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**Age at work: Ambiguous boundaries of organizations,
organizing and ageing
by Jeff Hearn and Wendy Parkin**

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5 Master discourses on age and our acts of organizing around age and ageing overshadow more complex,
6 non-essentialist inquiries in management and organizational studies. Hearn and Parkin (2021), in their
7 book *Age at work: Ambiguous boundaries of organizations, organizing and ageing*, focus their efforts on
8 deconstructing these master discourses thereby opening the door wider to considering non-essentialist
9 inquiries around age(ing) intersecting with organizations. In the process, they answer Aaltio *et al.*'s
10 (2017) call for a closer look at the discursive nature of age(ing). Notably, Hearn and Parkin consider the
11 boundary states of age(ing), in society and in organizations, and how such master discourses impact the
12 production and sharing of academic knowledge. They also reflect on an important rigid practice that
13 continues to be reproduced; that is, (gendered/racist/classist/etc.) ageism in organizations and in broader
14 society persists, as one of those discriminatory practices that we seem not prepared to undo 'just yet'.
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22 Their book is divided into four parts, where they along with Richard Howson and Charlotta Niemistö
23 address many if not most key concepts and, with the material-discursive theoretical framework,
24 investigate age(ing) in society, and age(ing) in organizations. They also look at notions surrounding what
25 they call 'a living afterlife', where "the power of the individual is diminished [...] major decisions are
26 removed to others [...] [and] people can feel powerless and superfluous" (p.128), along with
27 deconstructing death and post-death concepts and experiences. They set the stage for the postgraduate
28 reader in each of the introductory chapters (One, Two, Four and Six) to each of the book's four parts,
29 talking explicitly to the construction of such concepts as age and ageing, generations and life course, and
30 ageism in its many different facets (Chapter One), along with age systems, societal age regimes, social
31 structures organizing, and age hegemony (Chapters Two). The authors also guide the reader from social
32 relations' contingency to intersectionality scholarship, and onto the theme of intersectional age, and the
33 accompanying silences about these complex intersections that lead to the exclusion of old(er) individuals
34 in their third age (i.e. those who have active engagement in formal organizations, whether paid or unpaid)
35 or fourth age (i.e. those who are dependent, marginalized, and potentially isolated) (Chapters Two, Four,
36 and Six). They also consider historicity, power-relations, age hegemony and relations to social structures,
37 pulling on various kinds of literature on age(ing), where they call out that
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47 to understand age more fully there is a need to push beyond history to historicity, where the latter
48 is not the same as either history or histories [...] [historicity is] to move beyond the appearances
49 of truth organized into essentialist categories, the focus is less on identifying 'what is' and more
50 on the 'why it is' (p. 43).
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3 Their driving question for this book —why is age relevant for organizing and organizations? — goes
4 beyond the basic question of social divisions based on age. The informed reader is invited to look more
5 closely at the making and doing of organizations, in relation to age(ing). The material-discursive of how
6 age and ageing operate in and around organizations, and vice versa, are framed within an understanding
7 of how organizations and ways of organizing are co-constructed with age(ing). The historical contexts of
8 organizations and the formation and membership of organizations, such as questions of succession and
9 structuring around age limits and being age-banded, are addressed and examined (Chapter Four). They
10 also look to internal organizational dynamics, and examples of organizational talk and silence on
11 questions of age and ageing (Chapter Five). Furthermore, they consider gendered ageism where women,
12 in particular, are singled out in this treatment, while hinting at genders other than femininity or
13 masculinity/masculinities (Chapters Three and Five).
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22 The heart of the book is in Part Four, where age-organization boundaries are considered extensively.
23 Hearn and Parkin together and individually consider the importance of such boundaries starting with a
24 particular type of autoethnography, the personal narrative (Ellis, 2004). Hearn and Parkin view
25 themselves as the phenomena, writing and sharing stories that focus on their personal lives and academic
26 lives. Each one moves between the analytical and the very personal, sharing their journeys of age and
27 ageing and navigating their respective experiences with/without organizational boundaries. They tell us of
28 the significant challenges and marginalizations that they each face, as organizational objects of repression
29 and suppression. A good autoethnography pulls the reader into the big and the small picture, blurring the
30 lines between these pictures, in such a way to ultimately empower and teach the reader (Ellis, 2004).
31 Assuming this role as the reader for this viewpoint article, I was left wondering not about resilience but
32 adaptability and drive to pursue what Hearn and Parkin call unpaid or volunteer work, or physical and
33 mental exertion towards achieving existential fulfilment. There was no ready answer as to the question of
34 why age(ing) requires such mistreatments of our (older) colleagues in their various attempts to offer
35 service to the wider community. I also contemplated knowledge acquisition and the acts of sharing said
36 knowledge, and how boundaries are erected to stop individuals in their latter life phases from such
37 knowledge acts, with no one crying out that this is ethically and morally wrong to segregate the (older)
38 academic into such oblivion. These immense structures that divide us and segregate knowledge, to the
39 purview of those of a certain ‘younger’ age, lead me to ask: who decided, in this notion of knowledge
40 creation and dissemination, to exercise such power-relations or to erect such structures that result in only
41 those of a certain age individually and collectively contributing to knowledge?!
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3 Building from these autoethnographies presented in Chapter Seven and ‘a living afterlife’ in Chapter
4 Eight, the next three chapters on death, post-death (or the power of absence), and organizations move the
5 reader away from much of the academic literature’s focus on bio-medicalized ageing and medicalizing
6 death, health care, and the terror and fear of death. This growing literature, as evidenced via a keyword
7 search on ‘death’ in this journal which resulted in 59 hits for research paper publications in the past 10
8 years – more so than age and ageing, the older worker and successful ageing combined – would also
9 benefit from a move away from some of those master discourses. Notably, Hearn and Parkin take the time
10 to deconstruct the fear and terror surrounding death, and ultimately the avoidance of death; they ask us to
11 consider that “the language of death is part of organizational life” (p. 151), and they deconstruct notions
12 that some may have about ‘only’ the older old die. The intersections of age and ageing with organizing in
13 these death and post-death power-relations result in individuals being marginalized and discriminated
14 against, and in Hearn and Parkin’s words, “conveniently forgotten” (p. 4) and subject to “invisibilizing
15 processes” (p. 22). They also briefly consider organizational ‘death’ pushing aside such euphemisms as
16 reorganization, restructuring or downsizing. Hearn and Parkin also tell us that “post-death is the
17 paradigmatic state of absence and not knowing” (p. 163). It is a state in which both life and post-death
18 come together, where post-death is an actant. While individual post-death is organized and organizing
19 around such structures as medical, legal, funeral industries and the like, we can and should talk more of
20 ageing and ageism at the boundaries of organizing and organizations towards that endpoint that we will
21 all face, a ‘good death’, and thereafter during the power of absence.
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35 My personal experience with this book tells me that, yes, you can read it linearly from beginning to end;
36 however, you can also jump around and choose to live in an asynchronous re-discovery of the theoretical
37 frameworks and the extensive notions that are at play with age(ing) in organizing and organizations. I am
38 making such statements around linearity and asynchronicity because my relationship with this book is
39 temporal and influenced by life, death and post-death, as I too navigated my flow of gendered age(ing)
40 intersecting with organizations. I suspect many of us who have gone through the COVID-19 pandemic,
41 for the past two years, have also experienced such forces that transcend a specific age and those more
42 nuanced discourses of ageing as we navigate many life challenges, including mental health issues.
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49 Looking more closely at this idea of transcending a specific age, much of the academic literature adheres
50 to the rigid idea that age and ageing are about one growing 1 year older, for every year one lives. This
51 essentialist stance ignores one keyword – growing – and that life experiences are not necessarily acquired
52 yearly. Time, as Price *et al.* (2017) state, is indeed connected to age and ageing; however, Indigenous
53 Elders recognize that their “knowledges are not acquired exclusively in a linear way” (Price *et al.*, 2017,
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p. 23). I suspect that Hearn and Parkin, as academic elders who are “situated in a continuum and process, which is related to age but not exclusively bound by it” (Price *et al.*, 2017, p. 20), would agree with these Indigenous Elders. A lack of fluidity in an understanding of age(ing) translates itself into the academic literature and into the formative contexts that drive cultural and stereotypical understandings of what age(ing) is and is not at the intersection of society and organizations. For example, many of the studies on age(ing) and organizations are focused on areas of linearly managing an ageing workforce, succession and knowledge transfer, and motivational issues (e.g. Cook and Rougette, 2017; Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004), generational career mobility concerns (e.g. Lyons *et al.*, 2015), bridge employment, early retirement and retirement (e.g. Kim and Feldman, 2000; van Solinge and Henkens, 2007; Wang and Shultz, 2010). There is also a growing field of organizational academic literature that is focused on ‘managing’ death of (older) individuals (e.g. Mukherjee and Thomas, 2022). Attempts to address Western stereotypes of ‘older’ employees being less productive or less healthy or ‘less preferred’ (e.g. Brought *et al.*, 2011; Hedge *et al.*, 2006; Henkens *et al.*, 2008), are much needed but also seem to struggle with fluid understandings of age(ing). Hearn and Parkin’s work tries to untangle some if not most of these essentialist stances by recognizing that age(ing) can be, and is, mediated by not only individuals involved in social relations in organizations but also by the organizations themselves.

Turning explicitly now to death and post-death as a state of being, much of my work follows Foucault’s philosophies but somehow, I missed his constructions around these particular ontologies. He, unfortunately, let me down with respect to death: “there is no longer visible manifestation of power” (p. 164) said he, and so the dead escape power. Thankfully, Hearn and Parkin talked to post-death as being rather ambiguous, as it is a state of being that is political and politicized, and that it is both ‘alive’ and productive. A realization started to form for me with one of their more straightforward sentences: “our reluctance to honestly examine the experience of aging and dying has increased the harm we inflict on people and denied them the basic comforts they most need” (p. 149). Such a death and post-death existence, where that existential state of being in the land of the dead, even though I am not yet dead or dying, and that power of absence brought forth an awakening for me personally and as an academic researcher. That is, death and post-death in and with organizations can be socially and culturally productive. The dead person/the ‘dead’ career/ the ‘dead’ organization continues to exercise power over the living, while productive and oppressive power can either propel the living forward into the future or hold that living in limbo, neither moving forward or backward. We can, in other words, be in a state of being that exists with the living and with the dead, and we can experience post-death in and amongst organizations and in acts of organizing.

Sadly, my growing awareness of new and more fluid meanings to age(ing) intersecting with organizations and organizing, framed with Hearn and Parkin's help, only came to me much later. In the interim, Wendy Parkin transitioned into the post-death life stage on September 10th, 2021. While her family, friends and colleagues, notably Jeff Hearn, struggle through this power of absence, I take some personal solace in knowing that Wendy is reachable productively and constructively through her writings, sharing her knowledge and experiences in this what is most likely her last work, helping me and others navigate the complex relations and meanings of age and ageing at work.

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