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## **Taking Stock: a visual analysis of gendered ageing**

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### **Abstract**

While various forms of imagery have been highlighted as central to processes of social construction, the potential of visual methodologies to generate insight into gendered ageing has yet to be fully exploited. We build on the developing body of visual analyses within work and organization studies to suggest how understandings of gendered ageing are impacted by our consumption of work-related images, empirically explored here using stock photographs. We examine images of men and women of various ages to unpack the visual construction of gendered ageing within online news media, a critical context within the new economy. Through our own analysis, and our review of participants' responses to three images, we contribute to the unpacking of culturally produced age-sensitive subject positions through examination of the interrelationships between gender, age and employment. These combined methodologies offer new insights into ways in which understandings of gendered ageing are both (visually) constructed and interpreted.

**Key Words:** Gender, Age, Visual Analysis, Stock Photograph.

**Running Head:** Taking stock

## Introduction

Our paper examines visual representations of gendered ageing; unpacking the consumption of stock photos from online news media. This is a pertinent research context which reflects the importance of the 'media spectacle' (Tan, 2011: 169) at a time of media globalization (Machin and van Leeuwen, 2007). Based on Meyer *et al.*'s (2013) categorisation, we use both archaeological and dialogic approaches to visual research. That is, we deploy insights from visual studies to offer our own archaeological analysis (Davison, 2010; Machin, 2004; Rose, 2012). We also review the (dialogic) responses of 39 participants (self-identified as working in the areas of human resources or occupational psychology) to these stock photos from a photo-elicitation exercise. Together these analyses contribute to the unpacking of 'culturally produced age-sensitive subject positions' (Riach *et al.*, 2013: 1) through examining how interrelationships between gender, age and employment are visually constructed and interpreted.

No longer considered a straightforward demographic variable, age is now subject to significant academic investigation (Ng and Feldman, 2012). Inquiry is prompted by concerns about ageing populations (Baltes and Finkelstein, 2011), older workers' marginality (Fevre, 2011) and longer working lives (Cooke, 2006) set within the challenge of working in a new economy (McMullin and Marshall, 2010) characterized by job insecurity, demands for flexibility, and increasing risk of unemployment (Lippmann, 2008). A growing interest in older workers (Field *et al.*, 2013) is mirrored by concern about youth unemployment (Allen and Ainley, 2010), since younger workers are often seen to represent the future of organizations (Taylor *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, workers of all ages are impacted by the precarious nature of work in the new economy, for example, with older workers finding casualization a barrier to career change (Simpson *et al.*, 2012) and younger workers subject to 'auditioning' through internships to access paid employment (Smith, 2010: 291). This makes age in the context of work a significant topic for consideration within the new economy.

Moreover, dominant chronological and other categorical approaches to age (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014) are increasingly problematized through critical exploration of the social construction of age (Gullette, 2004), of age(ing) at work (Fineman, 2011) and age categories such as older workers (Riach, 2007; Rudman and Molke, 2009; Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012). These challenge the positioning of age as a numerical fact and instead consider the insights generated by treating age as situated and performed across a range of social and material contexts. These approaches have demonstrated that age (and categories thereof) is not neutral but (re)produced within complex circuits of societal and organizational action (Fineman, 2011).

This literature resonates with well-established considerations of gender and gender intersectionality (Benschop and Doorewaard, 2012). Indeed, the relative positioning of men and women, the value of femininity and masculinity and the performance of gender and sexuality at work have all received considerable attention, with many significant debates taking place within Gender, Work & Organization (e.g. Colley, 2013). When considering gendered ageing, studies have posited that the older woman incurs a double (Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2013; Duncan and Loretto, 2004) or triple jeopardy comprising not only sexism and ageism but also appearance (or 'lookism') (Granleese and Sayer, 2006), given the mutual reinforcement of youth, beauty and femininity (Trethewey, 1999). In contrast, it is suggested that older men benefit from a naturalized association between ageing, wisdom and experience (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012).

In our analysis we explore intersection of age and gender through examining depictions of men and women of various ages in relation to work. Our empirical context comprises stock photos from UK online news media, recognising this genre (Lewis, 2003) as a significant feature of the new economy (Machin and van Leeuwen, 2007; Fineman, 2011). Such news media do not simply reflect a truth about relationships between gender, age and work (Fineman, 2011; Pritchard and Whiting, 2014).

Rather these representations have 'practical consequences that social science must examine' (Foster, 2013: 199). Indeed, Acker (2012) identifies media images as an area ripe for empirical investigation. Recognizing these calls, we investigate empirically the ways in which understandings of gendered ageing are constructed and interpreted via stock photos.

### **Gender, age and their intersection**

It is suggested that 'gendered discourses saturate our society and guide the way we think of ourselves, respond to others and negotiate identity in our interactions' (Mackenzie Davey, 2008: 654). Research on the means and implications of such gendering is a well-established area of study (Benschop and Doorewaard, 2012). Particularly integral to understanding diversity (Shore *et al.*, 2011), feminist, critical research has raised awareness of on-going 'inequalities in the organization of work and life' (Ozbiligin *et al.*, 2011: 17). Within gender studies, much work draws on Acker in conceptualizing 'inequality regimes [which] are the interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organizations' (2006: 441), though she suggests that age is perhaps less 'thoroughly embedded in organizing processes' (2006: 445). At stake here is the notion that age differs from other diversity categories (Joshi *et al.*, 2010). For example, it is argued that the dynamic quality of age and ageing make it harder to identify a static disadvantaged group.

However, the need to further our understanding is significant since, whilst age and gender discrimination legislation are now well established in many countries, concern remains about prejudice and inequity particular via more subtle processes in work contexts (Cortina, 2008; McVittie *et al.*, 2003; Martin, 2006). Such processes are impacted by stereotypical perceptions of age and gender, as generalized assumptions are made based on an allocation of an individual to a particular group or intersection thereof (Fineman, 2011). Since, as explored later, stock photographs are often seen as reinforcing stereotypical representations this confirms the need for their academic interrogation.

As highlighted previously, when exploring age in an organizational context, empirical work has tended to apply chronological age-based categorisations (such as younger and older, e.g. Snape and Redman, 2003) or generational cohorts (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014). Studies have considered, for example, relationships between age and knowledge and talent (Tikkanen, 2011), performance (Kunze *et al.*, 2011) and work values (Smola and Sutton, 2002). However, there has been growing recognition of other factors that vary by age and hence complicate any ageing effect (Kooij *et al.*, 2008). In contrast, viewing age as a social construction enables a move to examine social structures and cultural practices (Krekula, 2009). For example, studies have explored older worker identity, highlighting how age is deployed as an organizing principle and moving understandings of age beyond its conception as an individual biological characteristic and chronological fact (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012; Rudman and Molke, 2009; Riach, 2007; Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2013; Riach and Kelly, 2013). This provides the foundation for a more critical examination of the intersection of age and gender: the construction of gendered ageing.

Woodhams *et al.* (2015: 63) summarize intersectionality as an interest in 'how multiple sources of labour market disadvantage combine', with a focus on potential additive and multiplicative effects (Holvino, 2010). Studies tend to either unpack the situated experiences of individuals or identify patterns associated with particular intersections (Woodhams *et al.*, 2015). Following the first approach, Irni (2009: 667) examines how the 'cranky old' woman contrasts with stereotypes of a tranquil old age, showing how gendering within organizations, the welfare system and biological discourses problematize older women. Looking at the complex intersections of age, gender, ethnicity and class, Moore (2009) suggests it is difficult to disentangle the discriminatory effects of age and gender. This reinforces the need to examine different ages and genders in studies of gendered ageing. However, in finding women are 'never the right age' (2004: 110), Duncan and Loretto report that at

all ages, women are more likely than men to experience ageist attitudes concerning appearance, highlighting the significance of the visual as a valid empirical interest.

In relation to other diversity categories, age suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity. Together with changing demographics, this makes age an area of increasing academic concern. Critical approaches make a significant contribution here in showing how gendered ageing is emergent and constituted rather than a natural pre-existing state and how subject positions, as socially constructed and legitimated categories, emerge from discourses that normalise certain ways of being. As such, subject positions can have similar effects to stereotypes though they are derived from a different conceptualisation of the world. Whereas stereotypes derive from a psychological perspective, subject positions are conceptually embedded within a constructionist approach in which texts and images are constitutive of social reality. We build on this work to examine how gendered ageing is visually constructed. Therefore below we explore the existing and potential contribution of such a visual perspective to understanding gendered ageing.

### **Visual understandings of gendered ageing**

It is some time since Potter (1996) reminded us of the importance of visual rhetoric, suggesting we unpack our assumptions about image representation and reproduction (Pritchard and Symon, 2014). Recognising the many different forms of visual representation (Rose, 2012), here we focus our discussion on photography and the photograph, as this is the form we investigate empirically. Considering in particular Barthes (1977, 1981) on photography and contributions from semiotics by Hodge and Kress (1988), Shapiro (1988) and Williamson (1978), Potter questions 'the idea of photography as an innocent medium of factual representation' (1996: 10). Developing these ideas within work and organization studies is a growing body of research which views photography as a 'meaning-laden mode of communication' (Shortt and Warren, 2013: 23).

Despite considerable technological development (Pritchard and Symon, 2014), Munir (2005) observes that photography remains associated with 'preserving' scenes (Runde *et al.*, 2009: 15) and 'realism' (Richards *et al.*, 2012: 66). Visual studies have therefore been concerned with unpacking layers of representation (for example, Mitchell, 2005 and Rose, 2012) with researchers often drawing on Barthes (1977, 1981) conceptions of visual denotation (specific representation) and visual connotation (representation of ideas) to read photographic images. At the same time both theory and research is concerned with moving beyond an academic analysis to investigate how images might be 'read' across an increasingly wide range of media and modes of interaction. In this way, both production and consumption are unpacked (Machin and van Leeuwen, 2007; Meyer *et al.*, 2013). This highlights the need for analysts to acknowledge that 'it cannot be taken for granted that images that are present are actually part of the process of meaning making' (Baetens, 2013: 183) since this must be explored both conceptually and empirically. Rose (2012: 19) identifies the concerns of visual research as the 'three sites of[:] production, the image itself and its audiencing'. How these play out within our own research will be explored later but first we review existing visual research on gender, age and, where considered, their intersection.

Featherstone and Wernick's (2003) major edited review of images of ageing highlights that 'consumer culture with its new images of youth, fitness and beauty lifestyles [have] produced a new set of exclusions for older people' (p. 7). Indeed within the field of gerontology there is a substantial literature examining media images of older people in relation to stereotypes (e.g. Lumme-Sandt, 2011), finding these to be supposedly more negative than those of race and gender (Nosek *et al.*, 2002). Other research has examined actors' portrayal of older people in adverts (Robinson *et al.*, 2008), in TV commercials (Miller *et al.*, 2004) and in these settings across different countries (Zhang *et al.*, 2006) to show how stereotypes (such as 'frail and vulnerable' or 'happy and affluent'; Williams *et al.*, 2010) are reinforced. Rozanova and colleagues (2006) found that representations of older



people exceptionalized and differentiated them from younger people in relation to work roles. Most images in these studies are, however, set outside a work context, an omission we aim to address.

Within visual studies of youth there has been an emphasis on the impact of the representations of different forms of behaviour (for example Stern, 2005 on smoking, drinking and drug use) but also some investigation of representations of relationships between younger and older characters (Robinson et al, 2009). However, a major focus has been the particular intersection of young women and their physical representation, as the embodiment of both youth and femininity are scrutinised. Gill (2008) suggests that 'the body is portrayed in advertising and many other parts of the media as the primary source of women's capital' (p. 42) while Twigg (2004, 2010) highlights concerns around discourses of perfectionism related to images of young women. Images (here with a particular focus on advertising) offer 'ideal' representations of aspects of gender and age (Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998) whilst hiding alternatives, such as the 'wild woman', from view (McNeil *et al.* 2012).

Moving to work and organization studies, researchers have paid particular attention to the use of photographs in specific organizational contexts. For example researchers have unpacked how diversity is visually represented within formal organizational publications (e.g. annual reports and brochures). Swan (2009) examined the imagery of diversity as a mosaic and, while focusing on ethnicity, she notes the dominance of youth. Moreover, such representations emphasize a particular kind of youth, as clean cut and smartly dressed (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). This research shows how these images work to construct an understanding of the valued employee. With a focus on gender, Hancock and Tyler (2007) draw on Butler (1997) to unpack the performative function of photographs within graduate recruitment publications, since these display particular combinations of gender, dress and pose. While age is only mentioned in passing, it seems that youth is implicit in depictions of graduate recruitment, presenting a potential challenge for mature graduates entering this labour market. A separate focus of visual research in organizations involves unpacking

representations of leadership, with emphasis on images within annual reports (Duff, 2011). Benschop and Meihuizen (2002) found that, despite the apparent neutrality and objectivity of accounting discourses within annual reports, texts and images work to reinforce gendered stereotypes of organizational roles and relationships. Davison (2010) also reviews images of (predominantly older male) leaders to uncover the visual rhetoric, identifying how these bring the person and the body back into our understandings of leadership while making visible intangible aspects of leadership (such as the use of pensive poses to convey creativity). Visual methods have been used to show how images are important in building understandings of employment and organizational roles. To date much research has focused on print media and organizational reports in particular; in contrast the site of our investigation is online news and stock photos, as outlined in more detail below.

### **Online news and stock photos**

Despite extensive consideration in other fields, there has been relatively little empirical engagement with online news in work and organizational studies (Mautner, 2005). Such sites are part of the broader 'media spectacle' (Tan, 2011: 169) embedded within the new economy (Machin and van Leeuwen, 2007). We suggest these are critical to investigate as influential and significant sites (Knox, 2007; Martin, 2006) within which the often invisible subtexts of gendered ageing are (re)produced (Acker, 2012). Lewis depicts online news as 'a theme-based group of news objects held together graphically overlapping with other such groups and undergoing progressive updating' (2003: 97). Within this genre we focus on stock photos; posing the research question: How are understandings of gendered ageing constructed and interpreted via stock photos?

A stock photograph is a particular form of image, a 'cultural text' (Milestone and Meyer, 2012: 3), which is significant since 'we gradually come to accept them as showing us how the world really is' (Machin and van Leeuwen, 2007: 157). Stock photos are constructed using models, enrolling props and staging (Ward, 2007), offering editors cost- and time-effective visual shorthand (Frosh, 2002).

Organizations such as Getty and Alamy mediate between photographers and those seeking to use the images (van Dijck, 2008). In order to maximize their saleability, stock photos must fit a range of requirements and may be generic even to the point of semantic ambiguity (Ward, 2007). Often they portray relationships between individuals or between individuals and objects, as though captured in a particular moment or experience (Frosh, 2002). These relationships or interactions portrayed are seen to be particularly important in terms of the visual meanings made available to the viewer (Machin, 2004). At the same time, relationships between accompanying text and the stock photo is symbolic in that they may convey different messages (Machin, 2004). In short there is a complex process of construction involved from the set-up of the shot, the labelling, sale and subsequent editorial selection and publication (see Frosh, 2002 and Machin, 2004 for more extensive considerations).

Critical here is that stock photos result from a very specific site of production (Rose, 2012). At the same time it is suggested that the site of the image itself (Rose, 2012) is also crucial as these photographs 'do not document or bear witness' (Machin, 2004: 316) but are designed to be visually flexible in terms of the moods, emotions and relationships they can portray. However, Machin (2004) further suggests that it is the translation or reading of the generic into a specific interpretation that is problematic, particularly since stereotypes may both guide and be reinforced through this reading so that these become normalised (Richards *et al.* 2012). Stereotypes are primarily a psychological construct, referring to how complexity and variety, for example in relation to age identities, is made simple and manageable by using readily accessible and undemanding categories (Fineman, 2011). In contrast the notion of subject positions emerge from discourses that reproduce certain ways of talking about, for example, gendered ageing, as if these were 'truths'. This in turn normalises particular ways of being and constructs and legitimates some categories of identity or 'subject positions' (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Organizations increasingly use stock photos in a range of different media, for example, annual reports, recruitment brochures and company websites; these images are potentially influential

sites within which reproduction of subtexts of work-related gendered ageing and reinforcement of stereotypes can occur. Despite this, the stock photograph has been relatively under examined notwithstanding the growing interest in the visual within work and organizational studies (Frosh, 2002).

We must therefore ask what is both revealed and concealed through the selection and use of an image in a particular context (Feighery, 2009). As we explain below, our focus is on three stock photos from a wider data set of material collected from online news. These offer a varied representation of gendered ageing and employment, enabling us to explore ways in which their particular interrelationships are (visually) constructed and how these photos (re)create understandings of gendered ageing.

## **Methods**

Based on Meyer *et al.s'* (2013) categorisation, our research encompasses elements of both archaeological and dialogic approaches to visual research. The former prioritizes researcher interpretation of pre-existing (here, stock) images, whilst the second involves engaging with participants' responses via a (here, group) process of elicitation. This enables consideration of an academic reading with further investigation of how these images might be read or consumed; in Rose's (2012: 19) terms: the site of audiencing.

Data from UK online news was collected systematically using internet tools in a daily automated search process over 150 days during 2011/2. After testing (Pritchard and Whiting, 2012a), the search terms used were older worker, age regulation, age discrimination, age diversity, youth employment, generation and work. Online news articles were identified via these searches with hyperlinks returned to a specified email while further material was collected via snowballing from the sources identified.

From this process we identified 120 usable photographs which were downloaded with accompanying text (e.g. online news articles) and relevant identifying information was recorded (including hyperlinks, sources, copyright information, dates of download). This is not the total number of images within the data set as for practical reasons some images were excluded. For example, where there was no identifying information enabling us to track the copyright of the image, where the image was poor quality or comprised named individuals (since these would be difficult to obtain permission for use and would likely present ethical issues). The accompanying text was the basis of finding the photos (through the automated search process). We have discussed elsewhere our analysis of such texts (Pritchard and Whiting, 2012b; 2014) but here we focus on the images themselves.

Next, both authors conducted an initial review of visual themes and then met to discuss the images and their impressions of each, an initial stage of description that is often recommended as analysts view the images for the first time (Schroeder, 2007). It was at this stage that our focus on stock photos was identified. This decision emerged, firstly, as these images were particularly prevalent within these data and, secondly, as based on discussions in the literature (see previous section) they seemed to offer a useful empirical basis from which to consider representations of gendered ageing, one which to date has been under explored (Frosh, 2002). Stock photos are important to organizational life particularly where they represent organizational and other work-related matters. As noted above, these can reproduce subtexts of work-related gendered ageing and reinforce stereotypes. The next stage of the selection process was driven by our focus on gendered ageing at work. We aimed to select images portraying a range of ages and that encompassed some aspect of work. For example, we excluded images of students in education and of older people pursuing leisure activities in retirement. The resulting sample size (16) was not set as a target but emerged from this review. Each researcher first completed an independent review and then we compared our selections. Photographs identified by both researchers were earmarked for further analysis and we then debated other selections before making a joint decision on their inclusion or exclusion.

From the literature on visual research (including the excellent resources on the in-Visio website: <http://moodle.in-visio.org/>), we selected three guides to frame our initial archaeological stage of analysis (Meyer *et al.*, 2013). Firstly, based on the portrait character of our stock photos and because of its use within the management literature we applied Davison's (2010: 165) framework which particularly emphasises attention to 'visual portraiture codes'. Based on our early utilisation of her 'sites' of investigation we also applied Rose's (2012) areas of investigation of the image: technological, compositional and social modalities. Given his specific attention to the stock photo we also undertook a reading based on Machin's (2004) developments of Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic approach (1996, van Leeuwen, 2005) to focus on the generic and abstract potential of these types of images. A final aspect of our analysis was the relationship between the stock photo and the online news setting, in particular the headlines and photo-captions which establish the links between the image and text, offering a suggested framing for each.

The 16 images were divided between the two authors who used these ideas to guide their interpretation and each produced a (textual) analytic account. These accounts were then passed to the other author who added, annotated and questioned the account to add further interpretative depth, again using the concepts above as analytic prompts. It was at this stage that we presented our analysis of a selection of these images at an academic conference (Pritchard and Whiting, 2012b). Discussions and questions from participants highlighted the potential of a dialogic approach (Meyer *et al.*, 2013) to develop our contribution; here using a form of photo-elicitation to gather others' views on the images (i.e. their audiencing, Rose, 2012). Therefore three images were selected (from the sample of 16) as depicting a range of ages and genders in a variety of employment scenarios. Selecting a small number of images is typical of visual studies deploying these approaches since this allows for the necessary interpretative depth (Feighery, 2009; Meyer *et al.*, 2013). Following their selection, the rights for the use of these images in research and publication were purchased. These images were

then used within photo-elicitation workshops to generate narrative feedback from 39 participants, as outlined below.

Participants (self-identified as working in human resources or occupational psychology) came from mixed practitioner and academic backgrounds within the UK (the same cultural context as the online news corpus). In each workshop, participants were provided with a paper form to complete individually, which also provided details of ethical rights and copies of the images in black and white. As participants looked at the paper copies and completed their comments, colour versions of the photos were also displayed on a screen. First they were shown the (high definition) photograph on its own and then the image in its online context, showing the headline and photo-caption. However, these latter displays were of significantly poorer quality and participants were not asked to comment on the textual context (although some did). Rather adopting an open approach, participants were asked simply 'what are your impressions of these photos' and to write their thoughts on the form provided. We did not provide any additional guidelines as to what elements to focus on or how to structure their response, nor were participants asked specifically to look at the online news context of the image. During this time participants could work alone or chat to others in the room, they were also free to ask questions and some open discussions took place. At the end of the exercise, we shared our own analysis of each image and discussed similarities and differences with the participants, though these discussions were not recorded. However, it is important to reflect that such discussions (here and indeed elsewhere as we discussed our research with colleagues) fed into further iterations of our own analysis. Given the free format approach adopted, we applied thematic analysis (King, 1998) to explore the participant data. We used the themes generated from the participant data and mapped them onto those from our own initial analysis, noting where they compared or contrasted. As with the discussions, this also provided a further reflexive prompt for our own analytic review of the images, the results of which are reviewed in the next section.

## Findings

Below we review our findings, highlighting in turn both our own visual analysis and our analysis of participants' responses to three images which offer a varied representation of gendered ageing and employment. We first consider each image individually before looking across these stock photos. As explained above, we particularly draw on the work of Davison (2010), Rose (2012) and Machin (2004) to inform our analysis, however, for ease of reading these references are not repeated within this section.

Figure 1



Headline: Record fall in employed over-65s shows businesses rushed to retire workers. Photo Caption: Experts say it is harder for older people to find jobs after redundancy than young candidates. Published: October 2011. Photo Credit: Roger Bamber / Alamy

This image, headline and photo-caption combine in ways which challenge the viewer's impression of what is being depicted, for example, the potential conflict between understandings of 'retirement' and the depiction of a job search. Despite the generic nature of stock photos these contradictions



entice the viewer to scrutinise the visual representation. The image is realistic in that it portrays a specific activity (reading the paper); while the props (the papers) are central to the (mirrored) composition, though that each holds a single page rather than whole newspaper draws attention to its artificial status. However, realism is compounded by low colour differentiation, neutral facial expressions and gentle lighting. These further act to produce a more sombre atmosphere that contrasts with the way in which bright colours and lighting are often used to portray positive emotions in stock imagery.

The dominant relationship portrayed is between each individual and their newspaper, there is no direct representation of a relationship between the two characters. This draws on a stereotypical portrayal of an older couple in a staid relationship engaged in a static activity (reading). However, this use of the props is problematic and acts to compound the contradictions between retirement and job search set up within the associated text. In particular the orientation of the job search page is toward the viewer, which challenges the naturalistic representation and invites scrutiny. We might say this even mocks the notion of this as job search by misaligning the characters and props (presenting them as ineffectual) for the visual effect of the viewer.

The photo invites us to see the man and woman as the same, particularly in regard to the activity depicted. They are presented as a mirror image, incorporating many clear signifiers of older age, with a flat colour modulation and differentiation. This includes their silver white hair, wrinkled skin and the beige colouring and style of clothing, in a depiction of shared, natural ageing. This image foregrounds (older) age while gender seems almost (but not quite) invisible. We suggest this composition constructs age as gender neutral, but also offers a subtly less masculine positioning for the older male (e.g. he is placed in the shaded area, at a lower height than the female). This depiction acts to deny the (more positive) subject position of the wise old man. Here the genders are equal but equally disadvantaged when viewed through an age lens, as the man has visually acquired the

stereotypical disadvantage of the older woman. Both are uncomfortably positioned with respect to the job search activity (mockingly) portrayed, as the 'ineffectual job seeker'.

A thematic analysis of participants' comments highlighted the job search as the dominant concern, reflecting our observations that this invited scrutiny, with further comments related to the status and dress of those depicted. Participants highlighted the similarity, particularly the style of dress, which reinforced our own reading of the mirroring effect of the composition. Most participants did not distinguish between the two characters and many referred to them as a couple. However, some noted that the man seemed older, with one suggesting he was 'unkempt, frail' in contrast to the female described as 'neat, powerful, positive, determined'. Several participants noted that the woman's glasses suggested she was a 'professional'. Participants seem to agree with our observation that the feminisation of the older man presents a problematic image, but some then made a more positive relational evaluation of the older woman.

In respect to the job search, participants offered that they might 'not [be] looking at jobs but at the content inside the jobs pages', replacing our interpretation of mockery with a valid alternative explanation. Others suggested that they might be reading the jobs pages for general interest e.g. 'looking at jobs now in their previous organizations' or that they might be job searching for younger family members. In respect of the idea that this was a job search for themselves, one participant commented that they 'fe[lt] sympathetic towards them as older people 'shouldn't' be looking for work' while this being 'sad' was reflected by others. In this respect, this image (which we earlier suggested was 'flat') prompted quite emotive comments. For example, one participant wrote that it 'seems hopeless, if they are looking for themselves they will not find a job'. At the same time, some respondents observed that 'they do not look as if they are required to work', with comments about the class and financial status of these individuals, offering a broader range of potential readings than we made ourselves. The relationship between this older woman and man and work (in particular their

role as jobseekers) therefore seemed to prompt a variety of interpretations. In contrast to our analysis, many of these sought to offer an alternative to the problematic conclusion that ‘they will not find a job’, rejecting the subject position of ineffectual job seeker.

Figure 2



Headline: Age discrimination ‘rooted’ in society Government finds; old age officially begins when people reach the age of 54 and youth ends when people turn 32 a government survey has found. Photo Caption: According to DWP Research, one in three people have experienced some form of prejudice in the last year because of their age. Published: January 2012. Photo credit: Johnny Greig / Alamy.

Here, and in contrast to Figure 1, the bright lighting and colours are typical of the more positive emotional tone of many stock photos and seem to create an artificial intensity around the figures within a mundane office setting. The compositional emphasis is placed on the four figures, drawing attention to both their relationships and individual representation. It is suggested that historically the

colour 'rose' was associated with youth so the coloured shirts of the seated man and woman may be significant (van Leeuwen, 2005). The male figures contrast, while the representation of the two women is similar (particularly physique, clothing and hairstyles) with only subtle age coding (facial wrinkles only visible at high resolution). Here the females' ages become obscured by their gendering, a potential subject positioning consistent with the need for women at work to appear ageless and for older women to attain a more youthful appearance. This is in contrast to the dominant (masculine) positioning of the older man; with his hands spread across the desk he is the tallest figure and at the apex of the pyramid formed by the figures. This composition reinforces the subject positioning of the middle-aged male manager. In depicting 'work', a paper is set out on the desk which both men and the younger woman are touching, while the older woman seems squeezed towards the rear of the group, perched on the corner of the table. In contrast there seems to be considerable focus on the younger woman as, literally, all eyes are on her, reinforcing the subject position of the former as the 'invisible older woman'.

For our participants, this image provoked a strong reaction for its 'text book' diversity representation, with some noting that it was, for example, 'a politically correct photo including males, females, different ages and ethnicities', falling into the category of a 'hyper-real' stock photo. Certainly (and in contrast to comments on the other images) this was identified as a positive work context: 'dynamic', 'everybody is happy', 'successful, productive, enjoyable work', reflecting a broader discourse of the happy productive workforce. However, some observed that this seemed fake as people were 'improbably good looking' and the image was too 'shiny'. Such reactions did not, however, stop participants unpacking the photo further. For example, some suggested that the age range was relatively narrow; one commenting this conveyed the idea that you 'don't have youth or old age in a successful environment'.

A key concern was the relationship between the individuals, particularly the younger woman and the older man. Here, a further subject position emerged, that of 'pretty young woman'. Comments noted that the group had a particular focus on the younger woman, whom one participant described as 'pretty in pink'. Indeed, she was also a focus for the participants, who particularly commented on her appearance. There were, however, very different opinions as to her status, especially in respect to her relationship with the older man. Some commented that the 'pretty young girl' was the focus of attention, with a possible sexual gaze from the men, invoking the subject position of 'sexual object'. One participant worked through their discomfort with this scenario writing 'the others are looking in her direction as well but why did I think the older guy was perverting on the younger woman?'

Many noted that the older man was likely to be the manager but could also construct a work explanation for the focus on the younger woman. For example, a 'stereotypically older person is the boss, reviewing the work of a young team, seated woman presenting the work so everyone is listening/focusing on her'. However, others suggested the younger woman might be the most senior and had 'called all these together to make some sort of announcement', with another interpretation that there might be a client-consultant relationship between the younger woman (as client) and the older man (as consultant). Whatever the account offered, participants seemed particularly to focus on this dynamic between the older man and ('pretty') younger woman, with many reinforcing the subject position of 'manager' for the former whilst seeking to resist the subject positions of 'pretty young woman' or 'sexual object' for the latter. The younger man and the older woman standing to the back of the image received much less attention. We note that these two figures fall outside the generalised associations discussed earlier for men (between age, wisdom and experience) and women (beauty, femininity, and youth) and their related subject positions.

Figure 3



Headline: There are 30,000 job vacancies in London but young Brits don't have the right work ethic, says Boris [Johnson, Mayor of London]. Photo Caption: Unemployment figures this week showed that the overall jobless total has reached a 17-year-high of 2.69 million. Published: January 2012. Photo Credit: Jenny Matthews/Alamy.

Unlike the other images, here the character's features are hidden from view, a rather unusual perspective for stock photos which so often rely heavily on the emotion conveyed by the models. Instead this image seems to take its cue from broader discourses of the hidden and anonymous nature of unemployment (Cole, 2008). Without a face, clothing and orientation become the dominant aspects of composition. Here the hood becomes the most prominent aspect of the image and so, by association, we are drawn to the (UK) stereotype of the hoodie (a subject position emblematic of a troubled youth within the discourse of unemployment) despite some conflicting aspects of the image, including the seemingly smart haircut. In this image there is no female representation, rather the compositional focus is on the young man and the street scene in which he is placed. The realism is underscored by the use of the job centre<sup>1</sup> sign though the soft focus of the background which hides the specific location and positions this as a generic scene to be found within any British town or city.

Participants used a variety of labels for the subject of this image. Gender unspecified terms used were 'young person', 'youth', 'hoodie', 'NEET<sup>2</sup>' and 'druggie', while when a gender identifier was added this ranged from 'male', 'gentleman', 'man', 'lad' to 'teenage boy'. Participants responded to appearance and dress, though only two specifically noted the hidden face of the individual. While many used the term hoodie, participants also noted that this could be more of an 'anorak' and that (as we had also highlighted) the seemingly recent haircut was at odds with a more stereotypical notion of a hoodie as a negative representation of youth (Bell, 2013). For example, one participant noted 'smart haircut and no tattoos so not completely stereotyped'.

From these observations some participants provided alternative accounts, again resisting the ascription of the subject position, here that of 'hoodie'. For example, accounts included that he was 'likely to be employable in client facing work' or that this could be 'a younger person on his way to work passing by the job centre and thinking of others out of work'. However, where the appearance was not unpacked, participants tended to suggest a negative, even hopeless scenario in keeping with

the 'hoodie' subject position; 'bleak outlook', 'few prospects', 'hopeless, no jobs', 'difficult, dire circumstances'. Some constructed narrative accounts which tied together their impressions: 'typical, stereotyped hoodie [with] no hope as he stares at the job centre sign [and] sighs'; 'young man from a disadvantaged background, has low skills or aspirations and is unemployed, going to jobcentre...he dreads it'. Given this hopelessness, another participant commented 'why not show a young man striding through the doors of the job centre'? Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that despite the hidden face, this image seem to offer fewer interpretative challenges for participants since it fits so readily with the available (negative) stereotype of youth unemployment set within a generic (and realistic) UK town.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Each stock photo offers us a visual representation of gendered ageing and employment which we have unpacked from both our own (academic) and our participants' perspectives. This highlights how stock photographs represent gendered ageing in ways that are open both to an analytic interpretation and as a prompt for participants' stories. Such carefully composed photographs offer stereotypes to be read (from which certain subject positions emerge) but also open up opportunities for alternative interpretations, sometimes triggered by seemingly small visual cues (e.g. the smart haircut in Figure 3). This was particularly the case where such cues were seen by participants as anomalies in relation to subject positions in dominant discourses (such as the 'hoodie' within the discourse of unemployment).

Across the photos, the use of light, colour and tone work with varying degrees of success in constructing (almost) realistic scenarios. In comparison to many stock photos used within advertising none of these 'demand' the audiences' interaction (through a direct gaze, van Leeuwen, 2005). Rather our focus becomes the various relationships on display (Schroeder, 2007), both those between individuals and between individuals and objects (a newspaper, a plan on a table, a job centre sign).



The posed nature of the stock photographs is not in itself problematic for our interpretation, as Machin (2004: 327) states 'images must be truthful, not in the sense that they look like what they represent, but in the sense that they correspond to the underlying nature, or 'essence', of what they represent'. Herein lies the challenge as the audience (both academic and participant) unpacks this correspondence and often finds room for alternative explanations, for example, through invoking visual anomalies. In sum, these readings raise issues regarding how understandings of gendered ageing are constructed and interpreted as we discuss in more detail below.

First, we find that the subject positioning in respect of gendered ageing can be problematic for both men and women though in different ways. In our own analysis, we focused on the construction of the stock photo, the site of the image (Rose 2012), and employed conceptual prompts (Davison, 2010; Rose, 2012; and Machin, 2004) to guide our interpretation of these three photographs. In each we examined the subject positioning in respect of gendered ageing by interrogating the individuals, their relationships with objects and each other. As indicated above, we find that problematic subject positions emerge for women of all ages, but also for some of the men portrayed too. This is not to suggest that the construction of gendered ageing is the same for men and women, but rather that neither is unproblematic. Representations of both younger and older men are problematic given the former are hidden (less salient in Figure 2 and anonymised in Figure 3) and the latter is feminised (Figure 1), while a comparison with a more typical dominant, masculine portrayal in Figure 2 only further serves to highlight the stereotypical differences of gendered ageing. Putting such visual representations within the context of the new economy, the precarious and disadvantaged situation of younger and older men is highlighted in contrast to the solid compositional positioning of the middle-aged male manager. For the women the subject positioning is perhaps more complex as, for example, femininity is conferred as a potential advantage (the 'pretty young woman' at the centre of attraction) but this position is only afforded in youth and under a (older) male gaze, invoking the

subject position of 'sexual object'. The older woman is positioned as, if not invisible, then less worthy of gaze despite her ageless positioning.

Even in the photo (Figure 2), which offers a 'positive' image of work, as highlighted by participants, the age range is still relatively narrow. Here we see the vulnerability of the women to being always too old or too young set in relationship to the compositional dominance of the older man (Duncan and Loretto, 2004). This contrasts starkly with the representation of the (relatively much) older man in Figure 1, suggesting a perception of an upper age limit to the subject position of the wiser, experienced man at work (c.f. Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012). Moreover the potential feminisation of this older man (through the mirrored composition) highlights the complexity of gendering age. Our participants' struggled to make sense of whether these individuals (Figure 1) were looking for work, rejecting an 'ineffectual job seeker' subject position. This perhaps reflects our own observations that the unrealistic use of props acted to undermine the subject position of the 'effective job seeker'. Looking for work in later life seems to fall uncomfortably between employment and a useful retirement, yet is likely to be an increasingly prevalent state (Cooke, 2006). Being out of work is also the issue at stake in Figure 3, though this photo meets our (stereotypical) expectations of the 'hoodie' subject position since a young (male) person is unemployed. Here seeking work was more (though not universally) accepted, perhaps based on a naturalized youth entitlement to work (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014). So, while two of the photos depict (older and younger) individuals seeking work, a more likely scenario for all ages in the new economy (Fevre, 2011; Lippmann, 2008), compositional differences are significant in their representations of gendered ageing.

Second, we highlight the importance of incorporating societal and cultural context when examining gendered ageing rather than treating it as a single and de-contextualised focus for consideration (Fineman, 2011). This of course raises the challenge of addressing intersectionality. Within our research it was notable that participants did not simply comment on age and gender but, as indicated

above, also introduced a form of intersectionality by offering observations on the individual's family status and social class. Gendered ageing is therefore always just one intersection that can be read. A constructionist approach that examines subject positions allows for consideration of more complex representations and readings that draw on societal and cultural wider discourses that extend beyond simple age / gender intersections. Further exploration of a broader range of subject positions would be a useful extension of this study.

Third, through this combined visual methodology, we contribute to the unpacking of 'culturally produced age-sensitive subject positions' (Riach *et al.*, 2013: 1) by examining the interrelationships between gender, age and employment in the new economy. Following the abolition of mandatory retirement and economic recession, we see the emergence in Figure 1 of the subject position of the ineffectual job seeker. This is occupied by both genders in older age with both equally disadvantaged but with the older man additionally denied the subject position of 'wise old man'. We suggest that this position has previously relied on retirement or a degree of seniority in late working life and is undermined by depictions of job search. Figure 2 highlights how, even within the relatively narrow age range required to represent 'diversity' in the workplace, there are differences in the intersection of age and gender for men and women. The age-coding of the men enable the subject position of manager (or other senior figure) to emerge for the older man, whilst such seniority was tentatively offered for the *younger* of the two women in resistance to her occupying the subject position of 'pretty young woman'. This reinforces the older woman's invisibility, as older age for her does not equate to seniority. Whilst the young man in Figure 2 received less attention, that in Figure 3 invoked the subject position of 'hoodie' with all its associations of troubled youth. This reinforces how the intersection of youth and male gender are problematized particularly within culturally prominent discourses of unemployment.

Finally, we reflect on stock photos as data and the further research possibilities they present. Our participants approached the stock photos in a variety of ways, sometimes offering quite short observations, other times constructing stories offering their interpretation not just of the photo but the circumstances that might lead to or follow from the particular image. This further highlights the need for further research which unpacks the stock photograph; more work is needed to ascertain if there are, for example, any particular compositions or relationships that provoke different responses.

In this paper, we have deployed stock photos to offer new insights into ways in which understandings of gendered ageing are both (visually) constructed and interpreted. Given the increasing use of stock images within and across a variety of traditional and new media, this highlights the need for further investigation. Ours are drawn from UK online news, itself an emergent media embedded within the new economy. Such contexts are 'open, unstructured, and quintessentially anarchic' (Mautner, 2005: 817) as both text and images are uploaded, updated, shared and re-used across a variety of Web 2.0 platforms. This precarious, flexible (Lewis, 2003) context provides a very different site of investigation to previous studies of representations of gender and age within more static forms (e.g. organizational reports). We have used this context to explore gender and age intersections through examining depictions of men and women of various ages in relation to work. A further challenge will be to develop our understandings of the range of representations and their relationships within these evolving technological contexts. Indeed, with recent campaigns for changes, particularly to the representation of women in stock photographs (see for example the launch of Getty's 'Lean in' collection<sup>4</sup>), there is an increasing need for such investigation as we cannot assume they will be either used or read in the positive way they may have been intended. While beyond the scope of this paper, such commercialisation of the visual is also an area worthy of further investigation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Within the UK, government-run job centres provide information and advice for job seekers, covering employment and training opportunities and sources of financial support while unemployed.

<sup>2</sup>NEET is a widely used acronym in the UK standing for 'Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training'.

<sup>3</sup>This is notwithstanding the more recent trend in some academic publications towards reliance on the fair dealing provision under copyright laws in respect of images reproduced for the purpose of research.

<sup>4</sup>LeanIn.Org and Getty Images jointly launched the Lean In Collection in 2014, a library of images of women, girls and families under the tagline 'You can't be what you can't see'. According to their website (<http://leanin.org/getty/>) the stated goal is 'to shift perceptions, overturn clichés, and incorporate authentic images of women into media and advertising'.

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