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Personal epistemologies and older workers

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the need and prospects for older workers to develop and deploy effective and critical personal epistemologies in order to maintain workplace competence, successfully negotiate work transitions and secure ontological security in their working life. A personal epistemology is an approach to and a practice of learning directed by individuals, often for purposes that are important for them. This seems particularly important for older workers as both the institutional and brute facts (Searle 1995) that comprise workplace affordances and maturation factors, respectively, may not be supportive of their attempts to maintain competence in their working lives. Instead, as both individual agents and parts of collective actions, the exercise of personal epistemologies premised on critical reflection stands as a means for older workers to understand and respond to the changing requirements of work life. These propositions are introduced and elaborated using a study of older workers' capacities to be critically reflective of their practice and enact workplace change.

Work, work transitions and the older worker

In order to understand how older workers' continuity and development throughout working life might best proceed, this paper brings together both developmental and epistemological accounts of their learning. It proposes that the shortcomings of both brute and institutional facts (Searle, 1995) that respectively comprise maturation processes and social support emphasise the need for older workers (i.e., those over 45 years of age) to play a significant and agentic role in maintaining their competence throughout working life and securing their sense of self through that work. This need may become more accentuated as younger workers become a scarcer resource, and are increasingly prized by employers, and as older workers increase in numbers and experience employers' diminished estimations of their worth. It follows that in the absence of support within workplaces and in confronting changes in their capacities, older workers may require effective personal epistemologies to utilise their existing knowledge and engage in active learning and critically appraise their work situations. These epistemologies might be deployed to fulfil workplace requirements and personal needs, as individuals or as part of a collective.

A personal epistemology is an approach to the practice of learning comprising an individual's view about what knowledge is, how knowledge is gained, and the degree of certainty with which knowledge can be held (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2006) and/or expanded. These epistemologies may be influenced by societal sentiments. If society promotes assumptions about older age as a period of intellectual decline, older workers may be prompted to believe this to be the case and their learning potential and activity may be accordingly inhibited (Withnall & Percy, 1994). Therefore, discussions and deliberations about older workers' need for personal epistemologies should include agentic and critical dimensions that can work to resist such views within individuals, and assist them to consider how best to exercise both their potential and limitations in securing an effective working life. So, this epistemological agency needs to be directed towards assisting individuals effectively to maintain their sense of self in face of the brute fact of aging and a societal sentiment that privileges youth. However, as with any population cohort, there is great variation in older workers' capacities for and interest in sustaining a working life. This includes abilities to maintain competence in the workplace and effectively engage in changed workplace circumstances. Moreover, there will likely be distinct differences in how older workers elect to direct their epistemological agency and intentionality.

Consequently, the need for, purposes of and characteristics of this epistemology will be person-dependent in many ways. And, given the rich variation in personal and workplace purposes that individuals generate and their diversity of focus and agency in the exercise of these intents (Billett, Smith, & Barker, 2005), the character of these personal epistemologies is likely to be diverse and person-dependent. Yet, individuals' epistemologies are central to how they negotiate their participation in and learning through working life. These will shape whether their negotiations are able to secure their sense of self and workplace participation in ways that meet their personal and professional needs. Hence, the effectiveness of their personal epistemologies is premised on measures that are subjective and strategic for the self, not the focus of what others might propose for them.

In making this case, this paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the ability and potential of workers over the age of 45, who are now classified as older workers, to remain competent and sustain their sense of self in the workplace, are discussed and elaborated. Next, societal views about age and older workers are discussed, including a consideration of how the privileging of youth over age in the provision of workplace affordances (e.g., support and training opportunities) may be enacted and its consequences for older workers. It is proposed that older workers are increasingly likely as individuals or cohorts to come to rely on their own agency in the conduct of their work and learning through and for work. They will need to develop an effective personal epistemology as a bulwark against both societal sentiments and brute fact of aging. The potential of critical reflection is discussed as an epistemological device that can assist older workers understand and respond to the changing requirements of work life and work transitions. If nothing else, it may serve to assist individuals in maintaining their sense of self, in a working life which may be prone to neglect them. These propositions are then elaborated through a consideration of the agency and reflection of six older workers in health-related work. The consideration here is about maintaining these workers' sense of self and potential as workers in so far as they want or need to participate in working life. It is not focused on sustaining older workers in work situations in ways that employers and governments might wish to extend their working life.

Capacities and potentials of older workers

Much is yet to be understood about the prospect for older workers to remain competent throughout their working lives. The literature on human development across the lifespan suggests that whereas maturation processes are helpful in extending children's and younger adults' capacities, they may not always be so helpful for older workers (Sigelman, 1999). There is an inevitable decline in a range of human functions through the process of aging. These include reaction time, processing of novel ideas and the active engagement of memory, and physical strength (Bosman, 1993). However, older adults have developed significant memories and capacities that can compensate for some of these changes. These include their capacity in resolving problems and performing effectively in work-related roles, and in ways that can compensate for slower nervous systems (Baltes & Staudinger, 1996), because work performance is not dependent on the speed of processing capacity alone. For instance, while typing speeds might decline with age, older typists are as efficient as younger typists. The wealth of older workers' previous experiences allows them to predict and execute typing tasks more efficiently than their younger counterparts (Bosman, 1993). Moreover, cognitive performance does not necessarily decline with age (Sigelman, 1999). Cognitive capacities may endure, yet are required to be engaged and/or reactivated to maintain and utilise their potential. Indeed, specific training can redress some of the negative effects of aging (Bosman, 1993).

This view of older workers' potential is consistent with functional conceptions of thinking and acting (Baltes & Staudinger, 1996): the need for thinking and acting to be directed towards purposes that individuals view as being worthwhile. Such imperatives commonly underpin conceptions of adults' engagement in learning-related activities (e.g., Knowles, 1975; Tennant, 1997) with functional applications seen to motivate adults' engagement in and learning of new tasks. Functional applications are likely to be both central to participation in paid work and consistent with adults' preferences for engaging in and organising their learning. Moreover, increasingly, knowledge is seen to be associated with individuals' construal and construction of what they experience through what they already know -- that is an individual domain of knowledge, rather than some objective set of knowledge to be learnt (Billett, 2006; Valsiner, 2000). Given this more person-dependent base for

learning and the active roles individuals need to take in that learning, the intentionality and agency of workers stand as potentially powerful mediators of their learning through and for work. This, in turn, constitutes a relativist claim about older workers' engagement in learning-related activities and interactions, which are relational to the individual and their circumstances.

Together, these functional and relativist conceptions are highly consistent with theories of human development that arise through negotiations between both the personal and social contributions to that development (Rogoff, 1995; Valsiner, 2000). In particular, the concept of ontogenetic development or life histories advocated through the social cultural constructivism emphasises the unique legacies of individuals' personal histories as they engage in socially-derived but functional activities throughout their life histories (Billett 1998; Rogoff, 2003). This development is seen as a product of a negotiation between the social experience (i.e., the contributions available in the social world) and individuals' construal and construction of what they experience (i.e., the cognitive experience) that comprises microgenetic or moment-by-moment development (Billett, 2003). However, both individual- and socially-oriented theories of learning often fail to acknowledge the impact of the brute fact of aging upon developmental processes. Yet part of ontogenetic development is the maturation process that has consequences for some of individuals' capacities to function effectively at work.

Given that maturation processes are not always as helpful for older workers as they are for younger workers (Baltes & Staudinger, 1996), opportunities for older workers to maintain or develop further their capacities might be sought from the workplace. However, as discussed below, this kind of support may not always be available for older workers. Workplace support is exercised selectively and, it seems, often parsimoniously towards older workers (McNair et al., 2004). Therefore, while personal agency and intentionality are important for all individuals' construction of knowledge (i.e., learning), they may be particularly important for older workers as they strive to remain competent in their work and negotiate workplace transformations.

Of course, the exercise of this agency will be subject to and conditional on support provided in the workplace. Nevertheless, personal epistemologies stand as a base for older workers to maintain workplace competence and negotiate workplace

transformations, even just to understand the changing circumstances and imperatives they confront and maintain a positive sense of self within those circumstances.

Societal views about older workers

Older workers tend to view their long work experience and corresponding competence as their special strength (Tikkanen, 1997). However, managers' assessments are consistently more negative about older workers, seemingly irrespective of their actual performance (Rosen & Jerdee, 1988). Despite becoming increasingly essential for the production of goods and services, older workers are often seen to be "last resort workers": at the bottom of employers' preferred kind of workers (Quintrell, 2000). Employees categorised thus will often be a low priority for employer-sponsored development opportunities and support in the workplace (Billett & Smith, 2003). Instead, opportunities in the workplace are likely to be distributed by a cultural sentiment where youth is championed and privileged, and where age is seen as a natural decline (Giddens, 1997).

The evidence consistently suggests that across Europe, employers are far more likely to spend funds on training the young and well-educated, rather than older workers (Brunello, 2001; Brunello & Medio, 2001; Giraud, 2002). True, some northern European countries (i.e., Scandinavia) adopt more positive attitudes towards and claim a strong sense of obligation to older workers as exercised through a set of national policies and practices (Bishop, 1997; Smith & Billett, 2003). However, elsewhere, the ways in which employers distribute and fund developmental opportunities to employees, is neither influenced by legislation (Giraud, 2002), nor government mandation (Bishop, 1997). Instead, it seems that the underlying sentiment that privileges youth (and never more so than when they become a scarce commodity within aging populations), is that which shapes employers' decision making about the distribution of sponsored workplace-based opportunities for learning.

It is unlikely that the societal sentiment favouring younger workers will change. Therefore, older workers cannot be confident of being afforded the kinds of employer support required to maintain their workplace competence and successfully negotiate work transitions. Moreover, given such privileging of youth, it is less likely that older workers will make demands for employer funded training lest they reinforce the sentiment of being a liability. Analogously, (Church, 2004) refers to disabled workers who have particular needs for support, yet are strategic and cautious in their

demands for support from the workplace and co-workers, lest they be seen as liabilities in cost-conscious working environments.

The widespread perception among employers that older workers are less able and inflexible, however, appears questionable. McIntosh (2001) notes enterprises employing older workers value their contributions. Survey responses of nearly 400 American employers and human resource development managers characterised older workers as (a) being flexible and open to change, (b) having up-to-date skills, (c) interested in learning new tasks, and (d) willing to take on challenging tasks. Furthermore, 68% of the respondents concluded that training older workers costs less or the same as training their younger counterparts; 57% reported that age does not affect the amount of time required to train an employee (14% disagreed); and 49% believed that older workers grasped new concepts as well as younger workers (18% disagreed). In all, this survey portrays older workers as ideal employees, which confounds the sentiment behind practices that distribute employer-funded support away from these workers. The exercise of this sentiment may also reflect the contradictory and confusing discourse that many older workers experience and try to understand in the workplace: they are essential to maintaining the production of goods and services, yet discriminated against in terms of the opportunities afforded them.

Despite the suggestion in the survey reported by McIntosh (2001), few studies throw light on the reaction and role of older workers to the changing nature of work processes. However, McNair, Flynn, Owen, Humphreys, and Woodfield (2004) claim their surveys indicate that most workers reported not being given assistance to negotiate new work roles and new work as their work life transforms. All of the above suggests that older workers as individuals or as a collective may increasingly be required to rely more on their own agency in maintaining their workplace competence than younger workers. Perhaps the societal sentiment favouring youth may change. However, even if it does, it will likely take the kind of time that older workers do not have. All this supports older workers having the need for approaches to learning (i.e., personal epistemologies) that are agentic and include a critically reflective component in order to maintain sense of self and capacities to effectively negotiate work transitions.

Personal and reflective epistemology for older workers

A consideration for individuals to possess a personal epistemology to negotiate with the social world is far from new. Indeed, Baldwin (1894) proposed the need to engage in thinking and acting (i.e., projective thinking) that is selectively based on dealing with an uncertain and inconsistent social world. This means that individuals need to engage with social partners and sources in ways that include an interrogation of motives and affordances that they are experiencing, as in being critically reflective. This reflective approach can guide older workers in the maintenance of their workplace competence as well as their sense of self as workers. So it is instrumental in both these ways.

According to Dewey (1933), reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a con-sequence – “a consecutive ordering, in such a way that each idea determines the next as its proper outcome, while each outcome, in turn, leans on, or refers to, its predecessors” (1933, p. 4). Some have defined reflection, or related concepts, in a phased approach that moves from problem analysis to the testing of possible solutions, and finally to the choosing and implementation of a solution (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Criticisms can be made to these phased approaches. First, although such cyclical models clarify the process of reflection and the subsequent steps, they appear to describe an ideal reflective process, rather than the reality of everyday process thinking of acting (Korthagen & Wubbels, 1995). Further, these models propose reflection as mainly an individual and mental action, instead of being interactive or dialogical (Reynolds, 1998; Vince, 2002). Yet, social interaction is an important source for learning, particularly when seeking to learn through and for work. Mezirow and colleagues (1990) distinguish between three levels of reflection: (a) reflection, (b) critical reflection, and (c) critical self-reflection. *Reflection* is aimed at the assessment of assumptions implicit in beliefs about how to solve problems. *Critical reflection* is devoted to problem posing and addresses the question of the justification for the very premises on which problems are posed or defined in the first place. *Critical self-reflection* is devoted to the emancipation of the individual, in order to make free choices. It means reassessing the way individuals pose problems, their meaning perspectives, and attitudes towards perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting. Given the circumstances that older workers face, all three forms of reflection seem likely and necessary, as they negotiate their learning through and for their work. Criticality may be necessary to help individuals understand that it is their age and not

their person that is the cause of the low level of affordances they encounter in their workplaces.

From a Critical Theory perspective, criticality concerns challenging dominant ideology and orthodoxy (Brookfield, 2000) and illuminating and transforming power relations (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). Within this perspective workplaces are highly political. Managers are clearly privileged in their decision-making while other groups can be seen as exercising only occasional and reactive influences and are often represented as simply economic “costs” rather than active and considered components of the workforce (Deetz, 1992). Yet, Brookfield’s (2000) pragmatic constructivism holds that criticality involves constructing and deconstructing one’s own experiences and meanings on the basis of dialogue and multiple lenses provided by others. Brookfield’s critique is grounded in an objectivist understanding of knowledge (i.e., knowing is penetrating false consciousness to reveal the fixed reality of the world’s economic inequities) with the epistemology of pragmatist constructivism as subjectivist (i.e., knowing is individually, culturally and socially framed and there is no fixed reality waiting to be discovered by diligent analysis). In this way, this critique is consistent with the functionalist and relativist positions of the developmental theories in so far as it can assist individuals understand challenges to their sense of self and what was claimed earlier about older workers’ personal and workplace imperatives.

Here, it is held that both perspectives are relevant. Reflection in the workplace can be critical when it questions social, cultural and political “taken-for-granted” (Reynolds, 1998) (critical reflection) or when it challenges personal norms, assumptions and taken-for granted (Cope, 2003) (critical self-reflection). Hence, this reflection needs to be grounded in the questioning within workers’ everyday practices as learners. The critique is situated in practice and self, rather than in concepts and ideologies (Cunliffe, 2002), and necessarily includes a consideration of older workers’ subjective construals. These are the functional and relativist perspectives that are important for older workers.

To illustrate the purpose and salience of reflective personal epistemologies for older workers, the experiences of a group of six older workers are discussed in the next section. The procedures for and findings of this study are now discussed.

Critical reflection and personal agency to work

The need for personal epistemologies that included critical reflection were evident and able to be elaborated in the experiences of six older health workers (Van Woerkom, 2003). These workers were employed in a forensic psychiatric clinic for patients who are hospitalised by a court ruling because of their mental health. The clinic is a division of the regional institution for mental health care. In the clinic, treatment, intensive care, and security are interlinked to diminish psychiatric problems, prevent delinquent behaviour, and reduce the danger to society. Most employees at the clinic are directly involved in the treatment of patients, and include psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, social therapists, and social workers. The largest group is the social therapists. Some older health workers were asked to participate in interviews about their work and workplace competence. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for the perceptions, attributions, and hypotheses of interviewees to be openly engaged and experienced. The workers were asked about:

1. Their job characteristics, characteristics of the context of the job, and the organisational climate.
2. Motivational factors (Do you feel socially integrated/competent? Do you feel a balance between challenge and security in your job?).
3. Their critical (self-) reflection at work.

Respondents were encouraged to clarify their statements with examples. Here, what comprised these six older workers' critically reflective approach to work is the key focus. It is noteworthy that these workers had been characterised as being either *high* or *low* critically reflective by their managers. The purpose here was to identify an elaborate personal epistemology of workers who were seen by others to have different levels of critical reflection in their work about their working life. These categorisations were a methodological device to access workers who are perceived to employ different levels of reflection in their work and working life. The *low* rated respondents comprised four workers: a 53 year old social therapist, a 52 year old system therapist, a 47 year old occupational therapist and a 48 year old therapist for sexual delinquents. The occupational therapist, a woman, had senior secondary vocational education; the other three were males with professional qualifications. The *high* rated respondents comprised two workers. They were both male: a 46 year old cluster manager and a 48 year old social therapist. The social therapist had senior

secondary vocational education and the cluster manager had a professional qualification.

The findings from the interviews about critical reflection and critical self-reflection are now discussed in turn from those categorised by their managers as *low* and *high* reflective workers.

Critical reflection on the workplace

Low-rated respondents

All four low-rated employees had many criticisms about the organisation they work for, although some may have chosen not to fully articulate these criticisms. The social therapist is a member of the representative advisory board of the clinic. In this function, he is a key person although he is aware that because of his age he might have the tendency to be conservative and to be especially critical about changes: *“I have to take care of that. The older you get, the less change you want and you want to stick to the old situation. That is one side of it. On the other side, I think that I have a lot of experience and I feel like I am not being listened to.”* The social therapist feels frustrated that despite his experience, he has no influence in the organisation, including changes that are introduced.

The therapist for sexual delinquents also felt his many years of work experience were sometimes underestimated: *“I sometimes doubt there is enough respect for my expertise, because, after all, we do live in a diploma culture nowadays. When the organisation got bigger I, of course, also lost my special position to a certain extent.”* Here, his sense of self is imperilled by this lack of workplace recognition and engagement.

The systems therapist had criticisms about the organisational climate and management, but has developed his own way of dealing with them. *“...I have seen so many colleagues breaking down because they were too critical and could not bend. I am a survivor. I must survive in this organisation. So I try to observe things and to stay out of trouble. And where I think ‘this is the right person to discuss this problem with’, I do so.”* So, here the public exercise of criticism is quite strategic.

The occupational therapist had a clear view of her role, yet indicated that this view is sometimes in conflict with that of management. She also indicated that she lacks the energy to be publicly critical anymore, since she needs all her energy for her job. Her work is emotionally demanding and she reports often feeling completely

exhausted by her work. Although she was invited by the organisation to participate in policy making, she found this to be unsatisfactory and inappropriate as she had been asked to join a meeting together with people who are responsible for sports and the library. Her preference was to meet with people from the education and coaching department. *“It is not that I do not want to discuss things over, but it bothers me that I do not have a say on what topics I would like to have a say.”*

The intentional focus of the low-rated respondents was largely personal and professional: on contact with the patient, and not so much on contact with other units, organisational policy, or institutions outside the organisation. The social therapist, occupational therapist and therapist for sexual delinquents mainly focused on contact with patients. Both social therapists ascribed this preference to the energy that it takes to work with these kinds of patients, and the fact that the units are restricted only to professional staff. There is no longer a unit manager, only a cluster manager who is much more physically isolated, which makes it difficult to understand the operation of the clinic and to make input to its operation. The occupational therapist attributed her inward focus to the conflict with her coordinator: *“I don’t feel so involved in everything in the organisation, and I don’t want to be either at the moment.”* The therapist for sexual delinquents in an outpatient clinic ascribed the lack of involvement to the solitary character of his work, having individual contacts with patients.

These accounts indicate that these workers all actively engaged in reflective activity about their work and their capacity to participate in it. However, much of the reflection serves largely to exacerbate the sense of disenfranchisement and separation individuals feel in their work. Their reflections are entrenching the individuals, rather than assisting them reflect upon and explain what is occurring in the workplace and how they can maintain their sense of self under the circumstances.

High-rated respondents

The high-rated cluster manager also had criticisms of the workplace. He thought it was too much absorbed in managing and too little concerned with the clinical work and its development. Yet he also noted that now that he had a management position, he could no longer afford to be critical all the time. Instead, he now had to build bridges and create consensus among workers. The high-rated social therapist also indicated that he was critical of the content of his work. However, he also stated a

dislike of conflicts and, therefore, was a reasonably compliant person. He tried to convince other people on the basis of rational arguments, but when he did not succeed, he became resigned to their preferences. He also stated that criticality was only appreciated within the boundaries of one's own province of work. So, both these high-rated respondents focused on the meaning of their work in a broader context of the workplace, and wanted to feel part of an entity bigger than just their own clinical unit. For this reason, they focused on contacts with other units, organisations, professional disciplines or facilities for the patients outside the clinic. However, the high-rated cluster manager felt frustrated about the inward focus of his job: *"My work is varied, but very much inward focused ...I would like to have more contacts outside – with other institutions, courses, etc."* He also felt that he lacked opportunity to understand and monitor what was happening in the other clusters. The social therapist was also a proponent of "opening up his unit" to others, although this is a contentious matter because of safety regulations.

The reflections of these highly-rated employees indicate concern for and concerns about both personal and workplace imperatives. This included some sense of what they perceived as being possible, and was informed by their personal dispositions and place in the organisation. Overall, these data indicate that criticality was directed selectively by the participants, rather than being possessed as a set quality, inherently possessed more by some than by others. It was merely the direction and intensity of their critical reflection that separated them. There was also accommodation here. Through the years, some workers developed their own way of surviving in the organisation. This has meant that they became more careful or strategic in making their criticism public; nevertheless they were still critical and engaging in critical reflection. Both highly and lowly rated workers engaged in agency and critical reflection, albeit directed towards different and personally significant goals. In general, the low-rated respondents were more withdrawn from the organisation and decided to concentrate on their direct task instead of the organisation as a whole. However, the variation was in the focus and intensity of the exercise of that criticality. In some ways, the interviews provided a salve for their hurt in being able to express something of their reflections.

Critical self-reflection

Low- rated respondents

The low-rated respondents were all very experienced practitioners in their field of work, with strongly developed occupational identities. One social therapist felt so experienced and confident in his job that he claimed critical self reflection about his clinical practice was just no longer necessary: *“I’m very satisfied. ...I once said that this is the only thing I can do. I still really enjoy dealing with people. I’ve been doing it with pleasure for the past 35 years. So I’m not, um, reflective I just don’t think that’s necessary.”* However, in contrast, the therapist for sexual delinquents indicated that he still often reflected on his job and suggested reflexivity as a necessity for this work: *“Every day I sit in the car for three hours. Then I often reflect on the way I do my job and if I still like it. People that do this work without reflecting on themselves have always bothered me. That is something that I see a lot with social workers.”* The systems therapist indicated that getting older made reflection less necessary because his work became less demanding as a result of his many years of work experience. *“When you get older it becomes all familiar. There are many repetitions so you need less time to recover.”* Yet, his work can still be so emotionally demanding that he has to reflect on his own thoughts and feelings and how to keep an appropriate distance from his patients: *“I sometimes work with patients and their families and because I have a wife and children my self I really have to change gears in my head, what are my thoughts and feelings, and where does it relate to my patient. You really need to reflect on that to prevent yourself from getting mad. You know, we in the mental health care pretend like we are ideal people, but of course we are only humans with our own vulnerabilities.”* The occupational therapist claimed that although she felt very competent, she still regularly reflected on her way of working or consulted her colleagues about her attitude towards patients. She also still learns a lot from her patients.

Because of their many years of work experience, these (low reflective rated) practitioners built up strong routines in their way of working, and they did not speak so much about wanting to make big changes to these routines. Yet, when it came to improvements to practice at a more detailed level, they were still actively experimenting and learning from their practice. The therapist for sexual delinquents indicated that he was still engaged in efforts to improve his way of working, such as the tone of voice, the words used, and the use of humour, etc. Conversely, a social therapist indicated that experimentation was not possible because of the many protocols he had to work with. The occupational therapist liked to experiment with

new printing techniques, and had followed a course on neuroemotional integration that she could apply in her job. So here, the imperatives of practice afforded different kinds of opportunities for these therapists to reflect on their work and transform their work through these reflections.

Three of the four low-rated respondents indicated that they were not concerned with their future career or personal development. The therapist for sexual delinquents stated that he did not have any ideas about his personal development, or the direction in which he wanted to develop, because he did not have high ambitions, and would rather spend his time on his private life. He did not feel the need to follow courses or training, although this was propagated by his manager. However, recently he thought about following a training course. *“At this moment I think I might follow a training course. But it must be closely related to my work. Not something radical.”* Two other therapists no longer bothered about their careers or training and education, because they felt they were at the end of their careers: the system therapist *“Well, I’m not bothered about training courses and that sort of thing, because in a few years I’ll be retiring. But I am going to teach myself next year”*. and a social therapist *“No, I’ve done that. I mean, I’ve only got a couple of years or so to go. I’ll leave that to the others.”* Only the occupational therapist said she was thinking about her career plans: *“I’m thinking about whether this is what I really want. I’m now taking two courses that I’m fully committed to. It’s possible that I’ll carry on working here, but what I’d really like to do is work in a therapy farm.”*

Again, the reflections of these low-rated respondents were focused on functional and relativist concerns of their practice and survival in the remainder of their working life. Secreted here are issues of self and dignity. Perhaps this is accentuated because in their sense of disillusionment of being marginalised in a workplace that seems to offer them the contrary discourse of what their labours, but not other kinds of contributions. That is, the intentionality and focus of the reflections is directed towards maintaining their selves as competent practitioners but also their life beyond the workplace. These are perhaps compensatory intentions arising from the lack of recognition and support that they perceive being afforded by their workplace.

High-rated respondents

The high-rated cluster manager claimed to reflect on his management skills and that these should be the focus of his intentional learning. He knew that there was still a lot he had to learn and he was unsure whether this was the right direction for him: *“As cluster manager, I think I’ve got a lot to learn. I’m not yet a real professional in that field. I think you need to be a certain sort of manager in this type of organisation. But the question is, do I want to? Do I really want to be that sort of manager?”* The high-rated social therapist felt quite confident about his level of professionalism because he and his colleagues had many years of work experience. He claimed that he and the other social therapists in his unit practise their profession at a higher level than elsewhere: *“We can really put the profession of social therapist into practice in our work. We’re quite direct and confrontational. In other units that is the territory of the psychologist or treatment coordinator.”*

In this way, both high-rated respondents indicated that they were interested in developing new concepts, projects, methods, and so on. However, the high-rated respondent who had been a cluster manager for six months felt frustrated because his job did not allow him to perform this role any more. He had many ideas for new projects, but felt constrained by the time pressure and by not being able to enact such projects. He also felt frustrated that there was not an organisational climate for innovation, nor personal and professional commitment for change: *“Yesterday, there was something really fundamental to the content of our work. So I said we should have some fruit juice and snacks while we discussed it. I came in especially on my day off to show how important I thought it was. There were 25 people there, but at 4 o’clock, they pack up their bags and off they go! And we’re left with just three of us and the snacks.”* The social therapist said he had initiated a gardening project outside the walls of the clinic. He also indicated that he needed new challenges: *“If that is no longer there, I have to look for a new challenge. I can’t just stay in the unit all day long - all that complaining and moaning.”* So, the focuses of the therapists’ agency in the unit play out in different ways, shaped by their intentions and reflections. Some want to innovate, others to survive, others to use their energies strategically and as directed towards their purposes.

So both low- and high-rated workers provided evidence of having engaged in demanding and self-directed processes of reflection and development that were directed by concerns about functionality and relativity to the individual. Although some low-rated workers indicated less engagement in critical self-reflection because

through the years they gained a lot of self-knowledge, making reflection less necessary, they were still reflecting on their own way of working. A more clear difference between the low-rated and the high-rated respondents was the extent to which they were engaged in setting up big projects or experimenting with visible new work behaviour. So these low-rated workers engaged in development and experimentation to improve their way of working, only on a more detailed level. For these workers, agency was exercised in particular ways based on personal imperatives of maintaining their practice, or by emphasising both the functional and relativist bases for the exercise of that agency. There is evidence of different levels of strategic development that is intentionally enacted and directed by individuals' developmental trajectory, which can be shaped in different degrees by a combination of personal goals and institutional imperatives. All these older workers enacted both the exercise of agency and critical reflection, albeit directed towards quite different goals and purposes as associated with their personal career ambitions. Yet, this agency was not always directed towards institutional goals.

Older workers' reflective practice

The interviews with the low-rated older workers indicate that these older workers are no less critically reflective than their more highly-rated counterparts. Instead, through their many years of work experience, they have built up strong routines in their ways of working. Perhaps because these routines have for many years secured successful work practice, these workers may be less radical in their reflection and in their attempts to improve their way of working, or in the ways that others (e.g., managers) would have them perform. For instance, when it comes to improvements to their practice, where there is interest and commitment, they are still active in experimenting and learning from their own ways of working. This emphasises what to these workers are the functional and relativist focuses of their learning-related activities. The interviews also show, however, that the functional and relativist imperatives are constructed differently between managers and practitioners, and among these practitioners. Hence, the latter prefer less critical opinions about the workplace and a more strategic (i.e., workplace) focus.

Clearly, some of the older workers developed their own strategies to “survive” in the organisation, while others had learnt that it may be wiser not to give air to their criticism or had consciously chosen to concentrate on their direct tasks instead of the

organisation because this might cost them too much energy and frustration. So although the four low-rated respondents were characterized as not critically reflective by their manager, they in fact demonstrate critical reflection, albeit of a kind not always central to management's ideals. The discrepancy between managers and employees seems to be caused by different conceptions of what constitutes the focus and purpose of critical reflection: what it should be directed towards. Van Vianen (1997) notes that not all employees' learning is rewarded: only those valued within the organisation. Being self-directed is seen as productive when it is about introducing new things, but not when it is about improvements to practice or resisting change when that change is perceived as professionally or personally unsatisfactory.

When [who was?] trying to explain this discrepancy, repeatedly the cause was low-rated older workers not feeling appreciated and engaged in the organisation. This is consistent with the functional and relativist approaches that characterise human cognition, perhaps of all workers. However, the personally-based context of what constitutes functionality is constructed differently across these workers. Here, the problem is not so much that these workers do not get support from their employer to follow courses and so on, as is the case for many older workers. Instead, the therapist for sexual delinquents, the low-rated social therapist and the systems therapist do not feel like following training courses, because of feeling at the end of their career.

They do however express a need to pass on their experience to the organisation, but they feel frustrated because this seems not to be appreciated. It is these workers' conceptions of functionality and their direction of intentionality towards achieving those goals that is central to what to them constitutes workplace performance and effectively negotiated workplace transitions. Critical reflection is advanced as an epistemological device that can assist older workers' capacity to understand and respond to the changing requirements of work life and work transitions. However, the degree by which that critical reflection is assisting or antagonising the self seems uneven across these older workers. In both those categorised as high and low on reflection, there are instances of reflective processes antagonising the self, rather than providing reconciliation or restorative outcomes. Even those whose voice is included are not always satisfied with that voice and the purposes to which it is being directed.

The significance of older workers' personal agency seems to be well supported by the data, for both personally positive and negative outcomes. The

findings suggest that it is not helpful to categorise older workers as a homogeneous group. Instead, they may all have quite different capacities, goals and intentionalities associated with their engagement in work. For instance, the worker who had become a cluster manager while reflecting on his continuity in that role suggested “not being him”. This emphasised a capacity to negotiate between his needs as an individual and the imperatives he faced both as an employee and the goals of his professional practice. For all of these informants, there was clear evidence of personal and professional agency, although exercised intentionally and by different motivations and for different purposes. So, critical reflection was not the preserve of those who were rated highly. Instead, a rating was likely a measure of how the agency and critical reflection were directed towards achieving institutional goals. Yet even those embroiled in achieving such institutional goals exercised critical reflection.

Older workers’ personal epistemologies

In sum, these older workers’ personal epistemologies included engagement in critical reflection. These epistemologies stand as a means to make sense of their circumstances and reflect upon a changed work situation, including the transition to new forms of work. Yet for all of them the exercise of personal agency and reflection, albeit directed in particular ways, characterised their engagement with work. It is these kinds of attributes that older workers may need increasingly to develop and deploy in order to maintain their workplace competence and/or their sense of self. These reflections, as observed, can facilitate frustration as well as easing the process of making sense of changed work circumstances. So, this reflection may not always be a salve. Perhaps engagement with a form of critical reflection of the kind that would permit the individual to separate their sense of self from the social world of the workplace in which the engage is needed. However, it may also be generative of more frustration and anxiety. A greater emphasis on critical self reflection may be what is required, as Mezirow and his associates (1990) suggest. Of course, ironically, it is these kinds of therapists that would prescribe such a remedy for their patients. Yet, one suggests that they are as human as everyone else.

The limited evidence presented here suggests that older workers engage in critical reflection but that it is directed in particular and distinct ways. They exercise these in making sense of their circumstances. The particular issue in the workplace reported above was that the critical reflections of some workers were towards less

well-regarded concerns and outcomes than others. This can lead to a particular privileging of their contributions (i.e., highly-rated or lowly-rated). So, in one way, these older workers have demonstrated a capacity for critical reflection in order to understand that the social norms and workplace practices they encounter are shaping their experiences of work and capacities to be effective. This reflection can also empower their responses to resist, learn how to comply with, or engage in negotiated outcomes with the workplace. However, it may lead to further anxiety and disillusionment. So in conclusion, both these high- and low-regarded older workers exercised the kinds of critical reflections required to sustain and improve their practice (i.e., maintaining their competence) and sense of self. However, for the latter, their reflections, agency and intentions were directed more towards personal-professional concerns associated with maintaining their practice, rather than towards goals that managers rated more highly. So it seems that perceptions of performance requirements, marginalisation and engagement with the workplace stand as bases for older workers to exercise their capacities more widely, and strategically, yet potentially, away from their selves. However, given the precarious employment in which many older workers find themselves, their sense of “last resort workers”, it is perhaps not surprising they might reflect in these ways. All this behoves workplaces to engage older workers as it does other and younger workers. That is, privilege them on the bases of their attributes and capacities, not on ill-founded assumptions and prejudice.

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