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Working identity in later life: the experience of employment and the labour market for older men

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Introduction

The paper presented here draws on the initial stages of a major project funded by European Social Fund which examines the experience of work and the labour market for older men aged 50 and over. Over the past three decades this group has been notable for its disengagement with paid work at a time when overall participation rates are rising. Whereas traditionally most men would typically work until they were in their 60s, this is now unusual. This paper asks questions as to why this might be the case, what the experience of work is for this group, what the barriers to work are and what forms of discrimination are faced inside and outside work.

The paper, and the larger project of which it forms part, aims at both the understanding of the experience of the labour market for this group as well as examining wider questions about identity and meaning of work. Fundamental to this approach is the use of work narrative to reveal how older workers view both the changing labour market and their position within it.

The paper itself will outline a number of issues arising from a comprehensive literature review. It will then briefly outline the research design. Finally it presents a number of emergent themes arising from a series of interviews with key actors in the field of age discrimination. However, it should be noted that these are tentative and exploratory ideas given that the research is still in its early stages and as such do not represent an attempt at systematic analysis or detailed findings.

Nature of the Problem

It is now largely uncontested that during the period from the early 1970s to the mid 1990s there has been a sharp rise in the worklessness of men aged over 50 (Gregg and Wadsworth, 1998; Campbell, 1999; PIU, 2000; Disney, 1999)¹. In 1974 over 93 percent of men in their 50s were in full-time employment; by 2000 this figure had fallen to just 77 per cent (Scales and Scase, 2000). There is also evidence that older people are exiting the labour market at progressively young ages (Barham, 2002; Campbell, 1999; Bone et al., 1992; Laczko and Phillipson, 1991) and planning for retirement much earlier than previous cohorts (Anderson et al., 2000).

Following Gregg and Wadsworth (1998) it is suggested that in order to understand the full range of experience that lays behind the catch-all term 'worklessness', this term needs to be unpacked. The most basic distinction that can be drawn is between those that are unemployed and those that are economically inactive. The central difference between unemployment and economic inactivity is whether someone is actively seeking work or not. As Gregg and Wadsworth(1998) note:

"[a]s soon as an inactive person engages in a job search they become unemployed...as soon as an unemployed person takes a break from job search they become inactive" (Online version, p.3)

It should be stressed from the outset that the rate of unemployment amongst older men during the last 25 years is largely inconsequential in terms of understanding these high levels of worklessness as unemployment for this group has since 1993

¹ In contrast Tinker (1997) and Unwin (2004) suggest that this decline has its origins in the 1950s.

been in constant decline² - closely mirroring national figures for all age groups (Ashdown, 2000). There are regional exceptions to this trend, most notably in London where a rise in unemployment is a major contributory factor to the worklessness amongst older men (Green and Owen, 1997). That being said, several authors have suggested that the true unemployment rate in many other areas has often been shrouded by a number of the unemployed being classed or classifying themselves as retired or inactive (Fieldhouse and Hollywood, 1999; Lambert, 2000).

It is within the economically inactive group, however, where older men's disengagement with the labour market is at its most pronounced. For much of the 1970s the rates of inactivity for men aged 50 and over remained consistently at around seven per cent (Gregg and Wadsworth, 1998). By 1984 this figure had risen markedly to 22.6 per cent, peaking at 28.5 per cent in 1995. Although it has declined slightly in recent times³ it still stood at 26.9 per cent in 2001 (Barham, 2002). (In contrast this period has seen a sizeable decrease in the economic inactivity rates of women in the same age group⁴ (Jones et al., 2003). Women's inactivity is concentrated within the prime age group of 25 to 49 rather than older workers, though even here there has been a rise in the labour market activity of women particularly among those with children under the age of two (Gregg and Wadsworth, 1998).)

Drawing on the current body of literature it can be seen that male inactivity has become a cause for concern, at least at the level of social policy, for three main reasons. The first of these relates to concerns over future labour supply. Demographic changes in the Britain since the mid-1970s have led to an increasingly ageing workforce⁵, a trend that is predicted to continue over the next 20 years

² Unemployment rates for those 45 years and over have consistently been lower than all other age groups (Jones et al., 2003).

³ For a discussion of the factors behind this recent trend see Disney and Hawkes (2003).

⁴ Unwin (2004) suggests that older women have also suffered a relative increase in inactivity as this group have not kept pace with the rising level of women's labour market participation more generally.

⁵ Barwell (2000) submits that this is primarily due to a combination of falling fertility rates ('baby bust') and a growth in post-compulsory education.

(Dixon, 2003)⁶. It is suggested that if older men continue to exit the labour market at the rates witnessed over the past three decades this may result in a potential labour supply shortage (Barham, 2002). The second area of concern highlights the fiscal consequences of early labour market exit. According to a number of commentators one of the main reasons for economic inactivity amongst older men is long-term sickness and disability⁷ (Barham, 2002; Gregg and Wadsworth, 1998; Unwin, 2004). Given this, a combination of increased social benefits and the loss of government revenue from income tax will increasingly place a strain on the public purse⁸ (PIU, 2000). A final set of arguments can be seen to key into the social exclusion debate. If, as already noted, older men are exiting the labour market through involuntary routes (sickness and disability, and redundancy) and by default living on social benefits they are unable to secure adequate pension provision or save for retirement. As a result they are likely to become both poor in retirement and socially excluded. In addition social exclusion may be further compounded by the loss of the social networks often associated with work (Barham, 2002; Gallie et al., 1994) and without the resources to help develop alternatives (Guillemard, 1986; Phillipson, 1987).

Why have older men stopped working

In an attempt to understand why older men have stopped working previous research has frequently categorised labour market exit as either voluntary/involuntary (for example Disney, 1999; Lissenburgh and Smeaton, 2003) or as responses to pull/push factors⁹ (Duncan, 2003). However, given the complexity of male economic inactivity these models may be too simplistic. Firstly, it can be suggested that these types of explanation focus predominantly on the structural features of the labour market while giving little attention to the role of individual agency. Secondly, the

⁶ It should be noted that this trend is somewhat lower in the UK than in many other OECD countries (OECD, 1998).

⁷ For example the 1997 LFS reported that almost two-thirds of inactive men cited ill health or disability as the primary reason (Gregg and Wadsworth, 1998).

⁸ It has been estimated that the combined loss to the Exchequer between the late 1970s and early 1990s is between £3 to 5 billion (PIU, 2000).

⁹ According to Duncan (2003) pull factors are those social policies which attract workers to leave economic activity whilst push factors relate to the demands of both the labour market and employers.

notions of voluntary and involuntary exit can often mask the rationale behind the decision to leave the labour market. For instance, those exiting the labour force to engage in informal care may typically be classified as examples of 'voluntary exit' although they are clearly doing so for objective reasons.

Conversely, Phillipson (1982) proposes an explanatory schema in which labour force exit is termed as either *stable withdrawal*, the subjective distancing from occupational life, or *unstable withdrawal* where external or objective pressures such as redundancy or ill health propel individuals into exiting the labour market¹⁰.

Objective Explanations

One of the most commonly recurring themes within the literature contends that the level of employment participation by older workers simply reflects the state of the economy or more specifically the relative 'tightness' of the labour market. The most developed version of this argument can be found in the work of Phillipson (1982) whose broadly Marxist analysis views older workers as a 'reserve army of labour' which can be easily be excluded from or drawn into the labour force during periods of recession or full employment respectively. In a more recent version of this thesis he suggests that older workers have been particularly affected by the increased competition for jobs brought about by the growing numbers of women participating in the labour market (Phillipson, 1993).

Similarly, the most frequent individual reason for economic inactivity relates to ill health and disability (Barham, 2002; Gregg and Wadsworth, 1998; Jones et al. 2003; Unwin, 2004). Between 1986 and 1998 the number of men citing this as their main reason for inactivity rose by 20 per cent (40-60 %) although this increase has been primarily concentrated among low-skilled¹¹ older men (Jones et al., 2003). Gregg and Wadsworth (1998) argue that employers may be raising the criteria for what constitutes a 'fit worker' rather than successive cohorts being less fit than the

¹⁰ Phillipson (1982) also considers a third position, *abrupt withdrawal* where little or no consideration is given to retirement. However, as this relates mainly to those of state retirement age it has not been included here.

¹¹ Low skilled relates to those with less than GCSE qualification.

previous ones, a position that is supported to some extent by Unwin's (2004) analysis of survey data showing that a number of this group wish to work.

A final objective explanation for why older men become inactive relates to increased informal caring responsibilities. Perhaps not unsurprisingly the caring responsibilities of both men and women peak for those 45 to 64 years of age¹². As Corti and Dex (1995) have shown using the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) male carers are five times more likely to have exited the labour market or moved to part-time employment than their counterparts without caring responsibilities.

Subjective Explanations

The next set of possible explanations is more sociological in definition. For both Bytheway (1986) and Tinker (1997) labour force withdrawal is connected to the way society views older people. In short they argue that older workers are coerced by a set of social values that hinge on the 'rights' of the young in respect to the jobs that are available. Whilst the 'lump of labour fallacy'¹³ has been used to show the flaw within this approach in economic terms it still may persist as a moral argument not least in the minds of older workers themselves.

Alternatively, a number of other authors have highlighted a weakening in the importance that older people attach to the concept of work. Gallie et al. (1998) and Charles and James (2003) have reported a consistent relationship between ageing and the decline in a commitment to employment. Similarly, Martin (1990) views early labour market exit amongst older workers as expressing empirically this demise in the work ethic.

Composite Explanations

A final type of explanation contains both subjective and objective forms and is predominantly concerned with the concept of early retirement. Although this practice

¹² Although it has been common to characterise informal care responsibilities as falling largely to women (for example Walker, 1983; Arber and Ginn, 1991), for the 50s and over age group men are just as likely as women to be carers (Corti and Dex, 1995; Mooney et al, 2002).

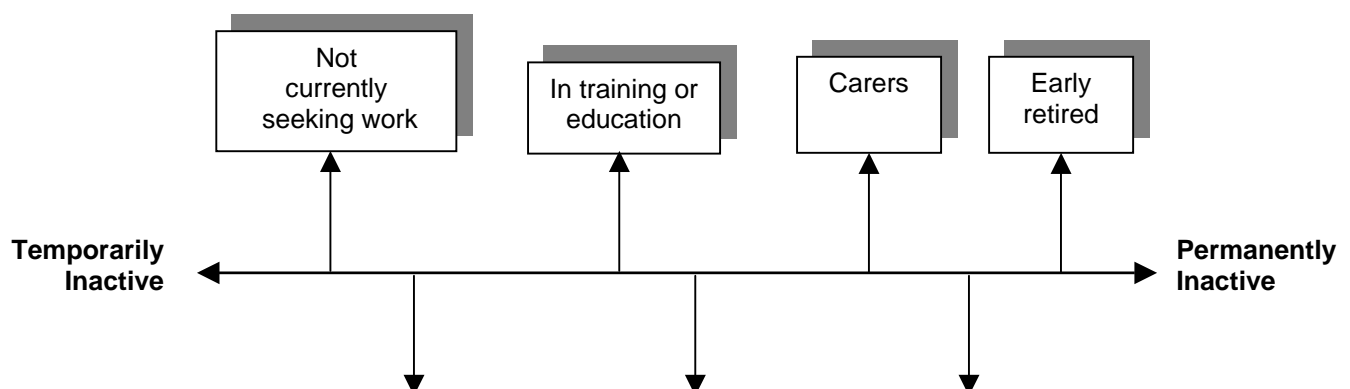
¹³ The lump of labour fallacy relates to the misplaced belief that there are a fixed number of jobs in the economy which can be exchanged between older and younger workers.

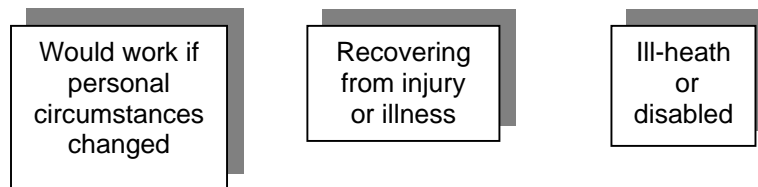
has been widespread it can be observed most frequently within two groups largely determined by socio-economic status (Undy, 2003), or what one commentator describes as the “*two nations in early retirement*” (Unwin, 2004, p.9). On the one hand older manual workers have suffered disproportionately from the process of economic restructuring. Not only was their employment heavily concentrated within the declining sectors such as manufacturing and construction but also they were unduly targeted by the methods used to achieve labour force reduction. Moreover, in many cases their skills and qualifications were either lower than those of the prime age group or non-transferable to other types of employment (Fieldhouse and Hollywood, 1999). On the other hand, those employed in professional and managerial occupations are increasing leaving the labour market to enjoy leisure and other activities funded by ‘generous’ occupational and private pension schemes (Bone et al., 1992; Undy, 2003). In short this group choose retirement as an alternative to work (Phillipson, 1993).

Barriers to labour market participation

There are a number of differing barriers that appear to prevent the labour market participation of older men. On the one hand there are those factors that influence individuals or groups of men which as can be seen from figure 1 range from temporary or short-term inactivity to those explaining long-term or permanent exit from labour market activity. Between these two extremes there are a number of differing types of inactivity, each with a greater or lesser propensity to re-enter the labour market.

Figure 1. A typology of inactivity





Source: Adapted from Gregg and Wadsworth (1998) and Jones et al. (2003)

On the other hand there are several other more general barriers that may prevent the shift from inactivity to employment. The first of these connects to the relationship between employability and educational attainment. As Jones et al. (2003) remind us an inactive man qualified to A-level and above is twice as likely to gain employment within a year as someone without GCSEs (Jones et al., 2003). This, it has been argued has affected older workers to a greater degree as the educational level of this cohort is less than the prime age group (Ibid.) and/or the demand for semi-skilled and unskilled workers has fallen (Dibden and Hibbett, 1993). The second issue relates to the 'discouraged worker effect' -the belief held by older workers that because there exists no paid employment for them they should stop looking¹⁴. Although the impact of this effect nationally is believed to have declined dramatically from fourteen per cent in 1984 to one per cent in 2002 (Jones et al., 2003) its effect within regional and local labour markets is unclear.

The final barrier is that of age discrimination. In general survey evidence suggests that around 20 to 25 per cent of all people have experienced age discrimination. However, when the focus shifts to older workers these figures appear to be reduced significantly. For instance, the Family and Working Lives Survey (FWLS) reported that just over seven per cent of men and women in the 50 to 54 age group felt that they had failed to get jobs because they were too old (McKay, 1998). This figure declined for both the 55 to 59 and 60 to 64 age groups; however, it was greater for men by around three and one-and-a-half percentage points respectively¹⁵ (Ibid.). It is worth noting that McKay's (1998) analysis of the FWLS largely views the issue of age discrimination as one of entry into employment rather than one affecting older

¹⁴ Barham (2002) suggests that this is one reason why male inactivity rates have risen.

¹⁵ Around three-fifths of those aged 45-69 who believed that they had been discriminated against were men (McKay, 1998).

workers whilst in employment (i.e. promotion and transfers)¹⁶. This view could be seen to be highly contentious given that the selection of older workers for redundancy is in itself is highly discriminatory. The extent to which these statistics will be reduced by the introduction of age discrimination legislation in October 2006 remains to be seen. However, two points relating to this legislation need to be made. First, it is worth remembering that a number of studies have revealed that legislation may not necessarily improve the participation rates of older workers (Laczko and Phillipson, 1990; Whitting et al., 1995). Even within those studies that have been more positive towards the effects of legislation (Hornstein, 2001) there is little indication that the attitudes of employers have altered¹⁷. Hornstein (2001) suggests that attitudes may only change within the context of wider social justice and where all parties are aware of "...*their obligations and rights*" (p.2). Alternatively, Ashdown (2000) argues that employers are far more likely to respond to labour shortages caused by the demographic shift than increased regulatory pressures, a position shared by the Institute of Directors (Duncan, 2003). Secondly, the figures quoted from the FWLS (McKay, 1998) appear to suggest that age discrimination may in itself not be the primary cause of worklessness amongst older men and therefore the impact of any legal intervention may be minimal. However, this analysis is problematic. Although it shows age discrimination may be less of a issue for older workers than for workers in general, this is based on a too narrow definition - both in terms of form and content - of what constitutes discrimination. As a result it raises important questions regarding the role of age discrimination in the inactivity of older men and the effectiveness of legislation in reducing their inactivity.

Older Workers in Employment

Whilst the discussion up to now has focused on the economically inactive, a majority of older people do play a role in the labour market. However, their participation can be seen to differ from other workers in a number of important ways. First, they are less likely than younger workers to become unemployed but once unemployed find it

¹⁶ McKay's (1998) work is based on data from the FWLS so this view may say more about the variables contained within the dataset than the 'true' level of age discrimination.

¹⁷ The studies by Laczko and Phillipson (1990), Whitting et al. (1995) and Hornstein (2001) draw on international comparisons of countries with established age discrimination legislation.

harder to return to employment and become more prone to inactivity (Ashdown, 2000). Secondly, older workers have lower patterns of mobility, both in terms of the number of jobs and geographical location of employment (Dixon, 2003). Thirdly, older workers engage in formal education and workplace training less often than other workers (McKay, 1998). Dibden and Hibbett (1993) have shown that this may be because they are less likely to be offered these opportunities. Fourthly, while older workers can be found across a wide range of sectors and industries older men are more prone to employment as labourers, porters, road-sweepers and in clerical and craft occupations (McKay, 1998). Fifthly, older workers are more likely to work part-time, although the patterns of women and men differ¹⁸. For women the propensity to engage in part-time work rises with age however, for men it is only within those aged 60-64 where a significant increase can be seen (Tillsley, 1995). It is also the case that for men part-time working is more common in the 16-24 age group (Ibid.). Nonetheless, the problem with this largely descriptive data is that it does not reveal whether part-time working is through choice or necessity. Finally, older workers are more likely to be self-employed (Tinker, 1997) although this appears not to be as a direct result of worklessness. As McKay's (1998) analysis of the Labour Force Survey shows many of them have been self-employed for a considerable time whilst only seven per cent cited this type of employment as an alternative to unemployment.

Gaps in the Literature

One of the most significant gaps in the current body of work relates to what Itzin and Phillipson (1993) referred to as 'double jeopardy' - the relationship between age and other forms of discrimination. Whilst there are emerging bodies of literature relating to gender and social class, and to a far lesser extent religion there is relatively little research concerning the saliency of ethnicity for the experiences of older people. The few studies that do exist (for example Afhars et al., 2003; Blakemore and Boneham, 1993; Wray, 2003a, 2003b) appear to have little to say regarding male labour market participation. Wray (2003b), for example, has explored the

¹⁸ It should be noted that women work part-time more frequently than men do across the whole life cycle (Tillsley, 1995).

relationship between ageing, gender and ethnicity. But while useful in terms of providing in-depth qualitative data and some discussion of labour market issues, in this study the discussion of gender relates solely to women.

Research Design

The project is based on a triangulated research design encompassing both qualitative and quantitative methods as well as cross sectional and longitudinal approaches. It also contains a comparative element which examines the role of the local labour markets - two contrasting urban areas in the UK, London and Nottingham.

Qualitative Approach

The qualitative stage of the research is to be conducted in two phases and is based on a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting around 90 minutes. Participants for both phases are selected by utilising a purposive sampling strategy.

The first phase consists of 15 interviews with key actors from organisations representing the main social partners. These fall into four categories; government agencies, employers' federations and associations, trade unions and organisations who 'speak' for those over 50 years of age. Key actors in this case have been defined as those individuals within the selected organisations who hold specialist knowledge in the field of age and labour market issues.

The second phase focuses on the employment experiences of 40 older men, aged 50 or over. They will be interviewed twice during the life of the project at a nine-month interval. The participants will be drawn from two contrasting labour markets- London and Nottingham- and include individuals from differing ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The sample will be sub-divided in each location into two groups: the first containing men currently in employment, and the second consisting of those who are inactive and unemployed.

The emphasis within this second tranche of interviews is to understand the complexity of the changing labour market situations that older men now find themselves in particularly with the context of the wide change to the nature of work. Furthermore we are attempting to capture how this group make sense of these changes and the extent to which they have had to re-evaluate their situation in the light of the transformation of work over the last two decades.

Quantitative Approach

Discrimination against older men in the labour markets of industrialised countries will be studied using Panel Data Sets from United Kingdom and Sweden. Panels in both countries cover periods between 1990 and 2000. Both Marxist and Classical models will be utilised in the analysis.

Theoretical Framework

The Marxist 'reserve army' theory of analysis will be used for the analysis of unemployment, and discrimination models for the examination of age, gender and ethnic differences will be applied. As competing models, we are also planning to estimate relationships using classical models which study unemployment as a transitory state in the market-based equilibrium. Models for analysis of discrimination of older men will also include versions of the Marxist and Classical theories concerning new imperialism: Neo Liberal Globalisation. Again, both theoretical approaches provide different analysis for the development of capitalism since the 1980s. The goal of full employment in industrialised countries after the Second World War gave way to concerns over inflation during this period. The number of unemployed individuals increased drastically which led to a higher risk of unemployment for older people, women, ethnic groups and the disabled.

Longitudinal Data Sets

For the United Kingdom the British Household Panel Data (BHPD) set and the Labour Force Surveys (LFS) will be used. As a first step, we will check whether or not BHPD provides national averages by comparing the results obtained from BHPD with LFS. For Sweden the Longitudinal Individual Data (LINDA) is to be utilised. This is a register dataset and 10 percent of all immigrants and 1 percent of all Swedes can be followed for the period 1990-2000.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive Analysis: The first analysis will be done using BHPD set for United Kingdom. Both men and women 50 age and over will be followed during the panel period.

Explanatory Analysis: Depending on the descriptive analysis done above, the more concrete working hypotheses will be defined and tested in this step.

Emergent Themes – key actors

As noted at the outset of this paper the reflections presented in this section are speculative, incomplete and in no way represents an attempt at systematic analysis. Rather it highlights a number of important issues and concerns held by the key players within the current policy debate around age discrimination and thus only reports on phase one of the qualitative stage of the research.

The first of these relates to whether age discrimination is best curtailed by regulatory measures or left either to the market or voluntary codes of practice - in short the voluntarism vs. regulation debate. Our data would suggest that this terrain has now shifted somewhat. The key question would appear not to be whether age discrimination should be regulated against but how and what form this process should take. Significantly organisations with an explicit free-market agenda such as the Confederation of British Industry and the Employers Forum on Age now accept that regulation is necessary. There is a sense of resignation, - having lost the debate over regulation these organisations are now concerned primarily with shaping it to provide the least prescriptive outcome - in other words a process of damage limitation.

Within the 'regulation debate' more generally there exists a continuum of positions ranging from a prescriptive ceiling of rights to what can be described as a 'regulated free market' based on a floor of rights. However, in terms of the proposed legislation this debate is far from settled.

The second theme concerns the issue of the continuing existence of a state retirement age and thus provides an illustration of prescription and a regulated free-market debate. It should be noted that here it is possible to observe divisions not only between social partners but also within them.

The regulated free market approach appears on one level to be based on a set of paternalistic assumptions which believe that a prescriptive legislation may harm the very people it aims to protect. However, implicit within this concern is the fact that many employers are ill-prepared to manage the end of a working life without the certainty of a state retirement age. In other words, without a state retirement age employers would be left to manage older workers' exit through performance and competency assessment, with systems that are either non-existent or lack the sophistication to avoid dismissal as the inevitable consequence of old age. Importantly, this issue appears to reveal a genuine point of conflict with the current legislative debate which is often presented as one characterised by consensus.

The third theme focuses on the impact and relationship of age to the other spheres of equality and diversity. Primarily our concern here has been to examine the sensitivity of the participants towards the concept of double jeopardy and in particular the problems faced by older men who are members of an ethnic minority. Whilst all those interviewed accepted the existence of 'double jeopardy' in terms of age and ethnic background, there appears to be little evidence that these organisations are either commissioning research or implementing policy measures to address it.

A number of participants have also suggested there may be a contradiction within age itself. In short, the over-emphasis on older workers may decrease the employment opportunities of the young. For example, depicting the over-50s as reliable, efficient and knowledgeable workers implies that younger workers may in fact possess the opposite qualities. This has led some organisations to argue for age invisibility, hence in theory avoiding the setting off of one age group against another.

A fourth and final theme relates to the relationship between the key actors and older men themselves. To some extent all of the organisations claim to have the best interest of older men at heart, either as direct representative bodies such as trade

unions and elder groups or the paternalistic assumptions of employers' associations and government. The precise nature of these interests, however, is at this stage unclear. This in part is result of not only contradictory positions between organisations but also within organisations themselves.

It can therefore be suggested that in order to illuminate the needs of older men in relation to the labour market a deeper and more sociologically focused understanding of the life and work histories of older men themselves is required.

Summary and Conclusions

It is clear that, despite a recent decline, older male economic inactivity is still a significant issue. Whilst older men have continued to exit the labour market for numerous reasons, it can be suggested that these are usefully understood as either objective or subjective in character. Similarly there are a number of complex barriers limiting increased labour market participation for these men which include factors relating to personal circumstances and wider labour market issues. This in itself raises two possible questions – one, that discrimination is just one of many barriers older men face in relation to labour market participation; or two, discrimination needs to be viewed in its broadest sense to encompass issues around social justice.

The project discussed within this paper also raises two further issues. Firstly, research around the concept of double jeopardy needs to be expanded to include an appreciation of the impact of age on ethnicity and visa-versa. Without an understanding it can be suggested that what we know represents only a partial view of how labour market discriminations work and thus how their negative effects can be ameliorated. Secondly, the emergent themes presented here indicate that there is no clear picture of how best to facilitate the needs of older workers. Given this, research concerning age discrimination and labour market participation clearly requires the insight of how older workers themselves understand the issues raised within this paper.

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