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Understanding Older Workers' Abilities to Exercise 'Choice' When It Comes to Extending Their Working Lives in Late Career

Conference paper

Dr Uracha Chatrakul Na Ayudhya
Middlesex University

Dr Heike Schroder
Queen's University Belfast

Dr Lilian Miles
Middlesex University

Dr Matt Flynn
Newcastle University

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In this paper, we report on our study that considers and questions the notion of 'choice' on the part of older workers in relation to extending their working lives in late career.

Encouraging older workers to extend their working lives is an ongoing public policy agenda for many countries with both ageing populations and a decline in public pension, social care and welfare provisions. Yet research shows that older workers are disadvantaged in terms of their labour market positions (for example Billett et al 2011, Büsch et al 2009, Ng and Feldman 2012, Van Dalen et al 2009). Although there has been an increase in the number of older workers aged over 65 in work in Britain in recent years, their employment rate remains low at 10.1% (May–July 2014) (DWP 2014a).

Extending working lives: a matter of choice?

In Britain, the public policy discourse on extending working lives is centred on the notion of 'choice', emphasising individual agency and decision-making over pension provision and public provision of welfare and social care.

In 2014, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) produced a framework for 'Fuller Working Lives', defined as 'working as long as necessary to create the future you want' (DWP 2014a, p4). Further evidence of the 'choice' discourse on this subject can be seen in an announcement made in October 2014 by the previous Coalition Government that three years after the abolition of the default retirement age, 'more than 1 million over 65s now choose to stay in work' (DWP 2014b).

This model of individual choice is in contrast to the model of universal welfare and protections for older workers defended by third sector organisations and, principally, trade unions, who have focused much of their work on trying to protect pensions and pension ages. For example, the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), UNITE and the National Union of Teachers (NUT), in collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), have argued that extending the state pension age (currently 60 for women and 65 for men) to age 68 is unrealistic, particularly in terms of health levels of an ageing working population. They also make the link between the growth of old-age working, often low-paid, and a decrease in employment opportunities for already precarious young workers, particularly 16–18-year-olds. This can be seen in headlines such as, 'We will retire into ill health', 'Too long to work, too late to retire', and 'Our young people on the scrapheap' (see <http://www.68istoolate.org.uk/pages/resources>).

While choice is important to older workers, especially in terms of working flexibly and quality of jobs, the ability to exercise 'real' (unconstrained) choice is substantially unequal within this demographic cohort. Older workers are not a homogenous group (Dannefer 2003), yet standardised initiatives and policies at government and organisational levels tend to reflect this assumption (Loretto and Vickerstaff 2015, Sargent et al 2013).

In light of this policy discourse of choice, debates about the extent to which older workers are, in fact, able to exercise real choices are important and necessary in terms of if, when and how they extend their working lives in ways that are sustainable and meaningful to them. This research is timely and important, because in a context of post-recession and austerity (reduction in employment opportunities) and welfare cuts (reduction in alternatives to paid employment), the dynamics in which older workers (are able to) extend their working lives are shifting.

A sense of entitlement

To help us understand how older workers perceive what their choices are in relation to extending their working lives, we draw on the conceptual framework of 'sense of entitlement'. It has previously been applied and developed in the work–family and work–life interface literature, particularly in terms of explaining the gendered nature of the sense of entitlement in relation to work–life balance (see Herman and Lewis 2012, Lewis and Smithson 2001, Major 1993). Our study is the first to apply the framework specifically to older workers.

It is an explanatory framework for understanding expectations – in this case, the expectations (or lack of) that older workers have in relation to their ability to exercise choice in how to extend their working lives. It is a process whereby individuals form their perceptions of what is fair and reasonable to expect, based on what they perceive is normative and socially appropriate (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya and Smithson 2016, Lewis and Smithson 2001, Major 1993).

The concept is useful, because we want to understand what older workers think is possible and what they think their options are in late career. It helps us to understand how older workers derive perceptions of what they feel they are entitled to through a process of comparing themselves with others. The sense of entitlement is subjective, although it is influenced by legal or other objective entitlements (Lewis and Haas 2005). It only comes about after a process of evaluations and comparisons. Social, normative and feasibility comparison processes are pivotal to the formation of sense of entitlement. These processes are shaped by social context, cultural values, norms and beliefs, as well as social policy context at the national level (Lewis and Smithson 2001, Lewis and Haas 2005, Hobson et al 2011).

It is this social comparison element of the framework that is key to understanding how older workers form expectations of what is fair and reasonable to expect in relation to extending their working lives. We are applying it in our study to understand:

- What do older workers perceive as being socially appropriate and normal to expect in late career? We propose that this is strongly shaped at the organisational level through organisational policies and practices, not just relating to older workers specifically, but more broadly relating to careers and career development and progression.
- Who do older workers compare themselves with in terms of what they think is socially appropriate and normal to expect in late career? We want to understand if they compare themselves with workers of the same gender and/or age group when considering what is socially appropriate and normal to expect for their careers at this point in their lives.

The proposal of our study is that, firstly, the sense of entitlement concept can help us in understanding the gaps between older workers' perceptions of choice as opposed to realistic opportunities for work in later life. In particular, it might explain the lack of agency that many older workers feel in being able to exercise choice in the labour market. Secondly, it offers us a perspective on the significance of organisational policies and cultures in raising both concrete job opportunities and the sense of entitlement of older workers. In particular, organisational policies and practices are more likely to impact older workers' perceptions of choice and their sense of entitlement than national policies, increasingly so in a context of austerity.

Our study

We conducted a study with older workers to explore their experiences of exercising choice in late career by asking them to share stories of their work history.

We interviewed 34 older workers (12 women and 22 men) who had previously completed an online survey on retirement plans and who had agreed to be interviewed in more detail on the same topic. Because of this opportunistic sampling strategy, the older workers that we interviewed represented a range of occupations and sectors, including education (teachers, school administrators, welfare officers), health (doctors, nurses, paramedics), social care (social workers, counsellors), science and engineering (scientists, engineers, architects), aviation (pilots), labourers, farmers, chefs and small business owners.

To assist our analysis, we categorised our participants into one of three groups:

- 1 older workers who transitioned into early retirement (before pension age)
- 2 older workers who transitioned into a new career as a way of extending their working lives
- 3 Older workers who have stayed on (or are planning to stay on) with their existing employers to extend their working lives.

We adopted a 'long view' of careers by situating older workers' careers within their life course trajectories and paying attention to critical turning points in their lives that impact their careers. By doing so, we are responding to calls for 'adopting a "life-course" perspective to understanding and managing work and careers' (Loretto and Vickerstaff 2015, p244).

In line with our objective, we considered how older workers conceptualise the notion of 'choice' in relation to their late career. By taking the long view of careers, we paid attention to the entire work history of each older worker, from when they started their working lives, all the way through to how choice was constructed and exercised (or constrained) at different points in their work history and life course trajectories. We paid particular attention to narratives of 'choice' in how our participants told their work history. We focused on how older workers talked about career, progression, development, setbacks, and significant career and life events (critical turning points – such as the arrival of children, labour market exit and re-entry, health issues of the individual or in their families as well as caring responsibilities).

We also looked at the extent to which their narratives of choice in how they told their work history reproduced (or challenged) organisational norms and practice about careers and career development and progression that tend to act as barriers to older workers' ability to exercise choice in if and how to extend their working lives. We take organisational norms to refer to the expectations of the older workers' place within the organisation. Typically, these are stereotypical beliefs about older workers' roles in the organisation, what opportunities for development and progression are, when they should retire, and if there are severe challenges if they want to continue at work.

Our findings

Our findings, based on ongoing analysis, indicate that older workers give constrained and restricted narratives about their careers and ability to exercise choice. This was the case across all three groups of workers. Consequently, their sense of entitlement to be able to extend their working lives in meaningful ways appeared to be rather limited.

Our findings also show that older workers who have entered retirement or have changed careers in order to extend their working lives tend to report more experiences of age discrimination at work

(for example denied training opportunities or career development in late career). In relation to older workers who remained with existing employers in late career, the majority tend to exhibit over-gratitude tendencies, because they consider themselves lucky to be given an opportunity to continue working.

We also found that their perceptions of choice significantly reproduce organisational norms about careers and career progression. Many of our participants held age-specific assumptions about careers and career progression. This demonstrates a reproduction of social values and norms that underpin the linear career model. For example, some older workers adopted a narrative of 'making room' for younger workers, believing that they should leave in order for younger workers to take on their roles.

Related to this is the assumption that there are finite numbers of jobs in the labour market. For example, one older worker said, '*the amount of jobs does not go up just because you're delaying the retirement age.*' This is ironic, since the Government has been promoting the extended working lives agenda (for example by abolishing the default retirement age in 2011). However, the Government's efforts stop short of enacting state-level policy to enable older workers to convert this 'political' discourse into reality. Their notion of choice remains, therefore, shaped by existing social norms, which in turn are not yet influenced by public policy. Additionally, it continues to be the employers' prerogative to decide who should be given a choice.

We found that some older workers disputed the notion of choice. When talking about their early careers, they explicitly said that they did not 'choose' a particular career path, but rather fell into it. Some described themselves as being lucky and felt grateful, while others were resigned as to the path that their lives have taken. This finding is important because it allows us to understand that how older workers engage with the notion of choice in later career is shaped by their experiences in their early careers.

In terms of what older workers think is socially acceptable and appropriate to expect in late career, there is no straightforward answer. There is a paradox. On the one hand, the older workers in the study had a strong sense of entitlement to choose how long they work in their careers and how they transition into retirement (either gradually or suddenly). Yet, they did not have a strong sense of entitlement to extend their working lives, as many did not feel compelled to consider this as an option. This finding highlights that these two considerations are not the same to the older workers in our study.

Therefore, older workers have a constrained sense of entitlement: a combination of incomplete government policy, social and organisational norms, all of which affect how they exercise this choice.

Discussion and practical implications

Our study showed how existing organisational policies and practices can disproportionately limit older workers' sense of entitlement to extend their working lives in meaningful ways and are therefore inadequate in their ability to enable older workers to exercise real choice, as advocated by public policy discourse.

As a result, older workers remain disadvantaged in the labour market because of organisational structural barriers, which are maintained and reinforced by existing norms and practices.

In a context of welfare reform and austerity, the actual choices for older workers are reduced. These national and systemic factors are likely to be well understood by older workers and, as a result, lead to a reduction in the sense of entitlement of older workers.

In some cases, older workers' perceptions of their possibilities may be significantly undermined, given their lack of individual power to address systemic factors and national policy. Organisational factors that influence the capacity of older workers to extend working life, therefore, have a disproportionate impact on older workers' perceptions about choice and sense of entitlement.

As the job market contracts, how those perceptions are constructed is likely to be increasingly influenced by organisational cultures and practices, as opposed to national policy. Therefore, influencing organisational policies and practices in relation to older workers is a powerful factor in making 'choice' about extending working life a reality.

The research highlights how a long-view through a life-course lens can facilitate the design and implementation of policy and practice for older workers. It highlights the role of HR and more broadly key organisational decision-makers in enabling older workers to exercise their choice.

If organisations are serious about enabling older workers to exercise choice in extending their working lives, they must recognise that in a context of declining choice, the employers' attitudes to extending working lives is critical. They should work to promote better understanding of the business case for retaining experienced workers and the conditions under which this experience can be utilised to strategic effect. Finally, organisations need to work with workers to promote planned retirement and extended working lives, where workers can exercise informed choice.

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