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'OLDER' WORKERS:  
THE NEGOTIATION OF AGE DISCRIMINATION AND IDENTITY  
IN THE JOB SEARCH PROCESS

By

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A Thesis

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## 'OLDER' WORKERS



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in the Job Search Process

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## ABSTRACT

Given the aging of the Canadian workforce and the trend for unemployed older workers (aged 45 to 65) to take considerably longer than younger ones to become re-employed, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine the importance of age in the job search process, how age influences identity when searching for work, and the management techniques used by older workers to obtain employment. There is little qualitative research generated in a Canadian context that examines the views of older workers themselves. Thus, this research uses qualitative methodologies (i.e. 30 semi-structured interviews supplemented by 35 hours of participant observation) and an interactionist framework, to contribute new insights into older workers' job search process.

Findings indicate that study participants feel employers discriminate against them in the hiring process through both subtle and overt mechanisms related to employers' ageist stereotypes concerning skills, training, adaptability or flexibility, and financial costs. Respondents believe that employers use specific wording in job advertisements, choose candidates to interview by assessing age in applicants' résumés, further assess age in the interview setting, and use an ageist discourse. With respect to the impact of age on identity in the job search process, the data suggest that once participants perceive they have been labelled "old" by

others (i.e. potential employers and personnel at older worker programs) they begin to define themselves as “old” and become susceptible to identity degradation. These findings highlight the paradoxical nature of the job search process – individuals go to older worker programs for assistance, yet some of the experiences encountered during attendance at these programs mirrored many experiences encountered with discriminatory employers. Despite this occurrence, most who experience identity degradation are able to successfully negotiate their identities by drawing on social support, attending older worker programs, changing their identities, maintaining their key roles, and altering their overall mental outlook. Finally, in an attempt to avoid being considered “old” when searching for work, respondents develop “counteractions” and “concealments”. These age-related management techniques are believed to counteract employers’ ageist stereotypes by maintaining skills and changing work-related expectations, and conceal age by altering résumés, physical appearance, and language. Overall, this dissertation advances the knowledge within the sociology of aging and work by using the richness of study participants’ accounts to conceptualize the meaning and import of age in the job search process. Conclusions are drawn in relation to improving policies and practices that govern employers’ behaviours in order to remove the structural barriers from older workers’ route to re-employment.

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### CHAPTER II

Berger, E. D. Older Workers Seeking Employment: Perceptions of Age Discrimination in the Hiring Process. Under consideration with *Ageing and Society*.

### CHAPTER III

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**CHAPTER I: Introduction: Contextualizing the Study**

... age is perhaps the most understudied dimension of inequality within sociology in general, and within the subfield of work and occupations in particular. Very little is known about the role that age plays in disadvantaging certain groups of people relative to others within the labour markets. (McMullin & Marshall, 2001, p.111)

It is widely recognized that the Canadian population is aging and as a result, there are a wide number of social and economic changes expected to occur in the coming years. In particular, changes in the domain of work will be considerable, as individuals aged 45 to 65 are estimated to represent close to half of the working-age population by the year 2015 (Forum of Labour Market Ministers, 2002). Given that Canadian society is aging, coupled with the centrality of work throughout the life course, it is not surprising that increasing attention has been paid to the aging of the workforce by both lay and academic audiences. In fact, researchers and the media in particular, often use statistical projections related to aging to “warn” the public about the economic “demands” of an aging population. However, as has been demonstrated in the literature in relation to health care (Evans, McGrail, Morgan, Barer, & Hertzman, 2001), the family (Rosenthal, 2000), and retirement income (Prince, 2000), this type of “apocalyptic demography” (Gee, 2000) or alarmist thinking is unwarranted.

As a result of the quantitative leaning regarding research on the aging of the workforce, little is known about the subjective experiences of workers aged 45 to 65 who are searching for employment. Individuals in this age bracket are defined as “older workers” in the majority of literature, including Human Resource Development Canada (Human Resources Development Canada, 2002), due in large part to the existence of age discrimination occurring as early as age 45 (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2000). This definition of older workers will be used throughout this dissertation. However, as will be argued in the concluding chapter, this somewhat arbitrary age designation is believed to be contributing to individuals’ perceptions of age as a barrier to re-employment and the subsequent degradation of their identities and is thus hindering their job search success.

Older individuals take considerably longer than younger ones to find work once unemployed, due in part to the existence of age discrimination (Walker, 2002). According to the American Association for Retired Persons (2002), 67 percent of older workers have personally experienced or witnessed discrimination on the basis of age (p. 65). A very similar picture is presented in Canada and more specifically Ontario. While the Ontario Human Rights Code is designed to protect workers against discrimination on the basis of age, research suggests that age discrimination in employment is very much a reality (Ontario Human Rights

Commission, 2000). Canada's legislation, such as the persistence of mandatory retirement in many provinces and its related permissibility in various sectors of the workforce, make the Canadian context distinct from other countries, such as the United States, which passed a law to eliminate mandatory retirement in 1987.

In light of the changing age structure in the Canadian workforce and the paucity of qualitative scholarly work that investigates the import of these demographic transformations from the older worker's perspective, this dissertation explores the subjective experiences encountered during the job search process that are related to age. The three chapters which follow this introductory one are individual papers that each tell a separate, yet related "story" concerning older workers' route to re-employment. Chapter II, "Older Workers Seeking Employment: Perceptions of Age Discrimination in the Hiring Process" provides the foundation for Chapter III and Chapter IV by presenting an exploration of older workers' perceptions concerning the existence and nature of age discrimination in the hiring process. Chapter III, "'Aging' Identities: Degradation and Negotiation in the Search for Employment" addresses the identity-related consequences of this perceived age discrimination and Chapter IV, "Managing Age Discrimination: An Examination of the Techniques Used When Seeking Employment" examines the ensuing age-related management techniques that are developed to overcome age as a barrier to re-employment.

In order to set the stage for the three chapters that follow, this introductory chapter first presents a substantive and theoretical review of the literature. While this section reiterates to some extent what is to come in the following chapters of this dissertation, it is necessary here in order to provide an overview of my particular research focus and illustrate the linkages amongst the three separate papers contained within this dissertation. Further, the review of the literature contextualizes the specific research questions that are addressed in this dissertation, which will be explicated in this introductory chapter. The methodology used to achieve these ends is then presented, followed by some of my personal reflections on the research process. Finally, I provide a summary of the findings contained in the chapters that lie ahead in this dissertation.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Contextualizing Older Workers' Search for Employment**

On the route to re-employment, older workers are often faced with various structural barriers related to age that threaten their job search success. The meanings attributed to these threats are the focus of analysis in this dissertation, yet before turning to older workers' subjective experiences in the ensuing chapters, the social context in which the participants are searching for work is presented.



Research suggests that employers' attitudes toward older workers are frequently related to misconceptions concerning older workers' abilities (American Association for Retired Persons, 1994, p.8). These misconceptions result in employers judging older workers to be in poor health, resistant to change, uncreative, prone to accidents, disinterested in technological change, and hard to train (Guillemard & Walker, 1994). While research does suggest positive attitudes toward older workers on certain dimensions (knowledge, experience, honesty, dependability, work ethic, mentoring, and stability) (Berger, 1999; Canadian Network for Experienced Workers, 1996; Gibson, Zerbe, & Franken, 1993; Marshall, 1996; Walker & Taylor, 1998), negative characteristics often overshadow the positive ones in the job search process. For example, employers cite various reasons for not hiring older workers, including negative beliefs relating to their computer literacy, appropriate skills and qualifications, adaptability to varying work settings, health, and pay-back period on training (Marshall, 1996). Further, employers' attitudes toward older workers vary significantly according to company size, employers' age, and employers' gender, with older, female employers from smaller companies displaying the most positive attitudes (Berger, 1999).

While the majority of these negative stereotypes have been disproved in the literature (Canadian Network for Experienced Workers, 1996; Charness,

1995; Davies & Sparrow, 1985; Human Resources Development Canada, 2002; Marshall & Taylor, in press), many of them do persist. These stereotypes can be the result of inaccurate beliefs about age-related changes in health that then lead to further misconceptions concerning older workers (e.g. higher rates of absenteeism, loss of work-related stamina, higher medical costs, higher risk of work-related accidents, lower productivity, and inability to learn new skills) (Centre for Studies of Aging, 1996). Negative attitudes also arise with respect to structural factors, such as paying larger health care premiums for older individuals (Marshall, 1996) or higher wages for older, unionized employees (McMullin & Marshall, 2001). However, of the seven case studies conducted under the guidance of Marshall (1996) the organization that had the largest proportion of older workers was actually the least concerned with health care costs, compared to the other organizations investigated. Thus, it is quite possible that the realities with respect to health care costs that coincide with an aging workforce are not as detrimental to companies as may be perceived by many employers. The relationship between employers' attitudes and their practices has not been studied in great detail, despite the fact that Human Resources Development Canada (2002) has suggested that negative stereotypes about older workers are particularly evident in employers' recruitment and hiring practices. One of the few studies that specifically examined the relationship between employers'

attitudes and their behaviours toward older workers did find a direct association between the two in relation to hiring, training, and advancement opportunities (Taylor & Walker, 1998).

Discriminatory attitudes and behaviours toward older workers are generally reflected in specific domains. For example, age bars are often used in job advertisements in the United Kingdom (Duncan, 2003; McGoldrick & Arrowsmith, 1993; Walker & Taylor, 1993). In Ontario (as well as Canada as a whole), the use of age in both job advertisements and job applications is prohibited (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2000). However, questions relating to age may be used in an employment interview if “age is a reasonable and *bona fide* occupational requirement” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2000, p.24) and an applicant’s age can often be assessed in this context as well. Thus, employers can use physical appearance as a criterion for discrimination in an interview. The importance of appearance in seeking or maintaining employment, particularly for females, has been noted in the literature: “When women attain the symbolic meaning of ‘physically unattractive’ (to men) they may be pushed out of visible areas or forced into retirement regardless of their skills” (Reinharz, 1986, p.512). Further, due to the physical appearance norms found in Western culture, it has been recognized that women face age discrimination in employment to an even larger degree and earlier on than do men

(Ginn & Arber, 1995).

Ageist beliefs can also be found in relation to discourse. For example, specific words such as “senile” or “decrepit” immediately evoke negative images of aging. However, even words that are not typically negative in nature can create negative “meanings through association” (Bytheway, 1995, p.59). For example, the word “old” itself is objectively a chronological marker of time, yet subjectively this word is often linked to other negative words, such as the previous two words suggested – “senile” and “decrepit”. More specifically, the role of language has been studied in relation to age discrimination in employment (McCann & Giles, 2002; McVittie, McKinlay, & Widdicombe, 2003). For example, research has shown that employers try to justify their lack of older employees in what they consider to be non-ageist terms (e.g. “young” industry); however, this in itself was found to convey a type of “new ageism” (McVittie et al., 2003). McCann and Giles (2002) also suggest that employers have an ageist discourse, such as telling an older job candidate that the company needs more “young blood”. While comments such as these have been used as evidence in lawsuits against employers (McCann & Giles, 2002), it is often a challenge to prove the existence of age discrimination on the basis of these more subtle types of comments (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2002).

Despite the growing body of literature on employers’ attitudes toward

older workers, there is a lack of research that examines older workers' perceptions in general. However, according to a national American work and career survey of over 2500 individuals aged 45 to 74, 80 percent of individuals who are searching for employment feel that age discrimination exists in the workplace (American Association for Retired Persons, 2002, p. 66). Also, 15 percent of older individuals feel that they were not hired for a particular job because of age (American Association for Retired Persons, 2002, p. 13). Findings from the survey speculate that older workers' perceptions about age-related barriers to re-employment are a reality, due to the increasing number of complaints about age discrimination made to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In fact, between 2000 and 2002, complaints increased by 25 percent (American Association for Retired Persons, 2002, p. 14).

Other research has examined employees' perceptions (mean age 38) about age discrimination within a particular workplace (Hassell & Perrewé, 1993). That study surveyed workers to assess the psychological impact of perceived workplace discrimination based on age. They found that perceived age discrimination significantly affected self-esteem, personal control, and job satisfaction. However, as can be seen by the age of participants in their research, the study did not focus on older workers. Experiences for older workers, and those searching for work in particular, would likely vary.

Research that has discussed the impact of plant closures on older workers, has suggested that it is extremely difficult for them to become re-employed following this experience, due in part to the existence of age discrimination (Kates, Greiff, & Hagen, 1990, p. 60). Gilberto (1997) conducted a qualitative study of 18 women over the age of 50 and concluded that older women in particular have the greatest challenges to overcome after a layoff occurs. She discussed participants' experiences with depression, shame, and anger, but focussed on the experience of losing a job, not on perceptions of age discrimination when searching for work. Other research also centering on older women's adjustment to unemployment has indicated that older women face the greatest financial and psychological difficulties during periods of unemployment due to a combination of age and gender discrimination (Rife, 1992, 1995; Rife, Toomey, & First, 1989). However, another study on older workers' perceptions related to downsizing found little difference between men and women (Armstrong-Stassen, 2001). What is clear in the literature is that once unemployed, older individuals experience economic strain (See for example LeBlanc & McMullin, 1997) and increased morbidity (See for example Gallo, Bradley, Siegel, & Kasl, 2000). In fact, in the United States and Japan, for male workers aged 55 to 65, higher unemployment rates were associated with increased incidence of suicide (Taylor, 2003).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Since the coining of the term “sociology” by Auguste Comte and the acceptance of sociology as a discipline in the academic world in the late 1800s (Collins, 1994, p. 39-41) various theoretical schools of thought have been introduced into the sociological realm of thinking. Depending on the theoretical underpinnings of the study, distinct research questions and methods of inquiry are created, which subsequently shapes how the findings will be interpreted. In this dissertation, I use the symbolic interactionist perspective to gain a firsthand understanding of how individuals subjectively interpret their experiences within the structural constraints (i.e. age discrimination) of the job search process. This section provides a historical sketch of symbolic interactionism, including the main tenets of this perspective, which is followed by a more detailed analysis of the key interactionist concepts that are used in this dissertation.

Prior to the conception of symbolic interactionism as a recognized theoretical perspective, various ideas and concepts were in existence outside of the sociological realm that were eventually incorporated into the symbolic interactionist perspective. For example, American pragmatism, a philosophical approach pursued by Charles Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, examined human behaviour and methods that individuals used to create knowledge and social life (Prus, 1996). An emphasis on human agency,

meanings, and language were the key concepts later transferred to the symbolic interactionist tradition. This tradition of thinking first became recognized as a sociological school of thought through the efforts of Herbert Blumer. Blumer created the term “symbolic interactionism” in 1937 to refer to the study of human interaction and group life (Blumer, 1969). As a student of George Herbert Mead, Blumer gave credit to his mentor, a social behaviourist, for creating the foundation for the symbolic interactionist perspective. In Mead’s most recognized work, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), he discussed the relationship between individuals and society, as well as the importance of interaction, interpretation, and language. He developed the concepts “I” and “me” and explored the importance of viewing the self as an object. Charles Horton Cooley (1902) also contributed greatly to the formation of symbolic interactionism. He discussed the important function of interaction and interpretation in group life, and demonstrated how language, reflected appraisals, and images play a role in the formation of the self. His concept of the “looking-glass self” and method of sympathetic introspection are both widely recognized in sociology today.

Blumer proposed three tenets to describe the main features of the symbolic interactionist perspective, which represent the foundation for what is now referred to as the Chicago School (Blumer, 1969). He argued that individuals act based on meanings they assign to things, meanings emerge from social interaction, and



individuals interpret these meanings in a processual manner. Thus, meaning, interaction, and interpretation are critical, and proponents of the Chicago school argue that individuals actively define and shape their behaviour (Prus, 1996) in a processual fashion (Gecas & Burke, 1995). Blumer (1969) criticized the positivistic nature of sociological methods at the time, and praised Cooley's (1902) method of sympathetic introspection as the only approach that would truly grasp the interpretive nature of group life and allow researchers to gain an "intimate familiarity" with their subjects (Prus, 1996). Thus, Blumer suggested a methodological approach that allowed for direct examination of the external world through inductive research techniques involving exploration and inspection.

*The Import of Stigma, Identity, and Impression Management in Interactionist Thought*

Within the symbolic interactionist umbrella, Erving Goffman developed what is now known as the dramaturgical approach.<sup>1</sup> In particular relevance to this dissertation, the key concepts created by Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and in *Stigma* (1963), are stigma, identity, and impression management. Goffman (1963) used the term stigma in his work to refer to "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (p.3) that results in discriminatory attitudes and behaviours being directed toward the stigmatized individual. He

distinguished between discreditable stigma (traits which can be hidden), and discredited stigma (obvious traits). More recently, the conceptualization of stigma has been re-defined as existing “when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p.382). The category of “old” has been described as a stigma in research on older widows (Matthews, 1979). Being viewed as “old” by others can become a master status (Becker, 1993) or the primary characteristic that others associate with an individual. Older people are particularly susceptible to internalizing stigmatization and labelling due to an ambiguity in norms and loss of roles and reference groups that are associated with aging (Breytspraak, 1984, p.91). Kuypers and Bengtson (1973) conceptualized the “social breakdown syndrome”, which they say occurs when older individuals are exposed to negative labelling and in turn label themselves as incompetent. More specifically, due to the stigmatization process, a self-fulfilling prophecy occurs; a term first coined by Merton (1968). This occurrence has detrimental effects on identity – “a person’s location relative to others in the situation, the community, or the society as a whole” (Hewitt, 2000, p.126 ):

What happens is that to the extent that we believe our stereotypes, we set up social structures to guarantee that our expectations are correct; the social structure in turn prompts the behaviors that confirm the stereotypes. (Breytspraak, 1984, p.112)

The notion of identity involves a dynamic process that may change over time through negotiated interaction between the individual and society (Goffman, 1959). Three types of identity are used in this process – “felt identity”, meaning attributed to one’s own identity, “presented identity”, a view of oneself that is projected to others, and “social identity”, the meaning that others attribute to the individual. Goffman (1959) argues that one’s “presented identity” can be altered to meet the needs of any given situation. By using certain techniques, individuals actively control the image they are projecting to others (“presented identity”), in order to obtain a desirable “social identity”.

In order to overcome negative changes in identity, individuals often use various identity negotiation strategies. These strategies either help maintain their established identities or help negotiate new or transformed identities. Cooley’s (1972) notion of the “looking-glass self”, where our opinions of ourselves are a direct reflection of how we think others perceive us, is an important part of the process of identity negotiation throughout the life course (George, 1990; Karp, 2000). Due to this importance, individuals actively use strategies to negotiate their identities on a continual basis. Therefore, identity negotiation occurs within a social context and is influenced by an individual’s historical and cultural location within this context (Breyspraak, 1984, p.93).

As individuals age and are faced with declining physical abilities, those who are able to negotiate their lives to tolerate these changes (and avoid being preoccupied by them) will be able to maintain a positive identity (Breyspraak, 1984, p.89). Other research has demonstrated that individuals in their fifties are able to cope better with change than when they were younger by coming to the realization that advancing age is generally coupled with advancing wisdom, which made them feel a sense of personal liberation (Karp, 2000). Further, research on chronically ill individuals has shown that illness can lead to a loss of self and identity if individuals compare their past identities (e.g. healthy) to their current ones (e.g. sick) (Charmaz, 1983, 1991). However, if individuals are able to overcome their illness, they can often reflect on their past hardships and realize that their experiences were part of a “path to knowledge and self-discovery” (Charmaz, 1983, p. 191).

Identity development has also been discussed in relation to the concept of a “career” or “the movement of individuals through the structure of society” (Haas & Shaffir, 1978, p.19). Individuals generally move along a type of continuum where identities change as a result of various changes in status (e.g. unemployment, marriage). Thus, identities may be transformed over time in relation to individuals’ personal histories and sequence of statuses (Spence, 1986). What is of primary relevance to my research is not only how careers link

individuals to society, but also how people transform their identities in a process linked to the larger social structure in which it occurs. Structural characteristics, such as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, gender, and more specifically age, undoubtedly shape and transform identity. It is important to note that while identities can be transformed as a result of age and aging, they also can be transformed as a result of other structural conditions, such as unemployment or discrimination.

“Continuous restructuring allows individuals to maintain a feeling of unity about themselves and a sense of connection with the parts of their pasts they consider relevant to who they are at present” (Kaufman, 2000, p. 103). According to Mead’s theory of the past or the concept of temporality, individuals use elements of their past to manage their futures (Hall, 1987; Maines, Sugrue, & Katovich, 1983). The notion of temporality allows for an examination of how one’s identity has been transformed over time by focusing on “the location of the person in an ever-shifting present that at each moment has a unique relationship to the past and future” (Breytspraak, 1984, p.99). Thus, by examining identity over time, we can see where, how, and why transformations have occurred.

Other research has discussed a model of identity processes in relation to aging that includes identity assimilation and accommodation (Whitbourne, 1999). Identity accommodation or change occurs as a result of an experience, such as an

illness, that causes one to re-evaluate his or her identity. Research that specifically addresses the age-related identity transformation that occurs for individuals between the ages of 50 and 60 labels this time period the “decade of reminders” as numerous events often occur (e.g. death of parents, becoming grandparents) that cause individuals to begin to define themselves as “old” (Karp, 2000).

In addition to discussing the notion of stigma and identity, Goffman (1959; 1963) also discussed the use of impression management, where individuals will “manipulate” the image they present to others to achieve a desired “social identity”. In this way, individuals are creating a specific “definition of the situation” (Thomas, 1972) in order to sway others’ perceptions of them in a positive direction. In relation to aging, research has shown that in order to avoid being stigmatized and maintain a positive identity, individuals may “suppress” evidence of age (Matthews, 1979, p.74-75). “People have time allotted to tend to physical and mental needs...to cover potential age stigma signs, such as wrinkles or gray hair, by surgical intervention or hair dyes” (Luken, 1987, p.185). Thus, research suggests that individuals use certain management strategies to avoid being classified as “old” and being stigmatized by others.

Studies indicate that impression management tactics are often used in the context of a job interview (Delery & Kacmar, 1998; Fletcher, 1989; Gilmore &

Ferris, 1989; Kacmar, Delery, & Ferris, 1992; Rosenfeld, 1997; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). More specifically, a study done by Delery and Kacmar (1998) found three types of impression management techniques to be useful in an interview setting: (1) entitlements (taking credit for a prior work-related success); (2) enhancements (making statements reflecting one's own positive attributes); and (3) self-promotion (highlighting strengths in relation to those required by the ideal applicant). That study considered the importance of applicants' age in an interview setting, but only included participants with a maximum age of 38 and considered age to be an advantage in relation to having more experience with the interview process itself. Other research indicates that individuals use impression management strategies when they perceive that discrepancies exist between the feedback received in an organizational setting and their desired social identity (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997). When discrepancies occur, individuals acquire alternative techniques to use and then wait for additional feedback, which determines the future interaction between the participants. Accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968) and disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975) are also used in the employment context (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997), in order to avoid negative stigmatization and negotiate identity in relation to past and future behaviours. Thus, while previous research has not focused on older workers seeking employment, it does suggest that certain strategies are particularly useful for

enabling individuals to focus the interview on their strengths and positive attributes.

It should be noted that some researchers in the organizational behaviour field consider impression management during job interviews to be a form of deception and manipulation (see for example Anderson, 1991; Arvey & Renz, 1992). Other research has demonstrated that there is a possibility of using too much impression management, as employers were found to prefer job candidates who used either one of two types of management strategies but rejected candidates who used the two types of strategies together (Baron, 1989). Thus, research on the use of impression management techniques during a job interview is mixed and no research to date has examined age-related impression management techniques used to overcome age discrimination during the job search process.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

After reviewing the literature and conducting some preliminary analysis of the data, I identified three specific sociological questions that required investigation. These issues are examined in this dissertation in order to advance knowledge about the meaning and import of age in the job search process.



Therefore, this qualitative study addresses three research questions that will be explored in Chapters II, III, and IV, respectively:

1. What are older workers' perceptions concerning the importance of age in the job search process?
2. How does age influence identity in the job search process?
3. What management techniques do older workers employ in the job search process?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **The Value of Qualitative Research Methods**

The use of qualitative methodologies allows for the subjective meanings and interpretations to be revealed to the researcher in a way that is often not attainable in quantitative investigations (George, 1990). Qualitative researchers make no claims to be objective observers; instead, they consider the meanings, behaviours, and interpretations of their study participants and thus qualitative methodologies are generally used to study research questions stemming from the symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969). Thus, given the nature of the research questions that I address in this dissertation, I use a qualitative research

method and a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that allows the theory to emerge from the data.

More specifically, after receiving approval from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board, I conducted 30 interviews with unemployed individuals aged 45 to 65, who were actively searching for employment. These interviews were semi-structured, and thus were conducted using an interview guide that allowed for some flexibility in the interview process (See Appendix A). The interview guide included questions on demographics, employment background, challenges encountered when seeking employment, and feelings related to these challenges. Due to the emergent nature of qualitative research, the interview guide was altered and expanded throughout the course of my study to reflect new research themes and neglected ones. Further, as the research project progressed (and my comfort level increased) conversations began to flow more freely and thus I felt less tied to the specific wording contained within the interview schedule.

In addition to conducting qualitative interviews, I also engaged in 35 hours of participant observation in three programs designed for individuals aged 45 to 65. Participant observation suggests that the researcher participates “in the daily life of the people under study either *openly, in the role of the researcher*, or covertly, in some disguised role, observing things that happen, listening to what is

said, and questioning people over some length of time” (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961, p. 22-23) (emphasis added). While I initially intended to go to these older worker programs solely to recruit participants for my research, I soon discovered that the firsthand knowledge obtained by observing organizational workshops, staff, and clients was extremely meaningful and provided a way for me to contextualize my participants’ job search experiences.

### **Participant Recruitment**

I attempted to use several avenues to recruit participants for my research (See Appendix B). The majority of respondents (n=20) were recruited through my attendance at three older worker programs. I also recruited two additional participants through personal referrals unrelated to my attendance at these programs. The remainder of my respondents were obtained after giving recruitment letters (See Appendix C) to individuals in various locations, requesting permission to post recruitment advertisements (See Appendix D). Four participants were obtained as a result of these advertisements being placed in older worker programs (including others not observed firsthand). Flyers were also placed in general employment agencies geared to individuals of all age groups, community libraries, and McMaster University’s website, yet no participants were recruited in this fashion. One participant responded to a flyer

placed in a community centre and three individuals replied to a recruitment advertisement placed in a newspaper aimed at individuals aged 55 and older (See Appendix E).

I designed my recruitment strategy to include both individuals who had sought assistance from an employment agency and those who had not. However, I had a much greater response through personal contact at older worker programs than through recruitment advertisements and thus the sample does not reflect my recruitment intentions. Interestingly, all participants (including those recruited through other means) discussed using older worker programs at some point during their job search process; therefore I do not suspect that the achieved sample has biased my research findings.

### **Older Worker Programs**

The three older worker programs that I observed were created or partially funded by Human Resources Development Canada. These programs were developed in an attempt to assist workers over the age of 45 who are not believed to benefit from general employment services geared to workers of all ages (Human Resources Development Canada, 1999). Thus, the creation of these age-related programs is thought to be more helpful in their job search. In addition to providing a context for my participants' experiences, my attendance at these

programs also gave me the opportunity to observe the services and workshops provided by the older worker programs. The topics covered in these programs ranged from workshops involving interviewing skills, personality assessments, computer training, and résumé writing to specific sessions on understanding the myths and realities of being an older worker.

In addition, I met briefly with several of the employment counsellors who were leading the programs, yet due to my focus on older workers' perceptions of the job search process, I only questioned them about the actual services provided and did not go into depth with them about their views on these services. One of the programs I attended only offered services to older workers, while the other two had programs for older workers in addition to other segments of the labour force. Workshops designed for older workers lasted from two to three weeks. In order to observe individuals at varying stages of the job search process (and recruit clients at these varying stages), I attended workshops on the first day a new session began, midway throughout the sessions, and at the completion of sessions.

### **The Interviews**

A total of 30 interviews were conducted in the Greater Toronto Area and were held in a variety of locations (including older worker programs, community

centres, libraries, and coffee shops), depending on personal preferences. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. The first eight interviews for this project were conducted in 1999. An additional 22 interviews were done in 2002 in order to expand the initial research project. As the unemployment rates were similar at these two points in time (7.6% and 7.7%, respectively), I do not believe that the economic conditions differentially affected participants' ability to secure employment in the two time periods (Statistics Canada, 2004a, 2004b). Further, due to the qualitative nature of this project and the related focus on individuals' meanings that were attributed to their experiences, the fact that data were collected at two different time points is not perceived to have altered the findings of my study.

Individuals who participated in my research were required to sign a consent form, granting permission for the tape-recording of each interview, as well as providing them with the option to discontinue the interview at any point in time (See Appendix F). With consent from the participants, 29 of the 30 interviews were tape recorded and transcribed on a continual basis throughout the course of my data collection process. One participant preferred not to use a tape recorder, and in this case, detailed notes were taken during the interview.

### **Sample Characteristics**

The sample for this study included individuals who varied by gender, age, occupation, marital status, ethnic or religious background, country of origin, education, income, and length of time unemployed (See Appendices G and H). Throughout the data collection process, I was conscious of the importance of interviewing both males and females of various ages in order to take into account the heterogeneity of the “older worker” population. For example, I purposively interviewed an equal number of men and women in order to allow for the possibility of gender differences to emerge during the course of my research. Previous research has recognized that women face age discrimination in employment to an even larger degree and earlier on than do men, partly due to appearance norms and disrupted labour force patterns (Ginn & Arber, 1995). Although I did not expect to assess the prevalence of this finding due to the study’s qualitative nature, I did explore whether the meanings attributed to age-related barriers differed by gender. I anticipated that I would find a type of double jeopardy phenomenon, where being female and older would lead to increased difficulties in securing employment, but I did not find such differences. For example, following experiences with age discrimination, males and females both experienced identity degradation and engaged similarly in age-related management techniques (e.g. dying their hair prior to an important interview).

I also anticipated that I would find differences relating to the age categories I created for purposes of analysis in this study – I interviewed a similar number of individuals between the ages of 45 and 54 and between the ages of 55 and 65. I expected that individuals in the older age category would encounter age discrimination to a larger degree than those in the younger age category, but this was not the case. Where I did come across the largest differences was in relation to participants' country of origin. In particular, there were substantial differences in the meanings attributed to the experiences encountered in the job search process, depending on whether individuals had recently immigrated to Canada. While this is an area that I would like to investigate further in the future, my current research does suggest that language and training barriers, coupled with age put individuals at an even larger disadvantage in their job search.

The length of time that individuals were unemployed also varied substantially, ranging from three months to six years, with the most common length of time unemployed being between six and eight months. I should note here that in order to be included in my research, recruitment advertisements stated that individuals must be unemployed for three months or longer. This stipulation was used since individuals unemployed for less than three months may still be highly distressed from losing their jobs, may not have had the opportunity to actively search for employment and thus may not have felt the need to develop



age-related management techniques for their job search. Further, individuals often receive severance packages for three months following job terminations thus I wanted to avoid recruiting participants who did not yet feel the financial need to secure employment. To avoid further repetition in describing the characteristics of the sample, please refer to Chapters II, III, and IV for more detail on the variations among the sample with respect to occupational backgrounds, marital status, ethnic or religious background, level of education, and income category.

### **Data Analysis**

The data for this study were coded in relation to the key themes that emerged from the literature and during the process of analysis. The themes generally centred on my three research questions, yet due to the emergent nature of qualitative research, additional themes developed throughout the course of my study. Following an initial coding of the data according to these main themes, sub-categories emerged, which were also coded and entered into the qualitative analytical software program QSR NUD\*IST [Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing]. This program assisted in the management of the data, as it allows the researcher to code large amounts of text and organize it in a way that is easily accessible.

### **Personal Reflections on the Research Process**

When doing qualitative research, there are many unique methodological issues that can arise that often are not reflected in the final product of a research project – published papers. Therefore, my intention in this section is to discuss some of my personal reflections on the research process that are not contained elsewhere in this dissertation.

First, after deciding to focus my research on the challenges related to age encountered during the search for employment, I became concerned that my study would contain a type of bias. However, when describing their research focus for a study on medical students, Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss (1961) indicated:

Operationally, this meant that we were eager to uncover ‘sore spots,’ to hear ‘gripes’ and complaints. It might seem that in doing this we were deliberately looking for dirty linen and skeletons in the family closet, but this is not the case. The point of concentrating on instances where things do not work well is that it helps one discover how things work when they do work well, and these are discoveries that are more difficult to make in situations of harmony because people are more likely to take them for granted and less likely to discuss them. (p. 21).

Thus, due to the fact that I was specifically interested in documenting older workers’ experiences and more importantly, interpreting the meanings attributed to their lived experiences, I suspect that this focus was quite justified.

At the start of my research, I anticipated that a methodological challenge would arise in relation to finding a sufficient number of participants to interview for my research, as difficulties often arise when sampling from “rare” populations

(Kalton & Anderson, 1989). Thus, focusing on a subset of the working-age population (individuals aged 45 to 65) who were actively seeking employment and willing to discuss their experiences with a researcher, I anticipated that I would have problems locating an adequate number of participants for my research. It turned out that my concerns were generally unwarranted, as I was able to obtain a sufficient number of participants to interview through the use of various recruitment strategies (i.e. attendance at older worker programs, posting recruitment advertisements in various strategic locations, and personal referrals). In fact, I was quite surprised to find out how many individuals over the age of 45 were currently seeking employment and believed that their age was representing a barrier to their re-employment. Thus, when I mentioned what the focus of my dissertation was to friends and colleagues, I was exposed to many interesting accounts of personal experiences with age discrimination in the search for employment. While some conversations led to recruiting participants to interview, overall, listening to the overwhelming number of experiences related to age discrimination helped strengthen my desire to tell the “story” relating to the importance of age in the job search process.

Similarly, I also heard various anecdotal stories from participants during our interviews that were not directly related to the focus of this dissertation, yet were sociologically interesting in their own right. It was often difficult to redirect

participants back to the areas of concentration in my interview schedule when I found the conversational tangents so interesting. For example, one respondent described how her volunteer work at the Humane Society was particularly helpful to her during periods of heightened frustration and disappointment in her job search. While discussing this experience, she digressed:

I find that being in physical contact with an animal that is calm...actually calms me down. It's amazing – pet therapy. I'm officially a volunteer but I do it as pet therapy...Speaking of age, there is ageism among the public as far as the age of the pet they want to adopt. "I only want the kittens. A one or two year old cat is too old." The same ageism exists for pets. (female, age 53b)<sup>2</sup>

While the discussion of ageism in relation to pets may not be directly related to my research agenda, all of the participants' experiences are meaningful to them, and thus help shape their lived experiences. Therefore, although I realize that redirecting participants back to the original focus of an investigation is a common occurrence in the interview process (Reisberg et al., 1989) at times I felt that allowing participants to discuss issues that were relevant to them led to accounts of other experiences that I would not have otherwise discovered. In fact, the very nature of qualitative interviewing is both flexible and dynamic (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.88); thus I felt justified in this decision and used this strategy quite frequently throughout my data collection process. Further, I felt that discussing issues that were not seen by participants as being directly related to my study's

focus allowed me to obtain a better rapport with the respondents and conduct a more “relaxed and conversational” interview (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 99)

Upon reflecting on the research process, I also encountered a phenomenon that initially appeared to be ironic due to the nature and focus of my dissertation. However, after more in-depth reflection, I realized that it was the very nature of the issues explored during the interview process that caused the initial contradiction. To explain – during the course of certain interviews, I experienced explicit evidence of my own age representing a barrier to the participant during the interview process. Similar to previous findings in relation to class and race (Gans, 1962), this structural barrier became a slight challenge in my research process. For example, throughout the course of one particular interview, a participant conveyed that he felt I was too young to relate to or to understand his experiences with age discrimination. In fact, many of the comments he made throughout the interview reflected a sense of intergenerational tension and at one point I even felt that he was grouping me into the same category as all younger workers – individuals who were seen as taking the jobs away from older workers. While I did not anticipate that participants’ struggles with their job search would be directed at me, I was particularly sensitive in wording my questions and responses to this particular participant. According to Wax (1971), “...the wise and well-balanced fieldworker strives to maintain a consciousness and respect for

*what he is* and a consciousness and respect for *what his hosts are*” (p. 48).

Therefore, I did not pretend to understand what this participant was going through; instead I expressed my desire to learn from his experiences in order to help other individuals in the future. In this way, I believe that a successful interview was conducted, although the qualitative researcher’s inability to conduct a truly objective interview was never more apparent to me.

Due to the nature of my research, I also found it difficult at times to listen to some of the stories told by participants with respect to age discrimination and unemployment. I suspect that it is only natural that some of the troubling experiences – both psychologically and financially – would affect the researcher. For example, individuals discussed experiences with being on welfare and being homeless (i.e. living in a tent), and referred to specific episodes that they termed “mental breakdowns”. Clearly, participants did not discuss their experiences in a matter of fact kind of way; they became emotional, angry, and frustrated during the course of our interviews and thus, my providing a sympathetic ear was quite difficult in many instances. Further, while there were many occasions during my research process that I wished I could do more to help the participants, I did ensure that I provided them with information concerning the services and programs available to older workers in the Greater Toronto Area.

In relation to the notion of reciprocity, it has been shown that individuals generally want to participate in research projects if they believe that they are contributing to some greater good (Kaufman, 1994). As all participants volunteered to be in this study, I suspected that they wanted to tell their stories to a wider audience. In fact, several respondents explained to me that this was part of the reason for their participation in my study and hoped that their experiences would help individuals in similar situations in the future. For example:

I even went to a lawyer. I described my individual situation and asked if there was any legal recourse. If I did hire a lawyer it would cost me so much... also, the bureaucracy is so thick and there are so many cases waiting and all of that and I thought it is not worth the time or the effort or anything...so I really haven't done anything as a result... That's what appealed to me about your research – doing something on a smaller scale like what you are doing. Because I can do it on a one-to-one basis like this and maybe something will amount out of it. I can contribute in a slightly different way. (female, age 53b)

Good luck with your research. Hey, do me one favour. Write a really insightful, hard-hitting paper... And then publish it. If somebody like you writes it, they'll read it. (male, age 52)

In this way, I feel that I have successfully fulfilled the responsibility of a social scientist – “to translate personal troubles into public issues” (Mills, 1959, p. 187). It has been noted in the literature that individuals engage in reminiscence in order to make sense of and achieve meaning in their lives (Marshall, 1980). In fact, it is believed that reminiscing is used as a control mechanism to help achieve greater self-consistency and self-esteem as individuals age. I suspect that participants recognized that I was genuinely interested in their experiences with age

discrimination and thus I provided them with a sympathetic ear (as mentioned above) and an outlet to express their fears and frustrations with the job search process. Upon completion of our interviews, several participants actually thanked *me* for letting them “vent”. I also offered to send a summary of my findings to the participants at the completion of my dissertation research (about which most of them expressed a keen interest) and sent them thank you notes following our interviews to ensure that they were aware of my gratitude for their participation. In these ways, I believe that I was able to provide individuals with an element of reciprocity for participating in my research.

Finally, in order to locate older individuals who were seeking employment, I approached employment counsellors at several organizations designed for re-integrating employees back into the workforce. Problems were encountered gaining access to several of these employment agencies. Gatekeepers – “individuals who exercise control over physical access and provide or withhold information” (Burgess, 1991, p. 47) – postponed meetings on several occasions due to their schedules or perceived lack of interest in my research. Thus, while gaining access to the particular organizations where these gatekeepers worked was not necessarily a requirement to successfully conduct my research, I felt that this was the most valuable avenue for my investigation. Fortunately, after problems occurred with several of these gatekeepers, I found other



employment counsellors particularly receptive to my research agenda and thus their respective older worker programs were used in my research.

## **SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS**

Given that becoming an older worker is a certainty that most Canadians will face, this dissertation addresses what it means to be an unemployed, “older” worker trying to secure employment. Each of the three chapters that follow examines the significance of this experience from various standpoints. Thus, while distinct research questions are addressed in each of the chapters, some repetition does exist in relation to highlighting the importance of my research and particularly in describing the theoretical framework and methodology used. I will now briefly summarize the major findings in relation to the three separate dimensions of older workers’ job search process that are addressed in Chapters II, III, and IV. I will also provide an overview of Chapter V, the concluding portion of this dissertation.

In Chapter II, “Older Workers Seeking Employment: Perceptions of Age Discrimination in the Hiring Process”, my intention is to explore individuals’ perceptions concerning the importance of age in the job-seeking process. Accounts from study participants suggest that employers discriminate against them both subtly and overtly in the hiring process. Respondents discuss particular

mechanisms that employers use to discriminate against them, which include job advertisements, résumés, interviews, and discourse. My findings also suggest that age discrimination is related to employers' ageist stereotypes concerning older workers' skills, training, adaptability or flexibility, and financial costs. These findings are interpreted within the context of broader policies and practices, which suggest greater attention be paid to the accountability of Canadian employers.

Using Chapter II as a foundation, Chapter III, “‘Aging’ Identities: Degradation and Negotiation in the Search for Employment”, examines the interconnectedness of identity and age in the search for employment. More specifically, in this chapter I discuss the identity-related consequences of perceived age discrimination and thus examine age-related changes in identity during the job search process. My findings suggest that once respondents suspect that they have been branded “old” by others (i.e. potential employers and personnel at older worker programs) they begin to define themselves as “old” and become susceptible to identity degradation (Garfinkel, 1956). My research also indicates that despite this degradation to participants' identities, individuals are generally able to negotiate more positive identities by drawing on much needed social support, attending older worker programs, changing their identities, maintaining some of their key roles, and altering their overall mental outlook. These findings are discussed in relation to the paradoxical nature of the job search

process – individuals go to older worker programs for assistance, yet the negative experiences encountered during attendance at these programs mirrored many experiences encountered with discriminatory employers. These latent or unintended consequences (Merton, 1968) are inadvertently discouraging many individuals in their job search process. Thus, my findings highlight the importance of improving the assistance provided to older workers, particularly in the social context, in order to prevent them from becoming “discouraged” from their search for employment.

Chapter IV, “Managing Age Discrimination: An Examination of the Techniques Used When Seeking Employment”, also uses the findings presented in Chapter II to examine the development of age-related management techniques that are used by older workers in their search for employment. Participants use various management techniques that are intended to counteract employers’ ageist stereotypes and conceal their age. Individuals counteract stereotypes by maintaining their skills and changing their work-related expectations and conceal their age by altering their résumés, physical appearance, and language used. Findings from this chapter are interpreted in relation to the current societal norms that favour youth and thus create a structural context for the participants that acts as a barrier to re-employment. Thus, analysis from this chapter leads me to conclude that once age discrimination is minimized on a broader societal level,

the counteraction and concealment strategies uncovered in this study will become unnecessary.

In the concluding chapter of this dissertation – Chapter V, “Conclusions: Conceptualizing the Meaning and Import of Age in the Job Search Process” – I provide an overview of the key theoretical and substantive contributions made to the sociological literature. In doing this, I have created an original conceptual model that illustrates the meaning and importance of age in the route to re-employment. Finally, I discuss some of the limitations of my research in this concluding chapter and explore further research questions that stem from this dissertation that can be addressed in future research.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While some theorists have argued that Goffman was actually a structuralist, and not truly a symbolic interactionist (See for example Fine, 1991; Gonos, 1977), his work does remain in this realm of sociological analysis in the majority of scholarly work and thus will be used as such in this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> There were three groups of women and four groups of men who shared the same age in my study. To distinguish between participants I have used the letters “a”, “b”, and “c” after their ages.

**CHAPTER II: Older Workers Seeking Employment:  
Perceptions of Age Discrimination in the Hiring Process**

*Abstract:*

It is well documented that, once unemployed, older workers take considerably longer than younger workers to become re-employed, due in part to the existence of age discrimination in hiring practices. Despite this knowledge, there is little qualitative research that examines the views of older workers themselves. To address this gap, this chapter draws on data from semi-structured interviews with unemployed individuals aged 45 to 65 (n=30) to examine their perceptions concerning the meaning and importance of age in the job-seeking process. Findings indicate that age discrimination is perceived to occur through a variety of subtle and overt mechanisms that relate to employers' ageist stereotypes concerning skills, training, adaptability or flexibility, and financial costs. Participants feel that employers use specific mechanisms to discriminate against them including job advertisements, résumés, interviews, and discourse. Based on these perceptions, it appears that the hiring practices of employers are discriminatory and thus policies and practices that govern employers' behaviours need closer attention.

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the aging of the Canadian population, the number of older workers (aged 45-65) is increasing rapidly. By the year 2015, older workers will represent close to half of the working-age population (Forum of Labour Market Ministers, 2002). While employers may be aware of the demographic transformations occurring in the labour force, it does not appear that their hiring practices reflect this reality. Once unemployed, older workers take considerably longer than younger ones to become re-employed (Walker, 2002), due in large part to the existence of age discrimination. Sixty-seven percent of older workers in the United States have personally experienced or witnessed discrimination on the basis of age (American Association for Retired Persons, 2002, p. 65).

The Ontario Human Rights Code is designed to protect workers against discrimination on the basis of age. However, the Ontario Human Rights Commission also reports that age discrimination in employment is very much a reality (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2000). In fact, they suggest a pressing need to eliminate employers' prejudicial attitudes and behaviours and suspect that the magnitude of this problem is even greater than reported in statistical reports due to the difficult nature of quantifying and proving the existence of discrimination, particularly in relation to the job search process

(Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2002). Further, individuals who experience age discrimination in the job search process are generally unemployed, thus they are often unable to afford the financial expenses of making claims against employers (Hassell & Perrewé, 1993).

It follows, then, that due to the inherent difficulty of proving age discrimination and the underreporting of its existence, research is warranted that examines older workers' perceptions concerning employers' "unofficial" attitudes toward them. Further, there is a paucity of research that examines the job search process for older workers in a Canadian context. Findings from other countries differ from Canadian findings due to distinct legislation, such as the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) and the absence of mandatory retirement in the United States. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to explore Canadian older workers' perceptions about the meaning and importance of age in the job search process. This research draws on interviews with 30 unemployed individuals aged 45 to 65 who are seeking employment. Perceptions suggest that employers' attitudes toward older workers are based on ageist stereotypes, which results in discrimination against older workers both subtly and overtly in the hiring process. More specifically, participants believe that employers discriminate against them through job advertisements, résumés, interviews, and discourse.



## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Employers' first impressions of older workers are often based on stereotypes – “mental pictures of people based on their membership in a group” (American Association for Retired Persons, 1994, p.8). While research suggests positive attitudes toward older workers on certain dimensions (knowledge, experience, honesty, dependability, work ethic, mentoring, and stability) (Berger, 1999; Canadian Network for Experienced Workers, 1996; Gibson, Zerbe, & Franken, 1993; Marshall, 1996; Walker & Taylor, 1998), they are perceived negatively in many other areas. For example, studies indicate that employers believe older workers are more likely to be resistant to change, in poorer health, less creative, less interested in technological change, and less trainable than are younger workers (Guillemard & Walker, 1994). In addition, older workers are seen as being more prone to accidents, having lower physical capacities, and staying with the company for a shorter period of time, as compared to younger workers. Further, the key reasons that employers cite for not recruiting older workers relate to beliefs concerning their lack of computer literacy, followed by lack of other appropriate skills, lack of appropriate qualifications, and difficulty adapting to varying work settings (Marshall, 1996).

It should be noted that the majority of these negative stereotypes have

been disproved by research (Canadian Network for Experienced Workers, 1996; Charness, 1995; Davies & Sparrow, 1985; Human Resources Development Canada, 2002; Marshall & Taylor, in press). For example, research indicates that learning ability, intelligence, memory and motivation do not decline with advancing age (Canadian Network for Experienced Workers, 1996). Further, in relation to absenteeism, unavoidable absenteeism due to health-related reasons is similar for both old and young workers; when an absence from work is avoidable or voluntary, older workers are actually absent less frequently (Charness, 1995). In addition, employers' attitudes toward older workers do vary significantly according to company size, employers' age, and employers' gender, with older, female employers from smaller companies displaying the most positive attitudes (Berger, 1999).

Employers' negative stereotypes can be the result of inaccurate beliefs about age-related changes in health that then lead to further misconceptions concerning older workers (e.g. higher rates of absenteeism, loss of work-related stamina, higher medical costs, higher risk of work-related accidents, lower productivity, and inability to learn new skills) (Centre for Studies of Aging, 1996). Negative attitudes on the part of employers can also emerge as a result of structural factors, such as paying larger health care premiums for older individuals (Marshall, 1996) or higher wages for older, unionized employees (McMullin &

Marshall, 2001). However, of the seven case studies conducted under the guidance of Marshall (1996), the organization that had the largest proportion of older workers was actually the least concerned with health care costs, compared to the other organizations investigated. Thus, it is quite possible that the realities with respect to health care costs that coincide with an aging workforce are not as detrimental to companies as may be perceived by many employers.<sup>1</sup>

Discriminatory attitudes and behaviours toward older workers are generally reflected in specific domains. For example, age bars are often used in job advertisements in the United Kingdom (Duncan, 2003; McGoldrick & Arrowsmith, 1993; Walker & Taylor, 1993). In Ontario (as well as Canada as a whole), the use of age in both job advertisements and job applications is prohibited (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2000). However, questions relating to age may be used in an employment interview if “age is a reasonable and *bona fide* occupational requirement” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2000, p.24) and an applicant’s age can often be assessed in this setting as well. Thus, employers can use physical appearance as a criterion for discrimination in an interview. The importance of appearance in seeking or maintaining employment, particularly for females, has been noted in the literature: “When women attain the symbolic meaning of ‘physically unattractive’ (to men) they may be pushed out of visible areas or forced into retirement regardless of their

skills” (Reinharz, 1986, p.512). Further, due to the physical appearance norms found in Western culture, it has been recognized that women face age discrimination in employment to an even larger degree and earlier on than do men (Ginn & Arber, 1995).

Ageist beliefs can also be found in relation to discourse. For example, specific words such as “senile” or “decrepit” immediately evoke negative images of aging. However, even words that are not typically negative in nature can create negative “meanings through association” (Bytheway, 1995, p.59). For example, the word “old” itself is objectively a chronological marker of time, yet subjectively this word is often linked to other negative words, such as the previous two words suggested – “senile” and “decrepit”. More specifically, the role of language has been studied in relation to age discrimination in employment (McCann & Giles, 2002; McVittie, McKinlay, & Widdicombe, 2003). For example, employers try to justify their lack of older employees by blaming it on the “young” industry in which their organization is located; however, this in itself was found to convey a type of “new ageism” (McVittie et al., 2003). McCann and Giles (2002) also suggest that employers use an ageist discourse in relation to older workers, such as telling older job candidates that the company needs more “young blood”. While comments such as these have been used as evidence in lawsuits against employers (McCann & Giles, 2002), it is often a challenge to

prove the existence of age discrimination on the basis of these comparatively subtle types of comments (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2002).

The relationship between employers' attitudes and their practices has not been studied in great detail, despite the fact that Human Resources Development Canada (2002) has suggested that negative stereotypes about older workers are particularly evident in employers' recruitment and hiring practices. One of the few studies that specifically examined the relationship between employers' attitudes and their behaviours toward older workers did find a direct association between the two in relation to hiring, training, and advancement opportunities (Taylor & Walker, 1998). Further, Taylor and Urwin (2001) found more recently that older workers participate less than younger workers in employer training programs, due in large part to an age bias in employers' decision-making.

While there is a growing body of literature on employers' attitudes toward older workers (described above), there is a lack of research that examines older workers' perceptions in general. However, according to a national American work and career survey of over 2500 individuals aged 45 to 74, 80 percent of individuals who are searching for employment feel that age discrimination exists in the workplace (American Association for Retired Persons, 2002, p. 66). Also, 15 percent of older individuals feel that they were not hired for a particular job because of age (American Association for Retired Persons, 2002, p. 13).

Findings from the survey speculate that older workers' perceptions about age-related barriers to re-employment are a reality, due to the increasing number of complaints about age discrimination made to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In fact, between 2000 and 2002, complaints increased by 25 percent (American Association for Retired Persons, 2002, p. 14).

Other research examined the perceptions of employees aged 18 to 63 (mean age 38) about age discrimination in their current workplace (Hassell & Perrewé, 1993). That study asked workers to assess the psychological impact of perceived workplace discrimination based on age. They found that perceived discrimination significantly affected self-esteem, personal control, and job satisfaction. However, as can be seen by the age of participants in their research, the study did not focus on older workers. Experiences for older workers, and those searching for work in particular, would likely vary.

Research that has discussed the impact of plant closures on older workers, has suggested that it is very difficult for them to become re-employed following this experience, due in part to the existence of age discrimination (Kates, Greiff, & Hagen, 1990, p. 60). Gilberto (1997) conducted a qualitative study of 18 women over the age of 50 and concluded that older women in particular have the greatest challenges to overcome after a layoff occurs. She discussed participants' experiences with depression, shame, and anger, but focussed on the experience of

losing a job, not on perceptions of age discrimination when searching for work. Other research also centering on older women's adjustment to unemployment has indicated that older women face the greatest financial and psychological difficulties during periods of unemployment due to a combination of age and gender discrimination (Rife, 1992, 1995; Rife, Toomey, & First, 1989). However, another study on older workers' perceptions related to downsizing found little difference between men and women (Armstrong-Stassen, 2001).

What is clear in the literature is that, once unemployed, older individuals experience economic strain (See for example LeBlanc & McMullin, 1997) and increased morbidity (See for example Gallo, Bradley, Siegel, & Kasl, 2000). "The experience of unemployment highlights the meaning of work; it clearly reveals the material, psychological, and social rewards of working that disappear with a lost job" (Krahn & Lowe, 1993, p.333). In fact, in the United States and Japan, for male workers aged 55 to 65, higher unemployment rates were associated with increased incidence of suicide (Taylor, 2003).

While the aforementioned literature presents a backdrop for my current research, it should be noted that findings from other countries differ from Canada, where the presence of mandatory retirement at age 65 is permitted in most provinces (including Ontario). Further, the majority of literature on older workers' perceptions relates to unemployment in general and most studies are

based on quantitative surveys of older workers' attitudes, which differ from qualitative accounts of the importance of age in the job search process. Thus, in order to address this gap in the literature, this chapter examines older workers' perceptions of their experiences when looking for work that relate to age.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses the symbolic interactionist perspective in order to understand the meanings that older individuals assign to their experiences in the search for employment. Thus, this framework highlights the importance of meanings, as well as interaction, interpretation, and language (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Meanings emerge from social interaction and individuals act based on these meanings. This perspective provides a lens to view the social world that enables the researcher to uncover participants' lived realities and subjective experiences. For the purposes of this study, symbolic interactionism provides a lens to explore older workers' *perceptions* of age discrimination and the meanings that they attribute to their experiences. Therefore, what is relevant here is not whether age discrimination has actually occurred (although it is believed that this is the case in most situations); what is relevant is how these individuals negotiate their experiences with age discrimination. As the Thomas theorem indicates, "if



men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572).

In order to allow the subjective meanings of participants’ experiences with age discrimination to be uncovered, this study used a qualitative methodological approach involving exploration and inspection (Blumer, 1969). A grounded theory approach was used in order to allow the theoretical formulations to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 males and females between the ages of 45 and 65 (in congruence with the definition of older workers given in the literature) who were actively searching for work and unemployed for three months or longer.<sup>2</sup> The analysis is also informed by 35 hours of participant observation in three older worker programs in the Greater Toronto Area. These programs were created by Human Resources Development Canada [HRDC] to assist older workers by designing services and workshops intended to meet their specific needs (Human Resources Development Canada, 1999). The topics covered in these workshops (lasting from two to three weeks) included interviewing skills, personality assessments, computer training, résumé writing, and specific sessions on understanding the myths and realities of being an older worker. One of the programs I attended offered services to older workers only, while the other two had programs for older workers in addition to other segments of the labour force.

The majority of participants in this study were recruited at older worker programs. I attended workshops at various points throughout the workshops conducted at the programs in order to obtain a wide range of participants, at varying points in their job search process. I also recruited participants by posting advertisements in additional older worker programs, employment agencies for all ages of workers, community centres, libraries, a monthly senior's newspaper, and a university website. Finally, a few participants were recruited through personal referral techniques. The recruitment strategy was designed to attract participants from a variety of locations. As Table 1 indicates however, the majority of participants were obtained through older worker programs.

**Table 1. Participant Recruitment (n = 30)**

	n
Attendance at older worker programs	20
Flyers at older worker programs	4
Flyers at other employment agencies	0
Flyers at community centres	1
Flyers at community libraries	0
55+ newspaper	3
University website	0
Personal referrals	2

After receiving approval from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board, interviews for this project were conducted in two stages. The first stage included eight interviews in 1999 and the second stage involved an additional 22

interviews that were done in 2002.<sup>3</sup> The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were held in a variety of locations (including older worker programs, community centres, libraries, and coffee shops), depending on personal preferences. Interviews were tape recorded (with participants' consent) and transcribed verbatim. In order to guide the discussion along key areas, the interview guide included questions on demographics, employment background, perceptions of age discrimination, feelings related to these perceptions, and strategies used to gain employment. The data were coded according to these areas (and sub-areas), as well as additional ones that arose during the course of analysis (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.142). The qualitative analytical software program QSR NUD\*IST [Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing] was used in order to manage the data once coding had been completed.

The sample for my study included individuals who varied in age, gender, marital status, ethnic or religious background, country of origin, education, income, and length of time unemployed (See Table 2). Just over half of the participants were aged 45-54 and the remaining ones were aged 55-65. There were an equal number of men and women in this study and the majority of respondents were married. The remaining participants were divorced, never

Table 2. Sample Characteristics (n = 30)

	n
<b>Age</b>	
45-54	16
55-65	14
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	15
Male	15
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	16
Divorced	6
Widowed	2
Never Married	6
<b>Ethnic or Religious Background</b>	
Atheist or unspecified	16
Catholic	4
Protestant	4
Jewish	4
Buddhist	1
Muslim	1
<b>Country of Origin</b>	
Canada	14
Western Europe	4
Eastern Europe	3
United Kingdom	3
United States	2
India	2
Iran	1
Japan	1
<b>Education</b>	
Less than high school	2
High school degree	7
Certificate / diploma	2
College / university degree	19
<b>Personal Income</b>	
\$20,000 to \$39,999	2
\$40,000 to \$59,999	8
\$60,000 to \$79,999	4
\$80,000 to \$99,999	2
\$100,000 or more	5
Unknown	9
<b>Length of Time Unemployed</b>	
3 to 5 months	8
6 to 8 months	14
9 to 12 months	2
> 12 months	6

married or widowed. In terms of ethnic or religious background, the majority of participants indicated that they were atheist or preferred not to answer this question. The remaining respondents varied in their ethnic or religious background. The sample was quite well educated as the majority of those disclosing their income were quite dispersed among the income categories provided to them in the interview (aside from the lowest income category, \$19,999 or less, into which none of the participants fell). Participants were also asked their personal and family income level *since* being unemployed; however, only a small number of participants were willing to provide this information. The length of time that individuals were unemployed also varied substantially, ranging from three months

Table 3. Occupational Background of Sample (n = 30)

	n
Administrative	6
Construction	1
Consultant	2
Education	1
Engineering	1
Executive	1
Finance	3
Food and service	1
Health care	3
Human resources	2
Lawyer	1
Mid-level management	4
Sales and marketing	3
Television producer	1

to six years. The most common length of time unemployed for the participants was between six and eight months. The occupational backgrounds of the participants interviewed were quite varied. Table 3 presents a breakdown of the occupational categories represented in this study.

## **FINDINGS: PERCEPTIONS OF AGE DISCRIMINATION**

As someone who was employed for a number of years in various different positions, I felt very much respected and valued and treated well. No question at all. But I find that it is a very different picture when, for whatever reason, you are in the job market at that particular age. (male, age 50a)<sup>4</sup>

While age discrimination is illegal, participants' accounts indicate that discrimination ranged from a general *feeling* that employers were stigmatizing them, to a more concrete belief that discrimination was occurring. This section explores older individuals' perceptions concerning how employers manage to discriminate against them in the hiring process, despite the legality of the issue. Both subtle and overt forms of age discrimination are presented in this section. This is followed by a discussion of the manifestation of stereotypes about older workers with respect to their skills, training, adaptability or flexibility, and financial costs. Next, older individuals' perceptions of the mechanisms that

employers use to discriminate against them are discussed, which involve job advertisements, résumés, job interviews, and language.

### *Sensing the “age factor”*

Interviews concerning older individuals’ perceptions of age discrimination revealed that subtle forms of discrimination were believed to exist in the job search process. For example:

This is very subtle. I am bringing into high focus what is done and said in very subtle languages. After all, they don’t want me to go to the Human Rights Commission and sue them. They are not that blatant. Prejudice is never blatant. Prejudice is always just under the surface. You have got to really read between the lines and look hard for it, but it’s there. And you know where you will see it in your books? You will see it in the hiring statistics. (male, age 52)

Individuals also discussed their experiences in the job search process more generally and described how they “sensed” that age was a factor in hiring decisions:

I know the age thing for sure is definitely a factor... Even if they (employers) don’t actually say it, you can sense it... It is more sensing than anything. (female, age 53b)

I went for the interview and everybody – like people passing by that work there – they were all under 30...The thing is, you wonder if they are not letting you have the job because of, you know, age, or is it because of other reasons. It’s kind of hard to figure out. (female, age 53c)

I don’t know what the employer thinks. You know, there is a perception that the employer thinks “Hey, you’re over the hill.” or “You should be retired. How come you’re not retired? What’s wrong?” (male, age 54)

It was just an impression I got. I can sense these things. I think we all know that this kind of age discrimination exists. (female, age 50b)

Another individual in this study had similar feelings regarding the subtlety of age discrimination and explained how this perception developed:

All of my life, I have been able to get jobs – any job that I wanted – and only this year, where I have been applying for jobs for six months, have I not only not had an interview, but I haven't even had an acknowledgement of an application. Everything has gotten better over the years – the qualifications, the credentials – they are all improving. Whereas say 20 years ago or even 15 years ago, I was getting calls from head hunters two or three times a week, wanting me to move from one company to another, today I am not even getting an acknowledgement, let alone an interview. (male, age 50a)

Respondents believed that the age of the employer interviewing them factored into the hiring process. Several individuals discussed their perceptions that younger employers regarded them unfairly, merely due to the age differential:

Employers don't feel you will be able to report to younger bosses. I have been asked this in an interview – “How do you feel about reporting to a younger person?” (male, age 57a)

The manager felt very threatened by my age... because she was so much younger... I had a hell of a lot more experience than she had... People become very jealous if you are overqualified for the job. (female, age 50a)

In other cases it was the respondents' own awkwardness with the age difference between themselves and the employers that was discussed:

When I went there (to the interview)... it was like a young crowd. Everyone was like about 25, so I didn't feel too comfortable being interviewed by 25-year-old guys... I mean, you know, just so much younger and it felt strange 'cause I was much more experienced... We didn't talk about age, but it was just me that felt uncomfortable. They didn't say anything. (male, age 46a)

Participants indicated that they experienced these subtle forms of age discrimination more often than overt forms, yet they found them to be an equally disturbing occurrence in their search for employment. While the aforementioned experiences were generally related to sensing the existence of age discrimination



in the hiring process, far too often, participants were provided with explicit confirmation of employers' discriminatory beliefs. The analysis now turns to these types of situations.

### *Explicit confirmation*

In contrast to the comments made above, many individuals in this study described experiences they had with more blatant discriminatory behaviours. In fact, several participants described how they had sensed the existence of discrimination in the hiring process and decided to question the source of their perceptions for confirmation. For example, after listening to various excuses made by a potential employer, one participant explained:

And then he told me the truth. He said, "If you were 35, it would be no problem, I would know where to send you. But, you are about my age. Look, they (the company) won't consider you at your age". (male, age 62)

The same respondent described a similar situation following another job interview where he was given explicit confirmation that age was a factor in the hiring decision:

I phoned up a month after I was told that they were not going to give me the position, because I wanted to talk to the person and see why. I was then told point blank that the main factor was my age. Point blank. Never mind the Ontario Human Rights Code, never mind age discrimination is illegal. She (the job interviewer) swore me to secrecy... Without having met me, the president of the company decided that I am not going to be his subordinate. She told me that age was a main factor. (male, age 62)

Another participant was caught off guard by a similar age-related comment made by an employer in the context of a job interview:

I applied for a job and the guy said, “Gee, we didn’t expect anybody your age to apply for this”. (male, age 60)

Other individuals described negative experiences with job recruiters hired by employers. For example, one respondent attended a “networking” meeting held by recruiters and described his experience:

They themselves at a number of meetings have expressed this – that if you’re over 50 or 55 perhaps the best thing you should do is think of opening your own business because you are not employable by larger companies. And it’s quite appalling...I went to a number of meetings that were targeted for executives and all these things and it was quite shocking how these people came to speak to this group of executives. Who would be so, I guess, direct about age discrimination and warn these executives that – “don’t think it’s going to be easy to find another job”?...Age is a big factor and yes, the recruiting community has a negative outlook on it. (male, age 57a)

In addition to discrimination by job recruiters and potential employers, several respondents described experiences when “friends” explicitly informed them that age was a factor in the hiring process:

No one will tell you; no one will admit it. But I have a friend who owns his own company and he said, “If I interview three people, even though you have the experience, if I think I can get more years out of another one, I would hire another person.” And you know, they don’t have to say that, that’s just the way it’s done. (female, age 60)

I’ve gone and asked... I worked at a place for 11 ½ years and I did speak to the human resource person and she’s given me, you know, a great reference. And I said, “what’s wrong?” and she said, “it’s age”. You know, without... as a friend, not anything else she says, “age”. You know, I guess I don’t think of myself in terms of being older yet. (female, age 58)

Thus, irrespective of the source of the discrimination, participants in this study felt the existence of both subtle and overt forms of ageism in the hiring process.

It was experienced most often in conversations with employers and it was clear that the meanings attributed to these experiences were influencing their overall job search process.

*Age stereotypes and the discrimination process*

Respondents felt that employers judged them according to negative age-related stereotypes. Surveys of employers' attitudes toward older workers indicate that they are viewed more negatively than younger workers with respect to lack of computer literacy and other relevant skills or qualifications, training, adaptability or flexibility, and financial costs (Frerichs & Naegele, 1997; Guillemard & Walker, 1994; Marshall, 1996; McMullin & Marshall, 2001). Most individuals in my study engaged in training programs and remained up-to-date with their skills and qualifications. Where participants felt that training was posing a barrier related to the perception that employers did not want to invest the money and time in training older workers:

They look at a person and – this has been told to me point blank by human resources people – they look at people as a monetary investment. They invest a certain amount of time and effort in training a new recruit – the higher level of the recruit, the more expensive the time in training. And they expect to get back ten times their investment, or else it isn't worth it to them to hire them. So if they spend a year acclimatizing me, training me, getting me integrated into the system, then they would expect to get ten years of profitable time out of me. Now, if I am 50 years old, they look at me as a poor prospect. Even at 46, they were looking at me as a very poor prospect. (male, age 52)

Regarding adaptability or flexibility, one respondent described her perception concerning employers' requirements:

It is difficult to find work when you are over 50. Even 45 or 40 is hard. Employers only want young people. They think they can work quickly and they are more flexible and will agree to work the night shift. (female, age 45b)

On the other hand, another participant's comment demonstrated that this stereotype might be ill conceived and at the same time illustrated that employers may not be able to move past this misconception:

Have you ever heard of this Emotional Intelligence? Basically, it talks about various skills that people have, rather than their IQ. It talks about interpersonal, adaptability, stress management, and general mood. What it says here is if you effectively function, your score will be between 90 and 110. My total score was 124 – so about 15 above where you function effectively. I think the funniest thing was related to my highest score. My manager was always complaining that I was not able to adapt well, but do you know that my flexibility score is 134 out of 150? (female, age 50b)

Participants also felt that employers would not hire them because of the perception that older workers are more expensive to employ (i.e. employee turnover, salary, benefits) as compared to younger workers. Respondents described how they came to this realization:

The end result for me is to find a position. I'm not finding a position. The end result of a company is to make money. They think they are going to make money off younger people better than they are going to make money off an older person because they think that the younger person will be with the company longer and is going to be able to produce or benefit revenue for a longer period of time. It's not true. An older person doesn't make the mistakes of the less experienced. So, the learning curve is a lot shorter. But they don't look at that. They don't look at the result's line. (male, age 52)

I think salary is a barrier because employers think we expect more money. (female, age 45b)

They want someone who is younger, probably because they figure if you are older they have to pay you more because you have more experience and so on. (female, age 53b)

See, if you're a certain age too, it affects the group company pension and the medical premiums are higher for a company. I know that from working in a company – from working in that department. So I don't know if they (employers) think along those lines as well. (female, age 64)

In fact, one woman was quite justified in her belief that the higher financial costs associated with older individuals represented a barrier to her re-employment. In discussing her experience with requesting a raise from her previous employer, she commented:

I said, "you know I cannot afford to work for nothing" – because there was always so many hours of unpaid overtime. And he said, "well I can have 50 young girls sitting here looking pretty and I can pay them whatever I want"...The younger people that he did hire really got very low pay. (female, age 50b)

It should be recognized that stereotypes can also be positive, and some of the participants felt that they possessed certain positive characteristics that are associated with being older. For example, the wisdom and experience that come with decades of work experience were recognized by several respondents with respect to describing their previous work situations:

There is a lot to be said about the judgment that comes with experience. The ability to judge and the ability to make a decision... I am used to decisions... I am able to apply my past background... That is where someone like me ought to be appreciated. (male, age 52)

I mean there is no substitute for experience...it does make the work that much more efficient; that much more professional. Honestly, I think a lot of people – say my age – when they go to an office and see a person my age, they would say "Okay, this person knows what she or he is doing. It seems that they've been doing this for a long enough time." (female, age 50a)

Unfortunately, potential employers did not always recognize these positive age attributes and this is where the challenges came into play for the individuals in my study. More specific discriminatory mechanisms used by employers will now be addressed.

### *Mechanisms for discrimination*

**Job advertisements** The first area where older individuals feel they are being stigmatized is in relation to the job application process. As mentioned earlier, while age bars are permitted in job advertisements in the United Kingdom (Duncan, 2003; McGoldrick & Arrowsmith, 1993; Walker & Taylor, 1993), they are illegal in Canada (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2000). However, some participants sensed that employers were using more subtle mechanisms in job advertisements to concentrate their search on younger candidates. For example:

I feel that discrimination takes place in job advertisements. The ads won't state that they want younger people, but they will only ask for three to five years experience and state lower salary ranges. Older people have more experience and expect higher salaries. So these job advertisements are only attracting younger, more inexperienced people.  
(female, age 45a)

A lot of the forms one fills out when you're applying for these jobs over the Internet – a lot of them ask for your experience. It says, "one to three years, three to five years, five to eight years, eight to ten years, ten plus years".... I'm glad they don't go above that otherwise they'll say, "oh this guy's older than Methuselah". (male, age 62)

This discriminatory technique believed to be used in the hiring process was only referred to explicitly by a handful of respondents, yet those who did discuss it

were quite disturbed by its occurrence. They felt it allowed employers to use “experience” to indirectly discriminate on the basis of age and thus avoid being held responsible for their actions.

**Résumés** Participants also felt that employers used their résumés as a tool to discriminate in the hiring process. Individuals thought employers did this by examining résumés and rejecting applicants based on the number of years spent in the labour force or the number of jobs held:

They don't say anything, but you know when there is absolutely no reason why you shouldn't be considered – to just look at my résumé, they know how many years I've been in the business and they can sort of deduct that I'm not 35 or 40. (female, age 60)

You don't know if they're looking at your résumé and looking at... like figuring you got all that experience so obviously you got to be a certain age, right? (female, age 53c)

In my career, I have had about 20 jobs. What happens when you don't have a regular career path... People become very jealous if you are overqualified for the job. If I look at my résumé here, I have a great deal of experience... So these things happen out of jealousy. (female, age 50b)

As you can see by my résumé I have 25 years [experience] so you know I'm not 35. (male, age 50c)

In addition, respondents thought employers scanned résumés to determine the year that a potential job candidate's degree was received and rejected older job seekers in a similar fashion. For example:

As soon as they see 1975 (referring to the year his degree was received) – or whatever it is – they say, “Okay, this guy is 50 – waste paper basket”. I mean, I don't know, I just have that feeling. (male, age 50a)

Another two individuals described similar challenges in relation to both the years of experience they had in the workforce and the years their degrees were received:

I changed my résumé somewhat to exclude the number of years I've worked and said, "I have extensive [experience]"...Even though – I guess now everybody who uses "extensive", they (employers) say, "Oh. This guy's got 20 plus years". (male, age 62)

I try to hide it (my experience). Sometimes I don't mention my degree and that sort of thing and I only show the last ten years of work experience. I think that they can see from the level of the work that I was doing that I'm over qualified for what they want. (male, age 60)

In the last two examples above, respondents described how their extensive experience was being used by employers as a way to determine age. In addition, it also suggests participants were attempting to conceal age by excluding years of work experience, number of jobs held, or the year a degree was received.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while age is often equated with experience in a positive way, participants felt that somehow the meaning of experience was now being tied to age in a discriminatory fashion. Thus, respondents felt that experience was being used to identify and select younger candidates to interview for job openings.

**The Job Interview** Another way respondents felt that employers discriminated against them related to the interview process. These individuals believed that after employers had the opportunity to see them during an initial interview, they could immediately estimate how old they were and only request second



interviews from the younger applicants. Several participants provided justification for this belief:

What is quite interesting is that a friend of mine who is 45 years old, about the same age as me and who just got her degree is getting more interviews than me. She is only getting the first interview though. I am not sure if it is because the employers assume that she is younger because of her recent degree, but once she gets in there and has an interview, she is never asked back for a second interview. I am not sure if it is age per se, but that is just my feeling. (female, age 45a)

We (her and other older workers) get interviews but not jobs ...When they (employers) look at you they decide. (female, age 53a)

They're probably looking for younger people. I know I have the qualifications but I just don't know why I can't secure that job (laughs)... They can't tell you that [it is because of your age] nowadays but obviously when I walk in they know I'm not 21. (female, age 64)

A lot of these interviews for entry-level positions amount to cattle calls. You go there and they meet you in person, you hand in a résumé, and then they make like they are interested...I never hear from them. So I am suspicious right away because obviously they have seen me. Usually I am the oldest one there. You see some of the other candidates that are there around the same time as you and you can kind of see that they are all younger than I am and don't have grey hair. So I think people subconsciously, if not consciously judge you by your appearance. So there is discrimination against religious things, there is discrimination against colour, and discrimination definitely against colour of hair too (laughs). (female, age 53b)

Similar to the last comment above, several respondents mentioned that after going to job interviews they recognized the importance of “fitting in” to an employer’s organizational culture, which essentially meant giving the impression of being younger. For example:

I think that the organizational culture in an organization is very important. You need to fit into the company’s culture. Many companies have youth-oriented cultures and they may only hire someone who fits into this culture. (male, age 50b)

Employers don't see you as fitting in with younger people. We are not part of the gang if we are older. You don't fit in with the younger guys. (male, age 57a)

No one has ever verbalized it. But you can look around and see the other employees. And you sort of think hey, maybe they feel that you're not going to fit. (female, age 58)

In sum, participants found that the interview setting provided a context for employers to discriminate against them by allowing them to judge their appearance and assess whether they would “fit in” to the organizational culture. These findings concur with research cited earlier on the importance of physical appearance in relation to employment and older workers (Ginn & Arber, 1995; Reinharz, 1986),

**Same “old” talk** The importance of language and its interpretation are two of the key tenets of the symbolic interactionist framework (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Thus, the meaning assigned to employers’ language is critical to understanding the lived realities of older workers. Respondents in this study believed that an ageist discourse was being used by employers to discriminate against them. Thus, while they felt that employers would attempt to use language that they did not believe would appear discriminatory to job candidates, it did not take the participants long to deconstruct this ageist talk and realize that being told they were “over-qualified” or “too experienced”, that someone more “junior” was hired, or that the organization was too “fast-paced” for them, were just different ways to tell them they were too “old” for the job:

I got turned down for a job and I asked the temp agency who was responsible for getting the job [why I got turned down] because I wanted to know for sure...and the answer was, and I quote, “well they hired somebody more junior”. So in other words, “junior” is a euphemism for “younger”. Now I am not supposed to realize that. I am supposed to be too stupid to realize that. So obviously they realize that if they were to have said “we hired somebody younger” that’s illegal, so now it seems like it is in vogue to say “more junior”. Well, “junior” means younger doesn’t it? So why shouldn’t that be illegal too? (female, age 53b)

And I went to two interviews there. They finally rejected me... I, as they put it, was “over-qualified”... But I couldn’t get anyone to hire me. (male, age 62)

There was one company I sent my résumé to... I was kind of surprised that I didn’t get an interview there and I sent an email to the HR lady asking why and what happened... Her e-mail seemed to indicate... Her e-mail said “too experienced” and I just assumed she means – as meaning too old or not fitting in with the people in the company. (male, age 46a)

I can see the way they (employers) talk to me sometimes – kind of in a lingo here. ‘Cause I can read the employers’ lingo very well, you know... They tell me “the place is very fast-paced”... That’s all a line of crap, as we know... It’s more or less saying “goodbye, I’m glad to have met you”. Oh yeah. So I’m getting a bit tired of listening to that. (female, age 49)

The negative feelings that were experienced by respondents as a result of being considered “over-qualified”, too “senior”, not able to keep up with the “fast pace” of the organization, or being “too experienced” were reflected in the comments above as well. Thus, the meaning assigned to employers’ language was quite negative and participants considered the belief that they were incapable of deconstructing this ageist discourse as quite insulting.<sup>6</sup>

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study has advanced sociological knowledge both theoretically and substantively by providing a more detailed understanding of the meaning and

importance of age in the job search process. Through the use of qualitative methodologies in an area that has been dominated by quantitative approaches, insights into the interaction between employers and older workers and the subsequent interpretation of these events has allowed for a unique glimpse into a previously understudied social world. Thus, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of the everyday experiences that the study participants encounter as a result of structural barriers in their search for employment (i.e. age discrimination). Interviews with 30 unemployed individuals indicate that age discrimination was perceived to exist both subtly and overtly in relation to negative stereotypes concerning older workers' skills, training, adaptability or flexibility, and financial costs. Thus, my study suggests that older workers' perceptions are similar to findings documenting employers' actual attitudes (See for example American Association for Retired Persons, 1994; Berger, 1999; Frerichs & Naegele, 1997; Gibson, Zerbe, & Franken, 1992; Guillemard & Walker, 1994; Marshall, 1996). Further, there is little research that has investigated whether employers' attitudes are being reflected in practice (See for example Taylor & Walker, 1998). While my research involved older individuals' perceptions of age discrimination and makes no claims of generalizability, it does suggest that employers' stereotypical attitudes are being reflected in their hiring practices.

Specific mechanisms that employers use to discriminate against older workers were also highlighted in this study and include job advertisements, résumés, interviews, and discourse. For example, while the use of setting age limits is illegal in Canada (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2000), respondents felt that employers used more subtle mechanisms in job advertisements to concentrate their search on younger candidates, such as requesting a certain number of years of job experience. With respect to résumés, participants were under the impression that employers rejected their résumés because of their extensive experience or the year they received their degrees. Prior research that examined employers' perceptions in hiring practices found that a clear preference was shown for a younger candidate's résumé, when compared to an older candidate's résumé (Bendick, Jackson, & Romero, 1996). Next, participants believed employers used the context of the job interview to assess their age and they thus used physical appearance as a criterion for discrimination. While prior research suggested that women experience these challenges earlier on and to an even larger degree than men (Ginn & Arber, 1995), my findings suggest that physical appearance is used similarly as an assessment criterion for both men and women. However, additional research is needed to assess whether this finding holds on a larger scale. Findings from my study also provide evidence that an ageist discourse is being used by employers in the employment context,

similar to research that focused on lawsuits against employers and employers justifications for not hiring older job candidates, respectively (McCann & Giles, 2002; McVittie et al., 2003). Thus, my research, which examines the views of older workers themselves, provides new insights into this ageist discourse.

The study participants' perceptions of age discrimination in the hiring process suggest that government policies regarding the accountability of employers need to be re-examined. Participants in this study believe that employers have found ways to discriminate against them that make it difficult to prove when age discrimination has occurred. Therefore, it is likely that employers are not being held accountable for their discriminatory actions and thus policies and practices that govern employers' behaviours need closer attention in order to remove the structural barriers from the route to re-employment.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This type of apocalyptic thinking has been found in relation to the aging of the workforce in particular (Prince, 2000), as well as health care more broadly (Evans, McGrail, Morgan, Barer, & Hertzman, 2001). For more detail on “apocalyptic demography” or alarmist thinking in other dimensions of aging, please see Gee and Gutman (2000).

<sup>2</sup> The stipulation that individuals must be unemployed for three months or longer was used since individuals unemployed for less than this may still be highly distressed from losing their jobs and may not have had the opportunity to actively search for employment.

<sup>3</sup> As the unemployment rates were similar in 1999 and 2002 (7.6% and 7.7%, respectively), I do not believe that the economic conditions differentially affected participants’ ability to secure employment in the two time periods (Statistics Canada, 2004a, 2004b). Further, due to the qualitative nature of this project and the related focus on individuals’ meanings that were attributed to their experiences, the fact that data were collected at two different time points is not perceived to have altered the findings of my study.

<sup>4</sup> There were three groups of women and four groups of men who shared the same age in my study. To distinguish between participants I have used the letters “a”, “b”, and “c” after their ages.

<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the strategies used by older workers to conceal age, please see Chapter IV, “Managing Age Discrimination: An Examination of the Techniques Used When Seeking Employment”.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed account of the identity-related consequences of these negative experiences, please see Chapter III, “‘Aging’ Identities: Degradation and Negotiation in the Search for Employment”.

**CHAPTER III: ‘Aging’ Identities: Degradation and Negotiation in the Search for Employment**

*Abstract:*

The concept of identity has been explored in the literature in both the aging and the work contexts. However, there is little research on the relationship between identity, aging, and work during the job search process. In order to better understand this relationship, this chapter uses data from semi-structured interviews with unemployed males and females aged 45 to 65 (n=30) to examine changes in identity that occur during older workers’ search for employment. Findings indicate that once participants perceive they have been labelled “old” by others (i.e. potential employers and personnel at older worker programs) they begin to define themselves as “old” and become susceptible to identity degradation. However, the majority of individuals were able to successfully negotiate their identities following their negative experiences by drawing on much needed social support, attending older worker programs, changing their identities, maintaining some of their key roles, and altering their overall mental outlook. In light of these findings, this chapter draws attention to the paradoxical nature of the job search process – individuals go to older worker programs for assistance, yet some of the experiences encountered during attendance at these programs mirrored many experiences encountered with discriminatory employers. These unintended consequences are inadvertently discouraging many individuals in their job search process and thus more needs to be done to assist older workers, particularly in the social context, in order to prevent them from removing themselves entirely from the search for employment.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationships between identity and aging and identity and work have been examined independently in the literature. However, there is little research that seeks to understand the interconnectedness of aging, identity, and work in relation to the job search process, despite the aging of the workforce (Forum of Labour Market Ministers, 2002) and the lengthy periods of unemployment experienced by older workers (aged 45-65) (Walker, 2002). The latter trend is due in part to the existence of age discrimination in the employment context (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2000), resulting from negative employer attitudes (American Association for Retired Persons, 1995; Bendick, Brown, & Wall, 1999; Berger, 1999; Canadian Network for Experienced Workers, 1996; Charness, 1995; Gibson, Zerbe, & Franken, 1993; Marshall, 1996; Taylor & Walker, 1994). Much of the research that does exist in relation to older workers is quantitative in nature and thus there is little known about individuals' subjective experiences related to age during their search for employment.

In order to address this gap in the literature, this research uses the symbolic interactionist perspective to explore changes in identity that occur during the older worker's job search process. In particular, this chapter draws on data from qualitative interviews to examine the subjective meanings that older

workers attribute to various age-related experiences during the job search process. Findings indicate that once individuals realize that age is a factor in their search for employment and feel that they have been labelled “old” by potential employers or personnel at older worker programs (designed for individuals aged 45-65), they begin to feel “old” and subsequently question their self-worth. Each of the aforementioned experiences represents a stage in the identity degradation (Garfinkel, 1956) process for older workers. Despite the existence of this process, the majority of participants are able to successfully negotiate more positive identities by taking advantage of much needed social support, attending older worker programs, changing their identities, maintaining some of their key roles, and altering their overall mental outlook.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IDENTITY**

The symbolic interactionist perspective is used to understand individuals’ motives, behaviours, and interactions throughout the search for employment (Blumer, 1969). This approach illustrates how language, reflected appraisals, and images play a role in the construction and negotiation of identity (Prus, 1996). Identity is an interactionist concept that refers to “a person’s location relative to others in the situation, the community, or the society as a whole” (Hewitt, 2000, p.126 ). It involves a dynamic process that may change over time through

negotiated interaction between the individual and society. Goffman (1959) described three types of identity that are used in this process. “Felt identity” describes meaning attributed to one’s own identity, “presented identity” is a view of oneself that is projected to others, and “social identity” is the meaning that others attribute to the individual. He argues that one’s “presented identity” can be altered to meet the needs of any given situation. By using certain techniques, individuals actively control the image they are projecting to others (“presented identity”), in order to obtain a desirable “social identity”.

Goffman (1963) also used the term stigma in his work to refer to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (p.3) that results in discriminatory attitudes and behaviours being directed toward the stigmatized individual. He distinguished between discreditable stigma (traits which can be hidden), and discredited stigma (obvious traits). More recently, the conceptualization of stigma has been re-defined as existing “when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p.382). The category of “old” has been described as a stigma in research on older widows (Matthews, 1979). Being viewed as “old” by others can become a master status (Becker, 1993) or the primary characteristic that others associate with an individual. Older people are particularly susceptible to internalizing stigmatization and labelling,

due to an ambiguity in norms and loss of roles and reference groups that are associated with aging (Breytspraak, 1984, p.91). Kuypers and Bengtson (1973) conceptualized the “social breakdown syndrome”, which they say occurs when older individuals are exposed to negative labelling and in turn label themselves as incompetent. Due to the stigmatization process, a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Merton, 1968) occurs. This occurrence has detrimental effects on one’s identity:

What happens is that to the extent that we believe our stereotypes, we set up social structures to guarantee that our expectations are correct; the social structure in turn prompts the behaviors that confirm the stereotypes. (Breytspraak, 1984, p.112)

In order to overcome the negative changes in identity described above, individuals often use various identity negotiation strategies. These strategies either help maintain their established identities or help negotiate new or transformed identities. Cooley’s (1972) notion of the “looking-glass self”, where our opinions of ourselves are a direct reflection of how we think others perceive us, is an important part of the process of identity maintenance throughout the life course (George, 1990; Karp, 2000). Due to this importance, individuals actively use strategies to negotiate and maintain their identities on a continual basis. Therefore, identity maintenance occurs within a social context and is influenced by an individual’s historical and cultural location within this context (Breytspraak, 1984, p.93).



As individuals age and are faced with declining physical abilities, those who are able to negotiate their lives to tolerate these changes (and avoid being preoccupied with them) will be able to maintain a positive identity (Breytspraak, 1984, p.89). Other research has demonstrated that individuals in their fifties are able to cope better with change than when they were younger by coming to the realization that advancing age is generally coupled with advancing wisdom, which made them feel a sense of personal liberation (Karp, 2000). Further, research on chronically ill individuals has shown that illness can lead to a loss of self and identity if individuals compare their past identities (e.g. healthy) to their current ones (e.g. sick) (Charmaz, 1983, 1991). However, if individuals are able to overcome their illness, they can often reflect on their past hardships and realize that their experiences were part of a “path to knowledge and self-discovery” (Charmaz, 1983, p. 191).

Identity development has also been discussed in relation to the concept of a “career” or “the movement of individuals through the structure of society” (Haas & Shaffir, 1978, p.19). Individuals generally move along a continuum where identities change as a result of various changes in status (e.g. unemployment, marriage). Thus, identities are transformed over time in relation to individuals’ personal histories and sequence of statuses (Spence, 1986). “Continuous restructuring allows individuals to maintain a feeling of unity about

themselves and a sense of connection with the parts of their pasts they consider relevant to who they are at present” (Kaufman, 2000, p. 103). According to Mead’s theory of the past or the concept of temporality, individuals use elements of their past to manage their futures (Hall, 1987; Maines, Sugrue, & Katovich, 1983). The notion of temporality allows for an examination of how one’s identity has been transformed over time by focusing on “the location of the person in an ever-shifting present that at each moment has a unique relationship to the past and future” (Breyspraak, 1984, p.99). Thus, by examining identity over time, we can see where, how, and why transformations have occurred.

Other research has discussed a model of identity processes in relation to aging that includes identity assimilation and accommodation (Whitbourne, 1999). Identity accommodation or change occurs as a result of an experience, such as an illness, that causes one to re-evaluate his or her identity. Research that specifically addresses the age-related identity transformation that occurs for individuals between the ages of 50 and 60 labels this time period the “decade of reminders” as numerous events often occur (e.g. death of parents, becoming grandparents) that cause individuals to begin to define themselves as “old” (Karp, 2000).

Another area of importance to my research involves the relationship between identity, work, and unemployment. Work can be psychologically

gratifying and provide a sense of self-fulfillment to an individual, thus it is a key component of an individual's identity (Hughes, 1971, p.339). "The experience of unemployment highlights the meaning of work; it clearly reveals the material, psychological, and social rewards of working that disappear with a lost job" (Krahn & Lowe, 1993, p.333). However, research has found that older individuals who experienced long periods of unemployment continued to identify with work and the work ethic to the same degree as when they were employed (Rife & First, 1989). Therefore, despite the fact that these individuals are not actually working, their work roles still remain important and provide them with a mechanism to maintain their identities.

Research that has discussed the impact of plant closures found that older women in particular have the greatest challenges to overcome after a layoff occurs, particularly in relation to depression, shame, and anger (Gilberto, 1997). Other research also focussing on older women's adjustment to unemployment has indicated that older women face the greatest financial and psychological difficulties during periods of unemployment due to a combination of age and gender discrimination (Rife, 1992, 1995; Rife, Toomey, & First, 1989). However, another study on older workers' perceptions related to downsizing found little difference between men and women (Armstrong-Stassen, 2001). What is clear in the literature is that, once unemployed, older individuals experience economic

strain (See for example LeBlanc & McMullin, 1997) and increased morbidity (See for example Gallo, Bradley, Siegel, & Kasl, 2000). In fact, in the United States and Japan, for male workers aged 55 to 65, higher unemployment rates were associated with increased incidence of suicide (Taylor, 2003).

Similar to unemployment, retirement has (controversially) been described as a “roleless role” where individuals relinquish their “key functions” in society and are left with insignificant roles to play (Burgess, 1960). While much of the literature on aging has focused on role-loss in old age, more recent research has argued that what is important to identity in later life are those roles that are maintained (MacRae, 1990, p.265). Individuals who no longer occupy certain roles continue to identify with them in retirement (Breytspraak, 1984, p.115). Other research that has disputed the simplistic notion of retirement described above has recognized that it includes several phases that occur as part of a gradual socialization process (Atchley, 2000). From the literature discussed in this section, it is clear that relationships exist between identity and aging and identity and work. Using data from older workers seeking employment, this study examines these relationships in depth in order to understand the interconnectedness of identity, aging, and work.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The symbolic interactionist perspective, accompanied by qualitative methodologies, is the most frequent approach used for studies on identity management in later life (Gubrium & Holstein, 1999). This perspective, combined with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), is used to gain a first-hand understanding of how participants attribute meaning to their experiences during their search for employment. The use of qualitative methodologies allows for the subjective meanings and interpretations to be revealed to the researcher in a way that is often not possible through quantitative approaches (George, 1990). Thus, qualitative interviews, guided by an interactionist framework and grounded theory approach were employed in this study.

The data presented in this chapter are drawn from 30 semi-structured interviews with unemployed individuals aged 45 to 65 who are actively searching for employment. The analysis is also informed by 35 hours of participant observation in three older worker programs in the Greater Toronto Area. Human Resources Development Canada [HRDC] created or help fund these specific programs as they feel that individuals in this age group may not benefit from general employment services geared to workers of all ages (Human Resources Development Canada, 1999). The creation of specific labour force adjustment

programs targeted to older workers is believed to be more helpful in their job search. I attended regular meetings at each of the three organizations in order to observe organizational staff and clients.

The topics covered in the older worker programs ranged from workshops involving interviewing skills, personality assessments, computer training, and résumé writing to specific sessions on understanding the myths and realities of being an older worker. I met briefly with several of the employment counsellors who were leading the programs, yet due to my focus on older workers' perceptions of the job search process, I only questioned them about the actual services provided and did not go into depth with them about their views on these services. One of the programs I attended offered services to older workers only, while the other two had programs for older workers in addition to other segments of the labour force. In order to obtain a range of clients from these programs, I attended workshops on the first day a new session began, midway throughout the sessions, and at the completion of sessions. These sessions ran over the course of two or three weeks. I also would drop by the older workers programs periodically to deliver recruitment advertisements and in doing so often found willing participants who were not attending a specific workshop at the time, but were searching through job advertisements or meeting with counsellors.

As Table 1 indicates, most of the participants for this study were recruited through my attendance at the three older worker programs described above. Participants were also recruited by posting recruitment advertisements in employment agencies (older worker programs as well as those geared to all age groups). In order to obtain participants who may not have sought out specific employment assistance (anticipating that this may lead to distinct results), recruitment advertisements were also placed in community centres and libraries in the Greater Toronto Area, in a monthly newspaper aimed at individuals aged 55 and over, and on a university website. Finally, participants were also recruited through personal referrals. Despite the fact that the majority of participants were recruited through older worker programs, I do not suspect that this biased my findings as all of them discussed using these programs at some point during their job search process.

The interviews conducted in this study lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. The first eight interviews for this project were conducted in 1999. An additional 22 interviews were done in 2002 in order to expand the initial research project.<sup>1</sup> Prior to conducting the interviews, the study was approved by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board. Interviews were held at a variety of

Table 1. Participant Recruitment (n = 30)

	n
Attendance at older worker programs	20
Flyers at older worker programs	4
Flyers at other employment agencies	0
Flyers at community centres	1
Flyers at community libraries	0
55+ newspaper	3
University website	0
Personal referrals	2

locations (including older worker programs, community centres, libraries, and coffee shops) depending on individuals' personal preferences. A semi-structured interview format was used in order to guide the interview along several key areas, as well as to provide enough flexibility for the participants to discuss issues freely that arose during the course of the interview. The interview guide included questions on demographics, employment background, challenges encountered when seeking employment, and feelings related to these challenges. With consent from the participants, interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The data were coded according to several key themes, which were broken down further into various sub-categories (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.142). This was done using the qualitative analytical software program QSR NUD\*IST [Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing].



Table 2. Sample Characteristics (n=30)

	n
<b>Age</b>	
45-54	16
55-65	14
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	15
Male	15
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	16
Divorced	6
Widowed	2
Never Married	6
<b>Ethnic or Religious Background</b>	
Atheist or unspecified	16
Catholic	4
Protestant	4
Jewish	4
Buddhist	1
Muslim	1
<b>Country of Origin</b>	
Canada	14
Western Europe	4
Eastern Europe	3
United Kingdom	3
United States	2
India	2
Iran	1
Japan	1
<b>Education</b>	
Less than high school	2
High school degree	7
Certificate / diploma	2
College / university degree	19
<b>Personal Income</b>	
\$20,000 to \$39,999	2
\$40,000 to \$59,999	8
\$60,000 to \$79,999	4
\$80,000 to \$99,999	2
\$100,000 or more	5
Unknown	9
<b>Length of Time Unemployed</b>	
3 to 5 months	8
6 to 8 months	14
9 to 12 months	2
> 12 months	6

The sample for this study included individuals who varied by age, gender, marital status, ethnic or religious background, country of origin, education, income, and length of time unemployed (See Table 2). Just over half of the participants were aged 45-54 and the remaining ones were aged 55-65. There were an equal number of men and women in this study and the majority of participants were married. In terms of ethnic or religious background, the majority of participants indicated that they were atheist or preferred not to answer this question. The remaining respondents varied in their ethnic or religious background. The sample was quite well educated as the majority of the participants had a college or university degree. In terms of participants' personal income before they became unemployed, individuals who were comfortable disclosing their income were quite dispersed among the income categories

Table 3. Occupational Background of Sample (n = 30)

	n
Administrative	6
Construction	1
Consultant	2
Education	1
Engineering	1
Executive	1
Finance	3
Food and service	1
Health care	3
Human resources	2
Lawyer	1
Mid-level management	4
Sales and marketing	3
Television producer	1

provided to them in the interview, aside from the lowest income category (\$19,999 or less).<sup>2</sup> The length of time that individuals were unemployed also varied substantially, ranging from three months to six years. The most common length of time unemployed for the participants was between six and eight months. The occupational backgrounds of the participants interviewed were quite varied. Table 3 presents a breakdown of the occupational categories represented in this study.

## **FINDINGS: IDENTITY CHANGE IN THE SEARCH FOR EMPLOYMENT**

### *Identity Degradation During the Job Search Process*

The concept of identity degradation was first used by Garfinkel (1956) in relation to “degradation ceremonies” (p. 420). He explained that these ceremonies were designed to deprive individuals of their prior identities as well as emphasize their lack of power and autonomy. For example, being fingerprinted and searched when sent to prison would be considered a type of degradation ceremony by Garfinkel (1956). In my research, I suggest that negative experiences related to age (e.g. being considered “old”) and the related meanings assigned to these experiences by the participants lead to the degradation of their

identities. The concept of identity degradation will be discussed in this section in relation to negative experiences with both employers and personnel at older worker programs. More specifically, the analysis in this section focuses on participants' experiences and feelings relating to the discovery that age is a factor in the search for employment, being labelled "old", and feeling "old".

**The "age" factor** Due to the participants' chronological ages and associated number of years in the workforce, many of them mentioned that they had been unemployed at various points throughout their lives. Despite this occurrence they explained that this was the first time they encountered difficulties re-entering the workforce. This led to them being suspicious about the reason behind their inability to secure employment:

I never had troubles getting jobs before. I mean they used to come so easy for me but now it's not that easy... [After the interview] you say – "Did I do something wrong? Did I say something wrong? Why aren't they calling?" I always say to myself – "Well, is it me?" – or – "What's going on; why am I not getting a job? Why am I not getting a reply from anybody?" You know, it's not like it was many years ago... That's why it's really frustrating. (female, age 55)

All of my life, I have been able to get jobs – any job that I wanted and only this year, where I have been applying for jobs for six months, have I not only not had an interview, but I haven't even had an acknowledgement of an application. So I feel very uncomfortable about that and wonder of course what it is. (male, age 50a)<sup>3</sup>

Thus, many participants eventually came to the conclusion that their inability to secure employment was a result of their age.

Despite the fact that older worker programs were created to assist in the job search process, my findings indicate that there were certain negative consequences that resulted from going to these programs, the first one being that participants soon realized that age was a factor in their search for employment:

I had a course that [name of agency] provided for experienced workers – a specialized program for experienced workers they called it – for older workers...It made me very much aware of what's going on out there. I was not realizing it. I never realized that age was a factor. (female, age 58)

We saw a tape, a video about age barriers... This problem related to age, I didn't expect. (female, age 61)

Many were told that age represented a barrier after listening to lectures by staff or watching films concerning stereotypes about older workers and age discrimination. They were told that employers' attitudes often reflect stereotypical and inaccurate perceptions of older workers' abilities. Being told that age represents a barrier in their job search made many participants very angry and upset:

One of the things that really annoyed me [about the older worker program] was the lecture they gave on age, interestingly enough, saying this is going to be a factor. And I remember having my back go up and saying, "well, I don't think this is as much as a factor as they're making it out to be". (male, age 48)

I watched a video at [name of older worker program] that was about age discrimination. I found it so depressing that I had to leave in the middle of the video. I was so upset by it that it is hard for me to discuss it even now... I would never want to see that again. And I really don't think that they are giving you the whole story...The longer it went on, the worse I felt I had to leave. To me it was totally negative. (female, age 53a)

**The “old” label** Being considered “old” due to physical appearance was a stigma (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001) that the participants felt they had trouble overcoming. In addition, it acted like a master status (Becker, 1993) as many participants felt that being identified as “old” was the primary characteristic that was connected to them when searching for work.<sup>4</sup> They felt it overshadowed any other status or qualifications that they possessed:

It doesn't matter that we can do the same job as well or better, they look at my grey hair and they see an old man. Perception is everything... Looks? It's nothing but skin surface. And people look at me and they see the skin surface... I am being judged by my appearance and my date of birth... They don't want to see my experience. They want to see me have a full head of dark brown hair. Maybe I should go to Honest Ed's (discount department store) and buy a nylon toupee (laughs). That would improve my appearance, don't you think? (male, age 52)

I have grey hair... I can see the reaction of people... It's costing me... I don't believe the colour of your hair should be an influence on how people treat you. (female, age 53b)

As illustrated in the above quotations, respondents clearly did not agree that their physical appearance should be the determining factor in their finding employment. Once participants were told to seek out assistance from older worker programs, they began to see that they were now branded “older” workers by other key people; thus, their “social identity” (Goffman, 1959) or meaning that others attribute to them had become “old”.

**Feeling “old”** Once individuals were placed into an “older” category by others, they generally began to see themselves as old as well, an occurrence which had

damaging effects on their “felt identities” (Goffman, 1959). This led many participants to question their own self-worth and caused many negative emotions, particularly in relation to feeling “old”:

It is kind of like you feel like...maybe nobody wants me. You start thinking that kind of a thing... Like you're starting to figure well maybe, you know, after all these years... It's made me think – “Oh my god. I feel kind of old.” (female, age 53c)

I was rejected altogether – I didn't keep an accurate count – but it comes pretty close to 20 times. And I began to wonder, “Why? What's wrong with me?” ... It makes me feel, at the same time, both sad and angry – because people are looking at my outer self...I admit it; I'm kind of depressed over it. I feel bad. I feel like a castaway, like an old shoe that is of no use anymore. (male, age 52)

It's a horrible experience. I hope [other] people don't have to be humiliated like this. You sort of feel you've worked all your life and then – whack – sort of at the end of your career they just sort of say goodbye, who needs you. (female, age 58)

It does play with your ego... I find it very frustrating... I find it degrading. (male, age 45b)

The above quotations not only convey that the participants felt old, but also illustrate how they felt devalued, cast aside, and degraded by potential employers.

Unfortunately, perceived age discrimination encountered from employers was not the only pathway to identity degradation. Some of the participants also explained that going to older worker programs, where they were surrounded by other unemployed older individuals contributed to their discouragement.

Individuals who were not discouraged before but were sent to these programs by an employment counsellor started to feel discouraged once they entered the

programs and realized how many other individuals were in the same dire situation. According to two individuals with these views:

Look at all these older people. They're looking for a job and maybe they're going to be looking for a job next year too. I'm not sure. 'Cause there is no such thing that there is enough jobs for everybody out there. No way. (male, age 56)

When I went there (older worker program) I thought, "Oh my gosh. I am here with all the other unemployed old people. They're just going to come here and complain about the world." (female, age 50a)

This led some of the participants to believe that they were indeed not qualified for re-employment due to their age. In line with the "social breakdown syndrome" (Kuypers & Bengtson, 1973) and the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Breytspraak, 1984, p. 112; Merton, 1968), comments made by participants suggest that they too engage in age-related negative labelling. For example, while suggesting remedies for avoiding age discrimination, one respondent indicated:

I think it is very important for our Human Rights Code to consider issues of age. I understand that as you age you may not be as efficient. Certain things decline with age. (male, age 45a)

Other participants had similar views when describing older workers in their previous places of employment:

A lot of the older workers were not as efficient and productive because they did stay on for a long time... They are going to be slower, their memory will fail more, you know, that kind of thing. (male, age 50a)

Age has its own problem... They (older people) are not that much, let's say, in a good mood to deal with the clients and customers. You know, older people have their own mode of living. They are not that much, you know, outgoing people... The other problem, which is the main problem I can say, is that age means – when someone is old it means that he has a lot of experience and he knows a lot, or she knows a lot. And these old people cannot stop practicing their experience and their knowledge... So it is more



difficult to work with old people than young people. Young people, you can just easily tell them to do this and that. And as they don't have any experience from previous, they just do it. (male, age 57b)

A more obvious example of the self-fulfilling prophecy was illustrated by a woman discussing the age distribution of workers in her previous place of employment:

I would say they probably had 30% up to 35, 40% up to 50 and then a few old geezers – some of them who were there for a long, long time...When I was hired it was very funny...every time I walked by I had ten eyes following me. I'm sure they were thinking, "they actually hired an old broad". (female, age 60)

Many individuals also began to question the value that they would provide to potential employers:

Mentally – again, this thing is playing with my ego, there's no question about that.... I mean you've got to go back and say – well, maybe I'm not presenting the value that I did in the past – or – maybe I didn't have the value that I thought and that was one of the reasons I was let go – I don't know. (male, age 45b)

Even though I have gotten a few calls you still feel like, you know – you don't know what to think. Like you're starting to figure well maybe, you know, after all these years you don't know anything. (female, age 53c)

According to the participants, these feelings ultimately led to varying levels of depression, which were difficult to overcome when there was no end in sight for their current situation:

Not just me alone but a lot of people I can speak for [at the older worker program] are all feeling depressed and the feeling that you can't get a job... Just like almost waiting at death's door really. (female, age 59)

I started to fall apart ... I don't really want to go into the details ... I kind of got depressed and into the isolation kind of stage sitting here at home. (male, age 46a)

I think I fell into a little bit of depression, you know... You do get hit with it. It is a heavy thing to go through... It's like ploughing the field and having nothing grow. So

that will do a slow depressional burn on you because you're not getting any fruits from your labours. (male, age 46b)

Therefore, feeling “old” not only had severe consequences for the participants’ identities, self-worth, and mental health, it also likely contributed to their inability to secure employment if these feelings were reflected (unwittingly) to potential employers in an interview setting. The concepts discussed in this section in relation to employers and older worker programs contributed to the identity degradation process. However, as the next section will describe, this stage of identity degradation was overcome by the majority of participants at some point during their job search through the successful negotiation of their identities.

### *The Negotiation of Identity During the Job Search Process*

While the events that lead individuals to begin to question their self-worth are upsetting (e.g. being labelled “old”), the individuals in this study were generally able to move beyond them. Participants were able to maintain their core identities throughout their job search experience but did experience transformations in other aspects of their identities, as was suggested in the more general literature on aging and identity (Kaufman, 2000). Several strategies were used by participants that contributed to the “successful” negotiation of their

identities. Despite the fact that the older worker programs contributed in many ways to the degradation of identity, ironically they also helped some of the respondents overcome this negative point in their lives. Thus, identity negotiation strategies included drawing on social support from family, friends, and others at older worker programs. The programs also provided participants a sense of daily purpose and structure. In addition, participants felt that changing identities, maintaining some of their key roles, and altering their overall mental outlook by staying positive helped them successfully negotiate more positive identities.

**Drawing on social support** The first negotiation strategy used by participants related to the importance of social support. Research indicates that the majority of individuals who lose a job also lose many of their social contacts (Kates, Greiff, & Hagen, 1990). The availability of social support not only provides opportunities for social contact, but also acts as a buffer to reduce the stress associated with unemployment. In fact, the existence of social support has been shown to have a direct impact on the transition from unemployment to employment (Korpi, 2001). The participants in my study indicated that the social support that was provided from friends and family was very beneficial to them:

If individuals have a family to lean on it is ok, but without a family it is terrible... I am happy I have my family and friends to talk to. (female, age 45b)

I do appreciate their friendship and their support (friends and family). And I don't think I could really cope as well as I am without that support... So in that sense I am lucky and that's what gives me strength and energy. And this is what I draw energy from. (female, age 50a)

When you're depressed you bring people down. And if you're lucky enough you'll get somebody to say – "Oh. Do you need some cheering up?" (male, age 46b)

In addition, many respondents indicated that they received a great deal of support through their connections with other individuals attending the older worker programs:

The centre I went to was absolutely a life-saving series for me. I was very depressed. I was worried. I was upset. I was second-guessing myself, saying "what's wrong with me?" and that type of thing. Well, at the centre in my group of 12 or 13 people, we were pretty much all in the same boat. All of us the same age, all of us experienced workers that somehow or other were downsized or, whatever the reason, found themselves without a job. (female, age 50a)

When I was taking the course it did help 'cause there's a lot of other people in the same position right? So if you feel a little bit down about something you can call and talk to them and it makes you feel a little bit better. And it's somebody who's in the same position as you too, you know. (female, age 53)

Throughout the summer I kind of got depressed and into the isolation kind of stage sitting here at home so I was glad to get into this [older worker] program... where there's other people to talk to. (male, age 46a)

The literature indicates that individuals often attempt to conceal their unemployment status to members of their own social network due to misconceptions concerning others' attitudes toward them or their own feelings of shame and embarrassment (Kates et al., 1990). Many respondents indicated that being in situations with other individuals in similar situations gave them more confidence and helped them overcome feelings of shame and embarrassment related to being unemployed. For example, one individual remarked:

You know what? Until I actually went to the centre and the day I completed the training was the first time I actually had enough nerve to say to one of my neighbours that I was actually not working and I was looking for a job... The first time that was since June, and this is October. This is what I learned at the centre – you do not have to be ashamed.  
(female, age 50a)

Thus, many of the participants' attitudes toward their current predicament were transformed after going to older worker programs.

Because many individuals lose the social contacts associated with their previous job, the importance of job networking with new social contacts becomes quite significant. According to two of the participants:

Just interacting with the people around the table – maybe there's not a lot of people in there that are in the tourism industry but maybe there's somebody in there that knows somebody that knows somebody that knows of a job. So, again, it's expanding your network. (male, age 54)

That's why I was at [name of older worker program] that week. That was my first time ever there. Somebody suggested it to me and I went there to see about making some connections that would possibly result in getting some new work. (male, age 52)

The data made it clear that having the opportunity to be around others in similar age brackets and employment situations, such as that provided by the older worker programs, offered much-needed social support to many individuals.

In addition to the social support provided by other individuals in the same situation as themselves, some participants also commented on the overall supportive nature of the staff and the older worker program itself. For example:

The people that were there were absolutely wonderful. Nobody treated us like second-class citizens because we were fired or whatever – because we were old or whatever. They were all absolutely wonderful, encouraging, supportive in every way possible. So that is actually what gave me a new wind. And, of course, there's that added support, that if we need the centre or if we need some help we can call on them for extra help. Now

having that alone is like a security blanket, really and truly. Like I could just e-mail or call on one of the facilitators there and I get a word of encouragement or just a little hint that I could not come up with because of the stress or whatever. And you get energy for another day or week or so. So that is a wonderful thing. (female, age 50a)

**Acquiring purpose and structure** Another way that the older worker programs helped participants transform their identities was by providing them with a sense of daily purpose and structure, which is often lost when faced with prolonged periods of unemployment (Kates et al., 1990). For example:

That routine [from work] is no longer there. The purpose to get up in the morning and go elsewhere, that is what I miss. So this [older worker] program I really enjoy because in the morning I get up and I have to go at a certain time. That is a really good feeling. The work and the pressure, I don't miss, but a kind of a routine and the purpose, I do. (female, age 61)

Coming to this program puts an activity in your day...It's beneficial... So the whole procedure is having structure and when you get depressed you lose that structure. And to get out of depression is to just resume your day and aim for structure again in your life and that really picks you up. (male, age 46b)

**Changing identities** Another strategy used by participants involved them actively negotiating new identities once their old ones became undesirable. In order to do so, many participants changed identities from a negative one (e.g. unemployed) to a more positive one (e.g. semi-retired). Thus, despite the fact that the respondents did not actually feel ready to retire, mentally or financially, several of them discussed this notion of identity re-construction:

I sort of call myself semi-retired 'cause that means that I could tolerate, say, a lesser job than I had before. Like part-time work or something...When I first looked [for work] that's what I told people – that I wasn't anxiously looking. Like when I say people, I

mean the neighbour I bump into on the street, or something, wondering why I was home during the day. (male, age 60)

You know, I almost made up my mind that this is semi-retirement but I'm not ready for it I'll tell you. (female, age 60)

These findings support those in the literature, as it has been recognized that older unemployed individuals may eventually decide to define themselves as retired, in order to avoid the stigma associated with being unemployed (McDonald & Chen, 1994).

**Maintaining roles** Another strategy used by participants, similar to the research reported earlier on aging and roles in general (Breytspraak, 1984, p.115), was that they were able to continue to associate with their previous work roles. Thus, while a large part of identity may be tied to prior work roles, participants were able to maintain identification with this role to some degree even through periods of unemployment. For example, according to one of the participants, a lawyer who was actually trying to diversify his career options:

I thought about applying there for a management position, maybe something dealing with leasing or helping with negotiations for major clients. Or perhaps something along the corporate line – there are many things I could do. [But] people tend to think of me – I found out – as “The Lawyer”. I'm branded for life. (male, age 52)

Thus, despite the fact that the work role is objectively “lost” during periods of unemployment or during retirement, it was subjectively maintained by many of

the participants. For example, respondents referred to themselves as someone in their particular occupation (e.g. accountant, health care practitioner, etc.) looking for work – not simply as someone who was unemployed. Therefore, their roles were subjectively maintained to a large degree during periods of unemployment and drawing on these roles helped many of them overcome identity degradation.

**Adjusting attitudes** The final strategy used by participants to negotiate a more positive identity was to change their mental outlook. Individuals discussed the importance of staying positive and looking forward:

There have been negative experiences but you learn to look on the positive side of it... It's just another bump in the road of life. Sure, you know you've lost that job [opportunity] – not specifically because of age, but you know that a younger guy got it. You can take that as a negative experience or you can take it as a positive experience – at least the kid's out there working. I started that way, you know; someone stepped down to allow me a job... If we can't help the next generation, forget it... If one door closes another one opens, so you go through that door and tomorrow's another day. I think as soon as you make that decision it gives you a vision to go forward; you're positive from that day on. (male, age 50c)

I'm still optimistic. I come from the east coast and fishing is... you can't catch fish if you don't put the hook in the water. And you just stand out there until you catch. Be patient and use what you've got and be faithful and keep the hook in the water... What I'm in right now is a temporary setting. (male, age 46b)

It was clear from comments similar to those above that a positive attitude was often the key in overcoming identity degradation. This process was quite a negative one for many individuals, yet those who were able to either stay positive



or change to a more positive outlook ultimately felt they were making more progress in their search for employment.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter investigated changes in identity that occur for older workers during their search for employment. Findings indicate that participants encountered several stages in their job search process that contributed to the degradation of their identities (Garfinkel, 1956). This process began for the respondents when they realized that age was a factor in their job search process. Therefore, as the symbolic interactionist perspective suggests, interaction with others led participants to re-define their subjective experiences related to their job searches (Blumer, 1969). Individuals sensed they had been labelled “old” by potential employers or personnel at older worker programs, which caused them to begin to feel “old”. Thus, both their “social identities” and “felt identities” (Goffman, 1959) had changed to reflect this perception. It was clear that the meanings attributed to the language used by employers and the reflected appraisals played a large role in the negotiation of their identities (Prus, 1996).

Despite many of the stages experienced in the identity degradation process, the majority of individuals were able to successfully negotiate more positive identities through a variety of tactics. For example, attendance at older

worker programs provided participants with social support and a sense of purpose and structure. In addition, participants negotiated more positive identities by drawing on family and friends outside of older worker programs, changing identities, maintaining some of their key roles, and altering their overall mental outlook by staying positive.

This chapter contributes both substantially and theoretically to the sociological literature by providing new insights into the social world of older individuals seeking employment. More specifically, this chapter advances knowledge in relation to the concept of identity degradation (Garfinkel, 1956) by applying it to older individuals who experienced structural barriers related to age in their search for employment. Second, the identity negotiation strategies used by older individuals following degradation to their identities is a novel area of investigation. Third, while this study's focus was not directly on older worker programs, it has drawn attention to the unintentional consequences of these programs. Thus, another key sociological contributions of this chapter relates to the paradoxical nature of the job search process – individuals go to older worker programs for assistance, yet some of the experiences encountered during attendance at these programs mirrored many experiences encountered with discriminatory employers. These latent or unintended consequences (Merton, 1968) are inadvertently discouraging many individuals in their job search process.

For example, while some of the information presented during sessions on overcoming age as a barrier to re-employment may be important and help some people focus on their strengths when looking for work, it became quite evident that the “older” classification in itself, was doing more harm than good.

This unexpected finding is similar in many ways to earlier research done by Robert Scott (1969). In his book, *The Making of Blind Men*, he discusses how agencies that are designed to assist blind individuals are socializing them to become dependent by telling them what to feel at a time when they are most vulnerable and thus “the authority of the system makes the client highly suggestible to the attitudes of those whose help he seeks” (Scott, 1969, p.83). He further explains how individuals begin to internalize many of the negative attitudes reflected by members of the agencies. Findings from my study provide support for this notion and thus contribute to the advancement of knowledge on the unintended consequences of organizations generally, and on older worker programs in particular. For example, not only did staff at the older worker programs warn their clients that age was going to be a factor in the job search process, they also discussed specific negative stereotypes about older workers at a time when their clients were especially vulnerable to internalizing them. The notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Breytspraak, 1984, p.112; Merton, 1968) was quite evident in comments made by participants and the process of identity

degradation was often initiated by coming to the realization that age was a factor through the attendance at older worker programs. Thus, similar to Scott's (1969) conclusion that "blind men are not born, they are made" (p. 121), I argue that the segment of the labour force considered to be "older" workers is also a social construction. Individuals do not arbitrarily become old at age 45. While this age has been set by Human Resources Development Canada (Human Resources Development Canada, 2002) in an attempt to assist individuals who are discriminated against at this early age, as more recent research suggests, the definition of older workers varies substantially by industry and occupation (McMullin, 2003). Further research on the value of defining workers as "older" at age 45 is warranted.

In addition, due to the small sample used in this study, future research is suggested that more specifically addresses the function of older worker programs. Thus, a larger and more detailed examination of the programs available to older workers will help determine whether the programs are in fact hindering the route to re-employment at a time when many job seekers are already highly "discouraged" and vulnerable. While some of the participants discussed their depression in the past tense, it was apparent that other respondents continued to experience many negative feelings, which could suggest that if these individuals are not able to successfully negotiate their identities following their negative

experiences, they may become discouraged from continuing to search for employment. For example, Ginn and Arber (1996) found “actual discrimination, anticipated discrimination and lack of confidence combine to discourage those without jobs who are over 50 from seeking work” (p. 35). While the majority of participants in this study were able to successfully negotiate more positive identities following their negative experiences, it became clear that the search for employment is clearly structured by age. In order to improve older individuals’ job prospects, older worker programs and employers’ hiring practices need to be more sensitive to this fact.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As the unemployment rates were similar in 1999 and 2002 (7.6% and 7.7%, respectively), I do not believe that the economic conditions differentially affected participants' ability to secure employment in the two time periods (Statistics Canada, 2004a, 2004b). Further, due to the qualitative nature of this project and the related focus on individuals' meanings that were attributed to their experiences, the fact that data were collected at two different time points is not perceived to have altered the findings of my study.

<sup>2</sup> Participants were also asked their personal and family income level *since* being unemployed, however only a small number of participants were willing to provide this information.

<sup>3</sup> There were three groups of women and four groups of men who shared the same age in my study. To distinguish between participants I have used the letters "a", "b", and "c" after their ages.

<sup>4</sup> For more detail on participants' perceptions concerning age discrimination during the job-seeking process see Chapter II, "Older Workers Seeking Employment: Perceptions of Age Discrimination in the Hiring Process". To summarize these findings, respondents felt that employers used various mechanisms to discriminate against them, which often reflected negative stereotypes about older workers with respect to skills, training, adaptability or flexibility, and financial costs. Further, participants felt that employers used particular wording in job advertisements to attract younger candidates and examined their résumés in a discriminatory fashion (i.e. choosing candidates to interview based on the year their degree was received or the number of years of experience they had). Respondents also felt that the job interview was a mechanism for employers to assess the age of job candidates and that ageist language was used during the hiring process.

**CHAPTER IV:        Managing Age Discrimination: An Examination of the  
Techniques Used When Seeking Employment**

*Abstract:*

This chapter examines the development of age-related management techniques that are used by older workers in their search for employment. Data are drawn from semi-structured interviews with unemployed males and females between the ages of 45 and 65 (n=30). Findings indicate that participants develop “counteractions” and “concealments” to manage perceived age discrimination. Individuals counteract employers’ ageist stereotypes by maintaining their skills and changing their work-related expectations and conceal their age by altering their résumés, physical appearance, and language used. The current societal norms that favour youth create a structural context for the participants in this study that acts as a barrier to re-employment. Thus, this research suggests that there is a need to re-examine the hiring practices of employers and to improve legislation in relation to their accountability. Once age discrimination is minimized on a broader societal level, the age-related management techniques described in this chapter will become unnecessary.

## INTRODUCTION

Within the next 10 years, individuals aged 45 and over will comprise approximately half of the Canadian labour force (Forum of Labour Market Ministers, 2002). As a result, employers will need to retain and recruit older workers in order to avoid potential labour shortages. However, older workers take considerably longer than younger ones to find work once unemployed, due in part to the existence of age discrimination (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2000; Walker, 2002). While employers' attitudes toward older workers have become more positive in recent years, there are many negative stereotypes that continue to persist (e.g. higher rates of absenteeism, inability to learn new skills, and inability to adapt to new technology) that are limiting older workers re-employment (American Association for Retired Persons, 1995; Bendick, Brown, & Wall, 1999; Berger, 1999; Canadian Network for Experienced Workers, 1996; Charness, 1995; Gibson, Zerbe, & Franken, 1993; Marshall, 1996; Taylor & Walker, 1994).

Despite these findings, there is a lack of research that seeks to understand older workers' experiences during the job search process. The purpose of this chapter is to address this gap in the literature by investigating the management techniques used by older workers when looking for work. To do this, I draw on

data from 30 semi-structured interviews with older unemployed workers. The findings suggest that experiences with age discrimination (See Chapter II, “Older Workers Seeking Employment: Perceptions of Age Discrimination in the Hiring Process”) lead to the development of age-related management techniques. This chapter focuses on the management techniques used by older workers to counteract ageist stereotypes and conceal their age in order to avoid being defined as “old” by potential employers.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Concepts that are taken from the symbolic interactionist framework are used in this chapter in order to gain a meaningful understanding of individuals’ motives, behaviours, and interactions (Blumer, 1969). In this perspective, individuals are seen as having agency and as engaging in mindful interaction and self-reflexive behaviour. Therefore, individuals act, they do not simply respond, and they make choices within the constraints of the broader social context. Within the symbolic interactionist umbrella, Goffman (1959; 1963) has demonstrated the importance of stigma, identity, self-presentation, and impression management through his dramaturgical perspective. The concept of stigma, refers to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman, 1963, p.3) and results in discriminatory attitudes and behaviours being directed toward the stigmatized

individual. More recently, the conceptualization of stigma has been re-defined as existing “when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p.382).

In relation to identity, Goffman (1963) described three types of identity that are used in the developmental process: “felt identity”, the meaning attributed to one’s own identity, “presented identity”, the view of oneself that is projected to others, and “social identity”, the meaning that others attribute to the individual. He argued that one’s “presented identity” can be altered to meet the needs of any given situation. By using certain techniques, individuals actively control the image they are projecting to others (“presented identity”), in order to obtain a desirable “social identity”. Goffman’s (1959; 1963) use of the term impression management explains how individuals present themselves to others by conveying certain images that they consider appropriate in a given situation. In this way, individuals can manipulate the presentation of themselves that are displayed to others and create a distinct “definition of the situation” (Thomas, 1972) in order to sway others’ perceptions of them in a positive direction. For example, in their sociological study of the process of becoming doctors, Haas and Shaffir (1991) discussed medical students’ “constant need to create and manage the image of a competent self through the process of impression management” (p.74). Thus, the

importance of managing self-presentations is a well developed concept in many realms of the sociological literature. With respect to aging, research on older widows has shown that in order to avoid being stigmatized and maintain a positive identity, the women “suppressed” evidence of age (Matthews, 1979, p.74-75). “People have time allotted to tend to physical and mental needs...to cover potential age stigma signs, such as wrinkles or gray hair, by surgical intervention or hair dyes” (Luken, 1987, p.185). Thus, research suggests that individuals use certain management strategies to avoid being classified as “old” and being stigmatized by others.

Studies indicate that impression management tactics are often used in the context of a job interview (Delery & Kacmar, 1998; Fletcher, 1989; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Kacmar, Delery, & Ferris, 1992; Rosenfeld, 1997; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). More specifically, Delery and Kacmar (1998) showed three types of impression management techniques are useful in an interview setting: (1) entitlements (taking credit for a prior work-related success); (2) enhancements (making statements reflecting one’s own positive attributes); and (3) self-promotion (highlighting strengths in relation to those required by the ideal applicant). Their research considered the importance of applicants’ age in an interview setting, but only included participants with a maximum age of 38 and considered age to be an advantage in relation to having more experience with the



interview process itself. Other research indicates that individuals use impression management strategies when they perceive that discrepancies exist between the feedback received in an organizational setting and their desired “social identity” (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997). When discrepancies do occur, individuals acquire alternative techniques to use and then wait for additional feedback, which determines the future interaction between the participants. Accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968) and disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975) are also used in the employment context (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997), in order to avoid negative stigmatization and negotiate identity in relation to past and future behaviours. Thus, while previous research has not focused on older workers seeking employment, it does suggest that certain strategies are particularly useful for enabling individuals to focus the interview on their strengths and positive attributes.

It should be noted that some researchers in the organizational behaviour field consider impression management during job interviews to be a form of deception and manipulation (see for example Anderson, 1991; Arvey & Renz, 1992). Other research has demonstrated that there is a possibility of using too much impression management, as employers were found to prefer job candidates who used either one of two types of management strategies but rejected candidates who used the two types of strategies together (Baron, 1989). Thus,

research on the use of impression management techniques during a job interview is mixed and no research to date has examined age-related impression management techniques used to overcome age discrimination during the job search process.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used a qualitative methodological approach that allowed for a direct examination of the external world through inductive research techniques involving exploration and inspection (Blumer, 1969). Further, the use of qualitative methodologies allowed for the subjective meanings and interpretations to be revealed in a way that is often not possible through quantitative methodologies (George, 1990). This chapter also used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in an attempt to let the data generate the theory and a naturalistic one to obtain a first-hand understanding of how people portray a desirable self-image to others (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.8).

The data for this study were drawn from semi-structured interviews with 30 unemployed individuals aged 45 to 65. I also conducted 35 hours of participant observation in three older worker programs in the Greater Toronto Area to help provide a context for older workers' experiences. Human Resources Development Canada [HRDC] created these programs to assist older workers in

their job search process by providing them with specific workshops to meet their needs (Human Resources Development Canada, 1999). These workshops covered topics such as interviewing skills, personality assessments, computer training, résumé writing, and specific sessions on understanding the myths and realities of being an older worker.

I recruited most of my respondents by attending the workshops described above (See Table 1). I also posted recruitment advertisements in various older worker programs and in other employment agencies (geared to all age groups). In order to obtain participants who may not have sought out specific employment assistance (anticipating that this may lead to distinct results), recruitment advertisements were also placed in community centres and libraries in the Greater Toronto Area, in a monthly newspaper aimed at individuals aged 55 and over, on a university website, and through personal referral techniques. In order to be included in my study, participants had to be between the ages of 45 and 65 (in congruence with the definition of older workers given in the majority of literature), actively searching for work, and unemployed for three months or longer.<sup>1</sup>

The interviews conducted in this study lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. The first eight interviews were conducted in 1999. An additional 22

Table 1. Participant Recruitment (n = 30)

	n
Attendance at older worker programs	20
Flyers at older worker programs	4
Flyers at other employment agencies	0
Flyers at community centres	1
Flyers at community libraries	0
55+ newspaper	3
University website	0
Personal referrals	2

interviews were done in 2002 in order to expand the initial research project.<sup>2</sup> Prior to conducting the interviews, the study was approved by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board. Interviews were held at a variety of locations (including older worker programs, community centres, libraries, and coffee shops), depending on individuals' personal preferences. A semi-structured interview format was used in order to guide the interview along several key areas, as well as to provide enough flexibility for the participants to discuss issues freely that arose during the course of the interview. The interview guide included questions on demographics, employment background, perceptions of age discrimination, feelings related to these perceptions, and strategies used to gain employment. With consent from the participants, interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The data were coded according to several key themes, which were broken down further into various sub-categories (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.142). This was done using the qualitative analytical software

program QSR NUD\*IST [Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing].

The sample for this study included individuals who varied by age, gender, marital status, ethnic or religious background, country of origin, education, income, and length of time unemployed (See Table 2). Just over half of the participants were aged 45-54 and the remaining ones were aged 55-65. There were an equal number of men and women in this study and the majority of participants were married. The remaining participants were divorced, never married or widowed. In terms of ethnic or religious background, the majority of participants indicated that they were atheist or preferred not to answer this question. The remaining respondents varied in their ethnic or religious background. The sample was quite well educated as the majority of the participants had a college or university degree. In terms of participants' personal income before they became unemployed, individuals who were comfortable disclosing their income were quite dispersed among the income categories provided to them in the interview, aside from the lowest income category (\$19,999 or less). Participants were also asked their personal and family income level *since* being unemployed, however only a small number of participants were

Table 2. Sample Characteristics (n = 30)

	n
<b>Age</b>	
45-54	16
55-65	14
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	15
Male	15
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	16
Divorced	6
Widowed	2
Never Married	6
<b>Ethnic or Religious Background</b>	
Atheist or unspecified	16
Catholic	4
Protestant	4
Jewish	4
Buddhist	1
Muslim	1
<b>Country of Origin</b>	
Canada	14
Western Europe	4
Eastern Europe	3
United Kingdom	3
United States	2
India	2
Iran	1
Japan	1
<b>Education</b>	
Less than high school	2
High school degree	7
Certificate / diploma	2
College / university degree	19
<b>Personal Income</b>	
\$20,000 to \$39,999	2
\$40,000 to \$59,999	8
\$60,000 to \$79,999	4
\$80,000 to \$99,999	2
\$100,000 or more	5
Unknown	9
<b>Length of Time Unemployed</b>	
3 to 5 months	8
6 to 8 months	14
9 to 12 months	2
> 12 months	6

willing to provide this information. The length of time that individuals were unemployed also varied substantially, ranging from three months to six years. The most common length of time unemployed for the participants was between six and eight months. The occupational backgrounds of the participants interviewed were quite varied. Table 3 presents a breakdown of the occupational categories represented in this study.

**Table 3. Occupational Background of Sample (n = 30)**

	n
Administrative	6
Construction	1
Consultant	2
Education	1
Engineering	1
Executive	1
Finance	3
Food and service	1
Health care	3
Human resources	2
Lawyer	1
Mid-level management	4
Sales and marketing	3
Television producer	1

## **FINDINGS: MANAGING AGE DISCRIMINATION**

In the job-seeking process, participants felt that prospective employers used various mechanisms to discriminate against them that reflected negative stereotypes with respect to skills, training, adaptability or flexibility, and financial costs. Further, participants felt that employers examined their résumés in a discriminatory fashion (i.e. choosing candidates to interview based on the year

their degree was received or the number of years of experience they had), that the job interview was a mechanism for employers to assess the age of job candidates, and that ageist language was used during the hiring process.<sup>3</sup> As a result of these negative experiences, the majority of individuals in this study developed specific strategies that they felt helped them avoid being stigmatized as “old” when searching for employment. While it is recognized that most individuals, regardless of age, use various management techniques during their job searches (e.g. wearing appropriate attire, preparing mentally for an interview), the strategies that I refer to in this section are management techniques that are related to age. I have grouped these techniques into two categories. The first type of technique used by respondents I refer to as “counteractions” – tactics used to offset negative stereotypes. These techniques involve participants attempting to counteract employers’ ageist stereotypes by maintaining their skills and changing their work-related expectations. The second type of technique used by participants was “concealments” – strategies used to hide specific information (i.e. age). These techniques, developed to conceal age, included participants altering their résumés, physical appearance, and language used.



### *Counteractions*

**Skill maintenance** The first age-related management technique used by respondents to counteract employers' negative attitudes toward them involved keeping up-to-date with training. This was done in order to avoid being classified as "out-of-touch" by potential employers:

Any training going on, I signed up for it, and I did it. You know, when it came to computer training, I was one of the older ones. Everyone realized it, but I'm computer literate, so that's not an issue...I have also gone for all the training on how to job search. They have my résumé, a follow-up letter and the whole bit – doing it professionally. (female, age 60)

I went to the University of Toronto to take some courses to update my knowledge. I also go when different organizations offer specific workshops that I am interested in. (female, age 56)

I keep up with the times. I just built a Pentium for my daughter and I am going to rebuild my computer next. (male, age 52)

That was the one thing about this [older worker program]. We all said that we really needed more computer training... I am trying to get into a course... You sort of have to be up-to-date in your computer skills. I don't care what kind of job you are looking for, that's what I'm finding. (female, age 53a)<sup>4</sup>

Individuals stayed up-to-date with their skills and training for a variety of reasons – the primary one being to counteract employers' negative stereotypes. However, some participants also expressed a personal desire to remain current in their field. In addition, staying up-date with skills and training was often associated with some level of guilt that was tied to being unemployed:

I found I felt guilty when I wasn't looking for a job during the day... or mentally trying to do something, you know. Like sometimes I would just sit on the computer and practice typing or work on my books that I have, you know, or [practice] different commands just to improve. (female, age 58)

Despite the recognized importance of keeping training and skills up-to-date, many of the participants were very frustrated with their current inability to pay for the training needed to obtain employment and described a type of “catch 22” situation during our interview:

I need the qualifications, but I need money to get the qualifications, but I need the qualifications in the first place to get the job to have the money. It's kind of like a catch 22. It's very similar to the 17-year-old fresh out of high school who can't get a job because he doesn't have any experience and doesn't have any experience because he can't a job. It is the same kind of catch 22 only 35 years later. (female, age 53b)

If you have an education here (Canada) you can reach whatever you want. But I have no money to take courses to upgrade my education from [my previous country of residence]. It is not a nice feeling. It is unpleasant and very difficult... I am planning to learn more and get a Canadian license but the problem for me is money. If I can get a job and start to work I will be able to save money and get a license. (female, age 45b)

Anything else I'd want to change to [career-wise] I'd have to take university education and I wanted to get a job before I spend the money. So that's my only hold up there. (male, age 60)

A few of the participants mentioned that they were doing volunteer work, in the hopes that this would help them gain re-entry into their desired occupation:

We both (she and her husband) are volunteering and always keeping busy. This allows us to improve our knowledge... And I am reading every day on the computer to improve my professional skills. (female, age 45b)

I have worked for two years as a volunteer... I am probably too chicken to get a [paid] job because I haven't worked in a while. (female, age 56)

Volunteering was viewed as a temporary (and undesirable) solution to prolonged unemployment, yet participants felt that this would help them update their skills

or keep them current and hoped that it would give them the chance to get a foot back in the door.

Another way that participants were able to update their skills was by attending workshops held by older worker programs:

I never really used the Internet very much where I worked 'cause you know, you were busy with your other things... They (older worker program) spent a lot of time on computer skills, like using Word and getting on the Internet. (male, age 62)

I was advised to go for that [older worker] program... I needed some updating in my computer skills because the courses I had in computers was from more than 20 years ago. (male, age 57b)

I have changed majorly since I took the training [provided through the older worker program]... There were a lot of books available there. There was a lot of advice given ... I went to the centre and every day I learned something new. (female, age 50a)

More specifically, many individuals indicated that due to prolonged periods in one specific job they did not feel qualified to apply for new jobs with respect to updating their résumés and skills, feeling competent in an interview setting, and contacting employers. For example:

I joined this program because the last time that I prepared my résumé was about 25 or close to 30 years ago. Everything's changed, you know, I had to relearn all the procedures... I learned what they (employers) are looking for and how to present myself. They look for a particular type of person... This is the first time I'm facing it. So it's really tough. (female, age 61)

We learned so many things about résumés. I had one résumé my whole life, just before this last job. And even over those ten years, much has changed in that area. (female, age 50a)

To anyone in my age group I definitely recommend the [older worker] program. I think it's really good... I've learned quite a few things here that's been very helpful. Like about thank you letters and cold calling and my résumé needs to be fixed up a bit. (male, age 46a)

Unfortunately, many of the fears and insecurities that the participants had may in fact be warranted, as they had not searched for employment in quite some time. Interestingly, what was previously considered an advantage by participants – having job security by remaining in one job for a long period of time – was now something that they believed was hindering their job search success. In order to overcome this newfound limitation, participants felt that they not only needed to update their skills, but they also needed to mentally alter their expectations to find work. Participants' changing expectations will now be discussed.

**Changing expectations** Another way that participants attempted to counteract employers' ageist stereotypes was in relation to their work-related expectations. Many individuals indicated that they altered their original employment goals, changed the type of employment they were seeking (i.e. monetary remuneration, career change, employment status), or considered geographic re-location in order to secure employment. While these mental strategies may be applicable to all individuals regardless of age, older workers have had to use these management techniques to heightened degrees due to the experience and higher salaries that are often associated with advancing age. Thus, once older workers perceived that their age was a barrier to re-employment, they soon realized that they could no

longer have the same expectations they once had if their main goal was to secure employment:

In terms of employment goals, while monetary rewards were viewed as important to a degree, satisfaction and fulfillment with work were seen as the primary motivators in seeking employment by some of the participants in higher income brackets. For example, according to one respondent:

You know, I'm not an entry-level person, and I don't expect an entry-level kind of remuneration. Not that money is the most important thing to me – satisfaction to me is as important or more important at this stage of my life than money. (male, age 52)

This tendency may assist older individuals in their job-seeking process as employers often cite higher financial costs (associated with salaries and benefits) as a reason for not hiring older employees.

It follows that many of the respondents realized that receiving the same level of financial compensation as they had prior to becoming unemployed was not necessarily feasible and thus lowered their monetary expectations in relation to the type of employment being sought. For example:

I know that I will take a lower [pay] rate to come in [to the labour force]... You just have to keep going, you know. Lower your expectations, unfortunately, and just keep going... It seems the longer you're unemployed the more you can rationalize it. You don't feel any better but you just sort of, like I said, you lower your expectations just basically to get back into the job market. (female, age 58)

Thus, job advertisements stating lower salaries, a mechanism that participants believed employers used to discriminate against them, would no longer be considered a barrier to these respondents.

Furthermore, after long periods of unemployment, many individuals begin to consider a change in career or industry in order to gain re-entry into the workforce:

I'd like to stay in the field, but right now I'm considering other alternatives...I'm also considering a change of career; getting into something else...When push comes to shove, I mean time is going and my requirements for income are still there... I've got a daughter that's planning to attend university next year. I've got a car that was supposed to be replaced. So I mean I've got things that I want to do; things that I need to do. (male, age 45b)

The frustration is immense because you keep sending your résumés back out to the same people... I've been about 18 months out of work and a couple of months ago I decided I've got to switch this trade. That's when I considered bartending... Then I decided on this building maintenance course... But [it is hard] knowing that no matter what industry I go into now I'll never make that kind of money again. (male, age 50c)

I am really open to look at other industries as well...I have had good business experience, which I can apply to any business. (female, age 60)

I am trying now to shift my focus... I am trying to diversify... It has been very difficult to get interviews so now I am trying to look into other areas. (female, age 50b)

While a change in career was not their preference, many respondents realized that this sacrifice had to be made at some point in their job search process. Some individuals even deliberated between returning to their previous careers with lowered salary expectations and changing careers in the hopes of achieving any level of financial stability. This decision was not an easy one as many

participants soon realized that once they left their original career they would have great difficulty re-entering it at a later date. For example, one woman who was a dental assistant explained her current predicament:

I am looking into – I mean I'm not really sure that I would be just as good doing other things and I'm thinking why should I waste 25 years of training... I have set up a deadline for myself that at least by the end of January if I do not get a job as a dental assistant – I never thought I could think along the lines and I'm still not happy doing that – but I just might consider other jobs... But then that's where the problem lies, that if you go into other things it's that much harder to go back. If you go for an interview and the doctor's asking you what you are doing and you say, "I'm in a bookstore" or something like that – "So why are you applying for the job? I can have 20 assistants that are actually assistants." So that's the dilemma there. (female, age 50a)

Expectations may also change in relation to the status of employment that is being sought. Many older individuals decide (voluntarily or not) to work on a contract or part-time basis with various organizations. For example:

From my past experience, in the company that I worked, they prefer younger people. I don't think I'd like to take that rejection constantly. I'm not sure I'm brave enough to take it on. So my situation is a little bit different. You know, if I'm 50 probably I would force myself to go back [to full-time work] or must go back. But because of my age – then part-time probably is best for both of us – me and the company. The company, they don't have to commit long term, I do have experience and I can contribute to them so that's the way I feel. (female, age 61)

I would accept part-time work and at the moment I'm doing some consulting work for a boutique; it gets me out of the house. (female, age 60)

People will hire me as a consultant because it is a contract position. It is short-term. They like my knowledge; they love my abilities. They always love the results of my work – because my work is excellent. (male, age 52)

There are some jobs that admittedly the salary is not what I want but right now, would I take a part-time job? Yes... Right now I'm willing to listen to any offers that come around. (male, age 62)

While the security of full-time employment was not present for these individuals participants felt that they were able to display their strengths to employers, which may ultimately lead to more stable employment for them in the future. Many participants felt that changing their own “definition of the situation” (Thomas, 1972) from unemployed to semi-retired helped them accept a possible change in the type of employment that was being sought. For example:

I sort of call myself semi-retired ‘cause that means that I could tolerate, say, a lesser job than I had before. Like part-time work or something... When I first looked [for a job], that’s what I told people – that I wasn’t anxiously looking. Like when I say people, I mean the neighbour I bump into on the street, or something, wondering why I was home during the day. (male, age 60)

You know, I almost made up my mind that this is semi-retirement but I’m not ready for it I’ll tell you. (female, age 60)

Individuals re-conceptualized their status from unemployed to semi-retired in order to provide a new and more acceptable social meaning to their current situation, similar to findings reported in the literature on displaced workers (McMullin & Marshall, 1999).

Despite making drastic changes in monetary, career, and employment status expectations, participants were still unable to secure employment:

I’d like to have full-time but if like I could only get part-time, well, I would do that, you know, in the interim...I’d take another job. Like I even applied at different places like IGA and Blockbuster, you know, I would take something like that, you know, just to be working and doing something. (female, age 53c)

I’m willing to try anything and I’m not asking 30 dollars an hour, what I used to make before, I’m not asking that. I’m going to go for – how much is minimum wage – six eighty-five? I’m willing to start with that if the job is normal and I’m capable of doing it.



I'm not picky. I'm not asking this kind of wages, minimum wage is going to do it. I'm going to be there. I'm going to try. (male, age 56)

I've junk mailed every employer out there with my résumé – even survival jobs where I went to a car dealer and wanted to be a lot person – you know, park cars, take them in and get them washed, vacuum them out, and that kind of stuff – even to get minimum wage. And I can't even land that 'cause they look at you and go – “What is your problem?” You know, it's just tough. (male, age 46b)

Making these extreme changes in their expectations without success (i.e. securing employment) was obviously quite disturbing to many of the respondents. In fact, many of the comments made by the participants conveyed both a sense of desperation and a sense of adaptableness. For example:

I'm willing to do practically anything to work rather than not work. (female, age 64)

Many of the individuals in this study were also quite willing to move to another geographical location in order to find work:

I thought there might be a lot more opportunity [in Ottawa]...and maybe just the small town atmosphere versus the big town [Toronto] would be better...I thought I would get something in Toronto but it's not going to work. But if I have to work in Ottawa that's fine. I'm close enough...Basically apartment living is cheaper down there... it's just too expensive to live here. (female, age 58)

Don't just depend on Toronto, Mississauga, Brampton or York because there is nothing out there. And you gotta have your mind made up to want to leave your home and to be travelling wherever the job is... You have to try all different angles. (female, age 59)

When I started my job search... I placed that restriction – my job search parameters – and then realized it. I used to say, “I want only full-time and I want it downtown”. Then I said “I want full-time but I'm willing to stay anywhere in greater Toronto or contract in greater Toronto”. So now it's full-time, part-time, or contract anywhere in Ontario... And this month I've also begun sending résumés off to the [United] States... So now I've widened my search... So we'll see. (male, age 62)

However, several participants noted that although they would personally be willing to re-locate in order to secure employment, they felt that the needs of their

families would best be met by remaining in their current geographic location. For example, despite the hardships that they had encountered since immigrating to Canada, some of the participants felt that there would be better long-term opportunities for their families if they remained in Canada due to the educational system or a general feeling of safety and security:

I would have, you know, left the country where I didn't have the problem of my daughter studying here. It's only for her that I continue to stay here. (male, age 57b)

We came to Canada because of the dangers of living in [my previous country of residence]...My husband was a big company director and I was a medical doctor and now we are both unemployed and on welfare... We can't find work here. We have been unemployed for five years – since we have been in Canada. (female, age 45b)

The changes in mental expectations described in this section were deemed necessary by the participants in order to try to overcome some of the stereotypes associated with being an older worker, such as higher salary expectations. Unfortunately, making these mental adjustments did not help participants secure employment, so many of them felt that more drastic measures were needed in order to conceal their ages to potential employers. The analysis now turns to these types of management techniques.

### *Concealments*

**Résumé modification** The first type of age concealment technique used by participants concerned the modification of their résumés. Respondents mentioned

that they attempted to conceal age on their résumés by eliminating some of their work experience or the year that their degrees were received:

I try to hide it (experience). Sometimes I don't mention my degree and that sort of thing and I only show the last ten years of work experience. (male, age 60)

I think what you need to do after a certain age is write your résumé in a certain way so that it doesn't represent the actual number of years that you have been working. (male, age 50b)

Participants also indicated that they switched the style of their résumés from chronological ones to “functional” ones, where the importance of skills rather than specific jobs or years in the labour force is highlighted:

I changed my résumé around. I was using a chronological résumé at first, but for the last four months I have been using a functional one. (male, age 50a)

I use a particular style of résumé that emphasizes skills more than the number of jobs or length of time that I have been in certain jobs. (male, age 50b)

Responses from the participants made it increasingly clear that “de-emphasizing age” was a strategy taught by personnel at the older worker programs:

At the [older worker program] they helped me modify my résumé – to de-emphasize age I guess, because it was a workshop specifically for experienced workers. They would tell us don't give them (employers) any more information, basically, than is necessary. Like sort of just give them your last ten years of work, let them see you versus, you know, putting down everywhere you've worked for the last 30 years or 40 years. So, I did that. (female, age 58)

I was taught [at the older worker program] that when you send a résumé you don't put the date you graduated from school... or stuff like that. So they really don't know how old I am when I send them the résumé. (female, age 55)

I really hadn't needed to do a résumé in many, many, many, many years... They (counsellors at older worker programs) want you to put your skill set right up front... And then go back ten years or 15 at the most. (male, age 54)

I realized with the amount of experience I've had, my résumé is about four pages... The general consensus [at the older worker program] is you give only the last 15 years [of experience]. (male, age 62)

Thus, while some individuals may have eventually decided to alter their résumés on their own using some of the techniques described above, it was clear that the overt encouragement at the older worker programs was the reason that the majority of adjustments were made.

**“Improving” appearances** Another type of concealment, which was used by the majority of participants, was to portray a “youthful” appearance to potential employers. Several of the participants referred to physical preparations for the job interview. For example, many men and women acknowledged dyeing their hair prior to an important interview:

When I actually get an interview... I dye my hair. (male, age 50b)

When you look around you and you see the faces getting younger and younger and you know you've got to keep it up. Even if you can't afford it, that's the one thing you need is your bottle of dye. (female, age 58)

Several men also considered using a toupee if they were balding and shaving their beards to appear younger, despite the fact that they did not necessarily agree with this or acknowledge that this was their idea in the first place:

They want to see me have a full head of dark brown hair. Maybe I should go to Honest Ed's (discount department store) and buy a nylon toupee. That would improve my appearance, don't you think? (male, age 52)

People say to me, because I'm bald "why don't you get one of these wigs?" or whatever you call them or "why don't you shave your beard?" I have had my beard all of my life – since I was 20. It was never a problem, so why is it a problem now? (male, age 50a)

Participants also indicated that they would dress a certain way for an interview in an attempt to "fit in" with what they believed was a young organizational culture.

For example, one individual explained:

There are certain techniques that I use [in an interview] to seem younger... I always wear young looking clothes.... I dress in certain clothes that fit in with their company's culture. (male, age 50b)

Another strategy that respondents used to maintain "youthful" appearances was to make a concerted effort to maintain their health. Thus, while many of the participants encountered changes in their mental health following experiences with age discrimination and prolonged unemployment,<sup>5</sup> the majority of participants were in good physical health prior to becoming unemployed and remained this way following unemployment. In fact, several of the respondents felt that their physical health had improved since they became unemployed. For example, when asked to describe his health since he had become unemployed, one individual explained:

My health has improved quite a bit because I've got back into a running program... My previous job, you know, they wanted the 60-hour weeks.... So physically I'm doing a lot better and my eating habits have improved. (male, age 46a)

Other respondents expressed how they felt fortunate that they did not physically look “old” due to their good health and thus felt they did not have to alter their physical appearance to avoid experiencing age discrimination from employers:

I guess [in relation to] how I look – I really haven’t had that kind of age discrimination. I think that when I go to a [work-related] event I always look good, so I think that also helps a lot. (female, age 50b)

Appearance-wise I find I’m okay... to be able to say, “yes, I’m still capable of working; I don’t have a cane yet”. (female, age 58)

Finally, it should be noted that not all of the participants agreed with modifying their physical appearance in order to obtain employment. Some individuals actually were quite against this active age concealment behaviour.

For example:

I have grey hair and I refuse on general principle to dye my hair... I don’t want to cater to this...I can see the reaction of people to somebody who has dyed hair – you know they dye their hair blond or whatever – they tend to think of them as younger and prettier and so on and I refuse to do it. I’m stubborn that way. It’s costing me I know but I don’t believe in catering to that. I don’t believe the colour of your hair should be an influence on how people treat you. (female, age 53b)

It is clear that this woman felt very strongly about not wanting to conform to society’s expectations regarding her physical appearance, yet she also recognized that this conviction may be harming her job search success.

**The “right” age talk** The last way that participants attempted to conceal their age was by managing their outward portrayal during job interviews. This was

done in several ways, the first of which was to use certain discourse to re-frame otherwise undesirable conversations. For example:

I was told that [I was too qualified for a position] but I turned it around because I had so much experience or knowledge in finance that – I was applying for a job in mutual funds and I said “You are getting kids out of school who don’t even own them so how do you expect them to sell them”. I turned it around. (female, age 53a)

Many of the respondents explained how they managed to avoid or deflect discussions in which their age could become known to employers and explained the importance of anticipating age-related questions during job interviews in order to mentally rehearse desirable answers:

I’m not saying falsify an image [during an interview]. Be yourself and be honest. But, again, depending on the questions, you know – “How old are you?” – rather than respond – “That’s none of your business” – I would have said something like – “Well, I’m old enough to have 25 years of experience in this business”, which gives them an age bracket and it doesn’t affect me. “As you can see by my résumé, I have 25 years [experience], so you know I’m not 35.” (male, age 50c)

I try to verbalize what I’m going to say to them (employers) because they seem to do this constantly... I guess I just sort of prepare myself mentally for these, I call them, stupid questions – “What are your goals, let’s say ten years down the road?” Well, I don’t have ten years left, you know. So you have to verbalize what you are going to say. (female, age 58)

Individuals also engaged in what they considered to be “youthful” language. For example, one participant explained the lengths he went through in order to avoid being defined as “out-of-touch” more generally in terms of current societal trends:

What I talk about is really youth-oriented. I make sure I discuss very physically active kinds of sports and I mention various social groups that I have joined. (male, age 50b)

Participants also realized the importance of using certain “buzzwords” (e.g. in the sales field, what was once referred to as a “forecast” is now called a “pipeline”)

during a job interview to illustrate to employers that they were up-to-date with the language being used in their field. For example:

The high-tech industry has so many different skills and languages. Like you have to be an expert... You've got to really move quickly and learn new stuff. (male, age 46a)

I think the lingo has changed considerably.... There are a whole slew of buzzwords that I am sure are being used today by corporations that perhaps a person that was trained 20, 25 years ago understands but is not comfortable using because it's not in their everyday vocabulary. They were trained with a different sets of words...I think it's a barrier.... As soon as you go into an interview and you use your own terminology, you date yourself – automatically, subconsciously. (male, age 57a)

This participant went on to describe a whole list of “buzzwords” that he felt were being used by individuals in his field and in human resources more generally:

We were just discussing a whole list of words yesterday [at the older worker program]. And they were words that I personally had not seen, let's say 20 years ago. Such as “telecommuting” and “motor-skilling” and “life-long learning” and “career planners” and “dejobbing”. This is just on human resources side... The same thing occurred in the marketing industry in a different way. For example, you know, having “new enhancements”. That's one way people would refer to things. In the old days you would just call it, you know, “increased sales”...I do believe that it would be useful to create, I don't know, a whole set of words, buzzwords, that are currently in use in an industry that show involvement and progression – at least of terminologies. (male, age 57a)

Another individual used some other “buzzwords” to explain his difficulties in an interview situation:

Let's say they (employers) describe a particular position you have to do... You have to meet “revenue targets” and you have to “integrate pricing and portfolio managements” and “database marketing” and you have to work “retention strategies”... Unless you are able to repeat these words that they put in their job description, you may sound outdated. You may sound that you will not be able to fit because you don't understand their terminology, which is not true. You are [just] more comfortable working with established business terms. (male, age 45b)

Thus, some of the respondents felt they were at a disadvantage in relation to the language being used in their field after realizing that the lingo they were trained



with in the past was already outdated; being unemployed for a lengthy period of time complicated the matter. They found this quite frustrating, similar to the “catch 22” situation that they found themselves in in relation to their skills and training. Thus, individuals felt that the only way to maintain a current lingo in their field was to be employed in it, and this was not happening for them at the time of these interviews.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study explored how older individuals’ perceptions of age discrimination in the job search process led to the development of age-related management techniques. Similar to findings discussed previously in relation to impression management techniques in general (Goffman, 1959, 1963) and their use in the organizational behaviour literature (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997), once individuals in this study perceived that a discrepancy existed between the image they wanted to convey to potential employers and the feedback they received (perceived age discrimination) they developed alternative management techniques that were age-related. This was done in order to project a positive “presented identity” (Goffman, 1959) and avoid being stigmatized by potential employers.

Management techniques were developed by the participants in order to combat employers’ negative attitudes in relation to their skills, training,

adaptability or flexibility, and higher perceived monetary costs by staying up-to-date with their skills and training and changing their work-related expectations. In addition, participants felt that employers examined their résumés and chose candidates to interview in a discriminatory fashion. After coming to this realization, individuals began to use concealment tactics on their résumés that involved eliminating the year that they received their degree or reducing the amount of experience (i.e. number of jobs or number of years in a job) displayed on their résumés in order to gain a more competitive advantage in the job market. Similarly, respondents felt that the job interview and language used by employers were key mechanisms for discrimination. By altering their appearance or using specific language to mentally prepare for age-related concerns, they felt a more “youthful” image was being conveyed to potential employers.

This chapter contributes theoretically and substantially to the sociological literature by applying concepts related to management techniques and the aging process to older individuals who feel stigmatized in their job search process. More specifically, in relation to management techniques, previous researchers have argued that the following types of impression management techniques have been used in an interview setting: (1) entitlements (claiming responsibility for a positive event that occurred in the past); (2) enhancements (making statements that reflect one’s positive attributes); and (3) self-promotion (highlighting

strengths in relation to those required by the ideal applicant) (Delery & Kacmar, 1998).<sup>6</sup> Findings from my study expand on the impression management techniques described by Delery and Kacmar (1998). My research demonstrated that older workers use two additional techniques in an attempt to combat age discrimination. The first technique was “counteractions” – tactics used to offset negative stereotypes. The second technique used by participants was “concealments” – strategies used to hide specific information (i.e. age). The notion of concealment has been examined in the literature on aging in relation to older widows who “suppressed” evidence of age (Matthews, 1979, p.74-75). However, the use of these management techniques has not been applied specifically to age discrimination in the hiring process prior to this study. I anticipate that this contribution to knowledge in the sociology of aging can also be applied to a broader area of literature relating to impression management and aging more generally. Both counteractions and concealments can relate to behaviours that attempt to offset any type of stereotypes or hide any type of stigma, although further research is needed to demonstrate the utility of these concepts beyond their applicability to older workers and the hiring process.

In summary, research indicates that as a result of prolonged periods of unemployment, older workers are often considered to be “peripheral and marginal to the workforce” (Henkens, Sprengers, & Tazelaar, 1996, p.575). This is due in

large part to the existence of age discrimination in employers' hiring processes. Thus, the current societal norms that favour youth have created structural barriers for older workers seeking re-employment. However, despite the existence of these structural barriers, findings from this study suggest that participants actively negotiate age-related strategies and thus clearly have agency in the job search process. While the findings from this study cannot be generalized to all older workers due to the small non-representative sample, the sociological insights gained contribute to knowledge of older workers' job search process and provide a foundation for further research into this area on a broader scale. Finally, to address previous researchers who argue that impression management tactics are dishonest and manipulative (Anderson, 1991; Arvey & Renz, 1992), one must raise the issue of why these strategies are used in the first place. Management techniques were used by participants in this study to combat age discrimination and thus were perceived to be necessary according to their "definition of the situation" (Thomas, 1972). Therefore, this research suggests that there is a need to re-examine the hiring practices of employers and to improve legislation in relation to their accountability. It is only by combating age discrimination on a broader societal level that the age-related management strategies used by the participants in this study will no longer be necessary.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The stipulation that individuals must be unemployed for three months or longer was used since individuals unemployed for less than this may still be highly distressed from losing their jobs and may not have had the opportunity to develop age-related management techniques for their job search.

<sup>2</sup> As the unemployment rates were similar in 1999 and 2002 (7.6% and 7.7%, respectively), I do not believe that the economic conditions differentially affected participants' ability to secure employment in the two time periods (Statistics Canada, 2004a, 2004b). Further, due to the qualitative nature of this project and the related focus on individuals' meanings that were attributed to their experiences, the fact that data were collected at two different time points is not perceived to have altered the findings of my study.

<sup>3</sup> For more detail on participants' perceptions concerning age discrimination in the hiring process, please see Chapter II, "Older Workers Seeking Employment: Perceptions of Age Discrimination in the Hiring Process".

<sup>4</sup> There were three groups of women and four groups of men who shared the same age in my study. To distinguish between participants I have used the letters "a", "b", and "c" after their ages.

<sup>5</sup> Please see Chapter III, "'Aging' Identities: Degradation and Negotiation in the Search for Employment" for more detail on the psychosocial consequences of perceived age discrimination.

<sup>6</sup> While this was not the focus of my current investigation, I found evidence that participants in my study were using all three of the impression management techniques described by Delery and Kacmar (1998). Many of them made statements to me that highlighted their past accomplishments, emphasized their positive attributes, and stressed how their work-related experience would benefit them in a job situation. Further, they explained that they would make similar comments to employers in an interview setting.

**CHAPTER V: Conclusions: Conceptualizing the Meaning and Import of Age in the Job Search Process**

By exploring the interconnectedness of age, work, and identity during the job search process, this study demonstrates the meanings older workers attribute to their lived experiences in searching for re-employment and thus advances the body of knowledge that presently exists in the sociological literature. In order to highlight the substantive, theoretical, and methodological contributions of this dissertation, I first provide an overview of the key findings contained in Chapters II, III, and IV. In doing this, I discuss the insights into older workers' perceptions on the existence and nature of age discrimination, the identity-related consequences of this perceived discrimination, and the ways that participants manage this perceived discrimination. After discussing these scholarly contributions, I examine the implications of these findings and link the evidence presented in each of the three preceding chapters by creating a conceptual model that emerged from my analysis of the data. This model conceptualizes the meaning and importance of age in the job search process. Finally, I explore some potential directions for future research in relation to aging, work, and sociology more broadly.

## **KEY FINDINGS: REFLECTIONS ON THE JOB SEARCH PROCESS**

### **Perceptions of Age Discrimination**

In Chapter II, “Older Workers Seeking Employment: Perceptions of Age Discrimination in the Hiring Process”, I explored older workers’ perceived reality concerning the existence and nature of age discrimination in the job search process. Further, I examined perceptions regarding the “unofficial” mechanisms that employers used to discriminate against older workers. The richness of these qualitative insights is absent from national reporting statistics. In pursuing this end, my findings suggest that while employers may project positive attitudes toward older workers in large-scale quantitative surveys (See for example Berger, 1999), their day-to-day practices do not reflect this. Perhaps this is due to the sensitive nature of age discrimination, resulting in a social desirability bias, whereby employers respond to survey questions anticipating the desired and “correct” responses. Further, results may be positive due to differences in employers’ knowledge about policies surrounding age discrimination and thus more informed employers may actually feel more positive, or may feel they must *appear* more positive in their views toward older employees. While my findings are based on a select sample of older workers and are not intended to be generalized beyond this sample, they do suggest that employers’ attitudes may not be as positive as they appear to be in quantitative analyses or from employers’



perspectives. Thus, employers' attitudes toward older workers and older workers' perceptions concerning employers' attitudes and hiring practices appear to be quite different.

More specifically, in describing experiences with their job search, many respondents explained how they sensed the existence of age stereotyping from employers in relation to their skills, training, adaptability or flexibility, and financial costs. Previous studies have confirmed that employers do hold these and other age-related stereotypes (American Association for Retired Persons, 1994; Gibson, Zerbe, & Franken, 1992; Marshall, 1996). Participants perceived this age stereotyping during the course of particular interviews or more generally after prolonged periods of unemployment. They discussed how they were able to secure employment quite easily in the past, yet their present difficulties led them to connect their age to their inability to find work. While this perception of age stereotyping was experienced more often than explicit confirmation of employers' discriminatory beliefs, it was equally disturbing to participants. Respondents described conversations with employers who made comments such as "they (the company) won't consider you at your age" or "we didn't expect anybody your age to apply for this". Participants also discussed negative encounters with job recruiters hired by employers and even with "friends" who told them the "truth" about the hiring process.

Individuals also pointed to specific mechanisms that they felt employers used to carry out their discriminatory attitudes. They explained how employers advertise job vacancies with specific wording (related to work experience and salary level) targeted at younger job candidates. Participants also felt that employers scanned résumés to estimate an applicant's age by assessing the numbers of years of experience, number of jobs held, or the year a degree was received. Next, respondents explained how the job interview was used as a mechanism to selectively hire individuals based on a visual assessment of their age. Related to this, many respondents felt that they did not "fit in" to the employer's organizational culture, which essentially meant they looked too old. These findings support previous studies that have pointed to the importance of physical appearance in the work context (Ginn & Arber, 1995; Reinharz, 1986). The last discriminatory mechanism that participants reflected on was related to the language being used by employers. Similar to prior research in relation to aging more broadly (Bytheway, 1995, p.59) and age discrimination in employment (McCann & Giles, 2002; McVittie, McKinlay, & Widdicombe, 2003; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2002) my findings suggest the existence of an ageist discourse. Specific comments, relating to being considered "over-qualified" or "too experienced", that someone more "junior" was hired, or

that the organization was too “fast-paced” for them, were ways that employers (not so) subtly communicated that particular respondents were too old for the job.

### **Identity Degradation and Negotiation**

As highlighted in various places throughout this dissertation, the findings described above reveal older workers’ *perceptions* of age discrimination and thus may at times be reflective of the participants’ own insecurities relating to the importance of age in the hiring process. However, as will be re-emphasized in this section, these experiences were very meaningful to the participants and thus resulted in various changes in their identities. To reiterate, the purpose of Chapter III, “‘Aging’ Identities: Degradation and Negotiation in the Search for Employment”, was to explore how age influenced identity. In this chapter, I examined negative identity-related consequences and discussed how participants were able to negotiate more positive identities following their negative experiences.

My findings suggest that experiences with age discrimination lead to identity degradation – a term first used by Garfinkel (1956). The use of this concept in my research illustrates its continuing usefulness in the sociological literature, as well as its applicability to older workers seeking re-employment. This degradation is a result of perceptions related to being defined as “old” by

employers and employment counsellors when searching for work. Further, this finding suggests that age represents a stigma (Goffman, 1963) and a master status (Becker, 1993), as participants felt that being considered “old” was the primary characteristic connected to them when searching for work. While some respondents explained that they did not agree with this label and made comments that suggested they may have tried to resist this process, most were not successful, and thus the majority of participants experienced identity degradation. Therefore, for the majority of participants, both their “social identities” and their “felt identities” (Goffman, 1959) had changed to reflect “older” perceptions.

The meanings that respondents gave to the experience of being defined as “old”, caused further negative feelings. They felt devalued, useless, cast aside, and in particular, degraded. For many of them, these feelings ultimately led to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Breytspraak, 1984, p. 112; Merton, 1968), since comments made by participants suggest that they also succumbed to age-related negative labelling (e.g. “old geezers”, “old broad”). These terms are clearly ageist in nature and thus while many of the individuals were clearly fighting a battle against age discrimination, they also appeared to be falling into some of the traps that they were fighting against. Overall, respondents’ experiences with age-related labelling had meaningful consequences with respect to their identities and

I can only speculate on how this may have contributed indirectly to their inability to secure employment.

What I consider to be one of the most sociologically interestingly contributions of this dissertation is the way in which older worker programs mirror employers' role in the stigmatization and degradation processes. Thus, despite the fact that older worker programs are intended to assist individuals in their search for employment, they actually caused many participants to become even more discouraged by emphasizing the importance of age in the job search process. These latent consequences (Merton, 1968) appear to discourage some participants in their job search process. As mentioned in Chapter IV, this finding echoes the research done by Scott (1969), who discussed how organizations created to help blind individuals actually hinder their route to independence.

The more general literature on aging and identity has suggested that older individuals are generally able to negotiate more positive identities following negative experiences (Kaufman, 2000). My findings show that this holds true in the specific instance of older workers seeking re-employment, as most respondents were able to successfully negotiate a more positive identity following their degrading experiences. Thus, this dissertation also makes an original contribution in relation to discovering strategies that individuals use to negotiate their identities following experiences with age discrimination, including drawing

on social support. While friends and family were an important source of support, respondents also obtained support from staff at the older worker programs and others in similar situations, such as those attending the programs. Also, participants felt that the programs provided them with a sense of daily purpose and structure, which is often lost when faced with prolonged periods of unemployment (Kates, Greiff, & Hagen, 1990). In addition to the help provided by the older worker programs, individuals negotiated new statuses for themselves once their old ones became undesirable (e.g. unemployed to semi-retired), maintained their subjective work roles, and changed their mental outlook by staying positive and looking forward.

### **Managing Age Discrimination**

The purpose of Chapter IV, “Managing Age Discrimination: An Examination of the Techniques Used When Seeking Employment”, was to explore whether perceptions of age discrimination in the hiring process led to the development of age-related management techniques. My research suggests that older workers develop a range of techniques related to age that are believed to reduce the stigma of being defined as “old” by potential employers. Thus, individuals actively control the image they are projecting to others (“presented identity”), in order to obtain a desirable “social identity” (Goffman, 1959).

Findings from my study expanded on the range of impression management techniques previously explored in the literature in relation to job search more generally (Delery & Kacmar, 1998) by adding two additional techniques.

The first type of technique used by respondents I refer to as “counteractions” – strategies developed to offset employers’ negative stereotypes. Specifically, participants stayed up-to-date with their training and changed their work-related expectations to counteract the effect of employers’ ageist stereotypes. With respect to the strategy of staying up-to-date with training, one type of training that participants were able to obtain was that offered through the older worker programs. However, this training focused on workshops related to résumé modification, interviewing skills, and word processing ability, and therefore did not provide the industry-specific training that some of them required. Despite the recognized importance of staying up-to-date, many participants explained their frustrations regarding the high costs of certain training programs and thus described a type of “catch 22” situation where they needed work to afford the training but could not secure work without the training. With respect to changing work-related expectations, many of the participants explained how they altered their original employment goals, changed the type of employment they were seeking, or considered geographic re-location in order to secure employment. I suspect that many of these mental alterations may

eventually help older workers secure employment, as employers often cite higher financial costs (associated with salaries and benefits) as a reason for not hiring older employees. In this way, job advertisements that state low salary levels (a mechanism believed to be used by employers to select younger job candidates) would no longer be considered a barrier by respondents. Further, by changing expectations in relation to the type or status of employment being sought, individuals were able to associate a new and more acceptable meaning with their current situation.

The second type of technique used by participants was “concealments” – strategies used to hide specific information (i.e. age). First, most of the respondents discussed modifying their résumés in an attempt to conceal age by removing years of work experience and the year that degrees were received. Many of them also replaced a chronological résumé with a “functional” one, which highlights skills not specific jobs. Interestingly, participants indicated that personnel at older worker programs were the ones who initially encouraged them to “de-emphasize age” on their résumés. Another way that participants attempted to conceal their age was in relation to physical appearance, similar to findings on aging more generally (Luken, 1987; Reinharz, 1986) and to those related to Goffman’s (1959; 1963) concept of impression management. For example, individuals explained how they would dye their hair prior to job interviews, wear



what they considered to be “young-looking clothes”, and several men contemplated shaving their beards or using toupees (if they were balding) to appear younger. While not all participants agreed with these concealment strategies, an overwhelming majority of participants were using some type of them in an attempt to secure employment. The last concealment strategy utilized by respondents involved the use of certain language during the course of an interview, including deflecting age-related conversations and using “youthful” terminology, such as the current buzzwords in a particular field (e.g. in the sales field, what was once referred to as a “forecast” is now called a “pipeline”).

The use of these management techniques has not been applied specifically to age discrimination in the hiring process prior to this study. I anticipate that this contribution to knowledge in the sociology of aging can also be applied to a broader area of literature relating to impression management and aging more generally. Both counteractions and concealments can relate to behaviours that attempt to offset any type of stereotype or hide any type of stigma, although further research is needed to demonstrate the utility of these concepts beyond their applicability to older workers and the hiring process.

## **Summary**

As mentioned in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, much of the past research on older workers has been quantitative in nature and thus an interactionist view of older workers that reflects on the qualitative meanings of their experiences was absent from the literature. By using qualitative methodologies (i.e. 30 semi-structured interviews and 35 hours of participant observation) and an interactionist framework, this study has contributed new insights into the meaning and import of age in the job search process. The importance of interaction, language, and its meaning or interpretation are central to symbolic interactionists (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Thus, for example, the meaning that participants assigned to employers' language after interacting with them was a critical component of understanding their lived realities. These meanings were reflected in each of the three dimensions of their experiences contained in Chapters II, III, and IV. In Chapter II, I discussed older workers' perceptions of age discrimination and in doing so I was able to shed light on the meanings assigned to employers' (negative) language. Chapter III looked more specifically at the consequences of the negative meanings and illustrated how the meanings attributed to language and reflected appraisals played a large role in the negotiation of their identities. Finally, Chapter IV examined reactions to these meanings including participants developing their own age-related language and

attempting to control the image presented to employers by altering their appearance to a more “youthful” one.

### **LINKING THE EVIDENCE: CONCEPTUALIZING THE MEANING AND IMPORT OF AGE IN THE JOB SEARCH PROCESS**

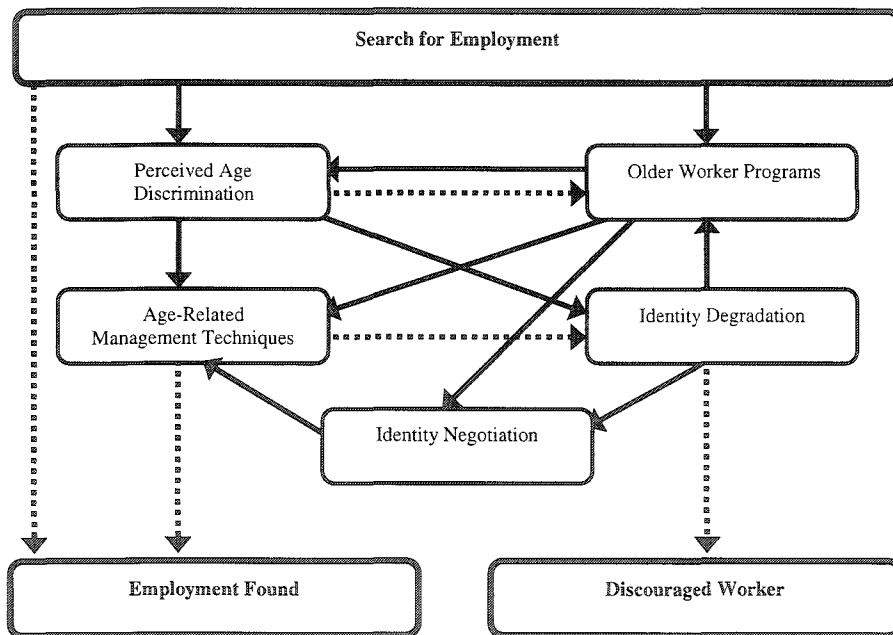
As has been discussed in the more general literature on work, the continuous (male) career profile has changed and individuals can no longer expect to work in one job throughout their lifetime (Naegele, Barkholdt, de Vroom, Andersen, & Kramer, 2003). Further, the tripartite model of education, work, and retirement (Kohli, 1986) is no longer the Canadian norm. Both of these trends have enormous implications for older individuals in particular, due to the lengthy periods of time spent moving from one job to another (Walker, 2002). Given these long periods of unemployment, it is important to understand the stages that older individuals go through on their route to re-employment. Thus, drawing on the main findings from Chapters II, III, and IV, I have developed a conceptual model (See Figure 1). This model not only links the major findings of these chapters to one another, it also visually illustrates the perceived phases that participants encountered (solid arrows) and theorizes additional stages that are believed to occur (broken arrows) when seeking employment. I will first discuss the perceived phases encountered, followed by the additional theorized stages.

Research has recognized that there are multiple “pathways” to retirement

(Kohli & Rein, 1991). A “pathway” is defined as:

...an institutional arrangement or – in most cases – a combination of different institutional arrangements that are sequentially linked to manage the transition process... Pathways consist of sequences of institutional arrangements, with rules providing for a specific program to be followed by a specific second (and third, etc.) one. (Kohli & Rein, 1991, p. 6)

**Figure 1 Older Workers’ Job Search Process**

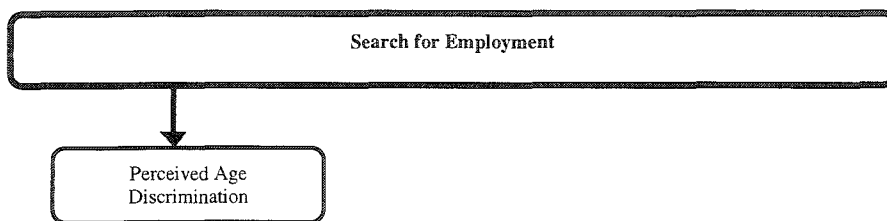


Findings from my research suggest that there are also multiple pathways in the search for employment. Therefore, the conceptual model presented here highlights the importance of examining variations in pathways in the job search process by illustrating the stages and experiences that threaten identity (e.g. age discrimination) and re-employment success (e.g. discouragement). Within each

pathway, there are several stages, and I will elaborate on the model depicted in Figure 1 in order to clarify these stages.

Figure 2 illustrates the first stage in several pathways in order to highlight the findings of Chapter II. Thus, this figure illustrates the stage where individuals seeking employment perceive that they have experienced age discrimination.

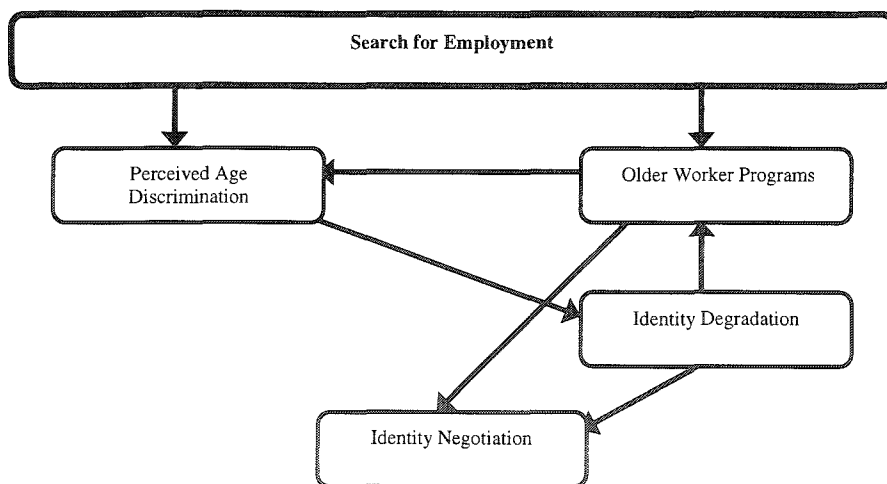
**Figure 2 Perceptions of Age Discrimination in the Job Search Process**



The first pathway occurs after participants perceive they have experienced age discrimination. Following this experience, as Chapter III suggests, the majority of them experience identity degradation (See Figure 3). Next, most of the individuals who experienced identity degradation, were able to successfully negotiate their identities. Identity degradation can lead directly to identity negotiation or individuals may go to older worker programs for help negotiating their identity (e.g. social support from staff and others in same situation). Thus, depending on the strategies used, distinct pathways are chosen. Another pathway, also depicted in Figure 3 as it too illustrates the findings from Chapter III, occurs

when individuals are searching for employment and decide to seek out the assistance of older worker programs. My findings suggest that experiences in the older worker programs (e.g. being considered an “older” worker) mirror those experiences related to age discrimination from employers. Thus, as Figure 3 suggests, these negative experiences related to age also lead to identity degradation and identity negotiation in most participants.

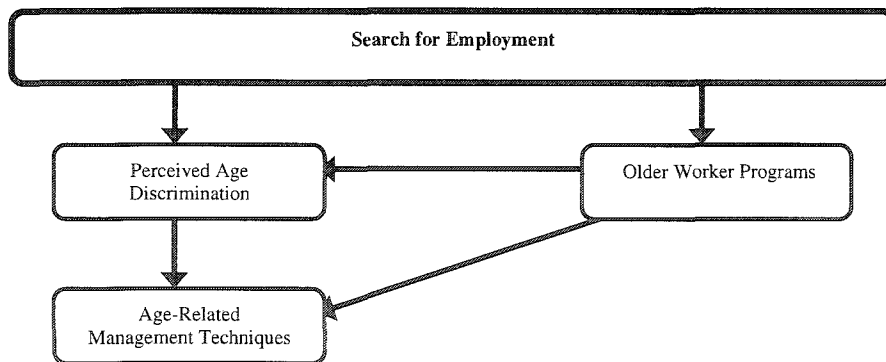
**Figure 3 Identity Degradation and Negotiation in the Job Search Process**



In Chapter IV, findings indicate that once individuals perceive they have been discriminated against, they develop age-related management techniques that they believe counteract employers’ ageist stereotypes and conceal their age. This stage is depicted in Figure 4. Another route to the age-related management

techniques is directly through the use of older worker programs, as many of the techniques used by participants were taught at these programs. For example, individuals discussed how employment counsellors instructed them to “de-emphasize age” on their résumés. The last pathway in Figure 4 reiterates the idea that older worker programs lead to perceived age discrimination, which then lead indirectly to the age-related management techniques.

**Figure 4 Managing Age Discrimination in the Job Search Process**



Thus far, I have linked the findings from Chapter II to Chapter III (See Figure 3) and from Chapter II to Chapter IV (See Figure 4). However, as Figure 1 illustrates, the findings from all three chapters can also be linked together. Thus, returning my discussion back to the entire model depicted in Figure 1, I will now discuss the linkages suggested by incorporating the findings from Chapters II, III,

and IV. When searching for work, most participants who experienced age discrimination also experienced identity degradation. Once (most) respondents were able to overcome these negative identity-related consequences, they were able to negotiate a more positive identity. Through this process, it was then possible for participants to use various age-related management techniques, which were now deemed necessary, in order to resume the job search process. Another similar pathway began with going to older worker programs, which then led to perceived age discrimination, identity degradation, identity negotiation, and age-related management techniques.

As can be seen in the model depicted in Figure 1, I also *theorize* two additional stages of the job search process (“Employment Found” and “Discouraged Worker”). These phases occur when individuals either obtain employment after using the age-related management strategies or become discouraged and give up their search for employment after experiencing identity degradation. As my research focuses on individuals who were unemployed and actively searching for work, these two additional stages did not emerge from the data and are thus more speculative than the others.

Reflecting on the first of these two theorized stages (i.e. “Employment Found”) raises the question of whether the age-related management techniques developed to counteract employers’ ageist stereotypes and conceal age are



actually working. They do appear to make some difference to employers; however, as mentioned earlier, older individuals are still experiencing longer periods of unemployment, as compared to their younger counterparts (Walker, 2002). Thus far, among my study participants, job searches have led to continual disappointments. On the other hand, my findings suggest that while age structured individuals' ability to find employment, participants also had the ability to shape their own lives and the majority of them negotiated more positive identities and developed age-related management techniques in an attempt to overcome these structural barriers. Due to this perceived agency, I anticipate that the majority of individuals will negotiate their way to "successful" job outcomes in the future.

The second stage that I have illustrated with a broken arrow is believed to occur if individuals are unable to move past the stage of identity degradation, they may become "discouraged" from their job search. In the literature, "discouraged workers" were "currently unemployed, desired to work full-time, were not unemployed due to physical or mental disability, and had not searched for a job in the last four weeks due to a personal belief that they could not find a job" (Rife & First, 1989, p. 197). These individuals may eventually decide to define themselves as retired, in order to avoid the stigma associated with being unemployed (McDonald & Chen, 1994). Thus, I suggest here that if an individual

cannot get past the stage involving identity degradation, it is possible he or she will become a discouraged worker. The additional challenges faced by discouraged workers warrant further investigation but I suspect that those who are not able to successfully negotiate a more positive identity largely fall into this category.

I have also used broken arrows in Figure 1 to suggest three additional pathways. The first, is a direct pathway from searching for employment to finding employment. While I did not observe this pathway in my research, I suspect that some older workers are able to go from one job to another without encountering any age barriers. The second theorized pathway occurs after individuals perceive they have experienced age discrimination and go to older worker programs to get help for this discrimination. I specifically questioned participants about what they did after they perceived that discrimination occurred, and they mentioned talking to friends or family and several discussed trying to seek legal advice. However, none of the respondents discussed going to older worker programs because they perceived they had been discriminated against. Instead, they discussed going to the programs as a way to help them improve their skills in order to find work, and to provide emotional support once they felt degraded from the discrimination encountered. Finally, the last broken arrow represents a pathway that is anticipated to occur when individuals develop age-

related management techniques, yet are still unable to secure employment. In this pathway, I suspect that individuals continuously use management techniques to try to conceal their age or counteract employers' ageist stereotypes, yet due to their inability to secure employment, begin to feel "old" and degraded. Thus, the stage of identity degradation follows the age-related management techniques, which ultimately leads to becoming a "discouraged worker".

In summary, the conceptual model discussed in this section illustrates the stages and pathways encountered by participants in this study, and theorizes additional ones that are believed to occur in the job search process. It also demonstrates how the three separate papers contained in Chapters II, III, and IV link together to provide insights into the job search process and thus advance the knowledge within the sociology of aging and work. The last two stages in the model depicted in Figure 1 with broken arrows (i.e. "Employment Found" and "Discouraged Worker") suggest potential avenues for further research into older workers' job search process. Further, while my conceptual model contains a multitude of pathways, I suspect that there are additional pathways that are not reflected in this model, which could be investigated in future research. For example, once individuals become discouraged workers, they may eventually define themselves as retired and successfully negotiate more positive identities. They may do this by building on their past experiences or perhaps even realizing

that they are in a better position than they expected (e.g. they no longer have the demands of a full-time job, etc.). Research on chronically ill individuals has shown that while illness can lead to a loss of self and identity, individuals can overcome this experience by reflecting on past hardships and realizing that their experiences were part of a “path to knowledge and self-discovery” (Charmaz, 1983, p. 191). I suspect that older workers who have become discouraged, can follow a similar path.

This model could also be applied more broadly in the sociological literature in relation to other structural factors that restrict the job search process, such as gender or race. While this model incorporates structural constraints encountered in the job search process, it mainly focuses on the micro-level of analysis as it was created by examining older individuals’ subjective meanings related to their search for employment. Connecting the study participants’ experiences to the broader structural level, participants in this study believe that employers have found ways to discriminate against them that make it difficult to prove when age discrimination has occurred. Therefore, it is likely that employers are not being held accountable for their discriminatory actions and thus policies and practices that govern employers’ behaviours need closer attention in order to remove the structural barriers from the route to re-employment.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Anti-age-discrimination legislation will be necessary to create a climate in which competence becomes the main criterion for employment and where people are not prevented from getting work by artificial age barriers. (Walker, 2002, p. 136)

This dissertation examines older workers' perceptions related to the meaning and import of age in the job search process. While this study does not claim to be generalizable due to its qualitative nature, the sociological insights gained contribute to knowledge about older workers' job search process and provide a foundation for further research into this area on a broader scale. Thus, the richness of the participants' accounts advances knowledge with respect to the meaning and import of age in the job search process and provides insights into employers' "unofficial" attitudes and hiring practices.

The findings of this research suggest that more needs to be done to assist older individuals in their search for re-employment, and while specific suggestions have been made throughout this dissertation, I believe that additional interviews with older workers, employment counsellors, and employers themselves will greatly enrich our understanding of the job search process. These findings would help expand the conceptual model presented in this chapter, which could then be investigated on a larger scale. A quantitative study that tests this specific model would further expand knowledge regarding structural barriers in the job search process. This suggestion highlights the utility of combined

research methods or triangulation (Creswell, 1994, p. 174). I suspect that the insights into the lived experiences of the participants could only be obtained from qualitative interviews, yet in order to illustrate the applicability of my conceptual model beyond the participants in my study, a larger scale investigation is warranted.

Another area that I feel warrants further examination relates to how age combines with other social structural factors, such as gender, race, ethnicity or country of origin, and occupation in the job search process. Future research could explore whether these factors, when combined with age, place older individuals at greater disadvantage in the job market. Further, it would be interesting to discover if the identity-related consequences and management techniques investigated in this dissertation vary according to these characteristics.

Another area worthy of future research relates to conducting interviews with individuals over the age of 65 who are working past the “typical” retirement age. This research would provide insights into whether these individuals have used specific age-related techniques to obtain and maintain employment. Further, it would be interesting to discover if these individuals are located in certain industries or occupations (e.g. those with less physically demanding jobs). I suspect that research of this nature would provide support for the elimination of mandatory retirement, a policy that I believe is setting (somewhat) arbitrary age

limits that do not reflect current life expectancy estimates. Thus, many individuals want to work past the age of 65 and are more than capable of doing so, and setting age limits in employment is evidence of a discriminatory practice that needs to be abolished. With respect to my dissertation research, I can only speculate on the effects of this age ceiling, as employers may have a specific age above which they feel workers are no longer competent. If this age limit was eliminated, perhaps applying for work at age 60 would not be viewed in the same discriminatory light as it is currently.

Next, I believe that longitudinal research is needed to follow older individuals who experience prolonged periods of unemployment. Interviewing individuals several times over an extended period would provide greater insight into the job seeking process and advance knowledge in relation to the amount of time spent in each stage of the job search process. Further, both physical and mental health could be assessed at various points in time to observe specific changes and relate them to their coinciding experiences with their search for employment. Thus, both long- and short-term health of older workers could be assessed in relation to experiences with age discrimination and unemployment.

Further research is also needed in relation to the newfound contradiction that has surfaced during my dissertation research. On the one hand, prior quantitative analyses have demonstrated that employers' attitudes toward older

workers have become more positive in recent years, yet, on the other hand, interviews with older workers suggest that age discrimination currently exists in the hiring process. While quantitative studies that document employers' attitudes toward older workers are growing, there is little research that examines employers' accounts of the hiring process. Therefore, qualitative interviews with employers would allow for greater insight into the meanings that they give to various experiences with older job candidates and provide a greater understanding of their attitudes toward older workers. It would also provide clarification in relation to whether employers' attitudes lead to the development of age-related hiring and retention practices and policies.

Finally, with respect to the older worker programs discussed throughout this dissertation – particularly in Chapter III – I feel that some of the negative experiences encountered by participants warrant a re-examination of these programs. Thus, future research is needed to more thoroughly assess how large an impact these experiences are having on older individuals' identities and whether in this respect the programs are hindering older workers' route to re-employment. Perhaps incorporating some of the positive aspects of these programs (e.g. skill updating) into more general employment services that do not segregate individuals by age is an avenue to consider. Furthermore, employment counsellors with specialized training in issues that pertain to older workers (which



need not be revealed to older workers themselves) located within more generalized agencies is also something worth contemplating. In this way, I feel that the function of older worker programs is questionable and may in fact hinder the job seeking process at a time when many older workers are already highly “discouraged” and vulnerable.

As a result of my findings related to the paradoxical nature of “older” worker programs and perceptions that age is a barrier in the job search process more generally, I conclude this dissertation by suggesting a re-conceptualization of the term “older” worker to one that better reflects the positive dimensions tied to aging and work. Thus, I suggest that the term “established workers” be used both in the scholarly literature and in relation to governmental definitions of workers aged 45 to 65. I suspect that the meaning associated with this new conceptualization will be more positive and thus be both personally and socially meaningful to individuals searching for work. As the baby boom cohort (born between 1947 and 1966) has succeeded in re-defining many other social and economic transformations (Foot & Stoffman, 1998), perhaps changes in attitudes and behaviours will also occur as this cohort moves through its “established” years.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**Interview Guide**

***Section One: Personal Information***

1. What is your age?
2. Where were you born?
3. Can you tell me a little bit about your family?  
(Probes: ethnic and/or religious background, marriage, children)
4. What is your educational background?  
(Probe: highest degree completed)

***Section Two: Employment Background***

5. Using this *card*, would you mind telling me which *personal* income category you fell into *before* you became unemployed (total *personal* income *before* taxes and deductions)? [categories on card (a) \$19,999 or less; (b) \$20,000 to \$39,999; (c) \$40,000 to \$59,999; (d) \$60,000 to \$79,999; (e) \$80,000 to \$99,999; or (f) \$100,000 or more]
6. Using this *card*, which income category do you fall into *since* you have been unemployed (total personal or family income *before* taxes and deductions)?

7. What are your *sources* of income since you have been unemployed?

(Probes: spouse – is he or she employed, pension, employment insurance, welfare, severance package)

8. Where were you working before you became unemployed?

(Probes: type of career, place of employment, full- or part-time work)

Additional Probes:

How long did you work in this position?

If less than 1 year, where did you work before this and for how long?

9. How did you become unemployed?

(Probes: voluntary or involuntary, early retirement package, company downsizing, health reasons, change of career, low job satisfaction)

10. How long have you been unemployed?

11. How long have you been actively looking for work?

12. What type of job are you looking for?

(Probes: position, same as previous, full- or part-time)

Additional Probe:

Would you accept a different job if offered to you?

(Probes: different position, lower salary, full-time, part-time, or contract position)

13. When was your last job interview? Can you tell me a little bit about the job interview?

*Section Three: Perceptions and Consequences of Age Discrimination*

14. Why do you feel you have been unable to find work?

(Probes: age, skills, economy – no jobs, discrimination)

15. How does searching for and being unable to find work make you feel?

16. Do you feel that you have faced any barriers to employment?

(Probes: discrimination related to age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, etc.)

Additional Probes:

Do you feel that you have ever been treated unfairly when looking for work (Probes: by recruiters, employment counsellors or potential employers)?

Did you ever feel that you were not hired because of your age?

Have you ever been told you were 'over-qualified'?

Do you feel you were treated unfairly because of higher costs to employers related to salary or benefits (Probes: found out a younger person was hired because they were less expensive, or told you would be too expensive to hire)?

How have these experiences made you feel?

Have you ever told anyone about these experiences and how they have made you feel (Probes: employment agency, government-related agency, therapist, friends, family)?

If *yes*, did anything happen as a result?

17. Have you ever had any negative experiences related to your age before you began your current job search?

(Probes: in your previous place of employment, related to promotions, related to training opportunities, related to day-to-day interactions)

Additional Probe:

How did these experiences make you feel?

18. Do you feel that the experiences you have encountered in your job search have affected your personal relationships?

(Probes: friends, family, spouse)

19. How would you describe your health since you have been unemployed?

(Probes: mental, physical, similar to before unemployed)

20. What do you miss most about being employed?

(Probes: social elements, work ethic, financial)

21. What is the main reason you are searching for work?

(Probes: financial, personal fulfillment, occupy time)

22. Have you had any financial problems since you have been unemployed?

23. Have you ever considered ending your job search and retiring early?

24. Do you have any retirement plans?

(Probes: at what age, what are they, have you made any financial preparations)

25. How do you feel about mandatory retirement?

***Section Four: Strategies Used to Gain Employment***

26. Have you ever participated in any training or re-training programs?

(Probes: at previous job, since being unemployed – résumé workshops, classes at employment centres)

If *yes*, how did you find out about these workshops? Did you enjoy them? What did they teach you about changing your résumé, interviewing, etc.?

27. Is there anything that you do *before* a job interview to help make a good impression?

(Probes: training on résumé writing and interview techniques, physical preparations – related to your appearance – new suit, hair cut or dye, etc., mental preparations)

If *yes*, what made you decide to do these preparations?

(Probes: advised by employment counsellors, recruiters, other employers, other individuals your age or personal decision)

If *yes*, do you feel that these preparations may have helped in your job search process?

28. Is there anything that you do *during* a job interview to help make a good impression?

(Probes: focus conversation on positive attributes, project a certain image of yourself, discuss ‘youthful’ topics of conversation)

If *yes*, what made you decide to do this?

(Probes: advised by employment counsellors, recruiters, other employers, other individuals your age or personal decision)

If *yes*, do you feel that these techniques may have helped in your job search process?

29. Are there any suggestions or advice that you would have for other individuals your age who are searching for employment?

30. Are there any suggestions you have for programs or services that could assist other individuals your age in their job search process?

31. Are there any topics that we have discussed that you would like to elaborate on or any areas that we may have missed that you would like to discuss?



**APPENDIX B**  
**Participant Recruitment**

<b>Participant Recruitment (n=30)</b>	<b>n</b>
Attendance at older worker programs	20
Flyers at older worker programs	4
Flyers at other employment agencies	0
Flyers at community centres	1
Flyers at community libraries	0
55+ newspaper	3
University website	0
Personal referrals	2

**APPENDIX C  
Recruitment Letter**

Ellie Berger  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Sociology  
McMaster University  
(416) 230-9990  
bergere@mcmaster.ca

I am a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at McMaster University. I am writing this letter to request your assistance in recruiting volunteers for my dissertation research. It is widely recognized that the Canadian population is aging and as a result, the number of older individuals in the work force is increasing rapidly. While employers may be aware of the transformations occurring in the labour force, they do not appear to be altering their behaviours concerning age discrimination in recruitment practices. The downsizing and involuntary early retirement trends of the 1990s have had the largest impact on older workers, individuals who take considerably longer than younger workers to find work when unemployed. Therefore, it is plausible that older individuals are being discriminated against in hiring practices. I anticipate that employers use a variety of subtle mechanisms to discriminate against older individuals in the recruitment process. Therefore, the purpose of my research is to gain a greater understanding of the consequences of age discrimination experienced when

seeking employment and the techniques used by older individuals to gain employment.

In order to conduct my research, I plan to interview 30 individuals between the ages of 45 and 65 who have been unemployed for three months or longer and are currently searching for work. I would like your permission to post the recruitment advertisement that I have left with you in order to obtain interested volunteers for my research. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (416) 230-9990 or [bergere@mcmaster.ca](mailto:bergere@mcmaster.ca).

Thank you,

Ellie Berger

APPENDIX D  
Recruitment Advertisement

Have you experienced difficulties finding  
*work* because of your *age*?

Volunteers are needed to participate in doctoral research that focuses on challenges encountered when seeking employment.

Participants must meet *all* of the following criteria:

- Currently searching for work
- Unemployed for 3 months or longer
- Between the ages of 45 and 65

The information you provide will be *strictly confidential* and will allow me to gain a greater understanding of the age-related barriers encountered when seeking employment.

If you or someone you know is interested in sharing your experiences, please contact:

**Ellie Berger**  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Sociology  
McMaster University  
(416) 230-9990  
bergere@mcmaster.ca

**APPENDIX E**  
**Newspaper Recruitment Advertisement**

**Have you experienced difficulties finding *work* because of your *age*?**

Volunteers are needed to participate in *confidential* doctoral research that focuses on age-related challenges encountered when seeking employment. Participants must be currently searching for work, unemployed for 3 months or longer, and between the ages of 45 and 65. If you or someone you know is interested in sharing your experiences, please contact:

Ellie Berger  
(416) 230-9990

**APPENDIX F**  
**Consent Form**

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Ellie Berger, from the Department of Sociology at McMaster University, Hamilton. The results from this research study will be used for my doctoral dissertation. I may be contacted at (416) 230-9990.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Carolyn Rosenthal at (905) 525-9140 extension 22517.

***Purpose of the Study***

It is widely recognized that the Canadian population is aging and as a result, the number of older individuals in the work force is increasing rapidly. While employers may be aware of the transformations occurring in the labour force, they do not appear to be altering their recruitment practices. The purpose of my research is to gain a greater understanding of the barriers encountered when seeking employment that may be attributed to age and the social-psychological consequences that may be experienced by job seekers as a result. To this end, I am interested in interviewing a number of individuals between the ages of 45 and 65 who have experienced difficulties finding work. Your firsthand accounts and experiences will help form the foundation for my doctoral dissertation, which will eventually be published in academic journals and presented at academic conferences.

**Procedures**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I would ask you to agree to participate in one interview that will last from one to two hours. You will be asked a series of questions designed to uncover the difficulties you have experienced when searching for work, such as “Do you feel that you have faced any barriers to employment?”; “Is there anything that you do *during* a job interview to help make a good impression?”; and “Are there any suggestions you have for programs or services that could assist other older individuals in their job search process?” Interviews will be tape-recorded. I also would like the permission to contact you by telephone after this interview for further clarification of information, if necessary. This follow-up call will last from five to thirty minutes, depending on the extent of clarification required.

If you would like to provide me with your address at the bottom of this consent form, I would be happy to mail you a summary of my research findings.

### **Potential Risks and Discomforts**

I am required by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB) to inform you of any potential risks or discomforts that may be experienced as a result of your participation in my research study. I feel that you would be the best person to evaluate whether you feel there are any social or psychological risks that may result from this interview. If at any time you feel this is occurring, please feel free to terminate this interview.

### **Potential Benefits to Participants and Society**

I anticipate that being given the opportunity to share your experiences may assist you psychologically in your job search process. Being able to openly discuss feelings and concerns is a useful tool for individuals encountering significant changes and challenges in their lives. It is possible that you may not feel any personal benefit from participating in this research, however, the information that you provide in this interview will help contribute to a greater understanding of problems experienced during the recruitment process that are related to age. Given that becoming an older worker is a certainty that most Canadians will face, research is needed to highlight the specific areas where employment barriers are occurring and suggest employer and government policies and practices for improvement. This will help diminish age-related challenges for older individuals who are seeking employment, as well as lead to older worker retention – an impending goal for the success of Canadian employers and the Canadian economy.

### **Payment for Participation**

If you agree to be interviewed for my research study, there is *no payment* for your participation. You are asked to participate on a voluntary basis.

### **Confidentiality**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. In concurrence with the MREB, I will

guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudo-names will be assigned to all information from this interview, which will be used in any publication or presentation of my findings. I anticipate that findings from my study will eventually be published in academic journals and presented at academic conferences. Only myself, a transcriber, and my supervisor will have access to the data (i.e. tape recordings and transcriptions), which will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. If you choose, you may review or edit the tape recordings at any point in time. Five years following the completion of my dissertation, all data will be destroyed.

### **Participation and Withdrawal**

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may exercise the option of removing your data from the study by telephoning the investigator at any point in time. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

### **Rights of Research Participants**

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:

MREB Secretariat  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street W., GH-306  
Hamilton, ON L8S 4L9

Telephone: 905-525-9140, ext. 23142  
E-mail: srebsec@mcmaster.ca  
Fax: 905-540-8019

### **Signature of Research Participant**

I understand the information provided for the study "Older Individuals' Quest for Employment" as described herein. My questions have been answered



to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Signature of Investigator**

In my judgment, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*Telephone Number and Address (for follow-up purposes)*

*Telephone Number*

\_\_\_\_\_

*Address*

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX G**  
**Sample Characteristics**

<b>Sample Characteristics (n=30)</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>Age</b>	
45-54	16
55-65	14
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	15
Male	15
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	16
Divorced	6
Widowed	2
Never Married	6
<b>Ethnic or Religious Background</b>	
Atheist or unspecified	16
Catholic	4
Protestant	4
Jewish	4
Buddhist	1
Muslim	1
<b>Country of Origin</b>	
Canada	14
Western Europe	4
Eastern Europe	3
United Kingdom	3
United States	2
India	2
Iran	1
Japan	1
<b>Education</b>	
Less than high school	2
High school degree	7
Certificate / diploma	2
College / university degree	19
<b>Personal Income</b>	
\$20,000 to \$39,999	2
\$40,000 to \$59,999	8
\$60,000 to \$79,999	4
\$80,000 to \$99,999	2
\$100,000 or more	5
Unknown	9
<b>Length of Time Unemployed</b>	
3 to 5 months	8
6 to 8 months	14
9 to 12 months	2
> 12 months	6

**APPENDIX H**  
**Occupational Background of Sample**

<b>Occupational Background of Sample (n=30)</b>	<b>n</b>
Administrative	6
Construction	1
Consultant	2
Education	1
Engineering	1
Executive	1
Finance	3
Food and service	1
Health care	3
Human resources	2
Lawyer	1
Mid-level management	4
Sales and marketing	3
Television producer	1