

Ageism, Age Relations, and Garment Industry Work in Montreal

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This study examined the complexities of age relations at work. Garment workers believed that their fate was linked to ageism and that their work experience was discounted by management. Managers wanted to be rid of older workers because they commanded higher wages than younger workers. The issue was cost reduction, and age was implicated unintentionally. Still, managers seemed to use stereotypical images to discourage older workers and they did not organize work routines to facilitate the adaptation of them. Instead, they subcontracted the easy jobs, relying on the experience of the older employees for difficult work while not adapting the workplace. Theoretically, the authors argue that ageism and age discrimination can best be understood through a recognition of the importance of structured age relations and human agency.

Key Words: *Age discrimination, Inequality, Gender, Class, Ethnicity*

In response to the widespread recessions of the early 1980s and 1990s and the simultaneous increase in global trade and competition, many firms developed restructuring strategies that were aimed at reducing "excessive" labor costs (Harrison, 1994; Menzies, 1996; Rifkin, 1995). The specific strategies used depended on the characteristics of the industry or firm. Some organizations moved their production plants from Canada or the United States to countries, such as Mexico or Brazil, where labor costs are lower (Hardy, Hazelrigg, & Quadagno, 1996; Leach & Winsen, 1995). Others declared bankruptcy and then opened a few months later under a different name and with a nonunionized, less expensive labor force

(Marshall, 1997; McMullin, 1996). Still others have used early retirement incentives or attractive severance packages as a means of eliminating the "dead wood" within a firm (Hardy et al., 1996). Regardless of the particular business strategy, rightsizing, downsizing, and restructuring are the buzz words used to signify the elimination of jobs and the termination of workers in a company's quest to become more competitive and profitable within the context of contemporary capitalism. These words have translated into loss of employment for thousands of people in Canada and the United States (Advisory Group on Working Time and the Distribution of Work, 1994).

Moore provided some indication of the magnitude of job displacement in the United States, estimating that "roughly two to three million people were displaced each year from 1982 to 1991" (Moore, 1996, p. 20). The volume of, and reasons for, displacement varied by changes in the business cycle, with displacement increasing during recessionary periods. However, many firms use recessionary layoffs as a means to downsize their workforce. Indicators of social class (e.g., occupation, education, wage level), as well as industry, gender, race, and age are among the factors that are associated with the likelihood of job displacement (Couch, 1998; Gardner, 1993; Herz, 1990; Kinsella & Gist, 1995; Kletzer, 1991; Lauzon, 1995). Persons in lower social classes are generally at a greater risk of job displacement than are those in higher social classes, and workers in goods-producing industries tend to be at greater risk of job displacement than those in other industries (Gardner, 1993; Herz, 1990; Lauzon, 1995). Men are more likely than women to be displaced from their jobs, and in the United States Black and Hispanic workers are at a greater risk of job displacement than are White workers (Gardner, 1993; Herz, 1990; Kletzer, 1991). Finally, younger and older workers are more likely to be displaced than are workers in the middle age groups (Gardner, 1993, 1995; Lauzon, 1995).

Among these factors, age is perhaps the most understudied dimension of inequality within sociology in general, and within the subfield of work and occupations in particular. Very little is known about the role that age plays in disadvantaging certain groups of people relative to others within labor markets. In fact, whereas youth unemployment has emerged as a policy and research issue over the last decade, older dis-

This article draws on a case study conducted by the Issues of an Aging Workforce Project and funded by the Innovations Fund of Human Resources Development Canada to Victor W. Marshall, Principal Investigator. The research could not have been conducted without the support of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (now UNITE), G. Roy, Canadian director, and the Quebec Fashion Apparel Manufacturer's Guild, S. Purcell, executive director. We also thank J. Wineman, director, Retiree Services Department of UNITE, and the garment workers, company owners, and union officials in Montreal who took part in the study. The research team for the design, data collection, and analysis in this case study included J. Edwardh, A. Ford, S. LeBlanc, and the authors.

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placed workers tend to be overlooked (Couch, 1998; LeBlanc & McMullin, 1997). This remains true even though unemployment rates among older workers increased between 1980 and 1990 in most industrialized countries and the unemployment rates among male workers aged 55 to 59 were higher than the unemployment rates among male workers aged 25 to 54 (Canada, Spain, Sweden, and the United States are exceptions here; Gardner, 1995; Kinsella & Gist, 1995; Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 1995; Schellenberg, 1994). Further, older workers have longer durations of unemployment (approximately 20 weeks among men and 15 weeks among women in the United States) than younger workers (approximately 15 weeks among men and 10 weeks among women in the United States; Kinsella & Gist, 1995; Love & Torrence, 1989) and tend to be overrepresented among discouraged workers (in the United States, older male workers represent 8% of economically active men and 28% of discouraged male workers; older female workers represent 7% of economically active women and 21% of discouraged female workers) (Kinsella & Gist, 1995). Further, if and when older, unemployed workers find a job, their reemployment earnings are less (Love & Torrence, 1989).

Employment and displacement statistics shed little light on the circumstances of the workers themselves or on their perceptions of job loss. Further, age patterns in job displacement are often interpreted as cohort effects. Researchers have suggested that older workers are at a greater risk of job displacement when compared with middle-aged workers because as a group they are less educated and are disproportionately employed in industries that have been the hardest hit by restructuring. Although cohort effects are important, other factors such as ageism may contribute to later-life job displacement and to other detrimental aspects of older workers' lives. In this article we address the role that ageism plays in garment industry work and displacement. Before turning to the data, we consider what ageism is and how it might be conceptualized.

What is Ageism?

Although ageism can refer to "any prejudice or discrimination against or in favor of an age group" (Palmore, 1990, p.15), the term has generally been used to denote systematic negative stereotyping of and discrimination against older people simply because they are old (Butler, 1969; Vincent, 1995). Ageism frequently rests on a conceptualization of age in chronological years and is thus defined as "the attribution of characteristics, abilities, limitations or events to the mere passing of time" (Bodily, 1991, p. 258). Ageism involves beliefs (e.g., old people are ugly, sickly, and unproductive) and attitudes (e.g., general preferences for youth and being young rather than old) that often translate into discriminatory action (Bytheway, 1995; Palmore, 1990). Ageist beliefs and attitudes may not, in and of themselves, be harmful. However, age discrimination occurs if these beliefs and atti-

tudes legitimate "the use of chronological age to mark out classes of people who are systematically denied resources and opportunities that others enjoy, and who suffer the consequences of such denigration, ranging from well-meaning patronage to unambiguous vilification" (Bytheway, 1995, p.14). Thus, there are two interconnected dimensions of ageism: an ageist ideology, which includes negative stereotypes, beliefs, and attitudes, and age discrimination, which is behavior that excludes certain people and places them in a disadvantaged situation relative to others on the basis of their chronological age.

In Western societies, ageism occurs within families and households, government agencies, health care systems, and waged labor markets (Laws, 1995; Palmore, 1990). Many government regulations and programs are established or interpreted with a particular age group in mind and thus inadvertently discriminate against persons in other age groups (Laws, 1995; LeBlanc & McMullin, 1997; Palmore, 1990). Job retraining programs are a good example of this type of discrimination because they are generally targeted toward people of "employable" ages or of specific gender, racial, or disability statuses (LeBlanc & McMullin, 1997).

In this article we focus on ageism that occurs within the context of waged labor markets (Laws, 1995; Palmore, 1990), one example of which is the practice of mandatory retirement. Although mandatory retirement is prohibited in the United States by the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA), certain occupations (e.g., airline pilots) are exempt from this legislation. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that individuals are equal under the law without discrimination on the basis of age, but only three provinces have legislation prohibiting age discrimination, making mandatory retirement an acceptable practice in the other provinces (McPherson, 1998). Hence, mandatory retirement policy is one example of age discrimination, whereby people are disadvantaged on the basis of chronological age rather than ability.

Beyond these mandatory retirement issues, some evidence suggests that age discrimination in employment may be relatively widespread. Between 1967 (when the ADEA was enacted) and 1983, millions of dollars in compensation were awarded to thousands of Americans for age discrimination in employment (Atchley, 1988). National surveys conducted in the United States in the 1980s suggested that 80% of Americans in general and 61% of employers in particular believe that "most employers discriminate against older people and make it difficult for them to find work" (Atchley, 1988, p. 268). Similarly, a recent Canadian survey of counselors in government unemployment offices across the country found that 84% moderately or strongly agree that "employers discriminate against older workers in hiring practices" (Underhill, Marshall, & Delencourt, 1997, p. 3). Further, older workers may be overlooked for promotions or fired, simply on the basis of their age (Falk & Falk, 1997; Palmore, 1990; Rodeheaver, 1992).

Very little research has examined the extent or nature of ageism within the workplace and research that has done so often has located the problem at an individual level; individuals are held to discriminate against others because they hold prejudicial attitudes and stereotypes about them. But, as the following section shows, ageism is not fully determined by ideologies and their component stereotypes and attitudes. Rather, social structural issues influence and shape ageism within many contexts, including that of paid work.

Rethinking Ageism: Structured Age Relations and Waged Labor Markets

There is little doubt that ageist beliefs, held by individuals, play a role in determining the nature of ageism within waged labor markets. However, as with sexism and racism there is likely a significant structural component to ageism that is not captured by ideology alone. Two approaches to this issue have informed our analysis. The first approach is from Laws (1995), who, from a postmodernist perspective, moved toward a discussion of ageist structures by discussing ageism in relation to oppression and power relations. Drawing on the work of Young (1990), Laws argued that oppressed older people are subject to marginalization, violence, powerlessness, exploitation, and cultural imperialism, all historically and geographically situated or grounded in sites of ageism such as families and households, government agencies, health care systems, and waged labor markets.

Throughout her analysis, Laws placed emphasis on the conceptualization of "age as a social relation, one dimension of a complex set of relations between people" (Laws, 1995, p. 112). According to Laws, age relations structure ageism that "like racism and sexism, is a form of prejudice, a form of oppression that not only limits people who are the object of that oppression but which also shapes perceptions of people, both young and old, who hold ageist attitudes" (Laws, 1995, p. 113). Regarding ageism in waged labor markets, Laws noted that later life labor force exit has defined old age at an ideological level, which produces and reproduces the institution of retirement. She discussed ageism as the marginalization and powerlessness that older and retired workers experience and as the material losses that these workers face in retirement.

In the literature on aging and social inequality, political economy theorists have located social structure at the heart of their analyses, and this approach is the second upon which our analysis rests. Political economy theorists have explained the relative situation of older individuals by focusing on the interrelationship between the economy, the polity, and the ideological structures that these systems of domination construct and reconstruct. In this approach, age discrimination (behavior) is not viewed as a simple consequence of ageist ideology (attitudes based on negative stereotypes). Nor are ageist attitudes or age discriminatory policies seen as direct results of an in-

ability of the individual to adjust to aging, naturally diminishing physical or mental capacities. Rather, political economists have attributed age discrimination to the structural characteristics of the state, the economy, and inequalities in the distribution and allocation of resources that these institutions create (Estes, 1979, 1991; Guillemard, 1983; Myles, 1984, 1989; Phillipson, 1982, 1998; Townsend, 1981, 1986; Walker, 1981). Ageism may be a consequence of, or provide a legitimating ideological foundation for, discriminatory age patterns.

The social construction of age as an organizing feature of social life is recognized in the political economy approach, and structural factors that limit the opportunities of older adults are at the core of these analyses. However, the approach tends to reduce the analysis of ageism and social inequality in later life to issues of social class. Like Marx (1967; Marx & Engels, 1970), political economy of aging researchers have emphasized the relations of production in their conceptualization of social class, because these relations structure behavior and privilege between those who own the means of production and those who do not (Guillemard, 1982, 1983; Myles, 1984, 1989; Phillipson, 1982; Townsend, 1981; Walker, 1981). Missing in most political economy accounts is an analysis of the relationship between age relations and class relations as they structure social inequality at various life course stages. And, as others have pointed out (Kohli, 1988; Marshall & Tindale, 1978–79), the economic and social locations of older people reflect not only class inequalities in early life but also unique processes that are structured by age relations as well.

The preceding review highlights the importance of the relationship among social structure and ageism as it is identified in both the political economy approach and Law's work. In this article, we explore this relationship further by focusing specifically on structured age relations. Although the term *age relations* is used sparingly within the gerontological literature, it has not been developed through a critical lens, as a concept that refers to a structural dimension of social life. We believe that it is important to consider the structural nature of age relations in their own right, and the ways in which they intersect with other sets of structured social relations such as class, gender, and ethnic/race relations.

In our view, social relations (such as age, class, gender, and ethnic/race relations) are fundamental elements of the social structure that produce enduring, orderly, and patterned social systems. Structured social relations are based on the varied rights and privileges that define social relationships (see Wright, 1999, for a discussion of this point with respect to social class). Hence, a relational understanding of age requires an emphasis on "structured forms of power, organization, direction, and regulation that exist in modern societies and through which ruling groups maintain and reproduce their dominant positions" (Layder, 1994, p. 159; see also Smith, 1987). By taking age relations into account in assessments of

waged labor markets, we are suggesting that age is implicated in productive social relations.

In our analysis, we have made three related assumptions about social life: first, that social roles, normative expectations, socialization processes, and role sanctions are grounded in structured social relations that are characterized more by conflict than by consensus; second, that, social structure does not stand outside of the human, social behavior that produces it, yet it nevertheless takes on properties that transcend the behavior of those who construct it; and third, although these properties of durability constrain and limit the agency of the individual, they never do so completely (for more detail on this theoretical approach, see McMullin & Marshall, 1999).

With this as our theoretical backdrop, we now turn to our case study of garment workers in Montreal to explore whether ideological (i.e., attitudes, beliefs, values) and/or behavioral (i.e., discrimination) dimensions of ageism are at play within these workers' lives. To do so we first assess whether garment workers discussed their labor market experiences by offering explanations about them that relied on ageist attitudes, beliefs, or values. Second, we explore whether older garment workers believed that they had been excluded or eliminated from employment opportunities because of their age. After presenting our analyses, we conclude by discussing how these ideological and behavioral dimensions of ageism can be explained theoretically by drawing on the intersection of structured age relations and individual actions.

Methods

Sample

We used data from a case study of the Montreal Garment Industry, one of seven case studies in different industrial sectors conducted under the direction of the second author as part of a project called Issues of an Aging Workforce: A Study to Inform Human Resources Policy Development (IAW). In this case study, researchers collected archival data and conducted key informant interviews; focus group discussions with employed, retired, and displaced garment workers; and industry representative surveys. We chose this case study because, unlike the other case studies, the data from the Montreal garment industry provided information from retired and displaced workers, as well as current employees. This allowed us to analyze perceptions of ageism among current as well as displaced and retired workers, which was not possible using data from the other case studies.

The analysis relied primarily on the focus group discussions (see Morgan, 1993, for a discussion of this methodology). Researchers can use focus group data in two ways: as documentary evidence to construct a case study of the firm or industry under study or as evidence about the individual providing the data. For example, these discussions could help us to understand general conditions, such as age and gender discrimination in a firm, as perceived by respon-

dents; but the individual account that is given in a focus group could also be taken to characterize the experiences and perspectives of the person who rendered that account.

Access to the garment industry in Montreal was facilitated through contacts with the Council of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (now called UNITE) and by the Quebec Fashion Apparel Manufacturers' Guild. Because of these Union and Guild links our sample comprised the most "privileged" garment workers, who work in unionized shops. Between May 1994 and March 1995, 12 focus group discussions were conducted in Montreal, two with retired workers, three with displaced workers, and seven with employed workers. The focus group discussions were relatively unstructured. However, the focus group mediator followed a list of guidelines developed by the IAW research team and always asked several questions relating to the key themes of the project—career mobility, health, retirement, technology, and family.

The focus groups ranged in size from 4 to 10 people, with a total of 79 individuals taking part in the study. Five of the focus groups comprised employees who worked together in five different shops. Two of these shops were relatively large by industry standards, employing between 80 and 100 people. Two of the shops were of average size (about 50 people) and one was small (about 20 people). These discussions were held on work time and the IAW project paid these employees for their time away from their jobs. Participants either volunteered to participate in a focus group at the request of the shop's union official or the union official chose who would participate. In the other two employee focus groups, union officials asked workers who were not necessarily employed at the same shop to participate in the IAW study. These focus groups were held at the union headquarters outside of normal working hours.

The retiree focus groups comprised members of the union's retiree club. The retirees met every Thursday at the union headquarters to participate in activities such as playing cards, and the IAW focus groups were planned as one of these activities. Those who chose not to participate carried on (in another room) with their regular Thursday activities. The IAW project contacted displaced workers through the union as well. Again, a union official asked for volunteers among employees who were currently looking for work. To preserve anonymity and confidentiality, focus group participants and the garment shops are referred to by pseudonyms, chosen to reflect the ethnicity of the participants (Snell, 1993).

The involvement of union officials in selecting our sample of garment workers created a potential bias because these workers may have been chosen because they were particularly sensitive to union issues. This would be problematic if the aim of the research was to illustrate trends and rates and to generalize these findings to other populations. However, our intent was to use a qualitative methodology to document the processes and mechanisms through which

ageism might occur. Thus, for our purposes, a heightened level of consciousness regarding union issues may have been beneficial. A second, and potentially more harmful bias, is that our study was based only on privileged, unionized workers or former unionized workers. More research is needed to determine if the processes and mechanisms of ageism are applicable to more marginalized workers within this industry.

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 shows the sample characteristics. We make no claim that our sample was representative of the garment industry as a whole. However, the sample did reflect industry trends in the distribution of gender and occupation (the only variables in Table 1 for which there is accurate industry data). The percentage of women in our sample was somewhat higher than in the Quebec garment industry (96% vs 82%, see the Results section for a discussion of gender composition of the industry) but nonetheless reflected the fact that the majority of workers in this industry are women. It is unclear why a disproportionate number of women chose to participate in this study. Fifty-eight percent of these respondents were married, and three quarters were parents. Sixty-six percent of them were or had been sewing machine operators (compared with 69% of women in the Que-

bec garment industry). Fifty-one percent of the participants were employed, 18% were retired, and 32% were displaced. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents reported French as their mother tongue, and the same percentage reported that Canada was their birth country. Forty-one percent stated their mother tongue as Italian, and 38% said they were born in Italy. Much smaller percentages reported other mother tongues and birth countries.

We did not specifically ask respondents about their income or education, in part because industry averages suggest that the majority of these workers are poorly paid and have low levels of education. For instance, whereas 71% of the Canadian workforce has at least a secondary school diploma, this compares to only 44% of the workers in the Canadian garment industry. Regarding income, the average hourly wage for unionized male workers in Quebec's garment industry is \$11.89 CA and for unionized female workers it is \$9.22 CA.

As part of the research design, older workers (aged 45 and older) were specifically targeted for participation in this study. Respondents were not systematically asked how old they were and hence precise age breakdowns could not be generated. In the analysis of the qualitative data, the age of the respondent was indicated if known and reported as unknown otherwise. Notably, most of the respondents who were not questioned about their age were in the displaced and retired focus groups, and these people were most likely older than 50.

These sample characteristics paint a picture of garment workers in the Quebec industry and in our study. It is a picture that is well known in the industry and one that is perhaps best described by one of our key informants, Daniel Dubuc, director of the Ladies' Clothing Joint Commission, an organization that comprises both guild members and union representatives. He said the following in describing a typical garment worker:

She is a woman, not well educated I'm afraid. Very stubborn, with courage, she is an immigrant, she is in her forties, she has backaches, and she has industrial handicaps.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two stages whereby the data were first physically organized into theme areas and then organized into analytically meaningful categories (Knodel, 1993). In the first, mechanical stage of the analysis, segments of text were coded into theme areas that were driven by the IAW project—family, career, retirement, technology and training, and health. The data in each of these theme areas were coded a second time for cross-referencing purposes.

The second, more explicitly interpretive, stage of the analysis involved establishing criteria for organizing the data into analytically meaningful subdivisions and then searching for patterns within and between

Table 1. Characteristics of Focus Group Participants (N = 79)

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Men	3	4
Women	76	96
Marital Status		
Married	46	58
Single	8	10
Widowed	8	10
Divorced	7	9
Missing	10	13
Parent Status		
Parent	60	76
Childless	15	19
Missing	4	5
Occupation		
Machine operators	52	66
Other	19	24
Missing	8	10
Employment Status		
Employed	40	51
Displaced	25	32
Retired	14	18
Country of Birth		
Canada	31	39
Italy	30	38
Other	13	16
Missing	5	6
Mother Tongue		
French	31	39
Italian	32	41
Other	11	14
Missing	5	6

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

these subdivisions (Knodel, 1993). This process involved searching for expected subthemes (e.g., ageist attitudes) and identifying subthemes that were less expected (e.g., the impact of bankruptcy laws and factory closures on the relations of production).

For the specific purposes of this study, the career, retirement, and technology and training theme areas were coded into subtheme areas that dealt specifically with ageism. Comments that were made in the focus groups about age were coded according to whether they reflected negative experiences, attitudes, beliefs, or values about older people or aging. We coded any instance in which focus groups discussed their work/displacement/retirement experiences by offering explanations about them that relied on ageist attitudes, beliefs, or values into a general category that we referred to as *ideological ageism*. Next, we coded work/displacement/retirement experiences that excluded or eliminated older workers from employment opportunities into a second category that we referred to as *age discrimination*.

Notably, we relied on the perceptions of the workers themselves as evidence of ageism within the garment industry in Montreal. Indeed, it was our purpose in this study to assess ageism from the point of view of older workers themselves. In the following discussion we see that workers implicated the owners and managers of the companies they worked for as being ageist, and they implicated themselves as being ageist in some cases as well. Methodologically, we privileged the knowledge, perceptions, and experiences of older workers themselves to better understand the power relations at play in garment work (see Smith, 1987, for a discussion of this method).

Results

Garment Work in Montreal: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender

Before turning to our discussion of ageism, we situate the analysis within the context of the more general nature of garment work in Montreal. The perceptions of the focus group participants about the nature of work in the garment industry concurred with past research, which has shown that garment work is hard work (Das Gupta, 1992; Frager, 1992; Gannage, 1986; Phizacklea, 1983, 1990). Managers and owners utilize workers in a quest to maximize productivity and profits. They control their workers by restricting the opportunities of those who sign grievances, by moving "problem" workers to different departments or jobs, and by limiting the use of bathrooms and drinking fountains (McMullin, 1996). These issues point to how social class, as it is conceptualized by researchers within the political economy tradition, structures the nature of garment work and how individual owners actively use their power to exploit workers.

Gender and ethnicity also structure garment work. At the industrial level, 82% of the workers in the ladies' clothing industry in Quebec are women and jobs within the industry are segregated along gender lines. Most of the highly paid jobs are held by men

(men make up between 71% and 92% of the three highest paid occupations), and a disproportionate number of women are in the low paying jobs (women constitute between 88% and 96% of the three lowest paid occupations). There is also ethnic segregation within the Montreal garment industry. The tendency is for certain ethnic groups to be concentrated in particular shops, with higher wages being paid in shops where most workers are French Canadian (McMullin, 1996). Recent immigrants, such as the Vietnamese, are more likely to find low-wage, nonunionized work in shops that accept work that has been contracted out from other shops, or even to be home workers.

Past research has shown that women, the working class, and ethnic workers are in disadvantaged labor market positions. In the case of garment work, these factors are simultaneously at play in creating an interlocking system of disadvantage for the majority of workers. Because past work has dealt with these intersections in relation to garment work (Das Gupta, 1992; Frager, 1992; Gannage, 1986; Phizacklea, 1983, 1990), we simply make note of this as the context within which our analysis is situated. All of these factors—class, gender, and ethnicity—structure work within the garment industry and create systems of relative disadvantage and powerlessness for those who work there. In the following sections of this article, we show that age is yet another dimension through which systems of disadvantage are at work.

Ideological Ageism

Past research has shown that sex and ethnic origin are bases of division among the working class and that employers discriminate on the basis of sex and ethnic origin by restricting access to certain jobs. Although age is well recognized as an axis of division among workers (as a basis of seniority, or a basis on which a worker loses the right to work), less is known about whether age is constructed as a cross-cutting basis of division among the working class or if, and how, ageism is implicated within the workplace. In this section, we first examine the role that ageist attitudes and beliefs play in dividing the workers and how these issues are perceived as threats to older workers' job security. Second, we explore issues relating to workers' perceptions of age and productivity. We show how older workers may themselves hold ageist views regarding their own productivity that in turn may conceal underlying reasons for reported productivity decline.

The experiences of some of the focus group participants illustrate that a worker's old age may be used by management as a means of intimidating workers. For instance, Madeline (retired, age unknown) told us about how she continued to sign grievances with the union despite considerable opposition from her employer. In the end the employer tried to convince Madeline that she was too old to continue to work and that she should retire:

We know that even if the union protects us and they sign grievances, the more they sign grievances—the

worse you are regarded. Well I did that anyway. I signed to return to work, as they say, I certainly experienced it after. I went to the office six, seven times a day and he [the boss] encouraged me to retire at the age of 57. . . . [He said] "You realize that you are too old to work now." I said, "No, I'll retire at the same time as everybody else."

The collective agreement states that employees have the right to sign grievances against their employers without fear of retaliation (International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, 1994). However, in Madeline's view, the fact that her employer tried to convince her that she was too old to work was linked to the fact that she continued to sign grievances. According to Madeline, the owner used old age as a mask behind which the true nature of the conflict—signing too many grievances—was concealed. Although the collective agreement and Quebec legislation also state that employers must not discriminate on the basis of a worker's age, this employer tried to convince a "problem worker" to retire because she was too old to work. Thus, the owner attempted to hide the class-based nature of this conflict behind the mask of old age. In doing so, he reinforced ageist beliefs and attitudes that suggest that older people should not work. This points to an intersection between social class and age whereby owners use ageist views about older workers as a means of class intimidation.

It is widely believed that productivity declines with age, for a number of reasons. Workers are thought to lose cognitive speed and physical stamina; to have greater difficulty adapting to new electronic, machine process, and organizational technologies; and to be less motivated to make these adaptations than younger workers. However, the research basis for these common beliefs is thin, and recent research in particular severely qualifies or contradicts these views (American Association of Retired Persons, 1986; Berkowitz, 1988; Butler, 1985; Centre for Studies of Aging, 1995; Ilmarinen & Louhevaara, 1994; Knowles, 1988; McEvoy & Cascio, 1989; McNaught & Barth, 1992; Rix, 1994) or suggests that any limitations can be easily overcome with thoughtful training and work organizational innovations (Itzin & Phillipson, 1993; Mital, 1994; Rix, 1990). In fact, cognitive decline is minimal during the normal working ages and rarely so great as to fall below levels required for performance (Cerella, 1990; Charness & Bosman, 1992; Earles & Salthouse, 1995); the case studies conducted in the IAW project indicated that physical health is not a strong barrier to work in most settings, and that older workers are quite receptive to technological and organizational changes. In the garment industry, however, the work is physically demanding, and age may be associated with declining productivity at younger ages than in many other industrial sectors.

Discussions of the relationship between age and productivity emerged in most of the focus groups, and in one the discussion focused around productivity and piece work. Wages in piece work shops depend on average levels of productivity. If a particular

worker cannot produce at or above this rate then their wage suffers. Clarece (employed, aged 57) suggested that her age limited her ability to produce the amount of pieces required for her to make a sufficient wage. As she put it,

Sometimes, I have to give tickets for dresses which aren't finished yet to get my pay at the end. They come and get the tickets. Sometimes, I haven't even had the dresses at my place. Well, I have to go and get a package, then, give my tickets. [laugh] It's not funny at all. I should be younger to get more of them done, but I try, I try to get more of them done.

However, when Clarece was asked by Angela, the focus group leader, more specifically about her views on the relationship between age and productivity, she elaborated by suggesting that the nature of the work had also changed as she has grown older.

Clarece: My nimble fingers are gone! [laugh]

Angela: Your productivity decreased with age?

Clarece: It's not only age, because, I have been making samples on an hourly basis for almost 8 years, so . . . one dress, one dress, one dress. While now, it's much more. . . . You can't look up. You have to work, work. So, it's not the same.

Indeed, Clarece offered several explanations for her productivity decline that were not directly related to old age. She went on to say that her employers sent the easy work out to contractors and kept the hard work for the experienced employees in the shop. This served to reduce the number of pieces that employees would make and, in turn, limited their wages. Hence, in the end, the ways in which owners organized the work process seemed at least as problematic for Clarece's productivity as did her own old age. However, because Clarece prioritized age in her discussion and joked about the relationship between her age and productivity, ageist stereotypes about diminishing capacities were reinforced and internalized.

Some of the older workers believed that the speed and dexterity associated with youth is less important to productivity than the skill and experience characteristic of older workers. As François (employed, aged 60) put it,

It's experience. . . . Older people's experience is helping youngsters. Experience. They make less mistakes than a young person. A young person can be active—but, he makes mistakes, a lot of mistakes.

Still others linked the relationship between productivity and aging to a combination of stereotypes regarding the speed at which older people can learn and the structural conditions in the garment industry that lead to company closures. Hence, according to these respondents, if older employees remained in the same shop, the productivity between younger and older workers would be equal. However, the produc-

tivity of older workers might suffer if they were forced to change shops after having been employed in the same company for 25 or 30 years. This view is illustrated by the following focus group discussion:

Dominique (aged 63): Apart from that, when there is a change in work, the work isn't different but there is a change of place. In each place, there is a way of doing things. Also we are a little old and we can't learn new ways of another person quickly. That's why, that's the problem.

Angela: So you, so you have a problem learning?

Carla (aged 59): To learn the ways of another person.

Angela: Oh, I see. Ah, OK.

Dominique: Because we are used to a certain way OK. Because of working in the same place, therefore we are all used to it. But then to start to learn at another place—

Angela: Other methods.

Carla: Yes, other methods, that's it.

Dominique: Yes, it is not all the same. When you are in one place—

Antonnia (aged 56): The coats are all the same but the way of working depends.

Dominique: I work one way, the others work another way, then it is hard to learn afresh. We have no more patience, like what we had when we were young. When we were young we had more patience but now—

Carla: It is the same thing, in your home, you have one way, I have another way in the home, the companies are like that. One company has a way of working and another company has another way of working. But the employers are looking for those of us who can work fast. When you work in the same place you work fast because you are used to it, but if I change places, I can't do it quickly because I have to think of how the others do it. The others are not pleased that I'm not fast.

Antonnia: Sometimes you forget, sometimes you forget how to do the piece. Sometimes you haven't forgotten the other way and you give it to the person. It is like, like the person is younger and can learn right away. People like us [it's] hard.

Two age-related perceptions emerge from this conversation. First, these workers believed that older people have difficulty learning new methods of work. Second, they believed that older people have less patience than younger people. Productivity may suffer when workers of any age are forced to change their habitual work practices, but these workers believed that age is at issue in learning and patience.

If workers perceived that their old age was the reason that they were no longer employed, the sense of pride that they had in themselves and their work appeared to be threatened. In the following discussion older workers defended their levels of productivity by comparing their work experience to the work experience of younger women.

Angelina: They call us the "old women" but when they put us out they have to bring in three others to do the same work.

Madeline: Yes, [but] young people do have some experience.

Angelina: But experience is really us, young people can't have experience. They need three young people to replace one of us.

Madeline: To do the same production. It takes three. I don't want to be racist but those little Vietnamese who are coming in, because the Quebecers in the industry, you can count them on the fingers of one hand.

In defending their levels of productivity, these focus group participants responded to the widely held belief that older workers are less productive. The fact that they acknowledged this belief in their discussion inadvertently reproduced the very view that they were trying to counter. Further, the reference to "those little Vietnamese," suggests that workers' perceptions of their situations were bound to the intersections of ethnicity and age. The comparison these workers made between themselves and younger ethnic workers suggests that these workers felt a sense of division on the basis of age and that this division was enhanced by ethnicity.

Age Discrimination and Factory Closures

We now turn from ideological to behavioral dimensions of ageism, focusing on the issue of factory closures and resulting job displacement. The competitive nature and structure of garment work influences the business practices that employers use to maximize profits. A strategy that has a long-standing history in the garment industry is that of hiring the least expensive workforce. One method that employers have increasingly used to reduce labor expenses is to replace unionized workers, who tend to be older, with a younger, nonunionized, less expensive workforce. Companies close down and then reopen a few months later under a different name and employing nonunionized labor. According to Gerald Roy, the Canadian director of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the disgrace attached to bankruptcy in the past has dissipated and now firms have lawyers who tell them exactly how to go out of business; how to escape paying their debts to the employees, landlords, machinery rental agencies, and banks; and how and when to open up another, nonunionized, shop. Roy highlighted the seriousness of

this problem for apparel industry workers in the following comment:

It is too easy to open and close a company in the apparel industry. What is deploring is that the workers are always at the end of the process. They lose conditions of work, they lose their paycheck, they lose vacation pay, they lose their health benefits, they lose their pension benefits, they lose and lose and they are getting older.

The fact that Roy mentioned the age of workers in his statement suggests that older workers may be particularly disadvantaged by this practice. Indeed, although the intention of this business strategy is to eliminate the union, one consequence of this practice is that older workers are forced out of their jobs and the labor force because, as we will see in the following section, old age works against them in finding subsequent employment.

Several retired workers suggested that their previous employers used subtle age-related strategies in their attempts to make older workers quit their jobs. Carmen, for instance, described how her bosses moved older workers from sit-down jobs to jobs that required them to stand up. When the focus group mediator asked why, the participants responded:

Angelina (age unknown): Why? Ha ha!

Carmen (aged 64): Because they said they needed this work. Instead of saying, "I am going to take the young Chinese women, because they were all young, 20, 22, 25, [to do the jobs]." I was the oldest in the department.

Mary-Jade (age unknown): They [young Chinese women] weren't forced to stand up. They [management] did it on purpose.

Angelina: They did it on purpose [and said] "If you don't like it, there's the door"—

Carmen: Because they wanted us to say we were not capable and they would have said, "OK. Off you go home." They didn't want to fire us, they would have said, "Well you know what you can do."

These older workers stood up on the job for 2 weeks, and then the company closed down. The focus group participants believed that management closed the company when they realized that having the older workers stand at work would not deter them from their jobs. In this situation, the easiest and most profitable scenario for owners was to keep their company open, if at the same time, they could also eliminate their older, highly paid workers. However, because these were unionized workers they could not easily be fired. As a result, it seemed that owners attempted to make the working conditions difficult for older workers so that they would quit their jobs without being forced out. And the owners used ageist beliefs about the relationship between stamina, frailty,

and old age to do so. In this case, the strategy that managers used to eliminate the older workers was unsuccessful. The company closed and reopened a short time later under a different name and without the employment of these older workers.

This is a story of class conflict—employers trying to eliminate a highly paid, unionized workforce—but it is one that intersects with age. For the workers who lost their jobs with this firm, high wages were not thought to be the reason. Instead, the perception among these workers was that their old age resulted in their unemployment. As Carmen went on to say,

We are out, three or four of us, because, we left on the same day, we were put out like dogs. I was more respected when I was young. With all the experience I had, it counted for more.

The degradation that Carmen felt when she was "put out like dogs" appeared to be linked to her age, because she went on to say that she was more respected in her youth. Carmen believed, however, that she should be afforded more respect now, not because of her age, but because of her experience as a worker. This points to a contradiction between an ideology that suggests that one should respect the work experience that is associated with aging and the value that is attached to youth in Canada and the United States. On one hand, the logic of capitalism suggests that experienced workers should be valued more because their productivity levels should be higher. On the other hand, common perceptions of older workers' productivity declines attenuates the value that is attached to experience.

Few of the garment workers in our study had been untouched by factory closures. When factories close, garment workers find themselves out of work in an economy where jobs are hard to find. Among the workers we talked with, the perception that their old age worked against them getting hired was strong and real. Celine (employed, age unknown) described her search for work as follows:

They [previous company] decided that our salaries were too high, so we were laid off, but the company is fine, always increasing. . . . What I find the most difficult is that when you are getting older it starts getting more and more difficult. Shops are closing one after another and you have to . . . it took me 9 months before I could find a job. . . . And, even if you find another job, you end up with lower wages, by at least \$2.50 lower per hour.

Similar sentiments were voiced in another focus group. As Maralisa (displaced, aged 56) said, "They always look for somebody younger." Theresa (displaced, age unknown) responded, "For example: You go somewhere; they ask your age, and after, they say, ah, ah. For the application, they say yes; then, after they say ah, no, no, no. We have no work. Come back next week. We'll see, maybe."

In response to our queries about age discrimination in the search for work, Leigh (displaced, aged

60) suggested that older workers were disadvantaged because “If older it costs. And you are slowed down. And the company doesn’t like this.” Thus, older workers interpreted their search for work as one that was laden with ageism that resulted in discrimination. They believed that employers wanted to hire young workers, either because they believed that they could pay them lower wages or because they felt that older workers’ productivity had declined.

Many believed that they were faced with a paradox in being too old to find work yet too young to receive retirement benefits. This paradox translated into worries about current financial difficulties and questions regarding how they would pay for their retirement. These issues are illustrated in following discussion:

José (aged 53): We have to accept it [factories closing and having to take work at lower pay] but it’s difficult. Like me, I started very young and it’s been a lot of years. I’ve been in the union for quite a long time, and I mean I have nothing. I’m facing nothing, nothing. I’m still too young for early retirement. . . . You’ve been working for 25 years, with all your heart, all your soul. You gave up your health and you fall face to face with nothing there.

France (aged 63): We even lost a lot of weeks of salary, vacations—

José: We lost part of our early retirement [pension contributions].

France: Yes, we gave our work and we lost it all.

José: We lost everything, there were people laid off. There were people who had so many weeks per year they had worked. We got nothing like it.

France: We didn’t receive a notice. One day, you went home, and the next day, the doors were closed. There were some who received notices—we didn’t get any notice. And we lost weeks of salary and vacation. Our vacations, they didn’t send them to the Joint Commission.

José: There are a lot amounts lost. We lost money—

France: It [the company] still exists.

José: It’s difficult because they changed the name, they changed the company, but the name is still there. They took three, four girls and they went.

This discussion illustrates how the industry practice of closing and then reopening a shop was experienced by the workers themselves. After years of working in the industry, José and France believed that, in the end, they were treated unfairly because of the many losses they faced when their company closed down. José was concerned about her current and future financial security, whereas France was more concerned with immediate losses based on the company’s payment

defaults. The different points of focus in this conversation may be based on age. For instance, on the surface it appeared as if José and France were affected in similar ways by a company closure. However, because France was 63 years old and José was aged 53, their financial options were quite different. France could apply for reduced state and Union pensions, whereas José had to either find work (a difficult endeavor in the current economic climate) or go on welfare. Thus, the seemingly age-neutral strategy of closing a business has different structural consequences for the workers affected by it depending on their age. Younger workers do not have to fight ageism in their search for work, the oldest workers have the option of retiring, and those in the middle must confront age discrimination in hiring practices.

Discussion and Conclusions

Ageism in Garment Work: Behavior and Ideology

In the introductory sections of this article we identified two components of ageism—ideology and behavior. Ageist attitudes, values, and beliefs that make up the ideological dimension of ageism need not be harmful to individuals, but this dimension often transpires into ageist behavior that is discriminatory. Drawing on a case study of garment workers in Montreal, we document how ageism is manifested at the ideological level of attitudes and stereotypes contrasting older and younger workers, and how it is manifested behaviorally as age discrimination. We argue that attitudes and behavior have related but independent impacts in structuring people’s lives.

Regarding ageist ideology, workers in the Montreal garment industry, most of whom are women, see their fate as tied to and affected by ageism. They believe that their work experience, which they view as one of the positive aspects of aging, is discounted by owners and managers, who focus instead on real or putative age-related declines in stamina and dexterity. To some extent, the workers accept the negative stereotypes held by the owners and managers, and negative stereotypes about dexterity and productivity appear to be produced and reproduced by older workers themselves. Older workers also counter that age and experience bring greater skill, fewer mistakes, and the ability to help younger workers. However, the fact that older workers feel the need to defend their work skills serves to reinforce the very ageist ideology that older workers try to guard against.

With respect to age discrimination, owners and managers do not appear to be overtly ageist. Rather, they make decisions about their workers and the work setting that are based largely on structural factors other than the age of the workers. For example, many of them want to be rid of older, unionized workers because they command higher wages than younger, nonunionized employees. The issue for them is cost reduction, and age is implicated only indirectly in their reasoning. Hence, the focus in the political economy of aging tradition on class relations is important within the context of paid garment work.

However, owners and managers do make use of age, including stereotypical and negative images of the older worker, as a legitimation for attempts to exclude or discourage older workers from employment. They do not organize the work routines so as to facilitate the adaptation of older workers to waning dexterity or physical strength. Instead, they contract out the easy jobs, relying on the experience of the older employees for the more difficult work but not adapting the pace or demands of the work. Real or supposed age-related declines in dexterity and physical ability become rationales to force or induce older workers to leave employment. When inducements fail, owners sometimes close the plants, reopening them soon after with younger, cheaper workers. In the end, seemingly age-neutral strategies of cost reduction become systems of inequality in which age is implicated and older workers are placed at a heightened disadvantage relative to younger workers. In support of Laws's (1995) argument, this suggests that there is something unique about age relations that creates disadvantage and must be considered as intersecting with issues of class.

Whereas negative stereotypes about older workers, and ageist attitudes toward them, undoubtedly play a part in the fact that older displaced workers almost never return to employment and are thus discriminated against, the economic calculations of owners and managers play a role as well. The severe economic pressures experienced by the Montreal garment industry cannot be ignored. The industry is in decline, making bankruptcies a more acceptable strategy and encouraging the use of contract labor, which is done for the most part by younger, nonunionized, immigrant workers. These managerial strategies produce casualties no less severe than the casualties that follow from restructuring through the downsizing that is found in less marginal sectors of the economy, but the limited human capital of garment workers—their gender, their limited education, their ethnicity, and their low social class position—likely intersects with their age to adversely affect these marginalized players in the world economy.

Understanding Ageism: Structured Age Relations and Individual Action

Clearly, ageism does not function in any simple way to structure work relations. How then do we explain the ageist views and behavior that are present within the garment industry in Montreal? Our theoretical approach encompasses a recognition of structured age relations and individual action. The research presented here suggests that age relations shape both the ideological and behavioral components of ageism within garment work. At an ideological level age relations organize and regulate the attitudes that workers have about their own and younger peoples' work. Older workers situate their discussion within their own work experiences but frame them around widely held beliefs about the productivity of older workers. At a behavioral level, owners use both class relations and age relations to exclude and eliminate workers from employment opportunities.

In this article we have focused on the social processes through which age becomes relevant in the lives of garment workers and in doing so have shown how age relations shape productive work relations. In discussing their experiences, workers actively construct age categories and place people into them on the basis of their own and other workers' chronological ages. As a result of such categorization, a structure of age relations is reproduced within garment industry work. Older workers are thought to be less powerful and less productive than younger workers, and alternatively, older workers are thought to have more experience, be more responsible, and make fewer mistakes in their work than younger workers. Regardless of whether any of these views are "true," the fact that they appear in the discourse of the workers suggests that age is a potential basis of division and conflict among the working class and thus a threat to working class solidarity.

However, we do not believe that social structural forces of age relations, class relations, or other bases of difference are located outside of the actions of individuals. Although properties of social structural relations constrain and limit the agency of the individual, they never do so completely. Older workers in the Montreal garment industry do not experience fates that are inexorably shaped by external forces. They experience enormous constraints but they nevertheless make choices and act strategically in terms of the options they see available to them. Indeed, older workers resist owners' and managers' attempts at using their "old age" as an intimidation tactic or threat. But this agency is deeply embedded in social structure, of which age structuring processes constitute one dimension. Individuals act within the structure of age relations to both reinforce and challenge it (see Giddens, 1993).

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Received April 18, 2000

Accepted June 19, 2000

Decision Editor: Laurence G. Branch, PhD