

Conceptualising Older Women's Wellbeing at Work Across the Life Course

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Introduction

The European Research Network: Older Women's Workplace Wellbeing was founded in 2021 at the University of Salford, bringing together a diverse group of European female researchers with shared interests in older women, ageing, demographic change and the policy implications. Key areas of interest for the group include structural, social and health inequalities, the needs of older women in the workplace, stereotypes, prejudice and identity and the challenges for older women within the workplace environment.

One overarching area of interest to the research network is: what are the barriers and facilitators to older women's workplace wellbeing across the life course? Recent evidence suggests life stress accumulation over the life course disproportionately negatively impacts wellbeing, cognition and health in older women (Gómez-Gallego & Gómez-García, 2019; Senft Miller et al., 2021). This stress comes from both the private and work spheres and is well documented in the literature.

This developmental paper outlines planned research examining Older Women's Wellbeing at Work across the Life course to be undertaken by the members of the *European research network*. The overarching aim of disseminating this paper is to generate some discussion around the proposed research which will aid the research team in their research design.

This paper is structured as follows: the first section provides some context to the older female life course, with a focus on employment and biological factors. The second section presents some of the literature around wellbeing and older women. The final sections outline the proposed study, its aims and expected outcomes.

Contribution to Knowledge

The current research responds to calls for further research to explore the complexities of older women's needs (Edge et al., 2021; Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2015) and addresses the need for this to be carried out from a life course perspective. There is a need for such research also because addressing negative self-perceptions is imperative and intergenerational work has been recommended to address the root causes of ageism (e.g. North & Fiske, 2012). The current research will explore older women's wellbeing and highlight the key challenges from a cross-country comparisons across Europe, which is a key research gap that the current study responds to (Edge et al., 2017).

Ryan (2023) suggests in order to address gender inequality it is important to explore the intersection between women's experiences whereby women are not a homogenous group. Therefore, this paper aims to explore different age groups of women's perspectives that

correspond with the pre, during and post the age of onset of the menopause, which is usually between 45 and 55 years with the average age 51 years old (NHS, 2022).

Context

There are an estimated 13 million people who are perimenopausal or menopausal in the UK (NHS, 2022) and 63% of women who are menopausal report increasing stress, as well as the majority experiencing a number of negative work impacts including less ability to concentrate and less patience with customers and clients (CIPD, 2019). A significant event in the life course is menopause which, in the biomedical discourse, is presented as an “invariant biological transformation” (Lock & Kaufert, 2001) that brings decline and loss (de Salis et al., 2018). However, the socio-cultural context, as well as socio-economic factors means that the experience of menopause may vary. Stigmatization of the menopause is linked with body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, and appearance-related ageing anxiety (Nazapour, 2021). Nevertheless, as de Salis et al. (2018) highlight, for some women *‘ageing can bring freedom, self-awareness, growth, reflection, and reassessment of role’* (de Salis et al., 2018 p. 521) and, thus, the menopause may be perceived differently.

Work stress affects women through the life course, impacting negatively on health and wellbeing. Women tend to be over-represented in lower skilled, lower paid and more insecure roles (EOC, 2007; Fawcett Society, 2014; OECD, 2012; Payne & Doyal, 2010), and have a tendency to take on more family roles and caring responsibilities (Burke, 2002; Nelson & Burke, 2002; Abramson, 2007). Structural inequalities are evident in the gendered social roles women tend to be associated with i.e. the 5 Cs’: catering, cleaning, caring, clerical and cashiering roles (EOC, 2007) and the gender pay gap (EOC, 2007; OECD, 2012; Payne & Doyal, 2010; Van Lancker et al., 2015).

In their later careers, women across Europe have been shown to have more diverse and less regular employment histories than men (Wahrendorf, 2014), and have been shown to face significant challenges as older women in navigating their work life balance (Schilling, 2015). Furthermore, in the UK women’s pension age has recently been harmonised, older women are more likely to extend their working life and are disproportionately affected by inequalities across the life course (Finch, 2014).

In terms of health, although women live longer (Mastekaasa & Melsom, 2014), they show consistently higher levels of sickness absence, as well as more hospitalisation episodes from early adolescence than men (Barmby, Ercolani & Treble, 2002; Laaksonen, Martikainen, Rahkonen, & Lahelma, 2008; Mastekaasa & Dale-Olsen, 2000). In later life, the literature indicates risk of osteoporosis, arthritis and other autoimmune diseases anaemia, thyroid conditions amongst a range of other conditions affecting older women (Doyal & Payne, 2006; Bird & Rieker, 2008).

As older women’s needs are unique due to the biological and social factors outlined above, as well as social norms around the woman’s role and gendered discrimination around ageing. Hence, there is a need to explore and understand self-perceptions and conceptions of growing older as a woman across the life course, as well as the promotion of the perception of older women going through the menopause.

Selective Optimisation with Compensation (SOC) life-course theory describes ageing as involving changes in resources and goals, and over time there is a shift from personal gain and growth towards a 'positivity effect'. (Baltes & Carstensen, 2003; Baltes & Smith, 2003; Carstensen et al., 2003; Carstensen, 2006). Moreover, Warr (2011) suggests that temporal perspectives in relation to older workers' employment differ as people age. However, such positive conceptions of ageing lie in stark contrast with representations of ageing in society prioritise youthful attractiveness whilst devaluing age (Ballard et al., 2009). As Quoidbach, Gilbert and Wilson (2013) have shown across the life course there is a tendency to fundamentally misunderstand the future self, underestimating the extent to which the future may present changes to be encountered. Crucially, there are inherent externalized and internalized self-perceptions specifically impacting women as they age that need exploring.

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Proposed Study

The proposed study will explore how women across the generations of adulthood conceptualise themselves growing old through the menopause and their experiences of externalised and internalised gendered ageism. The study aims to explore the factors that facilitate and inhibit wellbeing across the life course and to understand how ageing women navigate their workplace wellbeing at different points in lives. As *The European Research Network: Older Women's Workplace Wellbeing* has a wide membership, it is planned to undertake a cross-national approach to the research.

Data will be collected using qualitative semi-structured interviews with women across the adult life course (aged 18-45 years old; 45-55 years old and 55 and over) and the findings will be analysed using thematic analysis. Respondents will be selected from a range of professional backgrounds, and it is expected that, in the initial pilot phase of the study, participants will be identified using convenience sampling. As the section below outlines, it is expected that other stakeholders will demonstrate interest in the research, leading to pipelines of participants.

In the first phase, a pilot study will be carried out. This will have two principal functions: firstly, as this is a large research group, working together for the first time, it will be necessary to have a short research time frame, in order to calibrate and adjust for differences in research methodologies, expectations, access to samples and other factors and, secondly, in order to check data collected in the first instance for consistencies and anomalies in the female life course across Europe. The latter may lead to a new research design,

Dissemination

The European Research Network: Wellbeing of Older Women@Work is planning a series of workshops, as well as a stakeholder event to forge links for future collaborations, e.g. local authorities, NGOs, private sector organisations.

Conclusion

Understanding the complexities of women's needs across the life course with a focus on the menopause and their self-perceptions is crucial for improving the health and wellbeing of women. There is a global imperative to focus on gender in order to facilitate older women's workplace wellbeing across society, particularly as the numbers of women aged 55-64 participating in the labour market has consistently increased over the decades and this is projected to keep rising.

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