PROFESSIONAL AGING?

A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF THE DOINGS OF AGE EMPLOYED BY CONTEMPORARY SWEDISH PROFESSIONALS

ELIN HUNGER AND ANNI-MARIA LOUKASMÄKI

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Abstract: This thesis departs from a problematization of how and why certain age categories implicitly are associated with 'trouble' and aims to contribute to the current body of research on ages and aging in professional and working life. This is done through the adoption of a critical epistemology and a moderately constructionist ontology that allow for questioning and unpacking of taken-for-granted assumptions on age. Such unpacking is achieved by answering the research question: How is age done in accounts of professional life? Thus, drawing on a qualitative empirical study where 21 Swedish professionals – of different genders and chronological ages, working in nine different organizations – accounted for their working lives in thematic interviews, the study employs critical discourse analysis incorporating the notion of subject positioning in its aim to unpack what otherwise might pass as 'natural'. Leveraging the concept of chrononormativity, the analysis shows that the interviewed professionals do age within and through a developmental discourse on career, a discourse on maturity and a (gendering) discourse on competence. Although the participants also drew on a critical discourse recognizing chronological norms, they were still not able to resist them. In conclusion, it is argued that the doings of age are characterized by constrained agency; the participants mostly did their age when they found themselves interpellated into subject positions deviating from the 'ageless' norm.

Key words: Age; agency; chrononormativity; critical discourse analysis; gender; subject position.

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Cover art: 'Self-presentation' courtesy of one of the research participants contributing to this study – *thank you for letting us use it in print!*

Karin, thank you for always helping us see what we didn't know we had said.

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Table 1: Central concepts and how they are used

Concept	Definition
Agency	Refers to the individual's (that is, subject's) ability to engage in critical reflection and (to a lesser or greater extent) exercise choice when occupying a certain *subject position* (see below) (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2012; Kuhn, 2009; Törrönen, 2011).
Chronological age	Refers to what is commonly regarded as 'age', i.e. the number of years that has passed since a person was born (Cleveland and Hanscom, 2017).
Chrononormativity	Refers to (heteronormative) "ideas about the 'right' time for particular life stages surrounding partnering, parenting (…) career progression, promotions and flexible working" (Riach et al., 2014: 1678).
Discourse (count noun; e.g., a discourse, the discourses)	As a count noun *discourse* refers to a "[w]ay of signifying experience from a particular perspective" that is, discourse brings meaning into social life (Fairclough, 1993: 96). Discourses are associated with power; they determine what 'make sense' to say – and what does not (Fairclough, 2010).
Discursive practice	Refers to the meaning Fairclough (1993) ascribes the term; Fairclough uses the term *discursive practice* the way many other scholars use 'discourses' in order to underscore that discourse entails action. For example: "societies and particular institutions and domains within them sustain a variety of coexisting, contrasting and often competing discursive practices [discourses]" (Fairclough, 1993: 92).
Subject position	Refers to the position that is offered (or forced onto) to a subject (that is, an individual) in *discursive events* ('instances' of language use [Fairclough, 2010]); since society is characterized by a plurality of discourses, a person inhabits several subject positions simultaneously, which implies that the subject is somewhat fragmented and unstable (Törrönen, 2001).

1. Introduction

There are not many things in life that are certain, but one thing is: if we live, we age. Hence, one could argue that *aging* is one of few universal human experiences. Perhaps this is why marketers and media figures never seem to grow tired of feeding us with ideas of what to think of and do with our inescapably aging bodies (see e.g., Featherstone, 1991; Wray, 2018) and why medical scientists' hunt for a pill that could slow down aging processes (Janssens et al., 2019) is considered news-worthy (Nyheterna TV4, 2019). However, the stories of our lives do not only affect our (own) bodies: social relations, jurisdictions, national population compositions and even the world economy are put in relation to changes in human longevity within public discourse (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; FitzGerald et al., 2017). And, we *are* getting older; according to the United Nation's Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2017) the 'ageing population' – using the UN's definition, people being at least 60 years old – will more than double by year 2050, when the group is forecasted to include more than 2.1 billion people worldwide. In fact, the very shape in which the world population is visually represented is changing; what used to be depicted as an age pyramid, has turned into an age dome (The Economist, 2014). This holds true for contemporary Sweden as well (Statistics Sweden, 2018), where parliament recently opted for incremental delayal of early retirement, from the age of 61 to 64 years (Swedish Pensions Agency, 2019). Hence, from 2023 onward most people are expected to work until they are 69 years old and at the time of writing, we, the authors of this thesis, are expected to work until we reach the age of 70 (Swedish Pensions Agency, 2018).

The fact that Swedish public discourse treats current demographic shifts as a legitimate cause for concern (The National Institute of Economic Research, 2019), mirrors the situation in several other developed countries, where requests to disarm the "demographic time bomb" (Riach and Kelly, 2015: 290) are commonplace (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Statistics Sweden, 2019b). One answer to such calls can be found within the practitioner management literature, that favors narratives of supposedly homogenous 'generations' and – consequently – claims that there is a need for facilitation in 'intergenerational' organizational encounters (Howe and Strauss, 2007; Pritchard and Whiting, 2014; Thomas et al., 2014). Also, tendencies in the labor market indicate that 'being of working age' not necessarily is synonymous to being 'employable', but that individuals of certain (troublesome) ages must distinguish themselves from their cohorts; that youth unemployment is higher than unemployment in other age groups (Akademikernas A-kassa, 2019; Statistics Sweden, 2019a) suggests that 'young' individuals must qualify as 'fresh' rather than 'inexperienced', while the increased risk of encountering discriminating practices that 'older' individuals

run[1] indicates a presence of demarcation practices separating those identified as 'experienced' from those perceived to be 'outdated'.

Taking an interest in these matters, we conducted a literature review of what social science research has to say about age in relation to organizations and working professionals. What we found was that most attempts to discuss aging failed in problematizing the assumptions underlying definitions of 'young' and 'old' (see e.g., Dello Russo et al., 2017) and that age typically has been studied as 'old age' and/or as a 'problem' (Katz, 2005; Thomas et al., 2014). On the other hand, it turned out that studies of other issues tend to be 'age blind' (Niemistö, 2016) and that the few studies that were looking into aging more broadly focused on individuals *looking for* employment (see e.g., Ainsworth, 2002; Ainsworth and Hardy, 2007), rather than *working* individuals. Consequently, we came to the same conclusion as Spedale (2019) recently did: that there is a need for further studies of age (inequality) at work, if we are to push theory development on age(ing) forward. Drawing inspiration from language-oriented research methods, aimed at unpacking the "objects of research" that other disciplines take for granted (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004: 226), we hence decided to engage with what Fairclough (2010) labels 'positive critique', or critical analysis aiming to explore possibilities. In other words, we decided to explore age as a social process by looking in to how professionals of *a variety of ages* 'do' when they socially and discursively produce age.

Problem formulation

This thesis aims to unpack taken-for-granted ideas about age and shed light on ways in which 'age is done' by working Swedish professionals. This is achieved by answering the research question: How is age done in accounts of professional life?

Disposition

This thesis is structured as follows: first, we present our literature review on age in organizations and among professionals, as well as show how our research question addresses taken-for-granted assumptions of professional age that thus far have been overlooked. Second, we introduce critical discourse analysis and subject positioning, and account for how the theories contribute to an analysis aiming to unpack ideas and concepts that otherwise might pass as 'natural'. Third, we give a detailed account for how the research was carried out in the methodological chapter, and this is followed by a presentation of our empirical findings. Fourth, and lastly, we analyze the empirical material and land in a conclusion, which is used to discuss our contribution as well as limitations and implications for further research.

[1] This holds even in such instances where 'older' individuals have extensive experience in their field (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; DO, 2011, 2019; Malm, 2011) and highly educated professionals are forecasted to be in deficit in the upcoming years (IZA Institute of Labor Economics, 2019), although reports on such 'deficit' tend to assume that professionals are 'young'.

2. Literature review of ageing in organizations and among professionals

We find people of many different chronological ages in contemporary organizations: in Sweden, it is possible to enter a full-time employment at the age of 16 (Barnombudsmannen, 2015) and one is entitled to stay in one's position until the age of 67 (SFS 1982:80). Considering the wide range of ages covered by this span and the fact that all individuals are assumed to 'be of a certain age' – as the common question 'how old are you?' presumes – one might assume that there would be extensive literature on the subject matter. That is not the case, however: aging generally goes unnoticed in organization studies (Niemistö, 2016) and most existing studies revolve around 'old age' rather than *ages* in general (Hales and Riach, 2017; Heilmann, 2017; Parry and McCarthy, 2017; Thomas et al., 2014). The interest in the old employee might stem from the societal (di)stress some argue that groups of aging citizens, sometimes referred to as 'baby boomers', create in the labor market (see e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 2017; Bergman, 2018; Katz, 2005). However, it could also be a result of influence from the gerontological research tradition (which has focused on old adults) (Hales and Riach, 2017), or be an outcome of the sensitized approach to power structures (e.g., those causing age discrimination towards older people [Do, 2011, 2019]) that is typical for critical social research (Fairclough, 2010).

When research on age and employment has received attention in fields such as social and critical gerontology, sociology, social policy and psychology (see e.g., Binstock and George, 2006; Hales and Riach, 2017; Parry and McCarthy, 2017) investigations have typically scrutinized retirement, health and policy issues (see e.g., Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Binstock and George, 2006; Katz, 2005). There is notably less research focusing on 'young employees' (Furlong, 2009; Thomas et al., 2014) and although studies of young employees and generations exist, age is rarely treated as a central attribute (Thomas et al., 2014). Rather, such studies tend to explore issues such as young employees' role adaption in new workplaces (Coupland, 2001) or junior employees' discursive positioning in field specific professionalized power structures (Kuhn, 2009). Youth and young adulthood studies, on the other hand, has evolved the other way around: there has not been an interest in young employees, but in broader phenomena like youth consumer culture, adulthood transitioning, education and youth unemployment (see e.g., Furlong, 2009).

(Criticized) Conceptualizations

Although alternative conceptualizations and age measures have started to gain traction, and age now is being studied from social, functional, physical, subjective and generational perspectives (Cleveland and Hanscom, 2017; Ulrick, 2017), chronological understandings of age are still dominating – in aging studies and elsewhere (Barak, 1987; Cleveland and Hanscom, 2017; Ulrick, 2017). A chronological conceptualization implicates that age is measured in years and understood as a "general marker of becoming 'older'" (Cleveland and Hanscom, 2017: 28). Research adhering to the first perspective mentioned above, studies of social age, try to grasp how societal norms affect individual perceptions of age in relation to life progress

– whether people feel like they are 'on time', or not (Cleveland and Hanscom, 2017). The normative aspects of such conceptualizations have been criticized by Riach and co-authors (2014) who relate the tendency to *chrononormativity* (Freeman, 2010), that is, heteronormative "ideas about the 'right' time for particular life stages" (Riach et al., 2014: 1678), and claim that such normativity makes us expect explanations from those who cannot or do not want to follow the norm. Also, Riach and Cutcher (2014: 784) concluded that "'social aging' [rather should be understood as an] organizational phenomenon whereby the lived experience of aging at work is more dependent on cultural norms than chronological benchmarks."

Studies of functional age, on the other hand, expect that and investigate how variations in physical health, performance and capabilities evolve during people's working lives (Ulrick, 2017), and the issue of how people feel compared to their chronological age is investigated by scholars studying subjective age (Goldsmith and Heiens, 1992). In one such study, Akkermans et al. (2016) found that employees' motivation to continue working for their organization was unrelated to chronological age, hence suggesting that researchers should operationalize subjective age rather than chronological ditto in studies of employee motivation. In the practitioner-oriented literature, however, it is rather generational differences that make a popular topic (Thomas et al., 2014). A generation is commonly defined as a "group that shares birth years, age, location and significant life events at critical development stages" (Kupperschimidt, 2000: 66). According to Niemistö et al. (2016), the 'major life events' that generations are expected to have in common might include wars, major political events, changes in family and work patterns, and new technologies. Nonetheless, generational approaches have a tendency to group people into large cohorts and assume that such groups share the same 'values' (see e.g., Howe and Strauss, 2007; Kupperschimidt, 2000; Laird et al., 2015), although there is research showing that such simplification might cause more confusion than explanatory power, and that it downplays intragenerational differences (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014). Since many such studies also fail to distinguish between age and generation, it is also hard to argue that differences among groups stem from generational differences alone (Parry and Urwin, 2011).

'Manageable' age

Due to the manifold of ages present in contemporary organizations, some have further argued that we need age management (see e.g., Brooke and Taylor, 2005), which is an umbrella term for all human resource practices (such as training, career development and recruiting) that explicitly take employee age in account (Ilmarinen [2006], as referenced in Heilman, 2017). The aims of such practices are that the individual should be able to reach her personal and work-related goals, perform her tasks in a safe and healthy manner (Ilmarinen [2006], as referenced in Heilman, 2017) and that knowledge should be passed on when senior employees leave the organization (Wikström et al., 2018).

A concept closely related to age management is age diversity (see e.g., Backes-Gellner and Veen, 2013; Dello Russo et al., 2016; Scheuer and Loughlin, 2019; Seong et al., 2018). Examples of age diversity studies are Scheuer and Loughlin's (2019) research on how trust and status impact the ability to capitalize

on age diversity in teams, and Seong et al.'s (2018) and Dello Russo et al.'s (2016) respective studies of what leadership styles fit age diverse groups or older employees best. Based on the findings from the latter of those studies, Dello Russo et al. (2016: 779) argue that older employees might appreciate a coaching leadership style even more than young employees would, since they do not "expect to be target of developmental efforts." Concludingly, the idea behind age (diversity) management is that people of different ages are inherently different and therefore should be managed accordingly, hence implying an essentialized perspective on age. Hales and Riach (2017: 116) argue that the consequence of such a line of reasoning is that 'the diverse' is assumed to be manifested in, for example, physical appearances and that this leads to the presumption that "those who share some 'diverse' characteristics may be subject to the same experiences." Such an interpretation lay closely to the definition of age stereotypes: when people are categorized under different age labels due to presumed homogeneity (Ulrick, 2017). However, assumptions regarding the young and old can have negative as well as positive connotations (Ulrick, 2017); studies on age stereotypes have shown that individuals might gain as well as loose when being associated with a certain age group (Dordoni and Argento, 2015). A positive association people tend to make with older age is the one of 'being experienced', an attribute that tends to be valued in organizations as well among individuals (Spedale, 2019; Ulrick, 2017). However, experience and maturity have also been associated with 'being resistant to change' and it has been argued that there is a systematic bias against experienced individuals in organizations (Brooke and Taylor, 2005; Spedale, 2019). Hence, experienced (and/or old) people are often depicted as uninterested in career development, and as less trusting in general (Ng and Feldman, 2012). On the other hand, those who are identified as young employees are rather associated with 'freshness' and adaptability, characteristics that some scholars relate to "essentialist typologies of successful organizations" (Kelly and Riach, 2015: 298). Nonetheless, neither young nor old escape the stereotypes that the business literature has reserved for young as well as old employees, when it (re)presents them as "inadequate and troublesome" (Scheuer and Mills, 2017: 56). In sum, the age management perspective takes a normative stance on how to manage employees of different ages to enhance company performance.

Age(ing)

In depth review of current studies of age further indicates the presence of another challenge, namely that terms such as old and young easily escape definition: in some studies, the young employee is defined as under 25 years old (Blanchflower and Olwald, 2009; Duncan and Loretto, 2004) and in others under 35 (Patel et al., 2019); the old employee might be over 45 years (Duncan and Loretto, 2004; Handy and Davy, 2007), or more than 55 years (Cook and Rougette, 2017). Andrews (1999: 303) even argues that a distinction between young and old is inappropriate, since "[a]nything which involves a transformation – of which ageing is the epitome – does not, by definition, have clearly distinct beginnings and endings." Hence, some researchers promote the concept of 'agelessness' (Twigg, 2007), but, as Andrews (1999) argues, the term is only used to eliminate old age – not e.g., infancy or youth – and could therefore be considered to

be discriminatory since it eliminates the value of the experiences that come with aging. Experiences that may, in fact, be one of the (only) good things that come with age (Andrews, 1999).

A cousin of agelessness is the concept of 'successful ageing', often defined as healthy, productive and vital ageing (Cleveland and Hanscom, 2017). The concept has been criticized by Thomas et al. (2014), who argue that it shifts societal responsibility onto the individual. Indeed, a concept such as successful ageing inevitably implies that the individual risk being treated as accountable for her *un*successful aging, and it has been shown that everything from declining health to visual signs of old age are joined under the umbrella (Andwers, 1999; Katz, 2005; Thomas et al., 2014). In fact, the un/successful ageing dualism is part of what legitimizes the global market for anti-aging products, which by its mere existence tells us that we must rectify any emerging signs of our aging (Featherstone, 1991; Katz, 2005). Such a view shares similarities with perspectives that treat aging as something biological and as "something that happens *to* the body" (Hales and Riach, 2017: 115, emphasis in original) and which have furthered a medicalized view on aging, within which the body has been turned into the central determinant of age and hence into something that could (Hales and Riach, 2017) and should be fixed (Featherstone, 1991). Ideas of such 'bodily management' have further been shown to be gendered: women exhibiting visible markers of ageing (for example, grey hair or wrinkles) run the risk of becoming 'socially invisible', which further enhance the 'need' to maintain a youthful appearance (Clark and Griffin, 2008).

Lastly, studies of 'idealized bodies' in executive search have shown that shifts in bodily norms continuously shrink individual space through augmented demands (Meriläinen et al., 2015). That is, a 'fit' body has become an increasingly important attribute in managerial positions (Johansson et al., 2017; Riach and Cutcher, 2014), and even more so in professions where bodies regularly are treated as organizational artifacts (Ainsworth and Cutcher, 2008; Hancock and Tyler, 2000). This has been shown to be the case for female flight attendants (Hancock and Tyler, 2000) and female television hosts (Spedale et al., 2014); in both cases, women were rejected employment because they were considered too old to be the 'faces' of their respective organizations.

Age(ing) and other social categories

As already hinted towards in this chapter, *ageism*, which WHO (2019) defines as "stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age" has often been found to be gendered: women face more discrimination than men when they are identified as individuals of old age (Duncan and Loretto, 2004; Irni, 2009) and run an increased risk of encountering social and physical invisibility if they 'lose' their youthful appearance (Clarke and Griffin, 2008). Female employees have also been found to be perceived as older than their male peers of similar age (Spedale et al., 2014), which in turn restrict their career possibilities if they are working in ageist organizations (Duncan and Loretto, 2004). Some scholars even argue that older women go unnoticed in public discussions of ageing (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2007).

Interconnectedness (or intersectionality, see e.g., Carbado et al., 2013) between class and age have not been considered to the same extent as gender, although Riach and Cutcher's (2014) study of how

financial traders negotiated ageing at work by claiming certain forms of masculinity and class belongingness, and Zanoni's (2011) study of age, gender and class in a work setting make two exceptions. Zanoni found that those perceived as either old, disabled or female were discursively constructed as less productive. However, she also found that this heterogeneous group could use their disadvantaged identity to resist power structures in a way that younger employees – who were considered to be productive – could not: those who were considered to represent 'diversity', and therefore where assumed to be less productive, resisted managerial control by alluding to managers' low expectations and using them to their own benefit (hence reinforcing the low expectations).

Chrononormativity

The concept of *chrononormativity,* referred to when accounting for Riach et al.'s (2014) criticism of normative assumptions of social age, represents a critical view on (social) aging. The term, originally introduced and defined by Freeman (2010: 3), broadly refers to "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity." Freeman (2010) argues that chrononormativity is enforced onto individuals by the state and other social institutions that are pushing individuals to organize their lives in a certain chronological order. That is, these institutions legitimize and encourage heteronormative life orders, benchmarked trough events such as marriage, parenthood and death (Freeman, 2010). As a consequence, chrononormativity imposes ideas of 'right times' and 'correct order of life events' and St-Georges (2018: 557) writes that "[t]hose who deviate from the prescribed model [of chrononormativity] are considered stunted in their development, uncontemporaneous unto their … their peers, and, therefore, incomplete." The concept has been applied in analyses of temporality in theater plays (Harvie, 2018), films (St-Georges, 2016), literature (Hsy, 2018), tv-shows (Mupotsa, 2019) and podcasts (Rooney, 2018). It has also been applied in discussions of how overweight (McFarland et al., 2018) or sexual orientation (Cosenza, 2014) are connected to perceptions of (not) 'fitting in' within chrononormative frames. In organization studies, there are – to the best of our knowledge – two studies that have incorporated the concept. The first is Leonard et al.'s (2017) study of how older individuals retraining for a new profession – and who hence were 'breaking' the chronological order – perceived themselves and were perceived by their trainers. The second one is the above cited study by Riach et al. (2014: 1678), in which chrononormativity was conceptualized as heteronormative "ideas about the 'right' time for particular life stages surrounding partnering, parenting (…) career progression, promotions and flexible working". However, both studies focused on older adults, and the latter paid greater interest in the way (non-hetero) sexuality was (not) allowed to take up space in the organizational context.

On the unpacking of taking-for-granted assumptions

In this literature review, we have shown that age typically connotates 'old age' and 'problem' (Katz, 2005; Thomas et al., 2014). In fact, even the definition of *ageism* – intended to cover discrimination of all ages – is often defined as practices that have "harmful effects on the health of *older adults*" (WHO, 2019, emphasis

added). Like Heilmann (2017), we are inclined to believe that the time organizational scholars have dedicated to the old employee – resulting in neglection of other age groups (Thomas et al., 2014) – stems from the gerontological tradition. We further argue that while research on aging has left 'general aging' unattended, studies of other issues have been 'age blind'. Adding to that, studies looking into aging more broadly tend to focus on individuals seeking employment (see e.g., Ainsworth and Hardy, 2007; Ainsworth, 2002), rather than *working* individuals, and most studies that aim to discuss aging fail in problematizing the assumptions underlying their definitions of 'young' and 'old' (see e.g., Dello Russo et al., 2017). A recent attempt to problematize such suppositions was made by Spedale's (2019) in "Deconstructing the 'older worker': Exploring the complexities of subject positioning at the intersection of multiple discourses." The study attempts to problematize the 'old worker problematic', however, it builds on accounts made by a single soon-to-retire individual. Indeed, Spedale (2019) calls for further studies of age (inequality) at work, and based on our literature review we consequently argue that an empirical study that unpacks taken-for-granted assumptions (by exploring how professionals of *a variety of ages* do their respective ages) can address questions that so far have been met with silence. We further argue that the concept of chrononormativity – and the way in which it associates (the changing) norms of appropriate behavior with (changes in) age (Freeman, 2010; Riach et al. 2014) – can contribute to such a study since it points to the normative aspects of seemingly 'natural' orders of life events.

3. Theoretical framework

Building our theoretical framework, we are implicitly following scholars like Riach et al. (2014) who question chrononormativity (normative expectations about 'proper life course progress') and Thomas et al. (2014) who claim that age, rather than to be taken at face value, should be understood as something that comes into being in and through social interaction. We further adopt the concept of subject positioning (see e.g., Törrönen, 2001) within Fairclough's (2010) framework for critical discourse theory, and we assume individual agency within the constraints of established structures (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016; Törrönen, 2001). We adopt a critical perspective on discourse analysis because we explicitly seek a theory and method that can help unpack "objects of research" that other disciplines take for granted (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004: 226).

The theoretical foundation of critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis following Fairclough (2010) allows language to take center stage and adopts a "moderate" (2010: 5) form of language oriented social constructionism[2]: it is assumed that language use (and hence what one might think, say or refer to) shapes social reality, but it is assumed that social and material aspects impact language use as well (for example, through mechanisms such as control over resources and the processes of text production). In the following paragraph, we will give a tour of selected theoretical concepts derived from Fairclough's (2010) version of critical discourse analysis that are important to answer our research question: How is age done in accounts of professional life? Having accounted for the structure of our framework, we proceed by further elaborating on selected parts.

Talking with Fairclough[3] (1993, 2010), a *discursive event* denotes an instance of language use – examples of such events could be two persons who are talking to each other while having coffee, or when

[2] We think it is easiest to explain how we treat language by taking a detour via the work of structuralist linguist Saussure (see e.g., Saussure, 1959) and his theory on 'signs' – or "all the things that populate our mental life" (Burr, 2011: 59). Saussure contended that all signs are composed of what we *say, write or think* and the *concept that we are referring to,* but maintained that the link between the two sides the categorizations themselves are arbitrary (Burr, 2015; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999). However, while Saussure insisted that linguistic structures are stable (Burr, 2015), its descendant poststructuralism came to regard signs "as *polysemic*, influenced by the social context where they are used in a way which enables the privileging of certain interpretations, or *readings*, over others" (Bell and Thorpe 2013: 51, emphasis in original), hence shifting focus toward disagreement and fluid meanings (Burr, 2015). From this line of reasoning, we derive and incorporate a form of language skepticism, implying that one cannot be certain that different actors think that words are tied to the same thing (concept), and that the meanings of the concepts themselves are open to interpretation as well as contest. Talking with Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), such a view represents a form of discursive pragmatism.

[3] This section relies on Fairclough (1993, 2010) to a great extent, and we choose such a disposition since we find that the *theoretical* foundation of critical discourse analysis is inseparable from the *method* – they are different

a news article is published so readers can take part of the journalist's text. If one is to investigate such an event, Fairclough (1993) suggests that it should be analyzed at three levels: as *text* (as spoken and written words); as *discursive practice* (as production, interpretation and consumption of text); and as *social practice* (as action embedded in social and material context). Discursive practice is closely related to language's inability to neutrally represent concepts: a specific discourse is defined as a "[w]ay of signifying experience from a particular perspective" that brings 'meaning' into social life (Fairclough, 1993: 96). This implies that Fairclough (1993) uses the term *discursive practices* the way many other scholars use *discourses* and he makes the distinction to underscore that he treats discourse as a form of social practice (that is, action). Such action is considered to both shape and be shaped by other forms of social practice, and – having our research questions in mind – the distinction is important: it implies that a person who talks actively is 'doing' something, because the talk itself constitutes a discursive event (Fairclough, 1993).[4]

Interdiscursivity

Another important aspect of how discourses bring meaning to social life, is how they interrelate; when a text interlaces other discursive practices (discourses) to communicate a certain meaning, it is referred to as *interdiscursivity*. Interdiscursivity takes place through discursive practice, for example, when an individual gives an account in which s/he draws on an established discourse to convey a certain meaning. This implies that 'established' texts are (more or less) historically related to 'emerging' ones, and although this presents an opportunity to mix discursive practices, Fairclough (1993: 95) stresses:

> The seemingly limitless possibilities of creativity in discursive practice suggested by the concept of interdiscursivity – an endless combination and recombination of genres [forms of language use associated with certain social activity] and discourses – are in practice limited and constrained by the state of hegemonic relations and hegemonic struggle.

In other words, one is dependent on established ways of talking about and understanding various phenomena (existing discourses/discursive practices) when seeking to express oneself meaningfully (in a discursive event), and some meanings will dominate others: it will be harder to express or refer to meanings

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sides of the same coin (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999); since we base our method of analysis on Fairclough, it has obvious advantages to base the theoretical background on the same framework.

[4] There are several forms of discourse analysis (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999) and we choose to compile a theoretical framework that rests upon Fairclough's (1993, 2010) critical discourse analysis since we argue that it avoids some of the pitfalls of other versions of discourse analysis (that *solely* ascribe importance to discourses and hence also treat social and material practices as discourse); examples of perspectives that we argue risk fall short of contributing to our research purpose are macro forms of post-structural discourse analysis that assumes little individual agency, and takes little interest in empirical material stemming from interviews (Alvesson, 2003; Törrönen, 2001; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999) and micro forms of discursivist (social psychological discourse) analysis, which indeed studies empirical material stemming from interviews – but only as localized events and not in (inter)relation to societal discourses (Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000).

that lay outside of those that – in Fairclough's terms – are hegemonic. Nevertheless, critical discourse analysis assumes that social reality has an evolving rather than static nature and Burr (2015: 127-128) writes that:

> There are weak points, places where [the discourses] may be attacked, and points at which other discourses pose a real threat; they are always implicitly being contested by other discourses. This is Foucault's [see e.g., Foucault, 1980] point about power and resistance always operating together.

Hence, if one way to think about the world gains foothold, other ways of thinking are automatically challenged, implying that it is possible to shift meanings over time. In fact, our research question takes such a stance on power: when we state that we want to know how age is done in accounts of professional life we implicitly point to the fact that prevailing (dominating) understandings of age (discourses on age), like those of homogenous generations, might not be the only way to conceive of professional age. Thus, in order to answer our research question, we need theory that addresses discourses and individuals, and especially what the latter can do with language.

What people can make of (themselves through) language: Subject positioning and identity

To (inter)connect individuals with discourses, we use the concept of *subject positioning*[5], which incorporates the notion of *interpellation*[6] – that discourses address, or 'speak to', subjects as if they were "certain kinds of people" (Burr, 2015: 130). A discourse typically features several subject positions (and reserves them for different persons), and just as individuals seeking to convey a certain meaning (when they speak) are constrained by the meanings available discourses prescribe, they are also constrained by the discourses' corresponding subject positions when seeking to express who they, or others, 'are' (Burr, 2015; Törrönen, 2001). Hence, subject positioning can be understood as the process through which individuals – un/successfully – craft their identities within discursive constraints (Burr, 2015), and just as discourse and power are enmeshed, so are power and subject positions/identities: identity can be used as a resource as well as become a barrier for the subject (Zanoni, 2011; for a review of identity organizational scholarship, see e.g., Alvesson et al. [2008], or Brown [2015]). That is, by adopting certain subject positions one subscribes

[5] Fairclough – building on Halliday's (e.g., 1994) theory on the multifunctionality of language – do not incorporate the notion of subject position, but underscore that "[l]anguage use is always simultaneously constitutive of (i) social identities, (ii) social relations and (iii) systems of knowledge and belief" (1993: 92), which we interpret as synonymous to aspects covered by theories on subject positioning. We choose to incorporate theory on subject position/ing since there is extensive (interdisciplinary) literature on the subject matter, which provides us with an opportunity to fine grain our implementation of the concept as well as critically analyze its shortcomings (see next section on agency) (see e.g., Törrönen, 2001).

[6] We use it in a contemporary version that ascribes the subject some agency (see section below), although the concept originates in Althusser's rather determinist (Winther Jørgensen and Philips, 1999) structuralist Marxist theory (see e.g., Althusser, 2008).

to their "expectations on what is normal, permitted and serviceable" (Törrönen, 2001). Burr (2015: 139) summarizes this aspect saying:

> Our sense of who we are and what is therefore possible and not possible for us to do, what is right and appropriate for us to do, and what is wrong and inappropriate for us to do thus all derive from our occupation of subject positions within discourse.

Additionally, we argue that *chrononormativity*, introduced in the literature review, serves to explain how subject positions and norms of appropriate behavior change over time. That is, chrononormativity accounts for when and why ideas of 'right times of doing things' and 'a correct order of life events' are imposed on individuals (Freeman, 2010; Riach et al., 2014).

In sum, identity formation – through subject positioning – bridges micro and macro forms of analysis and provides a non-essentializing and process-oriented way of conceiving individual wants and needs (Alvesson et al., 2008; Törrönen, 2001) within power laden systems of rights, speaking rights and obligations (Davies and Harré, 1990). Consequently, people that speak are "not (merely) [giving] statements about selves but provide evidence of the discourses constituting a subject position" (Kuhn, 2009: 696) which provides a way to discursively contextualize individual accounts (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). This further implies that a person giving internally inconsistent accounts not necessarily is 'lying', but that the discursive context – the different discourses that the individual legitimately can draw upon in her accounts – will constrain what can be said and hence also lead to different outcomes (Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000).

The critical agency

What we have not touched upon yet, is what subject positioning within the power of discourses entails for individual *agency* – the individual's ability to negotiate options and make choices (Törrönen, 2001). In our study, agency is important because of our dual interest in the 'meanings' that dominate others and thus create taken-for-granted ideas of age, *and* in individuals' engagement with (discursive) practices that potentially could reinforce or counteract current power relations (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2012). The problem of agency arises because a harsh interpretation of the power of discourse, or a 'Foucauldian reading', is associated with "the death of the subject": that it is the discourses that exercise power rather than the individuals that speak in a discursive event (Burr, 2015: 27), which virtually turns individuals into "puppet[s] dangling from the strings of the discourse(s)" (Alvesson, 2003: 24). This view, devastating for the subject and for the critical view that we adopt – that implicitly assumes that subjects (researchers, for example!) have some agency and can attempt to impact their context (Bell and Thorpe, 2013; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999) – stems from post/structuralism's rejection of *humanism*, which assumes that humans have an essential and stable 'core' (Burr, 2015; Hall [1992], as referenced in Törrönen, 2001).

This said, there *are* scholars that have read Foucault differently: for example, Sawicki (1991: 100) has argued that Foucault looked at outcomes rather than the processes subjects endure and hence concluded that Foucault "did not entirely reject the notion of agency. The fact that one cannot guarantee the outcome of such resistance is no argument against it." Also, Burr (2015: 141) argues that a reading of Foucault, such as Sawicki's, allows the subject to engage in "critical historical reflection and [to be able] to exercise some choice with respect to the discourses and practices that it takes up for its own use". The temporal aspect of the term 'historical' aligns this view with the one of other scholars. For example, Törrönen (2001: 315) writes that "the agent that a cultural text tries to interpellate into a specific subject position has experiences with alternative subject positions" which, in turn, will map out "possible and impossible identifications that are, of course, in a constant state of change" (2001: 319).

To operationalize the discussed view on agency in an empirical study, Alvesson and Robertson (2016: 9) defined the concept of self-identity (the long-term outcome of repeated of subject positioning) as "a reflexively organized understanding of one's distinctiveness and valued key characteristics derived from engagement in and with competing discourses and multiple experiences, which produces *a degree of* existential continuity and security". Also, Kuhn (2009) adopted a similar view, where he treated subjects as capable of engaging in reflection and resistance, *while* still being interpellated by discourse (Törrönen, 2001) – this is also the approach we adopt in this thesis. In fact, this is a partial return to Berger and Luckman's (see e.g., Berger and Luckman, 1967) dialectical and co-constructing view of the relationship between individual and society, where individuals are thought of as "both agentic, always actively constructing the social world, and constrained by society to the extent that we must inevitably live our lives within the institutions and frameworks of meaning handed down to us by previous generations" (Burr 2015: 211).

4. Methodology

Our initial curiosity was an outcome of personal reflections on anecdotes told in our respective social circles (or those we found ourselves telling others!): people talking about their ages, how time passed and how it made them think differently about their careers or themselves (also in relation to others). We channeled our curiosity into an extensive literature research, which indicated that the concept of age(ing) either was problematized as 'old age' or was treated as a secondary or taken-for-granted concept (see chapter 2). Hence, we concluded that an empirical study unpacking 'naturalized' ideas of age (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Freeman, 2010; Riach et al., 2014) could contribute to the rather limited body of research. Drawing inspiration from language-oriented social science methods (see e.g., Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Fairclough, 2010) we articulated a research purpose aiming to contribute to theory development on age as a social process. That is, aiming to unpack taken-for-granted ideas about age and shed light on ways in which age is done among Swedish professionals. In the following, we will account for the decisions we made when we developed our research approach, and we will go from broader aspects to narrower ones – mirroring how we created our methodology by purposely eliminating options in order to achieve methodological fit: "internal consistency among elements of a research project" (Edmondson and McManus, 2007: 1155).

Scientific approach and research design

Since we chose to draw on language-oriented theory (method) to address the lack of empirical contributions investigating age as a social process and action, we situated our work within the border landscape between the Burrell and Morgan (1979) social research paradigms associated with social critique (Hassard, 1991). Our position entails that we adhere to the 'sociology of change': an epistemological position that assumes a fragmented and unstable social world where power dynamics are continuously evolving, hence creating constraints as well as potentialities for human subjects (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Hassard, 1991). To acknowledge that there might be possibilities as well as limitations involved in the practice of doing age, we further needed an ontological perspective that neither takes reality as structurally determined, nor completely fluid. We hence decided to build on an ontology in which we are assuming that discourse, and social and material reality stand in a dialectical exchange; we are following scholars who consider discourse to *constitute* and to *be constituted* by social and material reality (Fairclough, 2010; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999). Hence, we join with Willmott (1993: 709), who challenged Burrell and Morgan's dichotomous ontology and rather advocated organizational analysis that acknowledges "the practical indivisibility of the subjective and objective dimensions of social reproduction." We also decided to adopt an interconnected view on agency and structure that we operationalized by incorporating a notion of subjectivity (subject position) that allows individuals reflexive agency within the constraints of discourses (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2012; Kuhn, 2009; Törrönen, 2001).

The decisions we made led us to further opt for an abductive research strategy, where we alternated between theory, design choices, data collection and analysis when proceeding with the research project (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Our research question – How is age done in accounts of professional life? – further directed our attention towards individuals (that is, what individuals say), and we therefore decided to adopt a case study research design using interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2011). However, the term 'case study' has different connotations in various streams of research and our work, building on the typology of Welch et al. (2011), joins with the group of studies that strive for "*contextualized explanation* [and] are concerned with accounting for why and how events are produced" (2011: 249, emphasis added). Hence, and as Welch et al. (2011: 250) write, utterances that frequently cited Eisenhardt (1989) disregard as "idiosyncratic detail" (see Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007: 30) become the very "fabric for an explanatory account."

We decided to treat each interview (individual) as an individual case since we aimed contribute to theory development on age as a social process and action – as something *persons* do. That is, we were interested in the ways in which the interviewees, *individually*, would give accounts of how they do their ages – and not in questions of how their respective organizations (officially) look upon or procedurally treat the matter. To avoid the impression of researching organizations and to reach individuals working in different contexts, we therefore decided to interview individuals working in several different companies. Further, we made one decision aiming to increase coherence and two aiming to increase variation. First, we decided that participants should be employed in the private sector since we did not seek a comparison of experiences from the private, civic or public sector[7], and had greater access to the private sector as a consequence of our enrollment at a Business school. Second, it was imperative that varying degrees of work experience, intended to increase variation in terms of both experiences and chronological ages, would be represented in the case selection, since the sole focus on 'old' (and sometimes 'young') individuals was part of the problem of taken-for-grantedness that we aimed to address. Third, we decided to incorporate an equal gender distribution, since there is extensive research indicating that the social practices of professional life are gendered (for an introduction to the topic, see e.g., Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009, or Wahl et al., 2001).[8] All in all, the study comprises 21 cases: interviews with 21 Swedish professionals[9], of different chronological ages and genders. At the time of the interviews, they worked for 9 different organizations in Sweden.

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[7] Of course, current employment in the private sector does not rule out former employment in the public or civic sphere. Nevertheless, the criterion guaranteed *some* (and easily recallable) experience from the private sector.

[8] In the end three interviews with women having extensive experience were declined due to this design criterion.

[9] We use the term 'professionals' as a synonym to 'those working in supposedly knowledge-intensive (or knowledge-intensive departments of) companies'. Following Alvesson (2001: 863-864), we see it as "a vague but meaningful category" covering individuals working in contexts "where most work is said to be of an intellectual nature and where well-educated, qualified employees form the major part of the work force."

Recruitment of research participants

We reached out with our invitation to potential interviewees through two types of intermediaries: either through company contact persons that we were introduced to through Stockholm School of Economics' department for corporate relations and company network (this resulted in recruitment of 14 participants), or through individuals in our own networks (7 participants). However, although private connections were utilized to gain access, neither of us knew or had previously met any of the interviewees beforehand.

Our study invitation, found in Appendix 1, stated that the research was part of our degree project in organization studies and that we aimed to explore how individuals perceive, and have perceived, themselves in relation to work and workplaces at different stages of their careers, and that we were looking for variation in terms of work experience. We also informed that all participants, as well as their organizations, would be anonymized in our final report. Having received our invitation, interested parties contacted either us or the intermediary (depending on their own preference) per email, and a date and location for the interview was decided. However, at the time when we had recruited about half of the total number of interviewees, we realized that the selection was dominated by men. Hence, we decided – and told our intermediaries – that we wanted to get in contact with more women.

The way in which we chose to recruit participants is a criteria based (Dalen, 2007) convenience selection utilizing snowballing (Bryman and Bell, 2011), since participants were recruited through readily available intermediaries (convenience and snowballing) but we deliberately articulated criteria accounted for in the section on research design. A list of all 21 professionals who participated in the study (1 pilot interviewee, 20 interviewees; 11 female and 10 male participants) can be found in Appendix 3; the participants chronological ages ranged between 24 and 66 years and their work experience between 6 months to 44 years (junior employees as well as CEOs, Presidents and owners, active in sectors such as consulting, investment, recruitment, retail and industry, are included in the selection). They worked in companies of different sizes, ranging from small firms to global concerns. However, since we want to give the participants an opportunity to exercise agency in doing their age, we disclose participant ages only in the table in Appendix 3 and not in the text, and the table displays age in a way that was common among the participants themselves – as 'what age one has passed' (for example, '40' indicates that the person has 'passed 40 but not 50').

Method for production of empirical material

Deciding upon *how* to conduct the interviews we had to have the future analysis and our own philosophical grounding in mind: an interest in language comes hand in hand with an interest in discourse(s), but different forms of discourse analysis have various opinions about what (not) to do with interviews. In the end, we chose to incorporate an eclectic view on the relation between micro and macro discourses (Burr, 2015; Wetherell, 1998) and opted for critical discourse analysis in the examination of individual accounts

(Souto-Manning, 2014; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999). Below, we account for our theoretically informed decision-making process and course of action.

Thematic interviews with a drawing exercise to encourage rich accounts

We decided upon a course of action based on our reading of Alvesson (2003), who discusses three ideal types of interview approaches (romanticism, neopositivism and localism) in promoting what he labels 'reflexive pragmatism'. As Alvesson frames it, the localist (often a critical researcher) considers analytical findings stemming from interview (micro) accounts to be restricted to the encounter *itself*, hence not allowing for transferability to other contexts. This would not have been good for us, since we did not seek to explore how age was done in the interview setting, but rather how it is done in a Swedish professional context. On the other hand, strictly macro oriented discourse analysis pays more attention to texts other than those produced in interview settings (Alvesson, 2003; Törrönen, 2001; Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999). Nevertheless, in introducing the pragmatic reflexive approach Alvesson (2003: 29) conclude that if the interviewee's statements are studied as situated in a *discursive context* (hence seen as aiming to create certain subjectivities) "the gap between the interview situation as an empirical example and the possibility of going beyond this and referring to something broader and 'extrasituational' [is reduced]." Hence, building on Alvesson's argument (and taking our own epistemology and ontology into account) we decided to adopt a reflexive pragmatist approach on interviews and use Fairclough's (2010) critical discourse analysis (which allow for a dual ontology *and* is applicable to interview accounts according to Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999).

The reflexive pragmatist approach (Alvesson, 2003) has two main parts and Alvesson considers reflexivity to stand for "conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from different angles and avoid or strongly a priori privilege a single, favored angle and vocabulary" (2003: 25), while he writes that pragmatism "means balancing endless reflexivity and radical skepticism with a sense of direction" (2003: 14). Entering the interview situations, we implemented the approach trough a form of sensitive adaptability: we were curious about where the participants would 'take' the conversation and what topics (discourses) they would talk about (draw on) themselves, and we actively tried to pick up on accounts that ran counter to our preconceptions (Alvesson, 2003). Still, we used guiding themes to maintain direction (Alvesson, 2003; Qu and Dumay, 2011) and we asked explicit questions about career at relatively early stages of the interviews, while questions about age commonly were asked towards the end. Hence, participants had plenty of time to bring up the topic of age (in relation to other themes) themselves, which allowed us to observe to what extent participants related age to career or other concepts.

However, the reflexive pragmatist approach also involves a search for rich meaning (Alvesson, 2003), which in our case translates to rich accounts – that is, accounts that are "above some standard and unstinting" (Weick, 2007: 14). We therefore decided to incorporate an innovative moment: a drawing exercise (Banks, 2007; Matthews, 2012; Nossiter and Bieberman, 1990). Hence, we follow scholars who argue that material such as drawings can help participants provide meaningful information (Meyer, 1991)

by providing something to talk around and about (Kearney and Hyle, 2004). Specifically, we draw inspiration from the field of organization studies that have integrated participant produced drawings with verbal accounts from interviews (see e.g., Riach et al., 2014; Vince and Broussine, 1996; Zuboff, 1988). Zuboff (1988: 141), who used drawings within her interview settings to deepen her understanding of participants' "'felt sense' of their job experience", states that it "functioned as a catalyst, helping [participants] to articulate feelings that had been implicit and were hard to define". Based on such findings, we argue that the facilitating mechanism of drawings partially stems from visual representations' ability to represent several things at once: a movement from what Eisner (1995) calls the 'all-at-once-ness' of talk, to a state that enables participants to "simultaneously keep the whole and the part in view" (Knowles and Cole, 2008: 45). Concludingly, the drawings were used to stimulate rich *verbal* accounts and their *visual* attributes were therefore not included in the empirical presentation or analysis.

Conducting and documenting the interviews

To practically prepare for the interview endeavor, we carried out a pilot interview[10], which indicated that the interview guide contained too many questions (too many for the interview to be perceived as open or thematic; too many to be helpful for us as interviewers) and the amount of potential questions were therefore decreased, and long questions shortened. Also, the drawing exercise's instruction was modified in a similar manner.

All 21 interviews were conducted in Swedish, at a time and place chosen by the participant. All but 2 telephone interviews were undertaken during face-to-face meetings. Out of the latter, 16 participants met with us in their offices, 2 invited us to their homes and 1 met with us at the Stockholm School of Economics. Both authors were present during 15 of the interviews and in those cases, we interchangeably led the conversation. All interviewees gave verbal consent to audio recording, making it possible to document and listen to all interviews in their entirety at a later point in time. The duration of the interviews ranged from 40 to 110 minutes, with an average of 65 minutes. Since the interviews were intended to be open-ended, many of the interviews evolved in a conversation like manner (the themes of the interview guide found in Appendix 2 were covered, but few of the explicit questions were asked). If participants were curious about our own reflections during the conversations, we shared our experiences although in

[10] Since the interview initially was intended to assess how the interview themes were perceived from a participant's point of view – rather than to produce empirical material – we decided to interview a person one of the authors already knew (out of convenience). However, since the pilot interviewee did not know about the subject of the study beforehand and the interview was conducted by the other author, who had not previously met the pilot interviewee, we considered it appropriate to include the data when we – later on – discovered that the pilot interviewee had brought up topics relevant to the study. In order to increase transparency, empirical material stemming from the pilot interview is accompanied by the notation 'pilot' in the empirical section.

a brief manner (such questions tended to arise towards the end of the interviews, which arguably has less impact on the collected empirical material). However, some interviewees seemed to prefer to answer more direct questions and in those cases the interview guide was followed throughout the interview (although there are exceptions, such interviews were shorter). We decided to introduce the drawing exercise in the middle of the interviews, since that would give participants time to adjust to the interview setting whilst still allowing us to discuss the drawings with the participants themselves. Following previous studies (Kearney and Hyle, 2004; Vince and Broussine, 1996) each participant was given verbal instructions: we asked if they felt like drawing a "self-portrait or -presentation" (full instructions can be found in Appendix 2)[11]. If participants felt unsure about what to include in their presentations and asked whom they were presenting themselves to, we stated that they could think of it as introducing themselves to us. However, we modified the instructions when 3 interviews had been completed: initially, participants were given the option to paint on a white paper or a paper with three circles forming a Venn diagram (an inspiration drawn from Riach et al., [2014]). The option to use the diagram was intended to support participants feeling insecure about drawing freely, but the options was eliminated when we realized that it seemed to work in the opposite direction: it confused and/or made participants feel stressed since they did not know how to coordinate the circles' overlaps. We also decided to summarize the exercise instruction on top the white drawing paper provided, since the first participants frequently asked us to repeat the instructions. On average, participants spent around 4 minutes drawing although some talked about the content while drawing.

In order to convert the talked text of the interviews into written ditto, we started off by transcribing 10 of the 21 interviews verbatim, denoting pauses, sounds and interruptions. When this was done, we assessed the written material, taking the average number of hours required to transcribe 1 hour of recording (12 hours) into account. Based on this evaluation, we concluded that we would proceed by transcribing all relevant parts[12]. The final transcriptions comprised 418 pages of text.

Analysis of empirical material: A critical discourse analysis

Our framework is to a large extent based on Fairclough (1993), since he both provides guidelines for empirical investigation and places greater emphasis on the instable nature of the social world than do other proponents of critical discourse analysis (Winther Jorgensen and Phillips, 1999).

[11] All interviewees that were asked agreed to make a drawing. However, due to practical reasons we excluded the exercise from the telephone interviews and we never asked one participant in a face-to-face meeting since we felt it could disturb the flow of the specific interview.
[12] Since the average interview lasted about 1 hour, 1 transcription was as time consuming as actively listening to the same interview 10 times over.

To conduct the analysis, we read the transcriptions (418 pages) individually, highlighting instances of 'age related talk', for example, talk about time itself, age, aging, career and temporal aspects of organizational processes. After we had cross-referenced and compared our individual findings, we excerpted the highlighted text to a new document[13], which underwent a second round of the same form of analysis to sift out the strongest accounts. Later, we rearranged the selected text items and (iteratively): I.) analyzed the texts as instances of discursive practice, looking at interdiscursivity – how 'established' discourses were drawn upon to convey 'emergent' meaning, and how they were combined, II.) identified subject positions, III.) analyzed the texts *as texts*, looking at the extent to which subjects and objects were put in relation to things that 'happen' in sentences, which affect the degree of *agency* (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999) IV.) combined the insights derived from all discursive events to map *the order of discourse* (discursive interrelations; entangled subject positions) (Fairclough, 1993). When we had finalized the analysis, we jointly translated selected representative quotes from Swedish to English.

Quality of research

General criticisms of qualitative studies are that research reports often lack transparency in terms of why a certain area of inquiry was chosen in the first place and how empirical material was analyzed, that research subjects inevitably will be affected by researcher attributes (e.g., gender or age!) and that conclusions cannot be generalized (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Specific criticism of critical discourse analysis tends to focus on the lack of agency subjects often are ascribed, and that the endeavor risk ending up in the conclusion that there are plenty of discourses, but without showing their consequences (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999). In the following, we will hence discuss and/or show how we have addressed each of these issues. First, we addressed the issue of transparency by giving lengthy accounts of how the research was conducted (this chapter) and of why we decided to address this specific field of inquiry. Second, we introduce a separate section on reflexivity below, in which we account for the research process in terms of itself – that is, how we believe that we, as researchers, affected the research encounters (Amis and Silk, 2008). In so doing, we show that our position might have *encouraged* participants to talk freely – that the way we likely were perceived by research participants might have enhanced the quality of empirical material (see e.g., Spedale [2019] for the operationalization of a similar view). Furthermore, we argue that our reflexive pragmatist approach on interviews makes questions of truth peripheral: whether or not a participant 'tells the truth' is subordinated the question of why the chosen way of expression is believed to be 'meaningful' (Alvesson, 2003; see also Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000 on discursive pragmatism). Third, we want to underline that qualitative studies should aim to generalize to theory, not to populations (Bryman and Bell, 2011). However, we argue that Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of *transferability*

[13] When uncertain, we returned to the original transcripts and recordings to get a better idea about the discursive context.

apply to our research (although it has a romanticist origin). The authors claim that "transferability inferences cannot be made by an investigator who knows *only* the sending context" (1985: 297) and that "[t]he best advice to give to anyone seeking to make a transfer is to accumulate *empirical* evidence about contextual similarity; the responsibility of the original investigator ends in providing sufficient descriptive data to make such similarity judgements possible" (1985: 298, emphasis in original). Hence, we adopted a form of discourse analysis that opens up for discursive contextualization and application of the conclusions beyond the interview context (see the discussion in footnote 4, p. 10 and "Methods for production of empirical material" in this chapter). Fourth, we addressed the issue of agency by treating subjects as capable of engaging in reflection and resistance, *while* still being interpellated by discourse (Törrönen, 2001). Fifth, we recognize the drawbacks of 'simply listing discourses', which we rectify by adopting a view promoted by Ainsworth and Hardy (2004) who claim that critical discourse analysis should be regarded as dependent on concepts and ideas from other fields, which it, in turn, can break down and make more nuanced – in order to enhance our knowledge. That is, we argue that critical discourse analysis' main benefit is that it can help us "challenge our commonly held assumptions about the phenomenon we are studying" – in other words what Bell and Thorpe (2013: 96) state is what makes "systematic, scientific research techniques" important.

Reflexive considerations and ethics

Since we decided to adopt a reflexive pragmatic approach on interviews (Alvesson, 2003) we will end this chapter on methodology with a few comments on our position(s) within the 'discourses of the interview encounter' (or on the relation between researcher and field, as Mahadevan [2011] puts it in her proposal for a reflexivity framework). When we carried out the interviews, the discourse of 'scientific research' had potential to place us in a powerful position as 'researchers' vis a vis the 'participants' (Wray-Bliss, 2003). However, we were also 'students' talking with 'professionals', which implies an inverted power balance, particularly when we interviewed CEOs and Presidents, that is, persons with high formal authority. In fact, interviews often started with small talk about our studies, and we consider it likely that the lack of clout our position entailed made it easier for participants to talk with us – they were the experts in the encounters, not us. Furthermore, the author who considers Swedish to be her third language also perceived that participants, perhaps as a form of 'courtesy' when she told them not to be shy if not understanding her Swedish, simplified their answers and way of talking when she conducted interviews on her own (to some extent reinforcing her position as 'student' since it drew on an additional discourse of 'learning' i.e., 'learning Swedish'). Nevertheless, towards the end of several interviews, participants commented on the interview setting *itself* saying that it had been a great experience to take some time to reflect on their lives and work situation, which we hope (and believe) indicate insight reciprocity.

In relation to what often are seen as 'typical' ethical practices – or procedural requirements to conduct research – in the management research community (Bell and Thorpe, 2013; Jeanes, 2017), we have incorporated aspects such as: seeking informed consent for recording of interviews; ensuring privacy and

confidentiality by providing pseudonyms (all interviewees agreed to recording after anonymity was assured); and avoidance of harm (naturally, participating in the study was voluntary). Nonetheless, we had to use intermediaries when reaching out to potential participants and we could not control how our textual invitation was presented (the invitation can be found in Appendix 1). It is thus possible that some participants would have felt that it was hard to opt out, especially if the request to participate came from a superior in the organizational hierarchy. During interviews we therefore put extra effort into adapting our way of interacting and asking questions to what we interpreted the individual to prefer, in order to respect his or her individual sense of integrity. Such adaption could be seen as a form of enacted (Weick, 1998) ethics-of-care (for the participant) (Jeanes, 2017).

5. Doing age in accounts of professional life

In the upcoming chapter we will move from the general (the way participants talked about career), to findings more specifically related to age (for example, manifested in claims of seniority and/or juniority), and lastly to social expectations that participants (not) related to certain ages. We present the findings in this order to illustrate how each topic adds a new layer of social assumptions. Also, the findings are presented in a way which makes the participants' accounts part of a larger story; it is the way in which individual accounts illustrate discourses that is focal. Additionally, age related terms such as 'young' or 'old' refer to how the participants self-identified and/or used the terms to talk about other individuals or groups.

Career as personal development

Several participants sought to distance themselves from the textbook definition of career, which one participant conceptualized as "better titles, higher salaries" [William] and another as "to proceed within a company" [Fredrik]. That is, participants rather stressed the importance of continuous development and interesting work tasks, than 'climbing' the career ladder. Hence, continuous movement and progression was depicted as desirable, implying that "better titles" was substituted with the ability to demonstrate personal development. However, some accounts pointed to a paradox inherent in this development promoting view: even though it was "personal development" that was stressed, several individuals who had been employed within the same company for a longer period of time gave accounts explaining that they were "inherently driven" *even though* they had not displayed organizational mobility.

Platforms and development

Several accounts were similar to the one given by Oskar, who said that: "personally, to me, career equals development… if I were to summarize it, in one word." One participant specifically added that "I try to become… um, a better version of myself" [Sofia]. Often, participants were careful in their formulations, defining career in terms of what it "personally" meant to them and actively distancing themselves from the textbook definition of career, as can be seen in the following account:

> Better titles, higher salaries… uh, think it's a view that misrepresents what, what one like really should imply with career. With career it's like, like I rather think about my professional and personal development (…) I wanna step out of this like traditional (…) [and rather try to] develop as much as possible. (…) a generalization, but I think that, I think that, I'm not gonna say my *generation*, but many young ones, then, they rather treat… um, how to put it, like, organizations as platforms. [William]

The account above shows that the participant identified as young and that he believed other 'young people' to think in a similar vein. The "platform" view on organizations was adopted by another participant as well, who said that he considered himself to be in a position where he could choose between employers to find the "optimal" one, and that he was currently satisfied since he could "take on more and more

responsibility" and felt that he was "becoming a better and better consultant with every week that passes" [Elias]. Both views place the individual at the center – organizations hence become platforms that individuals can use. Another participant referred to herself as having embraced a new (to her, that is) idea of career as "development, development, development" by referring to how she "in the beginning" used to be a "typical careerist – [who wanted to] climb without really knowing why" [Viktoria]. By referring to how she had changed her point of view, the participant indirectly portrayed a 'development view' as representing a more conscious process. That is, she distanced herself from "typical careeris[m]" that she seemed to associate with a lack of (articulated) purpose.

When the platform doesn't change

Perhaps as a consequence of the above identified individual development view on career, where organizations were (sometimes) perceived as platforms, some participants emphasized individual responsibility. One interviewee pointed to what she perceived to be a shift, saying: "in a few years, I don't think there's gonna be that many places where one can just walk in, be taken care of and be guided and then – one's entire working life just passed" [Therese]. The account represents an outsider's perspective, however, another interviewee understood himself in relation to both the previous claim on individualization of responsibility and the textbook view on career, and he also said that it sometimes made him feel "gloomy":

> That [I have] stayed within one and the same company (…) I'm not a typical, I'm not a careerist, like that, but I, my goal, my… career…um, it's that I get to do things that I find interesting and exciting (…) here I begin and here I end. In a way. That's the way I perceive it sometimes, one entered as young and [will] exit as old. [Håkan]

In this account it seems as if the participant negotiated the meaning of his own choices in relation to the norms inherent in both textbook and development views on career. As a consequence, he also sought to legitimize his choices by emphasizing that he is a person who seeks out tasks that are "interesting and exciting" – characteristics associated with development and progression. The same tendency is also seen in other accounts, given by individuals with a common denominator of having been employed within the same company for a longer period of time than the other participants had. One interviewee who had been employed within the same company for 18 years, gave a retrospective account: "[Career] has never really, um, been that important to me. Uh… I think I've been very, like, had an inherent drive. Pushing myself, to like, prove my abilities to myself" [Ulrika]. Another interviewee who had been working within the same group for about 20 years, expressed similar thoughts when she said that: "I've never desired a career in itself, however, I think I have an inherent drive. (…) So, step by step I've discovered that I'm a leader" [Ingrid]. A third participant said that she aims to do a good job rather than to look for a career, but she still acknowledged that she might not 'fulfil' the criteria of 'having made a career' saying that she thought that her CV would have looked different then: "but… like, by definition… I haven't, because then I'd been moving a lot quicker [upwards], I believe" [Helena]. In a sense, these accounts show that participants

who had remained in the same company for a longer period of time (but who still had changed position from time to time) experienced that, to an outsider, it might not seem as if they had made a career since the platform had remained the same. Nevertheless, each of these participants emphasized their inherent drive as an engine of progress.

There was only one participant who explicitly expressed that he did *not* "have a career" and that he would not (be able to) develop further, saying that "there is nothing I could move on to. One could say that I've painted myself into a corner" [Göran, pilot]. The participant had been with his company for more than 20 years and when asked what he thought he would be doing in 10 years from now, he laughed and said: "Dammit, then I'll be dead! Um (…) Perhaps I'll take on some [work]. Like, 60…76? (…) We have some 77-year-olds that are still [working], some, because they have so much know-how… like areas of expertise." His statement implies that even though he did not see himself as active within either a development or textbook view on career, he still related himself to the activity of working and could not see himself fully 'stepping out' of the sphere of working life.

(Re)Presentations of seniority and juniority

During the interviews, the participants made various forms of seniority or juniority claims – on behalf of themselves or by assigning the concepts to others. It was frequently underscored that 'senior' or 'junior' do *not* equal 'old' or 'young', but that they relate to the degree of experience one has in relation to the task at hand. As one interviewee put it: "[I try to] move away from age related thinking. Uh, rather talk about whether one is senior or junior in relation to one's assignment" [Johanna]. However, as we will see in the subsequent sections, the concepts *were* repeatedly conflated.

Seniority

One person claiming seniority opened up the interview saying: "My current role here is senior consultant. So that's like, the second step on like, uh, the ladder" [Daniel]. His statement implies that he found it important to let us know his position straightaway – that he was already on his way 'up' the ladder. Another interviewee had detrimental concerns and was hesitant about imposing her seniority on others. She coupled her concern with a problematization of 'staying'. She said:

> Introducing oneself, one always says like 'I have worked within *The Company* for 18 years', or something like that (…) It's like a merit, or I don't know what it is – like, 'I have a value, I've worked [here] longer…' I don't know… sometimes … I have stopped saying it, I thought i-it gives the wrong, wrong impression (…) I *have* questioned myself regularly – why do I stay? [Helena]

That there are 'risks' associated with seniority was an idea voiced by several participants. Such risks were portrayed as either originating in senior employees unwillingness to compromise their current salary and status (if switching jobs), or residing within individuals *themselves* - that there is a risk that one will "stagnate

just because [one] has done this for a hundred years" [Viktoria]. Another interviewee gave an account in which she developed her thoughts on the problem that she perceived that a transit from seniority to juniority imposes on individuals:

> Then, one thinks like: 'Ok but I have lots of experience, I wanna be a consultant, a pretty senior consultant, I can guide others and…' – 'But you have like *zero* experience with consultancy' (…) [In such cases] one cannot expect to enter at *this* [high] level (…) then, things often become complicated because one has acquired a… a salary, a responsibility, an identity (…) [that in turn make it hard] to relate to those who have the same role – and are a lot younger. [Therese]

The statement indicates that a separation between juniority and young age, and seniority and old age is hard for individuals to maintain and enact in practice – at least if (social) friction is to be avoided. An additional example of such friction transpired from another interviewee's reflection on his own seniority at a young age. The interviewee spoke about the extensive skepticism he initially faced when he was "25, 30 years" and was assigned a managerial position where his subordinates were about "45, 50, 60 years old" [Göran, pilot]. However, he also said that he was recruited to his current company because he was junior in the sense of having no experience of the industry, and further stated that the recruiter wanted individuals who were "new, they were supposed to be clean, they shouldn't have any taken-for-granted assumptions." He said this with a tone of irony in his voice, but later on, when he shared his view on the interns that he now works with, he said: "we pick the good ones. [Being recent graduates] they are a little bit unspoiled as well" [Göran, pilot]. Hence, he – now speaking as a senior employee – jokingly perpetuated the same idea about 'clean' juniority that he had found a bit ironic when applied to himself.

Another senior participant gave a lengthy account on how she perceived that her own abilities as a professional and CEO had changed over the years. Elaborating on the matter, she arrived at the conclusion that her ability to act as a senior decision-maker and leader had been standing in inverted relationship to her perceived femininity. She said:

> Um, I'm afraid I think so… um, like now, now I'm not seen as a… as much as a young woman anymore… now it's more like I'm just a decision-maker. This thing about being a bit younger (…) you become more, not a sex object 'cause that's not the word I'm looking for… but you are rather seen, like more as a *woman*. The way I dress, like I'd say my looks are alright and I know how to dress, so it might be that I sometimes was seen more as a woman than a leader. (…) My, my… My female appeal, when it perishes [*almost laughs*] then I'm also being seen differently. Um… which might make things easier when one… one should be making decisions. [Ingrid]

Nonetheless, another participant found herself in a double bind: being CEO and owner, and hence (very) senior, she told us that she has adopted a strategy of not participating in certain meetings with subordinates and sub-contractors. According to her, it was her feminine attributes that made her positional power hyper-visible, which in turn dampened discussions. However, she also said that she had experienced an inverted power structure with some men of similar seniority as herself, and that she had been forced to

seek out external support to handle "the master suppression techniques" that she had become subject to in such encounters. However, she was also very careful when formulating her thoughts, and added that she did not think that the man using such master suppression techniques was purposefully mean, but rather that "he presumably doesn't know any other way to work" [Astrid].

Several other self-acclaimed (older and) senior employees also voiced ideas about juniority or young age: in most accounts 'young age' *was* used interchangeably with 'someone who does not have much experience' and the reflections regarded the participants' own previous juniority, or others' current one. One participant said that one of the two main reasons her company requires applicants to hold a masters' degree is because they then "have a bit of feeling, and age. It's not always that fun to enter a board of directors if you are 23 years old. Because they will be 50 plus – gaining legitimacy will not be that easy" [Therese]. One interviewee acknowledged the 'difference' that growing older makes to external expectations:

> When I was 27, one was still [considered] *young,* wh-when I entered my next position I was still *young* [*laughs lightly*] then I was 32, still young but then I was 40 and then, all of a sudden, I was senior [it happens quickly] [Johanna]

When another participant discussed the corresponding period in *her* life, she said that she had perceived that the main difference between being "25 and 45" lay in the "question of maturity" [Ulrika]. However, she also acknowledged and questioned the 'problem of legitimacy' that young people face because of their chronological age:

> In society, in general. When one is young, like, one is a bit, it's almost like age discrimination. Like, it exists. People don't really trust you. (…) Being here at *The Company* for such a long period of time, one has like deserved, can leverage some capital, in relation to others (…) It's not that strange, really. Perhaps. (…) [But at the same time] it is fascinating, sometimes, like when one finds old email correspondence. I mean, I have access to my entire email history. Questions I answered then. If I for some reason need to look into that now, it's sometimes like: *Oh, that's interesting! I actually thought about that… it wasn't that obvious.* [Ulrika]

In other words, she conflated juniority with young age and adopted an ambivalent position towards both her own previous juniority and juniority in general. She seemed to be unsure about whether it is fair to question the knowledge and skills of 'young/junior employees', and took herself as an example: applying her 'senior judgement' on tasks she had performed as a 'junior employee' she had realized that the way she solved problems *then* holds up *today*. Another participant said that she used to face work related skepticism when she was younger and even took a stance saying "give [young people] a chance (…) it can be such a surprise, like… wow!" [Lily] referring to how young individuals have repeatedly proven to know ways of doing things that she did not know about.

Juniority

One interviewee talked about seniority from a junior point of view. He claimed that the organization he works for did not have hierarchies, however, he also voiced some tentative concerns:

> The senior that I'm working with is also CEO (…) So it's like we just have the volume of contact that's necessary to keep up the work, um so it's like I work a lot on my own (…) If one was to put it like this, like, that I have a good place where I'm on top of my game, I think I'd been closer to that place if, um… if the project would have looked a bit different in terms of, like, um, the interaction between the project lead and me. [Elias]

That is, it seems as if he would have preferred to have closer interaction with the CEO, but that he did not think that he was in a position to place such demands. Arguably, it might be that similar kind of thoughts formed the background to another participant's statement when she said:

> I'm sure I've been a pain in the ass for my bosses, probably [*laughs lightly*] so, I guess it good for me (…) to be in the other position instead of just placing demands, like have all these opinions about what a boss should be like. [Elisabeth]

That is, she had dared to place demands although being junior, but therefore also, retrospectively, understood herself as someone who had been "a pain in the ass" for her superiors. Also, the participant whose attempt to claim seniority (on his own behalf) was discussed above, gave a lengthy account elaborating the consequences of his self-perceived young age and *juniority*, and the way he perceived that some of the firm's clients see him:

> When one enters and one is like twenty-five, twenty-seven and there's like some forty-year-old guy sitting there, and sees that, like they see that one is really young, then one has to have like plenty of, like craftsmanship (…) buy oneself a, like, um what's it called, eh buy [*drums lightly at table*] respect, or make them… have faith! Make them have faith in oneself (…) {How, then?} (…) Tune in, and pay attention to, like, um, know the details… so that one can show, like, make them notice that 'Yes, this guy knows what he's doing.' (…) Doing it once won't be enough. [Daniel]

The account shows how the interviewee, as a consequence of his perceived youth, makes deliberate attempts to appear credible when interacting with senior clients. That is, he has created a strategy for how to support himself. However, several female participants discussed the importance of seeking support in 'female networks' and how they had been able to find help, and discuss issues such as "how [one] should handle… um, older men, especially when being, like, a newly graduated female" [Linnea] with their mentors. Retrospective accounts were also made, often along lines such as "in general, in working life it's nice to become older because … it's not as difficult to have a conversation with a 50-60-year-old man anymore" [Lily] although one participant rather said that it was a "question of maturity" when he himself stopped thinking about his age [Lars].

However, one participant indicated that there might be benefits to juniority as well; she said that one is "spoiled" [Sofia] when one is perceived as young because one is expected to look for opportunities – and hence get them. She also added that she was very happy when she was recommended to apply for a job that she did not think she was qualified for – that is, when she discovered that she was perceived as more senior than she thought herself.

What one could, would or should do at certain times

If the previous sections mostly have been work-related, the coming one will cover how the participants expressed their views on their private as well as working life. One interviewee gave an account in which he both distanced himself from *and* understood himself in terms of age-related expectations:

> Um, like I joined as ju-junior at a consultancy firm when I was 29 and like if one thinks about those who go straight to business school from high school (…) Um, however, at the same time as I joined there was this other guy who joined as well and he's in my age, like, in a way, nowadays there's like no more… these standard paths (…) Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I had started… if I'd done like some of my friends. [Elias]

The statement includes interpersonal comparisons; however, two other interviewees rather shared their view on a specific event – to turn 30. The first one thought that the upcoming years would bring an undefined but significant change, and joked about an "upcoming life-crisis, or that one might reflect more on where [in life] one is. Now, it's like, one can feel as if, like 27, then one can have many years… left. 30 will be like, oh – soon I'll be 35!" [Daniel] while the other, talked about *having* turned 30:

> When one is like 30, it's like one crosses a certain line, then, one leaves one's twenties behind. Now it's time to, to… [*long pause*] how to put it – become, like, more mature in a way. Start thinking about getting married and having kids and stuff like that. [William]

Nonetheless, he *also* emphasized that he did not feel like bothering about societal expectations about what to do at certain ages – indicating that he holds an ambivalent view. Inverted perspectives where also represented: some participants articulated regrets of things they thought that they *should have* done. One participant thought that it was a pity that he never had been working or studying abroad, but could not see himself doing it anymore: "Uh… but now – no, now I'm too old, um… No, and it's risky business to say that I'm too old but [*sighs*; *long pause*] No, now that I've turned 60, 61 after all – no… it, that, that's for the next generation" [Per]. Hence, he indicated that he thought that he had crossed a line that ruled out certain life choices. The same strand of thoughts can be discerned in another account as well, which was given after the participant had laughed out loud when we asked if he would consider a change of career:

> I'll turn 66 in a few months, that is, I'm a retiree. So, like, no, I wouldn't consider it relevant. {So you don't want to work anymore?} Of course I do! I am working, like I could have retired (…) but I take advantage of the law. [Göran, pilot]

That is, although the participant worked full-time, he referred to himself as a retiree because of his age. Since he commented on Swedish law and said that he "takes advantage" of it, it seems as if he sensed that he had to explain and legitimize his choice to continue working.

Ideas about what (not) to do at certain ages were sometimes raised in relation to other people as well. Three participants made seniority claims (as well as claims of being older) and stated that they expected young individuals to work a lot (sometimes more than other employees). However, all of them returned to the fact that they understood that children, or a partner, might decrease employee availability, implicitly privileging *family* life. At the same time, one of the three participants was less enthusiastic about age-related expectations that he *himself* faced in the workplace. Discussing his upcoming retirement, he said that he did "not find it very positive" to receive questions about its scheduling, although he recognized that the information might be important to individuals "eager to succeed" him [Patrik].

Another participant also said that she sometimes contemplates what others would think if she would make an "unexpected" move: "In my career, like, what would it look like if I just quit and took three months off and applied for a new job? (…) Such thoughts, like, um, occupy my mind from time to time" [Sofia]. Her statement implies that she is aware of an 'outer gaze': that employers might evaluate one's (career) path. The outer gaze was recognized by another interviewee as well, who said that he was "pretty old [being 30]" when he started to look for work after his studies [Oskar]. Although he stressed that this gave him time "to mature" he also recognized that some employers probably would have perceived him as an "odd creature" at the time. Saying that the disinterest was mutual, he nevertheless underlined that he thinks it is a process that continues throughout working life: "It's almost considered unsightly not to change, um, jobs… like you should switch jobs because then you show that you are always looking for progress – I, I must say I don't approve". Hence, he recognized the implicit requirement of switching platforms that comes with the previously discussed development view on career.

The Other (generation)

Used to point out perceived benefits as well as shortcomings of age groups, the concept of 'generations' transpired from the interviews, and it was often self-identified (older) senior employees who discussed the 'younger generation'. A commonly held assumption was that young people had skills that the older generations lacked, and one participant discussed the perceived differences by listing what she perceived to be the benefits of having a young mentee: "well, I'm past 50 now… perhaps I don't always keep up with current developments in how to talk, think, like all these apps, systems" [Helena]. Another participant joined with the same view: "Your generation just enters and brings so much digitalization – like, it's part of your DNA (…) I'm sure you will have the same experience with younger generations, later, as well" [Viktoria]. However, the skills of the younger generation were also portrayed as coming at a cost: several interviewees who positioned themselves as senior said that a general tendency among young professionals was to seek managerial positions "straight away" [Viktoria]. One interviewee said that "young individuals (…) excel in verbal communication and they're… masters of everything… when they describe themselves,

but… um, but it doesn't always hold up in the real world" [Per]. Hence, he implied that young individuals overestimate their capacity – and are in a hurry. However, one participant partially contradicted the idea of 'young individuals being in a hurry' and stated that "the younger generation" – or rather "middle managers that are in their mid-thirties, are married and have a family" – are "unwilling to relocate" and place (too) high value on *private* life [Ingrid]. That is, she perceived that they *should* be more (career) hungry (as she implicitly suggested that her generation was). However, this is not the only generational difference she highlighted – she also underscored that she thinks that younger people are much more progressive in terms of gender equality and gave examples of situations in which she, as a female leader, felt as if she received elaborate support from young employees when old men in senior positions acted in disrespectful ways (for example, by not listening to her in meetings – although she is the CEO). In a similar vein, another participant also said that she considers the problematization of parental leave to be a "generational issue", although she pointed out that "it's at least the same for men and women now" [Ulrika] – that young wo/men now at least are equally discriminated on that matter. Nevertheless, several women in top positions made explanatory remarks, telling how support from partners or other family members had made their careers possible – no man felt a need to explain such matters (except telling us that they regretted *not* taking out parental leave). Further, it was not uncommon that female employees who discussed the difficulties that they had faced (or were currently facing) referred to how they gained strength and to some extent also *mandate* to act by thinking about younger women – that their own acts could make a difference to them. One interviewee thought that her own recognition of her visibility in a male dominated organization might have encouraged her to stay – to "perhaps be a role model, or the frontrunner younger women need" [Helena]. Another participant told how she found courage to rebuke a male subordinate just because she felt as if she owed it to her daughter [Lily]. In other words, when these individuals identified themselves as older women, they both felt responsible to act in certain ways and to some extent felt as if they had a greater mandate when also acting on the younger women's behalf.

6. Analysis

As our theoretical framework suggests, we analyze the interviews – the *discursive events* – by highlighting instances of *interdiscursivity* in order to identify both which *discourses* that are being drawn upon in the accounts, and how the participants portray discursive *interrelations* (Fairclough, 1993). In so doing, we show how emergent and established meanings are put in connection (Fairclough, 1993). We also show which *subject positions* the participants (try to) claim or distance themselves from, or ascribe to other individuals, when crafting their *identities* (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016; Törrönen, 2001). Furthermore, looking at subject positions we illustrate how participants are (not) able to exercise *agency* (Kuhn, 2009; Törrönen, 2001). Lastly, we combine the findings to map the *order of discourse* and show how it is permeated by *chrononormativity* (Fairclough, 1993; Freeman, 2010). That is, following Riach et al. (2014) we argue that the concept of chrononormativity, accounted for in the literature review, can help to explain how subject positions (and their corresponding norms for appropriate [discursive] action) change with time, that is, change in tandem with the way the individuals' chronological age is both created and understood within discourse.

A discourse on development

The discursive implication of asking the participants about their view on 'career' is that we *interpellated* them with the textbook discourse on career, which due to its implicit assumptions of occupational (hierarchical) progress represents chrononormativity in the workplace, working "as an organizing process in itself" (Riach et al., 2014: 1692). However, most participants partially rejected our attempt by drawing on an emergent discourse of individual development. In this discourse, old ideas about 'traditional career' were acknowledged, but in terms of what the individuals personally were distancing themselves from, which can be seen as a form of negation of the perceived challenging position (Billig [1991], as cited in Törrönen, 2001). Drawing on the emergent discourse, the participants indirectly claimed agency: they often portrayed it as if they, themselves, now were the drivers of their own careers. That is, they claimed subject positions in which they were active agents in their individual development "becom[ing] better and better" at what they were doing, rather than *subject to* ideas of "better titles, better salary." However, since the discourse reserves a (prominent) subject position for those who *do* develop, it – in a dichotomous manner – implicitly reserves another one for those who do *not*. The implicit demands of the discourse on development, as well as the fact that participants tried to resist the latter of the two positions, are discernable if one looks at accounts given by participants who had been employed within the same company for a longer period of time. These participants often negotiated their own lack of tangible aspects or artifacts indicating their developmental mobility or progress, for example, a CV. However, to resist the less desirable subject position of *un*-development, they tweaked the developmental discourse and tried to claim a subject position where they, themselves, came to represent progression and movement. Thus, they claimed agency by drawing on additional discourses of individualism, for example, individual capacity and

inherent leadership ability, to communicate how their presumably static position still included development. Examples of accounts representing this subject position are statements of "having inherent drive" or "*being* a leader". However, one participant subordinated himself to a combination of the textbook and developmental discourses on career, and depicted himself as being in a position deprived of agency when he said that he found that he had "painted [himself] into a corner" where he no longer was able to make choices. Nonetheless, an alternative reading is that the same participant (who *also* said that he practically is a retiree *although* he is still working: "Of course I am") was resisting both discourses altogether by no longer relating himself to the labor market, but rather claiming to be a retiree who has made a deliberate choice to continue working – which in turn gives freedom to choose although at the cost of situating oneself in the (presumably declining) end of the chronological spectrum (Andrews, 1999; Freeman, 2010). In fact, both readings point to a further circumstance, namely that the requirements the developmental discourse places on the subject – that it should always be on the move, developing itself or change platforms – incorporates normative assumptions similar to the textbook discourse on career, that the participants sought to challenge in the first place. That is, also the developmental discourse places chrononormative demands on subjects, since the way to gain legitimacy as a 'developing subject' is to manage oneself and to aim for constant improvement – that one should always try to become "a better version" of oneself. When this idea gains foothold, there is a risk that the 'natural' choice will be to monitor one's own behavior since lack of mobility will be perceived as deviant and therefore less desirable. Most likely, this contributed to the distress one participant felt about the symbolic meaning of having experienced his own aging within one and the same company: that it made him "gloomy" to think about that he "entered as young and [will] exit as old."

Discourses assigning subjects age

As we showed in the empirical section, although participants tried to separate juniority from young age and seniority from old age, the concepts were repeatedly conflated and acquired meaning in relation to each other in a slightly dichotomous manner. We further argue that it is possible to discern that ideas of seniority, juniority and (appropriate) working life are inherently social and related to identity – the potential 'problems' that the participants described almost exclusively related to how oneself could or would be seen by others (that is, what discourses others would draw on and hence what subject position one would be interpellated into, and what degree of agency one hence would obtain). Here, just as in the empirical section, age related terms such as 'young' or 'old' refer to how the participants self-identified and/or used the terms to talk about other individuals or groups. 'Juniority' and 'seniority' are used to illustrate what the participants indicated that they were recognized as by other social actors (which coincided with their formal positions, if not otherwise denoted).

While critical studies of age have emphasized how 'old age' has been marginalized and turned into a 'problem' within public as well as scientific discourses (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004), our empirical material point in another direction. In fact, younger participants never drew on discourses that related older

people or older generations to problems, but older participants often commented on younger ones – and this was done in positive as well as in negative terms. For example, older participants drew on discourses on technology and on generations, thus assigning chronologically young people a desirable subject position (however, although the position is desirable it is also characterized by constrained agency due to its static rather than dynamic character); individuals from the 'young generation' were assumed to be inherently skilled in areas like IT and digitalization. However, in relation to a discourse on maturity (a discourse which all participants – irrespective of chronological age – related to desirable aspects of growing older, since it in broad terms was understood as 'decreased distress and greater personal insight') some older individuals claimed a dominant position towards younger individuals, who were portrayed as being *too* much in a hurry for promotion or as if not fully understanding their own shortcomings. That is, in some instances older individuals drew on the discourse of maturity in order to claim a subject position characterized by greater trustworthiness (they implicitly implied that *they* would not say something they could not live up to, and that they 'knew' themselves), in relation to which younger individuals were perceived in terms of their partial *lack*. In fact, Andrews (1999: 303) distinguishes ageism from sexism and racism since "those who practice it will one day join the group they presently discriminate against" and our analysis shows that this might hold true other way around: individuals who perceived themselves as *having* been part of an age group drew on discourses on generations, which in combination with a discourse on maturity provided a legitimate foundation to comment on 'young people'. One of the participants recognized this herself when she gave an account on her own previous and others current juniority/young age: she both recognized that discrimination against young individuals "exist" *and* (using her own work as an example) elaborated on the fact that she could not determine whether the trustworthiness claims by older individuals – and the perceived dichotomous *lack* among younger ones – were reasonable or not.

Chrononormativity

The participants who self-identified as young often drew on discourses on family life, and some associated their own age with certain (constrained or pre-determined) courses of action: that they should "start thinking about getting married and having kids." Part of the power of this discourse crystallizes if one looks at the way some senior and/or older participants drew on it; family life was treated as a legitimate reason for employees to decrease their availability at work – availability that younger employees otherwise were expected to provide. That is, discourses on work and the one on family life imply expectations about productivity, but the latter ascribes young individuals (who are presumed to be the ones who are building a family) a position through which they can partially resist the productivity claims of the former one. This further implies that those who do *not* subscribe to family life, but would like to opt for other life courses, are left without a recognized source of resistance. In fact, ambivalent views on what was recognized as "societal expectations" *were* common, implying that several participants acknowledged that they experienced fragmented subject positions. They were both located in the (chrononormative) discourse on family life (or career) *and* in an emergent critical discourse, which they could draw on when seeking to illustrate

that they were aware of (had agency in relation to) the mechanisms of the former discourse(s). For example, one participant compared himself to his own friends, who had entered working life at a younger age than he had. While he acknowledged that he might have 'broken' the chrononormative chain and pointed out that he did not think that there are any "standard paths" nowadays, he implicitly recreated the idea of chrononormative paths by relating and understanding his own experience as a contrast to those of his (presumably normative) friends.

As we stated above, a social perspective – or an 'outer gaze' – was acknowledged in a great amount of the accounts. One (young) participant reflected on what it would 'look like' if she would quit her job and then travel for a while before she would look for new employment. She implicitly seemed to evaluate her situation drawing on the chrononormative developmental discourse, which implicitly demands that the subject should frame all steps it has taken in a way that can be understood in terms of personal development. From such a point of view travelling is not of the map, but it must be presented in productive ways, which in turn constrains agency. Another participant went a step further, when he introduced the "odd creature" when talking about the way he thought that he was seen by some employers when he applied for his first qualified job at the chronological age of 30, thus breaking the chrononormative order of textbook (and developmental) versions of career. Rather than representing a subject position, the "odd creature" is introduced as a symbol/actor in itself (or something that is 'alien' in Martin's [1990] terms) and the way it is introduced suggests that subjects that are being associated with the symbol are expected to be unpredictable and hence less trustworthy (c.f. the discussion on young individuals above). Nevertheless, it is important that the same participant exercised moderate resistance when he positioned the employers who associated him with the "odd creature" as 'others' (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013) – that he was not interested in working for them anyways.

In the example of the odd creature the lack of trustworthiness stems from unpredictability in terms of chronological employment path, and in fact, another participant introduced further symbolism in relation to what might happen *after* work life – jokingly portraying it as 'death'. However, the impact of this symbol was immediately downplayed, since the participant – pointing to other individuals – argued that it would still be possible to continue working, although to a more limited extent. This (discursive) action could possibly be connected to an ambivalent position within both the discourse of 'old age as a problem' *and* a critical discourse similar to the one discussed above, which an additional participant drew on when he acknowledged that it is "risky business to say that I'm too old" but further declared that certain life choices were "for the next generation". However, both of these participants concluded that they would still choose to work even if they did not have to, which arguably implies that they situate themselves as active agents vis a vis "'others', the old people" (Healey [1994: 82], as cited in Andrews, 1999: 307).

Doing age

Citing Hewitt (2008), Spedale (2019: 43) writes that experience is an "ambiguous and vague concept, and its usefulness for organizational effectiveness is paradoxical: while praised as a source of increased productivity and as intellectual capital, it is identified as a potential barrier to the acquisition of new knowledge and an obstacle to adaptability and flexibility". Based on the empirical material, the idea of experience – and its paradoxical connotations – contribute to the meanings that the maturity discourse ascribes to the process of becoming older. Several senior and older participants drew on this discourse, stating that they did not want to "stagnate" even though they had extensive experience in their fields. In fact, this is something that participants who passed as senior or older had to actively resist: being assigned (as well as claiming) a position of seniority within the developmental discourse on career, they both enjoyed the privileges of a dominant position – could "leverage some capital"– *and* risked being seen as 'unable to change'. Thus, several participants tried to exercise agency by discursively indicating that they recognized what 'bad seniority' looks like and by actively drawing on the development discourse to indicate movement rather than stagnation. In line with what Riach and Kelly (2015) previously have argued, this shows that characteristics that first appear positive, such as experience and maturity, do not fit the businesses discourses of today. Here, the subjects must mask themselves as agents of change in order to be successful in their attempts to claim 'positive' seniority.

Nevertheless, some senior participants stated that they either actively tried to "move away from age related thinking" or that it had been a question of "maturity" when they stopped thinking about their own age. However, other accounts from one of these persons indicated that such discourses of 'agelessness' proved difficult to act on in practice; the person who sought to move away from "age related thinking" (herself), still acknowledged that ideas about young age and juniority (and old age and seniority) overlap, and that individuals – whether they want it or not – are subject to normative assumptions about development. That is, she acknowledged that "all of a sudden, I was [seen as] senior", hence indicating that the transit was not her choice but rather *assigned* to her. The statement further implies that she perceived that there is no turning back from assigned seniority – perhaps because one cannot change one's physical indicators of age (without surgery) and hence one's assumed seniority. However, another interviewee gave accounts that pointed to how individuals themselves contribute to ideas about 'static seniority'. That is, she accounted for how difficulties sometimes arise when individuals try to transit from a senior to a junior role (when shifting industry): "things often become complicated because one has acquired a… a salary, a responsibility, an identity (…) [that in turn make it hard] to relate to those who have the same role – and are a lot younger." We argue that the account indicates that individuals making such anti-chrononormative career moves risk being associated (and associate themselves) with the symbol of the odd creature, which, in turn, arguably seems to be perceived as worse than being a 'stagnated senior'. Indeed, the same participant said that such career moves seldom worked out in practice.

Lastly, one participant who was appointed a 'senior title' is an example of the difficulty to *claim* seniority when one is chronologically young and hence bear such visible age markers. The participant gave

extensive accounts of how he (discursively) worked to claim the trustworthiness he was perceived as lacking (due to his young age) in interaction with older and senior clients. He illustrated how he tried to do his (young) age in a credible and trustworthy manner, further indicating that social interaction at work demanded extensive effort from his side. That is, he showed how he cannot solely focus on the actual work (task) at hand but also must manage the social framing, by asking the right kind of leading questions and by not making any demands. Similar thoughts were expressed by another junior participant, who had the company CEO as his project lead. Although it was obvious that he would have preferred to design the work differently, he was very careful to express his view in a distanced manner, talking about the "volume" of contact and preferable "places" rather than his own first-hand experience (which could have made it sound as if he was placing demands).

A gendering discourse of competence

A strand of ideas submerging from a large share of the interviews point in a clear direction: even though we did not prepare any specifically gender related questions, a majority of the female professionals gave accounts in which they showed how they had been gendered as women in specific situations or throughout their working lives. Thus, at some point of their careers, they had been forced to think about what their perceived femininity (or loss thereof) meant at work, and what strategies to employ in order to counter other's preconceptions. Based on the accounts of the participants, we use the concept of femininity to discuss what it 'means' to be identified and identify as a woman, which based on the empirics relate to questions of whether or not women 'belong' in authoritative positions in the workplace (a gendering discourse on competence) (for a discussion of how femininity and masculinity has been theorized, see e.g., Alvesson and Due Billing, 2009, or Connell and Pearse, 2015).

In partial accordance with Ainsworth (2002), and Clarke and Griffin's (2008) findings on the invisibility of older female employees, our empirical findings and analysis suggest that those perceived to belong to the category of 'young women' often were gendered (interpellated as women rather than professionals), while those perceived to be 'older women' rather lost their "female appeal" and therefore became invisible as *women*, a form of reversed gendering. The times when the actors who had made the interpellations were mentioned, they were identified as men. However, the reversed gendering part of growing older was considered to be (partially) positive by the female participants themselves. Because when they had been perceived as aesthetically and chronologically young, they had also been "seen more as a woman than a leader" which had been ruling out the possibility of being seen as a "decision-maker". Thus, growing older as a woman was often depicted within discourses of both work and femininity: growing older and the lack of agency inherent in being a feminized employee ('not belonging in an authoritative position') gave way to a position deprived of femininity. That position in turn entailed greater authority and hence (work related) agency – less effort had to be spent at the "handling [of] older men". However, as the accounts of another participant imply, there is another line in this equation. The participant told that due to the way her femininity made her power hyper-visible in some situations, she had to avoid

meetings with certain subordinates to not to dampen discussions (that is, she was indirectly punished). Nevertheless, she also had to meet with a coach to handle an older man who employed "master suppression techniques" to undermine her authority. The only man who discussed similar strategies was the one who engaged in extensive discursive work to claim trustworthiness in client meetings (due to his perceived young age). Arguably, this implies that while one man negotiated his age due to the implications of being perceived as young, most of the women had continued to negotiate their age throughout their working lives. However, the participant who gave the account on "master suppression techniques" was also cautious when she voiced her thoughts, and almost took responsibility for the man's actions saying that she believed that he was not "mean" and probably just did not "know any other way to work." Such care for others, or responsibility claims, were also seen in accounts made by three other women, who – half joking, half serious – understood themselves as 'troublesome ones' since they had been placing demands on their managers. Since no man made self-referencing comments along such lines, it would seem as if the women had accepted their 'exceptional' position at least to the extent that they were monitoring their own actions, which implies restricted agency (since the possible/positive interpretations of their behavior are constrained). This adds on to the types of work that (junior) women must take on to be seen as professionals and leaders and is a finding in line with Martin (1990) who argues that assumptions of legitimacy of authority favour men rather than women.

Summary

Our analysis has revealed how chrononormativity unites (or permeates) several discourses that assign subjects age. First, we have shown how the participants drew on an emergent developmental discourse on career in order to challenge traditional ideas about hierarchical climbing. However, we have also shown that this resistance comes at a price: even the developmental discourse incorporates normative expectations on individual progress – the developing subject is not allowed to stay content with the way things are but must aim for change and mobility. This provides a partial explanation as to why characteristics that often are depicted as positive, like experience and maturity, risk deteriorating into a problem.

Second, the analysis also indicates that older participants often commented on younger ones, drawing on discourses on technology and generations, in which they assigned chronologically young people desirable but static subject positions. However, drawing on an additional discourse on maturity, the older participants claimed subject positions characterized by greater trustworthiness (anchored in the idea that they knew themselves), which they thus expected younger individuals to lack. However, due to the risks associated with (stagnated) maturity, several older participants underscored that they recognized what 'bad seniority' looks like and actively adhered to the development discourse (hence reinforcing the discourse causing their partially undesirable position).

Third, several participants also drew on a critical discourse recognizing societal expectations, in order to illustrate that they were aware of (had agency in relation to) the mechanisms of the discourses on work (productivity) and on family life. Nonetheless, participants who had (or had been thinking of) breaking

the chrononormative employment path, still recognized that others (mostly employers) might perceive them as unpredictable "odd creatures".

Fourth, the analysis found that most women, and to some extent young men, were forced to actively engage in 'age performance' in order to appear authoritative and/or trustworthy within a discourse of competence. The accounts by the young man indicate that interaction with senior clients demands extensive effort from his side, while work and femininity discourses characterized female participants' experiences of growing older. In other words, young femininity was related to an experience of constrained agency (one was not seen as authoritative), but visible markers of growing older flipped the coin: they were not seen as *women* anymore, and could thus act as decision-makers, implying that less effort had to be spent on "handling older men". This finding represents a partial contrast to earlier studies that have argued that older women's invisibility would contribute to their discrimination (Clarke and Griffin, 2008; Duncan and Loretto, 2004).

Lastly, and as a concluding remark, we want to comment on a 'silence' (Martin, 1990) that was discovered at the end of the analysis. That is, we realized that some participants were underrepresented in accounts where doings of age had been identified, and a cross-referencing of those participants' chronological ages indicated that most of them had entered their thirties, but not yet their forties. Thus, we (tentatively) interpret this silence as an indication of that these individuals, due to not being perceived or perceiving themselves as either 'young' or 'old', could avoid doing their age due to their close proximity to an 'ageless' (Andrews, 1999) ideal.

7. Conclusion

By conducting our study, we have contributed to theory development on age as a social process by unpacking taken-for-granted ideas about age and by shedding light on ways in which age is done among working Swedish professionals. The analysis has shown that age is done within and through a developmental discourse on career, a discourse on maturity and a (gendering) discourse on competence (or rather, what competence presumably looks like). Especially the discourses on development and maturity are permeated by chrononormative assumptions, and although participants drew on a critical discourse to recognize chronological norms, they were still not able to resist them: attempts to counter the norm served to partially recreate it (which echoes previous work questioning the victim-perpetrator divide in terms of age inequality, see Riach and Kelly, 2015). In conclusion, we argue that the doing of age is characterized by constrained agency: the participants only did their age when they found themselves interpellated into subject positions deviating from the 'silent' (Martin, 1990) and 'ageless' (Andrews, 1999) norm. That is, it was only when the participants identified themselves as 'too junior' (and hence not trustworthy) or 'too senior' (and hence at the verge of stagnation) that they worked their way towards a more desirable – and less *aged* – position.

Limitations and further research

Since it has been argued that age resides in the intersection (Carbado et al., 2013) of multiple social categories (Riach and Cutcher, 2014), it is possible that we have highlighted some accounts (on gender) at the expense of others (for example, on class and ethnicity). Since the focus on gender stemmed from the empirical material itself (that is, it was not pre-defined), it is likely that a different participant selection would have granted a different result: only two participants (succinctly) drew on discourses of 'migration' or 'non-Swedish parents' and most, if not all, participants held positions associated with the middle or upper class (a consequence of our focus on professionals). Although some participants briefly commented on previous economic struggle, none of the participants drew on discourses of job insecurity and we would argue that the doings of age might look different in environments were reorganization and job loss are perceived to be an immediate risk (see e.g., Riach and Kelly, 2015).

Furthermore, we are aware that we criticized other studies on the ground of only studying individuals of 'old age' (for a problematization, see e.g., Hales and Riach, 2017), but that we (partially) have slid into an age dualism ourselves. However, we would argue that an additional finding lurks in the silence (Martin, 1990) that surrounds the participants who were neither the chronologically oldest nor youngest: it would seem as if it was not necessary for them to do their ages at all – and we further argue that such effortlessness is what characterizes a norm. Hence, we invite further studies to (specifically) investigate the ways in which the 'ageless' and so called 'middle-aged' individuals do when they avoid doing their age (in other words, the age-related equivalent to studies of dominant forms of masculinity, see e.g., Connell and Pearse, 2015).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Study invitation (originally in Swedish)

Hi – would you like to contribute to our study on working life?

Our names are Elin Hunger and Anni-Maria Loukasmäki and we are second year Master students of Business and Management at the Stockholm School of Economics. We are currently working with our thesis in organization studies, a project in which we aim to explore how employees (or managers) perceive, and have perceived, themselves in relation to work and workplaces at different stages of their careers. Hence, we are looking for research participants who would like to conduct an interview with us; participation does not require any pre-defined work experience. Rather, we are looking for individuals who have been working for varying lengths of time, and we would like the the interview conversations to cover topics that the participants themselves consider important.

Do you want to participate?

If you sign up for participation, we will accommodate the date and location to fit your schedule – each interview will last for about one hour (we intend to conduct the interviews during March this year). During the research process and when reporting on the results, we will anonymize your name as well as the name of the company you work for. However, you are welcome to take part of our final report if you are interested in the study findings.

This is an invitation to participate in a study about working life and one's perception of the stages in one's career. If you have a preference for conducting an interview in English, or want to receive more information in English, it can certainly be arranged – just send us an email.

If you would like to know more about our research or want to sign up for the study, you can reach out on: elin@email.com.
You can also call Elin: +46 123 456 789.

We are looking forward to hearing from you!

Appendix 2: Interview guide (originally in Swedish)

Statements or questions marked "»" were always made or asked, questions marked "o" were asked in some interviews but not others, depending on how the conversation evolved. During the two telephone interviews, the drawing exercise as well as related questions (marked in grey font below) were excluded for practical reasons (i.e. mainly section 3).

Introduction to the research project

- » Degree project, Master students of Business and Management, Stockholm School of Economics.
- » We aim to explore how one perceives, and have perceived, oneself and one's work throughout working life, and we are interviewing people who have been working for various lengths of time.
- » Your experiences are what matter to us – we invite you tell us about your spontaneous thoughts and ideas. There are no "right" or "wrong" responses.
- » If you want to, we can send you the final report.
- » We will change all names in the final report (both given and company names).
- » Would it be okay if Elin records the interview on her phone, so that we can transcribe the conversation to make sure it is correctly represented?

1. What do you work with here?

- » What is your role?
- o How do you work here?
    - o What does a usual work day look like for you?
- o What competences are you looking for when you are recruiting?
- o How common is it that colleagues quit?
    - o What do they usually do then?

2. Your working life

- o Have you always worked within the same field?
    - o Your studies?
- o Have you received advice on how to manage your work life (that you tend to think of)?
- o What would you say that "career" means to you?
    - o Is "career" something you think about?

3. Self-presentation: "This is me"

- Would you also like to conduct a small drawing exercise as part of the interview, it takes just a few minutes?
- We wonder if you would like to make a sketch of your life – you might include your workplace, your hobbies, or places and people that are important to you.
- If you prefer, you can choose to write instead.

The instruction printed on the piece of paper the interviewee used stated: "Self-presentation: 'This is me'. You may include your workplace, your hobbies, or places and people that are important to you – you decide what to include, and whether you prefer to write or draw."

4.Self presentation: Questions

- Would you like to tell us about your drawing?
- Hobbies?
- How do you do to allocate time between for example work, hobbies, friends or family?
- What do you think this picture would look like if you would make a new one, in a situation ten years from now?
- Have you ever felt that other people have certain expectations on you because of your age?
    - Would you say that you feel as if you are "of your age"?
- When was the last time you reflected on someone else's age?
- Have you been thinking about what you would like to do when you have stopped working?

5. To summarize

» Would you like to summarize your experiences by formulating an advice, directed to someone who lacks your experiences?
» Is there something you would like to ask us, or something that you would like to add?
» Can we get back to you if we have any questions?

Table 2: List of research participants

	Pseudonym	Age*	Works in business type	Interviewer(s)	Duration	Location
1	Astrid	50	B2C goods and services	EH & AML	70 min	Interviewee's home
2	Daniel	20	Consulting	EH	80 min	Interviewee's office
3	Elias	20	Consulting	AML	80 min	Interviewee's office
4	Elisabeth	30	B2B goods and services	EH & AML	60 min	Interviewee's office
5	Fredrik	30	B2C goods and services	EH & AML	45 min	Interviewee's office
6	Göran	60	B2C goods and services	EH & AML	70 min	Interviewee's home (pilot)
7	Helena	50	B2B goods and services	EH & AML	40 min	Interviewee's office
8	Håkan	50	B2B goods and services	EH & AML	65 min	Interviewee's office
9	Ingrid	50	B2B goods and services	EH	60 min	Telephone
10	Johanna	50	Consulting	EH & AML	65 min	Interviewee's office
11	Lars	50	Investments	EH	40 min	Telephone
12	Lily	30	Consulting	EH & AML	110 min	Sthlm School of Econ.
13	Linnea	30	B2C goods and services	EH & AML	45 min	Interviewee's office
14	Oskar	50	Consulting	EH & AML	80 min	Interviewee's office
15	Patrik	60	B2B goods and services	EH & AML	70 min	Interviewee's office
16	Per	60	Investments	EH & AML	65 min	Interviewee's office
17	Sofia	20	B2B goods and services	AML	55 min	Interviewee's office
18	Therese	40	Consulting	EH & AML	80 min	Interviewee's office
19	Ulrika	40	B2B goods and services	EH & AML	50 min	Interviewee's office
20	Viktoria	40	Consulting	EH & AML	70 min	Interviewee's office
21	William	30	Consulting	EH	55 min	Interviewee's office

* We follow an expression common among participants when referring to age, that is, in terms of what age they had 'passed'. For example, if the table sates an age of 40, the individual has 'passed 40 but not 50'.