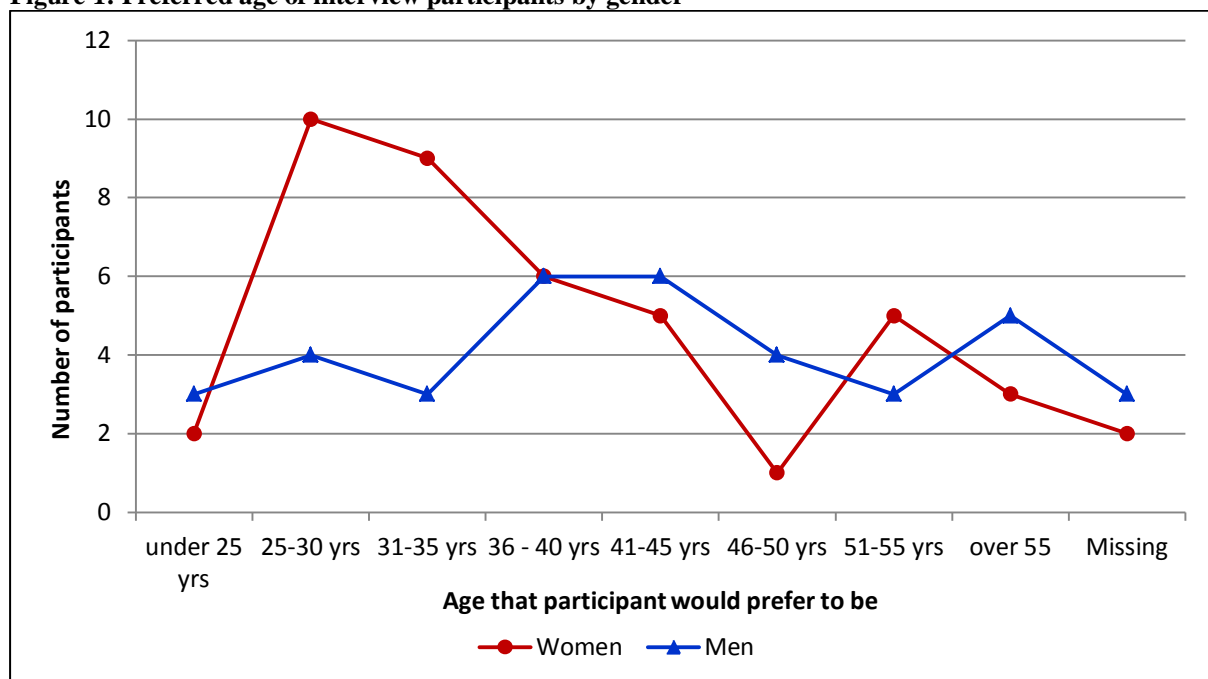


‘point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook’ (Guest & Johnson 2006:65)—occurred after 46 interviews. A second round of more in-depth interviews was conducted with half the participants (22 women and 18 men) in late 2014 to further explore key identified themes such as their understandings of ageism.

### 1. Prevalence of perceived age discrimination: gender differences

The interview data suggested some differences in the level of perceived discrimination between older men and women. Women interviewed were more likely than men (88% vs. 71%) to cite ageism as a barrier to finding work. This was particularly true of women aged 45–54 years (88% vs. 56%), 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. As Figure 1 shows, the majority of women reported that they would prefer to be no more than 35 years of age whereas men gave far more varied responses.

Figure 1: Preferred age of interview participants by gender



The generalisability of these findings is limited by the small sample size of the qualitative research. Consequently, in this section, we exploit the nationally representative data from the HILDA Survey to examine trends in the incidence of perceived age discrimination during the period 2001–2013 and, in particular, whether these trends support the observation that levels of perceived ageism in employment diverge between older male and female jobseekers.

Figure 2 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.

As shown in figure 2, the extent of perceived age discrimination by older male jobseekers fell in line with the decline in unemployment during the first nine years or so of the decade, dropping from 42% to 29% between 2001 and 2009 and continuing to dip to below 20% by

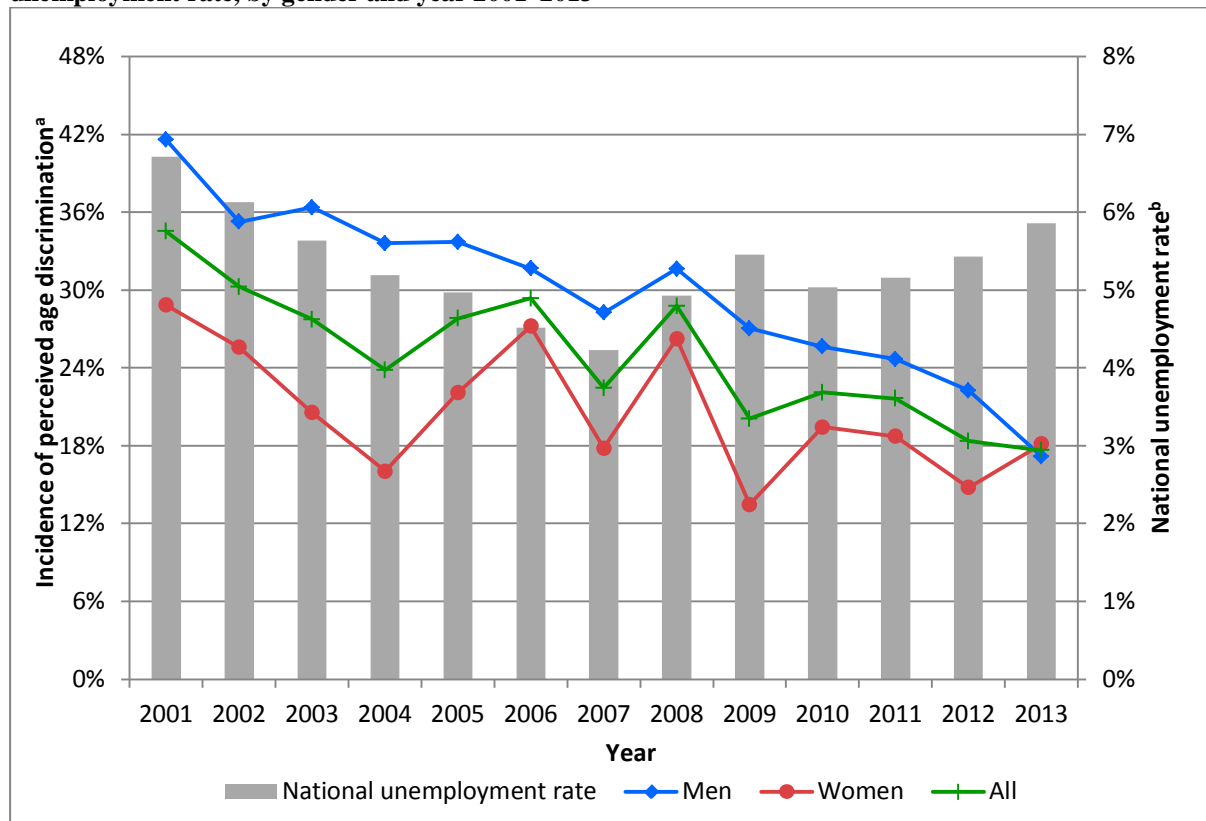
2013. The trends in perceived age discrimination among older female jobseekers are noticeably different from men. Over the entire period of analysis, the extent of perceived age discrimination only declined by eight percentage points for women. One possible explanation is that the mining fuelled economic boom in the early 2000s has favoured occupations that are predominantly male dominated in nature (e.g. technicians and trades workers, machine operators and drivers) 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 business boom; but this is not so in the case of women.

A key policy intervention in regard to ageism during the period in question was the introduction of the Age Discrimination Act in 2004. There are two important trends in perceived age discrimination subsequent to the implementation of the Act. Firstly, there was a rise in perceived age discrimination amongst older women in the three years immediately after its introduction. It is possible that greater awareness of ageism caused by the passing of the legislation may have led more jobseekers (and in particular women) to perceive that they were discriminated against because of their age<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, while the introduction of the Act has been followed to a decline in perceived age discrimination amongst 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> It is notable that the 2011 introduction of Brodie's Law, a legislation making workplace bullying a criminal offence in Victoria, was followed by an escalation the number of bullying reports – see <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-07-09/brodies-law-sees-rise-in-bullying-complaints/2788282>

**Figure 2: Incidence of perceived age discrimination amongst older jobseekers and national unemployment rate, by gender and year 2001–2013<sup>a</sup>**



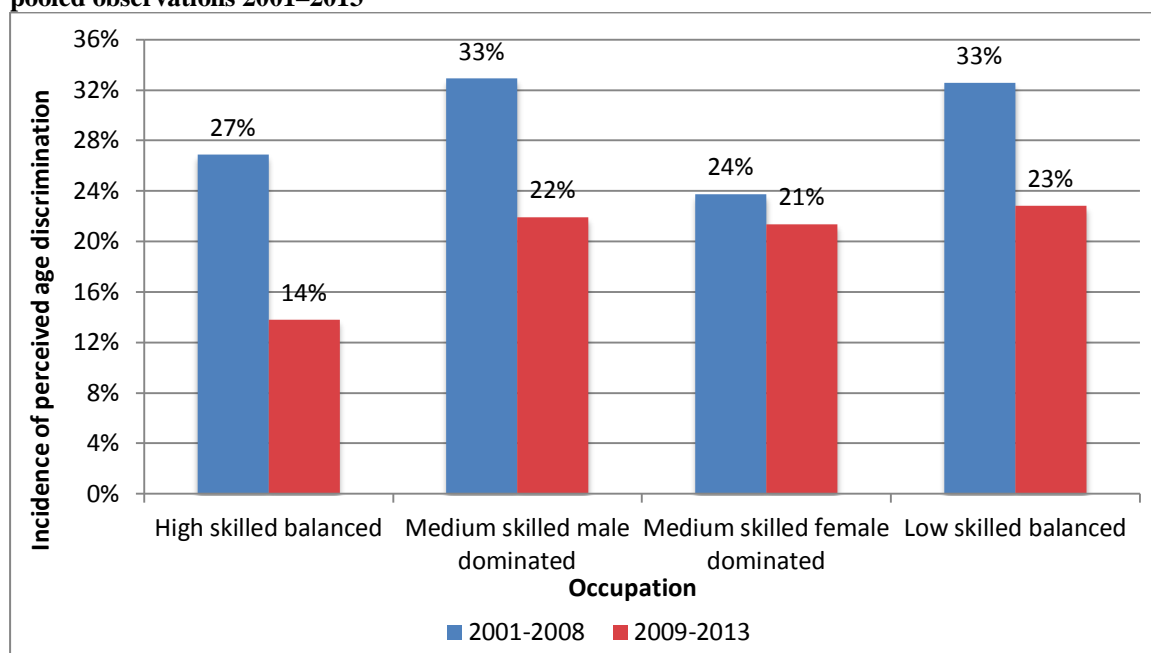
Source: Authors' own calculations from the 2001–2013 HILDA Survey, Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015)

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.

As occupations are heavily gender segregated, we further investigate 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 female dominated category. A comparison of the medium skilled male and female dominated occupations may offer some insights into the relatively steep decline in incidence of perceived age discrimination amongst older male jobseekers compared to female jobseekers. The incidence of perceived age discrimination dropped by over ten percentage points within medium skilled male dominated occupations between the pre- and post-GFC years. This was over five times the decline witnessed within medium skilled female dominated occupations, which showed a meagre two percentage point reduction in perceived age discrimination over the two periods.

**Figure 3: Incidence of perceived age discrimination amongst older jobseekers, by occupation and year, pooled observations 2001–2013**



Authors' own calculations from the 2001–2013 HILDA Survey

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 has been very marginal. Additionally, the magnitude of the decline in levels of perceived ageism among older jobseekers in the female-dominated occupations of clerical, administrative, sales and community and personal services work has been much smaller than the decline in levels of perceived ageism in other occupations.

One might speculate that the economic downturn that occurred in the post-GFC era impacted female dominated occupations e.g. sales jobs more than male dominated occupations such as technicians and trades workers. However, an important question that emerges for policy that seeks to promote older employment participation is 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. Our findings suggest that the nature of ageism experienced by older women is qualitatively different from men. However, to date, ageism is commonly discussed within 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.

## **2. 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 interview participants in the qualitative research 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 forthcoming).

One particular source of difference was the extent to which participants' different understandings of ageism revolved around the ageing of their physical bodies and negative stereotypes about an older physique or appearance. This was how many older women seeking employment in customer service, sales, clerical and administrative roles interpreted the nature of the ageism they felt subject to. Their overriding impression was that employers 'generally speaking ... want people who *look* young, fit and attractive' (Natalie, 52).<sup>2</sup>

A small minority of older men from traditional working class occupations such as trades workers, labourers, and machinery operators also grounded their perceptions of ageism in negative stereotypes about an older body, although 'looking old' had a different connotation for these older men. For older men 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-50s. 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 Connor's (48) account of being photographed during recruitment for a job as a stevedore, a 'demanding' job that required workers 'to be a reasonable height, you know, fitness wise...': 'I think it was a bit of a screening exercise. You know, he's too short, he's too tall, he's too old, he's too fat...'

Les (61), a former telephony maintenance worker, 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 wanted someone young. He didn't want to employ someone older. I wasn't quick enough. That was to install fans and doing things with fans. But I am not fast.

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. Older male managers and professionals' descriptions rarely focussed attention on negative stereotypes about an older physique or the ageing of their physical bodies. Rather the 'deficit' of ageing for these older workers revolved around a perceived loss of intellectual rather than physical capital. This was typified in the comment of a 64-year old IT professional that 'once you're over mid-40s...[there's a perception] that you're rigid and not flexible enough for the roles.' An advertising worker in his 50s 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).

Older managerial and professional men 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 50s, 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.

Several older professionals such as Dan (53), who had worked in pathology labs, commented that this fear of older workers was particularly prevalent among younger recruiters and managers. As Dan elaborated about times he had been considered 'over qualified':

---

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used. Interviewees' ages are provided in brackets.

I may be running into younger hiring managers and people who don't want to be hiring somebody who's potentially older and maybe even more experienced.

Drawing attention to the fact that managers in the IT industry were mostly 'people a lot younger', Tim, a programmer in his early 60's likewise commented:

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.

The ageism that these older male managers and professionals perceived was derived not from any real inabilities but, as Hallier (2001:343) argues of the impact of new management approaches on older workers, from 'their capacity to question new management decisions and practices.' These older workers felt that the knowledge and experience that they had accumulated over their careers was no longer valued by companies. Indeed, they felt it could potentially disrupt organisational cultures that required employees to be 'foot soldiers who can be sort of manipulated in their own form' (Neil, 55). As Ed (54) elaborated:

"You're too experienced" ... "This is a young and vibrant workplace" are all code for ... we just need people to turn the wheels ... There are lots of, I call them, "hamsters on treadmills."

Older managerial and professional women also associated ageism with a fear of older workers. Anne, a librarian in her late 50's, emphasised that many people in human resources are '20 or 30 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.'

Nevertheless, this understanding of the nature of ageism differed markedly from how other women seeking employment in administrative, receptionist and customer services work made sense of ageism, which frequently involved physical signs of ageing and the pressure to maintain a youthful and attractive appearance. 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 physique or look as it was around being able to technically perform job tasks. As Catherine (58), a teacher who had been unemployed for several years, recounted about 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 in all cuts and tuxes, the physical types. I'm not the look or the age. There's an appearance thing.

There were occasional examples of where an older female appearance might be advantageous. McDowell (2009:169-70), for example, observes that care taking is still largely seen as a feminine competence and that the majority of care workers are 'middle, aged, working-class women.' Marina (48), who had been out of the workforce for nearly a decade to care for her daughter, was retraining as a disability support worker. She was quietly confident of securing employment at the end of her training, explaining 'they're screaming for people...' Her confidence contrasted with the experiences of older working class men, such as Les (61), who had tried to retrain as a disability support worker but 'when it finished, there was no work.' 'They don't want me.'

But beyond 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 50s, gave the example of the banking sector as an instance of where employers generally 'want someone spruiky 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). Several women such as Jacinta (46) rationalised the preference for young looking retail workers, in particular, as 'probably...common sense', elaborating: 'to see me dressed up in a Supré outfit ... may not be very appealing.' As Weller (2007:431)

argues of aesthetic labouring, 'when age and gender define the social construction of both an occupation and its workforce, employer preferences are naturalised to the extent that they no longer appear discriminatory at the individual scale.'

Many of the women interviewed reported that 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: 'a man can get away with grey hair and that, whereas a woman can't,' explained a library worker in her 50s. Eve (63), who had 'gone au naturale' felt that 'people tend to look at you almost like 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.

Another secretarial worker in her 50s similarly explained that 'you do present a little bit different than perhaps a younger person would look when applying for the same sort of role,' emphasising that she was 'sort of overweight'. As Na Pier *et al.* (2005) highlight in their research on the intersection between ageing and weight gain, older people who are overweight can be doubly disadvantaged. Research shows that those who are overweight are less likely to be hired for jobs than applicants of average weight, a bias that is 'more pronounced for women than men' (NaPier *et al.* 2005:33).

Several women responded to ageism by trying to look younger or 'impressive in some way.' Nicole (56), who was looking for a retail job, described how she had 'become very image conscious again': 'before setting off to look for jobs I'd have to put my proper make up on and wear the retail clothes or whatever...' Kate (56), a social worker, started to dye her 'white hair', explaining that people 'can't look at anything else during the interview.' However, not all women were in a financial position to counteract ageism through managing their appearance in this way. Catherine (58) gave the example of a friend who 'went and had a cosmetic surgery to look younger ... Some people go down that road, because they've got the money. I haven't done that.'

Men were more likely to adopt the strategy of concealing aspects of their work history on their résumés:

If you give a lengthy history, you know, they probably aren't going to read it and you're giving your age away, simple as that ... So you're not even going to come in for an interview (John, 57).

Women also adopted this strategy but they were aware it could only achieve so much. 'We can do that on our paper résumé,' explained Diane (53): 'But then when we front up at the interview, even though ... I don't think I look like Mrs Doubtfire.' As Calasanti (2005:10) argues, 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.'

### 3. Conclusion

The mixed methods research reported in this article 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 there has been a considerable decline in levels of perceived ageism among older men nationally, the decline in levels of perceived ageism among older women has been very marginal. Additionally, the magnitude of the decline in levels of perceived ageism among older jobseekers in female dominated

occupations of clerical, administrative, sales and community and personal services work has been much smaller than the decline in levels of perceived ageism in male dominated occupations.

These findings suggest that the nature of ageism experienced by older women is qualitatively different from 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 within clerical, administrative, secretarial and customer service work appears to have much to do with issues of 'lookism' that barely feature in the accounts of discrimination reported by older managerial and professional men whose ageing bodies rarely come into view. For certain groups of older men, namely those from traditional working class and manual occupations, the ageing of their physical bodies does indeed feature in their narrative accounts of ageism. However, it does so in a very different way where the emphasis is on looking like one can physically (and quickly) perform manual work rather than on bodily attractiveness.

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 highlighting the inaccuracy of the deficit accumulation model of ageing and the ongoing contributions that older workers can still make. As Weller (2007:431) argues in the case of service occupations where recruitment is based on 'ascribed rather than technical skills' and on 'physical attributes': 'if discrimination is integral to firms' accumulation strategies, education and awareness campaigns promoting the skills of older workers will not alter [employers'] preferences.' This difference in the nature of ageism experienced by many older women may help explain why the decline in perceived ageism reported by older male jobseekers over successive waves of HILDA has not been matched by a similar decline in levels of perceived ageism among older female jobseekers—particularly in the female dominated occupations of clerical and administrative work, sales work, and community and personal service work. An implication of this finding is that policy responses to ageism need to be far more tailored in their approach. Present, one-size-fits all, business case approaches rely on 'an over-narrow concept of ageism' (Duncan 2003:115) that is grounded in a human capital framework that obscures 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.

## References

- Austen, S. and Ong, R. (2013), The effects of ill-health and informal care on the employment retention of mid-life women: Does the workplace matter?, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 55(5), pp. 663–680.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014), *Persons Not in the Labour Force: September 2013* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics).
- Australian Government (2015), *2015 Intergenerational Report: Australia in 2055*, Available at:  
[http://www.treasury.gov.au/~media/Treasury/Publications%20and%20Media/Publications/2015/2015%20Intergenerational%20Report/Downloads/PDF/2015\\_IGR.ashx](http://www.treasury.gov.au/~media/Treasury/Publications%20and%20Media/Publications/2015/2015%20Intergenerational%20Report/Downloads/PDF/2015_IGR.ashx)



- Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2010), *Age Discrimination – Exposing the Hidden Barrier for Mature Age Workers* (Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission).
- Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2013), *Fact or Fiction? Stereotypes of Older Australians* (Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission).
- Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2015), *National Prevalence Survey of Age Discrimination in the Workplace* (Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission).
- Bennington, L. (2001), Age discrimination: Converging evidence from four Australian studies, *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 13(3), pp. 125–34.
- Butler, R. N. (1969), Age-ism: Another form of bigotry, *The Gerontologist* 9(3), pp. 243–46.
- Calasanti T (2005), Ageism, gravity, and gender: Experiences of aging bodies, *Generations* (Fall), pp. 8–12.
- Clarke, L. H. and Griffin, M. (2008), Visible and invisible ageing: Beauty work as a response to ageism, *Ageing & Society* 28 653–74.
- Creswell, J. W. and Plano Clark, V. L. (2011), *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, Sage, Los Angeles.
- Department of Employment (2015a), *Improving the Employment Prospects of Mature Age Job Seekers*, Canberra: Australian Government.
- Department of Employment (2015b), *Job Services Australia Data June 2015 – Mature Age Population by Duration of Registration*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Department of Employment (2015c), *Job Services Australia Data June 2015 – Newstart Customer Population by Age Group*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Department of Human Services (2014), *Budget 2014–15: Increase the Age Pension qualifying age to 70 years*, Available: <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/corporate/budget/budget-2014-15/budget-measures/older-australians/increase-age-pension-qualifying-age-70-years>
- Department of Social Services (2009), *Income Support Customers: A Statistical Overview 2008*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Duncan, C. (2003), Assessing anti-ageism routes to older worker re-engagement, *Work, Employment & Society* 17(1), pp. 101–20.
- Duncan, C. and Loretto, W. (2004), Never the right age? Gender and age-based discrimination in employment, *Gender, Work & Organization* 11(1), pp. 95–115.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A. and Johnson, L. (2006), How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability, *Field Methods* 18(1), pp. 59–82.
- Hallier, J. (2001), Greenfield recruitment and selection, *Personnel Review* 30(3), pp. 331–51.
- Handy, J. and Davy, D. (2007), Gendered ageism: Older women's experiences of employment agency practices, *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* 45(1), pp. 85–99.
- Huppatz, K. and Goodwin, S. (2013), Masculinised jobs, feminised jobs and men's 'gender capital' experiences: Understanding occupational segregation in Australia, *Journal of Sociology* 49(2–3), pp. 291–308.
- Itzin, C. and Phillipson, C. (1995), Gendered ageism, In: Itzin C and Newman J (eds), *Gender, Culture and Organisation Change*, London: Routledge, pp. 81–90.
- Johnson, G., Billett, S., Dymock, D. and Martin, G. (2012), The discursive (re)positioning of older workers in Australian recruitment policy reform, *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 32(1), pp. 4–21.
- Jyrkinen, M. and Mckie, L. (2012), Gender, age and ageism: Experiences of women managers in Finland and Scotland, *Work, Employment & Society* 26(1), pp. 61–77.
- Kossen, C. and Pederson, C. (2008), Older workers in Australia: The myths, the realities and the battle over workforce 'flexibility', *Journal of Management & Organisation* 14(1), pp. 73–84.

- Loretto, W. and White, P. (2006), Employers' attitudes, practices and policies towards older workers, *Human Resource Management Journal* 16(3), pp. 313–30.
- Loretto, W., Duncan, C. and White, P. (2000), Ageism and employment: Controversies, ambiguities and younger people's perceptions, *Ageing & Society* 20 279–302.
- Macdermott, T. (2014), Older workers and extended workforce participation, *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 14(2), pp. 83–98.
- Mcdowell, L. (2009), *Working bodies: Interactive Service Employment and Workplace Identities*, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Napier, E. A., Harrington, M. M. and Himes, C. L. (2005), Old and overweight: Another kind of double jeopardy?, *Generations* 29(3), pp. 31–36.
- National Seniors Australia Productive Ageing Centre (2013), *Age Discrimination in the Labour Market: Experiences and Perceptions of Mature Age Australians*, Melbourne: National Seniors Australia Productive Ageing Centre.
- National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre (2011), *Ageing and the Barriers to Mature Age Labour Force Participation in Australia*, Melbourne: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Consultative Forum on Mature Age Participation.
- Ozanne, E. (2009), Negotiating identity in late life: diversity among Australian baby boomers, *Australian Social Work*, 62(2), pp. 132–154.
- Patrickson, M. and Ranzijn, R. (2003), Employability of older workers, *Equal Opportunities International* 22(5), pp. 50–63.
- Productivity Commission (2013), *An Ageing Australia: Preparing for the Future*, Commission Research Paper, Canberra.
- Ranzijn, R., Carson, E. and Winefield, A. (2004), Barriers to mature aged re-employment: Perceptions about desirable work-related attributes held by job-seekers and employers, *International Journal of Organisational Behaviour* 8(7), pp. 559–70.
- Taylor, P. (2011), Ageism and age discrimination in the labour market and employer responses, In: Griffin T and Beddie F (eds), *Older workers: Research Findings*, Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research,
- Tonks, G., Dickenson, K. and Lindsay, N. (2009), Misconceptions and realities: The working relationships of older workers and younger managers, *Research and Practice in Human Resource Management* 17(2), pp. 36–54.
- Twigg, J. (2004), The body, gender, and age: Feminist insights in social gerontology, *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18, pp. 59–73.
- Walker, H., Grant, D., Meadows, M. and Cook, I. (2007), Women's experiences and perceptions of age discrimination in employment: Implications for research and policy, *Social Policy and Society* 6(1), pp. 37–48.
- Warhurst, C. and Nickson, D. (2007), Employee experience of aesthetic labour in retail and hospitality, *Work, Employment & Society* 21(1), pp. 103–20.
- Weller, S. A. (2007), Discrimination, labour markets and the labour market prospects of older workers: What can a legal case teach us?, *Work, Employment & Society* 21(3), pp. 413–37.
- Williams, C. L. and Connell, C. (2010), Looking good and sounding right: Aesthetic labor and social inequality in the retail industry, *Work and Occupations* 37(3), pp. 349–77.
- Witz, A., Warhurst, C. and Nickson, D. (2003), The labour of aesthetics and the aesthetics of organization, *Organisation* 10(1), pp. 33–54.

The Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre is an independent economic and social research organisation located within the Curtin Business School at Curtin University. The Centre was established in 2012 through the generous support from Bankwest (a division of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia), with a core mission to undertake high quality, objective research on the key economic and social issues of relevance to Western Australia.

The Centre's research and engagement activities are designed to influence economic and social policy debates in state and Federal Parliament, regional and national media, and the wider Australian community. Through high quality, evidence-based research and analysis, our research outcomes inform policy makers and commentators of the economic challenges to achieving sustainable and equitable growth and prosperity both in Western Australia and nationally.

The Centre capitalises on Curtin University's reputation for excellence in economic modelling, forecasting, public policy research, trade and industrial economics and spatial sciences. Centre researchers have specific expertise in economic forecasting, quantitative modelling, microdata analysis and economic and social policy evaluation.

A suite of tailored and national economic models and methods are maintained within the Centre to facilitate advanced economic policy analysis: these include macroeconomic and time series models, micro(simulation) models, computable general equilibrium (CGE) models, spatial modelling methods, economic index analysis, and behavioural modelling methods.

## CONTACT

Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre  
Curtin University  
Kent Street Bentley WA 6102  
GPO Box U1987 Perth WA 6845

Tel: +61 8 9266 2873

[bcec@curtin.edu.au](mailto:bcec@curtin.edu.au)  
[bcec.edu.au](http://bcec.edu.au)