

## CHAPTER 9

# Gendered Ageism/Age(ed) Sexism

## *The Case of Unemployed Older Workers*

JULIE ANN MCMULLIN  
ELLIE D. BERGER

### Introduction

Workforce aging has been identified as a public policy issue in most Western countries, including the United States and Canada. Although many have argued that workforce aging is not a concern worthy of crisis proportion (American Association of Retired Persons [AARP] 1999, 2001; Gee 2000; Marshall 2002; McDaniel 1998), to the extent that older workers have unique needs and priorities there may be challenges associated with this trend. Among such challenges will be the increasing necessity of employers to rely on the employment of older workers. Problems may arise, at least in part, because of implicit or explicit ageism that likely exists in paid-work environments. And, because older women will increasingly make up larger proportions of the workforce, the intersection between ageism and sexism in the workplace may be problematic.

Since at least the 1970s, a considerable body of research and feminist scholarship has considered gender-based inequality and sexism in paid work. One of the key issues that emerged from this scholarship was a better understanding of how gender relations structure labor markets thereby placing women at a disadvantage relative to men. The story is now well-known. Labor markets are segregated such that women tend to be employed in less well-paid, devalued jobs that often involve nurturing or caregiving tasks. Sexism at work takes many forms and often restricts women's access to jobs and promotions. Sexual harassment remains pervasive in work environments, and double standards still exist, which make it difficult for women to negotiate and manage their work environments.

Relative to the structure of gender relations and the sexism that emerges as a result, very little is known about the mechanisms through which age relations are made manifest in paid-work environments. We know very little about whether older workers are discriminated against, whether they are harassed on the basis of their age, whether they are patronized or considered invisible. Although there is a general acknowledgment among feminist scholars that age is an important structural basis of inequality, very little research has considered whether and how intersections between age and gender relations influence inequality in labor markets. Indeed, most feminist research on the workplace has focused on the experiences of younger women and gender relations, thereby neglecting the workplace experiences of older women and the theoretical importance of age relations.

Within paid-labor markets, unemployed workers are among the most disadvantaged because they are in the uncertain and precarious position of needing to find work to earn a living and make ends meet. Older displaced workers are especially disadvantaged in this regard because, compared to younger displaced workers, they face longer spells of unemployment (Rowe and Nguyen 2003), are often rehired at lower wages or in part-time positions (McMullin and Marshall 2001), and have less time to financially recover from an unemployment spell before their retirement. Research on older displaced workers tends to be based on national statistical data and not on the experiences of the older workers. As a result we know little about the challenges that older workers face in their search for employment and how age and gender intersect in shaping their experiences.

In this chapter, we ask how gender and age relations structure the experiences of older displaced workers in their search for employment. In doing so, we show that feminist analyses of younger women's workplace experiences, while important, do not fully capture the experiences and the problems that older women face in labor markets. We begin with a conceptual discussion of how gender and age intersect in systems of social

inequality. Next, we provide a brief overview of the literature on how gender and age relations structure paid work or the production processes. We then analyze qualitative data from a sample of older unemployed workers to explore their experiences in searching for paid work. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of how age and gender mutually constitute one another among the older displaced workers in our sample.

### **Gender and Age Relations as Structures of Social Inequality**

Over the past several decades, feminist scholarship has shown that gender is a structure of social inequality rather than a physiological characteristic of individuals. Yet there remains considerable disagreement among feminist scholars and others about how best to structurally conceptualize gender. Similarly, there are multiple ways in which age is theorized in the literature. As such, it is important to make clear how we conceptualize gender and age at the outset of this chapter. Notably, the conceptualizations of gender and age relations that follow are not new (see, for example, Arber and Ginn 1995; Browne 1998; Calasanti 1996; Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Connidis and McMullin 2002; Laws 1995; McMullin 2000; McMullin 2004; Ray 1996) but rather represent many of the ideas that feminist gerontologists have been working on over the past years.

As a starting point, if the subject of analysis involves the intersection of gender and other bases of inequality such as age, the gender concept must not take an a priori emphasis over other dimensions of inequality (McMullin 1995). As such, concepts of gender that evolve from an emphasis on the gendered division of labor (Chafetz 1990; Young 1981) are not adequate because the division of labor in society is also structured by class, age, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, and so on. This does not discount the importance of a society's division of labor to studies of social inequality. Rather, it implies a shift in emphasis from a gendered division of labor to one that focuses on the processes of production, reproduction, and distribution. This is a subtle shift that moves gender away from the center of the analysis and instead places the social processes that are critical to individual and societal survival at the core. It is the ways in which these processes of production, reproduction, and distribution are organized and shaped by class, age, gender, ethnicity, race, and so on that lead to inequality in society (McMullin 2004: 54).

We favor a relational understanding of gender, which assumes that it is through our interactions with others that gender structures are realized. An emphasis on interaction highlights the process of "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) and implies that gender structures do not simply constrain choices and act on individuals in creating disadvantage

for them. Rather, men and women constantly interact as they engage in processes of production, reproduction, and distribution, which in turn shapes, reinforces, and sometimes changes existing ideologies of masculinity and femininity and gender-based systems of advantage and disadvantage (McMullin 2004: 54).

Beyond processes of doing gender, we must recognize that gender relations also represent a “deep” social structure (Sewell 1992). Deep social structures pervade all that we do within every aspect of our lives. Gender is a deep social structure because it has an unconscious influence on our existence and reflects “taken-for-granted mental assumptions or modes of procedure that actors normally apply without being aware that they are applying them” (Sewell 1992: 22).

As is true of most structural accounts of gender, a relational understanding of gender recognizes that oppression is a characteristic of relations among women, among men, and between women and men (McMullin 2004: 54). According to Wright (1997), oppression occurs if the advantages of one group depend on disadvantages of another and if the disadvantages of the oppressed group depend on the exclusion of this group from access to resources, rewards, and privileges. Within the context of gender relations, then, the advantages men hold in society depend on the disadvantages of women and on the exclusion of women from access to things such as highly paid, high status jobs.

Just as it is important to conceptualize gender in a way that does not prioritize it over other bases of inequality, so too is it important to conceptualize age in a way that does not give it priority status (McMullin 1995). Again, placing the processes of production, distribution, and reproduction, rather than gender or age, at the center of the analysis helps to ensure that equal theoretical weight is given to the structural bases of inequality. As such, age relations are one of many connected structures that influence how the processes of production, distribution, and reproduction are organized. As conceptualized here, age relations are structural bases of inequality and are distinct from the concept of age groups. In this sense, “a relational understanding of age requires an emphasis on forms of oppression and power that are structured on the basis of membership in age groups” (McMullin 2004: 101). And as Calasanti and Slevin (2001: 179) point out, a relational and structural understanding of age recognizes that “different age groups gain identities and power in relation to one another.” Like gender, age is a deep structure because of age-related taken-for-granted assumptions about appropriate and inappropriate behavior and status positions. Yet unlike gender (for the most part), age is a more fluid basis of inequality,

with people experiencing varying degrees of privilege and disadvantage as they move through age groups over their lives (Calasanti and Slevin 2001).

In summary, age and gender relations intersect in systems of inequality and are conceptualized as “sets of social relations, characterized by power, which are fundamental structures or organizing features of all aspects of social life” (McMullin 2004: 128). Gender and age relations influence our day-to-day survival as we work through the processes of production, distribution, and reproduction. Relational understandings of gender and age recognize that small differences in age and gender categories tend to be exaggerated and made problematic. Hence, men and middle-aged adults are seen as genderless and ageless, and the inequalities that women and younger and older adults face are assigned meaning according to these differences. Furthermore, a relational understanding of gender and age takes into account “the meaning that is attributed to these categories of inequality based on relative positioning within social hierarchies” (McMullin 2004: 129). Although gender and age relations structure inequality in many social domains, the focus of this chapter is in the realm of paid-labor markets and the ageism and sexism that exist therein. As such, the next section provides a brief discussion of how gender and age relations structure processes of production and the sexism and ageism that result from these structures.

### **Gender Relations and Age Relations in Processes of Production**

For the most part, the processes of production involve paid work, and most people in Canada and the United States are either directly or indirectly involved in such processes. The extent and quality of an individual’s involvement in these processes are, however, organized through complex interactions between occupations, gender, and age. In the first place, occupations vary in the extent to which they are considered desirable. Desirability is based on characteristics of occupations, industries, and firms, including level of pay, benefit structure, working conditions, hours of employment, status, authority, and the extent to which a job allows for autonomy and creativity. As noted earlier, women are segregated into industries and occupations that are less desirable than the occupations and industries in which men typically work (Reskin and Padavic 1994).

Regarding age, it has long been the case that the youngest workers have been segregated into the worst jobs in the lowest tier of the service industry (e.g., restaurant workers, retail sales staff), with middle-aged and older workers in better paid, more stable occupations and industries. Yet one needs only to enter a Wal-Mart, McDonalds, or Home Depot to notice that such positions are increasingly being held by older workers. Indeed,

Home Depot actively recruits older workers and has been given recognition by both the Canadian Association for Retired Persons (CARP) and the AARP for being an older-worker-friendly organization. The problem is that most of the older workers who work in such service occupations likely do so out of economic necessity, perhaps after having lost their jobs in other industries. Furthermore, these positions offer minimal pay, benefits, and job security.

Indeed, increasing global trade and economic restructuring throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s disproportionately affected older workers, resulting in unprecedented job loss for this age group. Once unemployed, older workers experience economic strain (see, for example, LeBlanc and McMullin 1997) and increased morbidity (see, for example, Gallo et al. 2000). Research suggests that it is extremely difficult for older workers to become reemployed following job loss because of plant closures, due in part to the existence of ageism in paid employment (Kates, Greiff, and Hagen 1990: 60; McMullin and Marshall 2001). Gilberto (1997) conducted a qualitative study of eighteen women older than the age of fifty and concluded that older women in particular have the greatest challenges to overcome after a layoff occurs. She discussed participants' experiences with depression, shame, and anger due to the experience of losing a job. Other research also centering on older women's adjustment to unemployment has indicated that older women face the greatest financial and psychological difficulties during periods of unemployment due to a combination of ageism and sexism (Rife 1992, 1995; Rife, Toomey, and First 1989).

Because feminists have focused on workplace issues that are central to the lives of younger women (e.g., child care, breast-feeding, sexual harassment) and researchers who study older workers often focus on issues related to age, very little is known about the mechanisms through which ageism and sexism intersect in the job search process of unemployed, older workers. Ageism and sexism encompass gendered and age(ed) beliefs and attitudes that lead to systematic, exclusionary behavior (Butler 1969; Bytheway 1995; Reskin and Padavic 1994). One way in which ageism and sexism intersect in societies is through the attitudes that people hold about physical attractiveness. As Calasanti and Slevin (2001: 54) put it, "Ageism interfaces with sexism to put pressure on women to be a particular shape and size, to portray a youthful image even if old." Besides influencing body image and self-esteem (McMullin and Cairney 2004), the emphasis placed on beauty and youth in society places older women at a disadvantage, relative to older men and younger women, in paid-work environments. Hence, gender and age relations structure our expectations of what people in particular occupations should look like, which in turn influences employers' hiring

decisions. This results in women being more likely than men to face the negative implications of the combined experiences of sexism and ageism in employment (Ginn and Arber 1995; Reinharz 1986; Rodeheaver 1992), and we expect they will influence the experiences of unemployment as well.

### Methodology

In this chapter we use a qualitative research method and a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) that allows the theory to emerge from the data. We conducted thirty interviews with unemployed women and men aged forty-five to sixty-five who were actively searching for employment. We conducted these interviews using a semistructured interview guide, which allowed for some flexibility in the interview process. The interview guide included questions on demographics, employment background, challenges encountered when seeking employment, and feelings related to these challenges. Because of the emergent nature of qualitative research, we altered and expanded the interview guide throughout the course of the study to reflect new research themes and neglected ones.

Participants were recruited for this study through a variety of techniques (see Table 9.1). The majority of respondents ( $n = 20$ ) were recruited through attendance at three older-worker programs. These older-worker programs were created or partially funded by Human Resources Development Canada and were developed in an attempt to assist workers older than the age of forty-five who are not thought to benefit from age-neutral general employment services (Human Resources Development Canada 1999). The topics covered in these programs range from workshops involving interviewing skills, personality assessments, computer training, and résumé writing to specific sessions on understanding the myths and realities of being an older worker. The employment workshops were designed for older workers and lasted from two to three weeks. Individuals were

**Table 9.1** Participant Recruitment ( $N = 30$ )

Recruitment Means	<i>n</i>
Attendance at older-worker programs	20
Flyers at older-worker programs	4
Flyers at other employment agencies	0
Flyers at community centers	1
Flyers at community libraries	0
Newspaper for those aged fifty-five and older	3
University Web site	0
Personal referrals	2

recruited at various stages during these workshops to ensure that the sample had individuals at different stages of the job search process.

Two participants were recruited through personal referrals unrelated to attendance at the older-worker programs. Four participants were obtained after advertisements were placed in older-worker programs. Although flyers were also placed in general employment agencies geared to individuals of all age groups, in community libraries, and on McMaster University's Web site, no participants were recruited in this fashion. One participant responded to a flyer placed in a community center, and three individuals replied to a recruitment advertisement placed in a newspaper aimed at individuals aged fifty-five and older.

The recruitment strategy was intended to include both individuals who had sought assistance from an employment agency and those who had not. However, there was a much higher response through personal contact at older-worker programs than through recruitment advertisements, and thus the sample does not reflect the initial recruitment intentions. Interestingly, all participants (including those recruited through other means) discussed using older-worker programs at some point during their job search process.

We conducted thirty interviews in the Greater Toronto area and held them in a variety of locations (including older-worker programs, community centers, libraries, and coffee shops), depending on the preferences of the participant. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two hours. We conducted the first eight interviews for this project in 1999, and we conducted an additional twenty-two interviews in 2002 to expand the initial research project. As the unemployment rates were similar at these two points in time (7.6 percent and 7.7 percent, respectively), we do not believe that the economic conditions differentially affected participants' ability to secure employment in the two time periods (Statistics Canada 2004a, 2004b). Furthermore, because of the qualitative nature of this project and the related focus on individuals' meanings that were attributed to their experiences, the fact that data were collected at two different time points is not perceived to have altered the findings of this study.

Individuals who participated in the research were required to sign a consent form that granted us permission to tape-record each interview and provided them with the option to discontinue the interview at any point in time. With consent from the participants, we tape-recorded twenty-nine of the thirty interviews and transcribed them on a continual basis throughout the course of the data collection process. One participant preferred not to use a tape recorder, and in this case we took detailed notes during the interview.

To take into account the heterogeneity of the older-worker population, we included in the sample individuals who varied by gender, age, occupation, marital status, ethnic or religious background, country of origin, education, income, and length of time unemployed (see Table 9.2). Just more than half of the participants were aged forty-five to fifty-four, and

**Table 9.2** Sample Characteristics (*N* = 30)

Sample Characteristic	<i>n</i>
Age	
45–54	16
55–65	14
Gender	
Female	15
Male	15
Marital status	
Married	16
Divorced	6
Widowed	2
Never married	6
Ethnic or religious background	
Atheist or unspecified	16
Catholic	4
Protestant	4
Jewish	4
Buddhist	1
Muslim	1
Country of origin	
Canada	14
Western Europe	4
Eastern Europe	3
United Kingdom	3
United States	2
India	2
Iran	1
Japan	1
Education	
Less than high school	2
High school degree	7
Certificate / diploma	2
College / university degree	19
Personal income	
\$20,000 to \$39,999	2
\$40,000 to \$59,999	8
\$60,000 to \$79,999	4
\$80,000 to \$99,999	2
\$100,000 or more	5
Unknown	9
Length of time unemployed	
3 to 5 months	8
6 to 8 months	14
9 to 12 months	2
>12 months	6

the remaining participants were aged fifty-five to sixty-five. There were an equal number of men and women in this study, and the majority of respondents were married. The remaining participants were divorced, never married, or widowed. In terms of ethnic or religious background, the majority of participants indicated that they were atheist or preferred not to answer this question. The remaining respondents varied in their ethnic or religious background. The participants were quite well educated, and the incomes of the participants, prior to their bout with unemployment, were widely distributed among the categories. We asked participants what their personal and family income level was *since* being unemployed, but only a few participants provided this information. The length of time that individuals were unemployed also varied substantially, ranging from three months to six years. The most common length of time the participants were unemployed was between six and eight months. We should note here that to be included in our research, individuals had to be unemployed for three months or longer, as stated in the recruitment advertisements. We used this stipulation because individuals unemployed for fewer than three months may still be highly distressed from losing their jobs and may not have had the opportunity to actively search for employment and thus may not have felt the need to develop age-related management techniques for their job search. Furthermore, individuals often receive severance packages for three months following job terminations; thus we wanted to avoid recruiting participants who did not yet feel the financial need to secure employment. The occupational backgrounds of the participants interviewed were quite varied. Table 9.3 presents a breakdown of the occupational categories represented in this study.

**Table 9.3** Occupational Background of Sample ( $N = 30$ )

Occupational Category	<i>n</i>
Administrative	6
Construction	1
Consulting	2
Education	1
Engineering	1
Executive	1
Finance	3
Food and service	1
Health care	3
Human resources	2
Lawyer	1
Midlevel management	4
Sales and marketing	3
Television production	1

We coded the data for this study in relation to the key themes that emerged from the literature and during the process of analysis. Following an initial coding of the data according to these main themes, subcategories emerged, which were also coded and entered into the qualitative analytical software program QSR NUD\*IST (Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing). This program assisted in the management of the data, as it allows researchers to code large amounts of text and organize it in a way that is easily accessible.

## Findings

### *Ageism in the Search for Paid Employment*

Our data suggest that the job search experience and the meaning that respondents attribute to it are structured by age and gender relations. The most pervasive theme that emerged in our data was the belief that age influenced the job searches of the study participants in various ways. One woman described an experience where she was explicitly told that age entered into the hiring process:

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

Another fifty-eight-year-old woman reflected on her struggle to find employment and recalled asking a manager who wrote a reference letter for her why she couldn't find a job. As she put it,

I worked at a place for eleven and a half years. And, I did speak to the human resource person and she's given me, you know, a great reference. And I said, "What's wrong?" and she said, "It's age." ... You know, I guess I don't think of myself in terms of being older yet.

The blunt response of the human resource professional simply linking age with not being able to get a job is telling. But also interesting is the respondent's denial of aging and being older. Similarly, another three quotations point to encounters at older-worker programs when three women first realized that their age might pose a barrier in the search for employment:

I had a course ... a specialized program for experienced workers they called it—for older workers. ... It made me very much aware

of what's going on out there. I was not realizing it. I never realized that age was a factor. (female, age fifty-eight)

We saw a tape, a video about age barriers [at the older-worker program]. ... This problem related to age, I didn't expect. (female, age sixty-one)

I watched a video at [name of older-worker program] that was about age discrimination. I found it so depressing that I had to leave in the middle of the video. I was so upset by it that it is hard for me to discuss it even now. ... I would never want to see that again. ... The longer it went on, the worse I felt I had to leave. (female, age fifty-three[a])

These illustrations point to the contradictions and identity struggles that some older workers face as they are being labeled "older" but do not "feel older" yet.

According to many of our informants, prospective employers would refer to older applicants using phrases such as "over-qualified" or "too experienced" rather than stating that a job applicant was too old. For example,

I went to two interviews there. They finally rejected me ... I, as they put it, was "over-qualified." ... But I couldn't get anyone to hire me. (male, age sixty-two)

There was one company I sent my résumé to. ... I was kind of surprised that I didn't get an interview there and I sent an e-mail to the HR lady asking why and what happened. ... Her e-mail seemed to indicate. ... Her e-mail said "too experienced" and I just assumed she means—as meaning too old. (male, age forty-six[a])

In other cases, respondents were told that someone more "junior" was hired or that the organization was too "fast-paced" for them. Our informants recognized that these were simply euphemisms for being "too old" for the job, as indicated in the following quotes:

I got turned down for a job and I asked the temp agency who was responsible for getting the job [why I got turned down] because I wanted to know for sure ... and the answer was, and I quote, "well they hired somebody more junior." So in other words, "junior" is a euphemism for "younger." Now I am not supposed to realize that. I am supposed to be too stupid to realize that. So obviously they realize that if they were to have said "we hired somebody younger" that's illegal, so now it seems like it is in vogue to say

“more junior.” Well, “junior” means younger doesn’t it? So why shouldn’t that be illegal too? (female, age fifty-three[b])

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

Hence, in efforts to avoid charges of ageism and age-based discrimination, employers seem to disguise their ageist hiring practices by rejecting older applicants with the use of more age-neutral terms.

*Gendered Ageism: The Experience Factor*

The insidiousness of ageism in job search processes was further reflected by the view held by many of our study participants that employers would examine résumés and reject applicants based on the number of years spent in the labor force or the number of jobs held. The following three quotations are illustrative of the general view that years of experience are equated with age:

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

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

As you can see by my résumé I have twenty-five years [experience] so you know I’m not thirty-five. (male, age fifty[c])

The relationship between age and paid-labor-market experience is, however, structured by gender. Indeed, equating age and experience reflects a gendered bias that assumes lifelong, full-time employment, which remains more typical of men’s lives than of women’s. Notably, the women in our sample tended to have less paid-work experience than did the men, mainly because of their responsibilities for raising children and their other gendered care activities. One fifty-three-year-old woman commented specifically on the erroneous assumption that “age and experience” are correlated. As she states,

The assumption is that if you are older you have more experience. ... The two concepts of age and experience go hand-in-hand. But it is not necessarily accurate because you can be older and have very little experience if you have done something else with your life or whatever or doing a career change or your life has gone some other direction. (female, age fifty-three[b])

One disadvantage that the older women in this study face is a result of the double-edged sword of domestic labor responsibilities. In the first place, women take years out of paid labor to care for children thereby limiting their paid-work experience. In the second place, domestic work is devalued and the skills associated with it are rendered useless and inapplicable in the realm of paid work. The devaluation of the skills associated with unpaid work made several women in the study fear the prospect of returning to paid employment. As one woman noted,

If I really want to go back to full-time, probably I'd have to overcome my feeling that yes, I can do the job. ... Still, there is a "but" that is coming out. It's not so much the confidence; I do have confidence to do my work, but to face the reality. ... I started to feel scared. ... It's a very, very scary thing, I tell you. ... It's no longer the same as around thirty years ago. They look for a particular type of person. ... So this is the first time I'm facing it. So it's really tough. (female, age sixty-one)

A fifty-six-year-old woman who decided to leave paid work as a pharmacist to stay home and raise her children explained the fear and struggles that she had with the idea of going back into pharmacy after being out of the field for so many years. She spoke with many of her friends and colleagues in the pharmaceutical industry about the possibility of going back to work, and this heightened her fears because her associates told her that much had changed in the industry since she left. This woman eventually got an offer to volunteer at a pharmacy. She struggled with this decision but eventually decided to take the job:

I was probably too chicken to get a job. I guess really, I didn't feel confident that I could get a job in my field because I haven't been in it for so many years. I left it to raise my kids, and then when I wanted to go back to work I was too afraid. ... It's funny actually. A lot of my friends around my age are already considering retiring—early. And here I am going back to work. (female, age fifty-six)

Hence, the combination of age-related norms about how old someone should be when they are looking for work and a gendered structure that

makes women primarily responsible for the care of their children and families made it difficult for this woman to get a paid job. Instead, she took an unpaid job, which serves to reinforce the devaluation of her specific skills and women's skills more generally.

Notably, some of the men in our study indicated that their paid-work experience was a valuable asset in the job search process, particularly in a job interview. They suggested that being able to discuss their varied experience with potential employers was a technique that actively counteracted ageism in an interview setting. For example, one male participant described how in job interviews he would emphasize the value of his experience in past employment positions:

There is also a lot to be said about the judgment that comes with experience. The ability to judge and the ability to make a decision. ... The people they had there were very inexperienced. They couldn't make any decisions. I was able to make decisions and so I kept things moving. ... I am used to decisions. That is why I think that someone like me—even though it was an unaccustomed situation for me—I was able to apply my past background. I jumped in, took over, and did what was necessary to get the thing moving again. And that is where someone like me ought to be appreciated.  
(male, age fifty-two)

Another male respondent explained how emphasizing his experience was a strategy he used in job interviews to reframe the meaning tied to age-related questions from potential employers:

Depending on the questions [during a job interview], you know—"How old are you?"—rather than respond—"That's none of your business"—I would have said something like—"Well, I'm old enough to have twenty-five years of experience in this business," which gives them an age bracket and it doesn't affect me. "As you can see by my résumé, I have twenty-five years [experience]."  
(male, age fifty[c])

Because many of the women in this study lacked paid-work experience, they did not have the one advantage that was associated with being an older worker that the men in the sample had.

#### *Gendered/Age(ed) Ideologies*

The job search experience and the meaning that respondents attribute to it were conditioned by respondents' deeply held views about the roles of men and women in society. Although things have changed somewhat in

recent decades, dominant middle-class ideologies still suggest that men should be primarily responsible for breadwinning and that women should be primarily responsible for domestic labor. These ideologies infiltrate the experiences of men and women and shape the extent to which they identify with paid and unpaid labor. As such, many of the men in our study discussed an inherent pressure they felt to be the breadwinner of the family. This meant not only finding a job but finding a good job that paid well enough to support their families. One fifty-seven-year-old man in the study discussed this as follows:

My wife is the same as other wives, she cannot just accept that this man is idle, doing nothing; no earning ... and, you know when a man is doing nothing then he's not in a good mood. He cannot be a happy man. And all these are something that makes a family life difficult. I cannot be a good father also, when I don't have a good job, I'm not active, I don't have any social activity. (male, age fifty-seven[b])

He continued by elaborating on how his unemployment was affecting his personal relationships and those of friends in similar situations:

Ladies have the authority more than the man, so they can easily send a man out of the house. He's not working and he's also having a lot of, let's say, bad type of attitude, angry, not helpful, not friendly. So all this helps the condition that comes to the point that ladies do not like to continue their joint life anymore. (male, age fifty-seven[b])

When asked if he faced any barriers to finding a job, another man indicated that gender was a factor. What was interesting is that he felt that women had an easier time adjusting to unemployment and the job search because they have had to hold multiple roles throughout their lives. As he put it,

The barriers are sort of marginally there—I do sense that gender is a bit of a factor. ... Men have had a difficult time adjusting. ... I think we all know about “The Angry White Male” ... that the white male has had a difficult time, the most difficult time adjusting to the changes and because of maybe certain expectations that he was raised with. You know, that he was going to be a provider and that he would be stoic, loyal. ... Women are, in many ways, more adaptable—multitasking—I'm throwing a lot of stereotypes. ... It is harder for men to adjust—because, I mean, women obviously—women are having to do it all now. (male, age forty-eight)

Finally, the fact that many of the male participants expressed how they thought it was much easier for women to get jobs than it was for them is linked to the gendered structure of paid work and the fact that women are segregated into jobs that are not well paid. According to one of the men in our study,

Let's consider a lady in the family is faced with the problem that I just mentioned. ... Here [in Canada] it is easier for ladies to get a job. Because the kinds of jobs in the supermarket as a cashier, front desk, like that, administration, it is preferred to be done by ladies. So it is easier for ladies to get a job. (male, age fifty-seven[b])

The paradox in this quotation is clear. It is easier for women to get jobs because they are preferred for the kinds of jobs that are readily available; jobs that are the least well paid and most marginalized in society.

#### *Gendered/Age(ed) Bodies*

The interview setting provides a context for employers to discriminate against both men and women through stereotypical assessments of aged bodies. Yet although both men and women in our sample considered altering their physical appearance for job interviews, this occurred far more frequently for women. Only two men considered dyeing their hair, and another two men considered wearing a toupee or shaving their beards to appear younger. Indeed, one man questions why his beard is suddenly a problem when he's the age of fifty:

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

In contrast, with a single exception, the women in this study dyed their hair in an effort to present a younger appearance to potential employers. They recognized the importance of this, irrespective of their current economic situation:

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

Although one fifty-three-year-old woman did not agree with modifying her physical appearance to obtain employment, she did recognize that this conviction was likely harming her job search success:

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

Aged bodies were thought to be a barrier to finding employment for most of the women in our sample. In response to a specific question about whether she faced any barriers to finding employment, one woman responded as follows:

Well definitely because I am a woman and because of my age. They want young, attractive women, not women who are forty-five, fifty or older. (female, age forty-five[b])

Equating young with attractive was typical in our interviews and reflects deeply held, ageist societal views about bodies. Another woman conveyed ageist and sexist sentiments as she expressed her frustrations with her former employer. She described him as being

the kind of a dentist that would rather have a twenty-year-old bimbo sitting by his side looking pretty with her perfect smile, than a fifty-year-old woman. And there's no question about it. This is the kind of clientele his practice is geared to. I mean, who reads *Flair*? Not fifty-year-olds. (female, age fifty[b])

She went on to describe her former employer's response to her request for a raise:

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

Here we see tension between the pay expectations of younger and older employees that are inflated by the value an employer sees in having young pretty girls working for him rather than a fifty-year-old alternative. In this way, younger women have an advantage in the workplace in terms of obtaining employment. Because younger women are valued for their looks, it follows that older women are devalued in the workplace, both in relation to younger women and in relation to men. This, in combination

with past research that suggests that women face age discrimination at work at younger ages than men largely as a result of bodily appearances (Rodeheaver 1992), suggests that such issues need to be significant dimensions of feminist analyses of the workplace.

### Conclusions

As is the case with sexism, ageism encompasses both negative attitudes and behaviors and has been identified as a significant employment issue for older workers. Yet relative to sexism, very little is known about the mechanisms through which ageism is manifested in paid-work environments. Even less is known about how ageism is gendered or how sexism is age(ed). The qualitative data presented in this chapter demonstrates how gender and age relations mutually constitute one another through ageism and sexism among displaced older workers. Women face more discrimination than men in the workplace, and older workers face more discrimination than their younger counterparts. Thus looking at only one of these structural characteristics at a time does not portray an accurate picture.

Instead, we found that a phenomenon was occurring in the labor market, where sexism and ageism combined to reduce older women's job opportunities. Our findings indicate that both gender and age represent deep social structures that are present in the search for paid employment. Respondents described how ageism led to the belief that they were now considered too old to be hired. Several participants discussed experiences where they discovered that gender or age, or both, were factors in their job search. Thus it is through our interactions with others, in this case in the context of paid employment, that gender and age structures are realized. The naïveté on the part of these individuals not only points to the deep-rooted structures of inequality but also highlights the identity struggles faced by our participants throughout their search for employment.

We found that employers rejected older job applicants by using what they considered to be age-neutral language to describe older job candidates (e.g., "overqualified" or "too experienced"), or they explained to the job candidate that someone more "junior" was hired. It is interesting that being "overqualified" or "too experienced" were attributes most often associated with male respondents, thus experience is also structured by gender. Women generally have multiple disruptions in their "life course work patterns" (Berger and Denton 2004) because of child care, unemployment, and caregiving for elderly parents. These disruptions lead to a unique set of factors when women are confronted with searching for a new job, including the devaluation of their skills and the marginalization of women into nonpaid or low-paid employment. Furthermore, experience

was structured by gender in that men were able to counteract ageism by describing to employers how their age could be equated with their experience, which would then be seen as an asset to potential employers.

Our data also pointed to the existence of gendered and age(ed) ideologies in the context of paid employment. Most of our participants were firmly entrenched in traditional gendered ideologies whereby men felt that they had the responsibility to be breadwinners for their families. This ideology caused the men in our study to feel a heightened sense of urgency to find employment. It also further devalued the work of women (particularly in the view of our male respondents) and provided justification for their marginalization into lower paying jobs, as their paid employment was seen as a complement to their primary responsibility of domestic labor.

Finally, our findings suggest that employers discriminate against job candidates in relation to their gendered and age(ed) bodies. While a few men attempted to conceal their age to some extent by dyeing their hair, shaving their beards, or purchasing toupees, all the women but one dyed their hair. Despite this age-concealment practice, it was clear that gendered and aged bodies played a role in the job search process. Older women were devalued not only in relation to men but also in relation to their younger counterparts, largely as a result of how they looked. Thus it is important for feminist scholars to move beyond examinations of workplace issues that deal with younger female bodies (e.g., sexual harassment) and begin to adequately address the embodied experiences of older women.

Therefore, we conclude that the search for employment occurs within a specific gendered and age(ed) context and barriers are in place that put older women at a disadvantage in the paid-labor force. The experiences of being female in a male-centered labor market with unequal processes of production, reproduction, and distribution cause women to experience challenges throughout the life course that translate into heightened inequalities in later life employment. Feminist scholars need to pay more attention to the importance of age in the labor market to gain a better understanding of how older women experience the combination of ageism and sexism in a way that men and younger women do not.

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