

Unretirement and the (re)construction of age in post-industrial America

by

Nicole L. John

B.S., Cameron University, 2006
M.A., Kansas State University, 2010

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work
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Abstract

In the 21st century, millions of older adults in the United States are coming out of retirement to work. In some cases, inadequate benefits and savings force them out of retirement, especially when they or their spouses experience costly health problems. In other cases, older workers “unretire” after losing loved ones, or as they experience social loss and disengagement. These older workers seek companionship through work. Although many older workers enjoy aspects of the jobs they attain in unretirement, their compensation is often insufficient, forcing some of them to perpetually delay re-retiring. Such unretirement reverses decades of movement toward greater and earlier retirement for older adults and significantly affects cultural meanings of old age. Focusing on six different worksites in Kansas, I examine how older workers and employers socially and culturally re-construct age. Evidence from ethnographic observation and thirty-three in-depth interviews with older workers and their employers suggest that employers view older workers’ agedness as an asset they can exploit to cut costs and boost profits. In sharp contrast, many older employees’ younger co-workers and clients treat them as if agedness diminishes their competence and relevance in the workplace. This is particularly true for women, who struggle more than their male colleagues to fend off the negative labels some younger co-workers and clients attempt to apply to them. Ultimately, I find that old age is a valued human resource for employers, making older employees “ideal workers,” but the cumulative effects of older workers’ interactions in the workplaces tend, on balance, to devalue older age. Notably, the forces that promoted positive constructions of older age tend to be rooted in exploitation. Employers who idealize older workers do so to squeeze as much unpaid labor power out of them as possible. When older workers resist exploitative work assignments, they often become subject to negative labeling, as opposed to other kinds of “problem worker” labeling that younger

workers might face. By specifying the mechanisms that produce harmful versus helpful constructions of age at work in traditional retirement years, my study contributes to the growing body of research on the relatively new phenomenon of unretirement in the United States.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Alisa Garni

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my loving husband Dr. Orlandrew Danzell, your enduring motivation, love, patience, humor, and support is immeasurable. You are my pillar of emotional strength when things seem daunting and the finish line seems distant. To my wonderful family, dad Edgar John, sisters Nevlyn John, Erlyn John and Naeisha John-Diarra, and niece Frances Adele Lopez, you all gave me strength even though miles away to continue when the road seemed unending, lonely, and arduous. To my mom Dora John, even though you are not here anymore I know you are smiling down on me and will be proud. You are all my cheerleaders encouraging me to finish the race.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

After years of scrimping money as a graduate student and thus looking for deals at the local Wal-Mart, I began to notice a battery of older adult workers attending to shoppers throughout the giant store. Stationed at the entry, where throngs of harried adults—often dragging small children along—would grab carts and push their way into the bowels of the store, older adult workers sporting blue frocks cheerily greeted parents and distributed small stickers to children. In the back aisles, older adult workers would suddenly emerge from behind towering stacks of merchandise, some assisting bewildered customers who struggled to find what they needed. Many of these older workers wore brightly emblazoned buttons reading, “How may I help you?” Why, I asked myself, the sudden influx of older adult workers, and why, apparently, as customer service providers? Is this happening elsewhere? Is it new? An anomaly? A misperception? Are they performing other jobs? Do they want to work? Now curious, I began to notice more and more older workers at additional venues, working as greeters and sometimes cashiers at stores connected to huge multinational corporations, as drivers and bus monitors for the school district and city, library workers, customer service representatives at the local mall, store clerks, servers at huge local restaurants, and some at hardware stores. This study is the result of my deep curiosity about what turns out to be a very real and widespread pattern of un- or non-retirement among older adults in the United States.

Following the New Deal, a powerful historical trend in the United States was for employers and policymakers to push workers to retire at age 65. In contrast, we are now seeing a reversal. Twenty-first-century employers and policy makers are stripping workers of their retirement benefits, older workers themselves are not ready to leave work, some are not financially prepared, and so either return to work or neglect to retire. These opposite trends each

had significant implications for the meanings that Americans build around age particularly, “old age.”

While the earlier retirement trend has been researched and documented extensively and the newer pattern (i.e. unretirement) has received initial attention, we still have a lot to learn about the social and cultural construction of age in the current neoliberal period of “unretirement.” Thus, based on the preceding discussion and in what follows, the principal goal of my dissertation is to answer the central question: *how is age being socially and culturally constructed among workers who are working beyond traditional retirement age, and by the employers who hire them?*

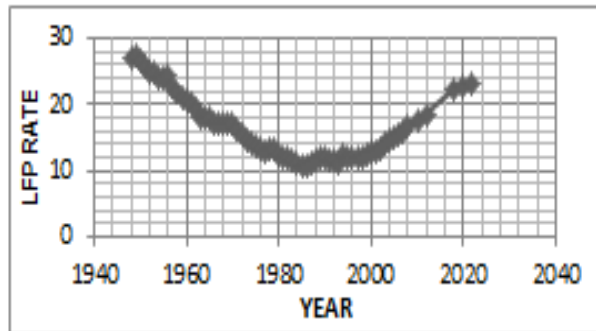
Context/Background of Unretirement

The U.S. work structure has changed from what it was during the height of “the retirement era” when tens of thousands of workers withdrew from the labor force upon reaching the age of 65 (see Figure 1, below). Social and political policies such as the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) passed in 1967 abolished mandatory retirement for most occupations (Hedge, Borman and Lammlein 2006:14). These policies make retirement more voluntary than in the past. The phenomenon of “permanent employment within a single firm is now almost an anachronism. For the most part, tomorrow’s workers [are] no longer stay[ing] with the same firm throughout their working lifetimes” (Judy and D’amico 1997:54), but they are increasingly switching jobs several times during their careers (Judy and D’amico 1997:54). Work is increasingly more transient, contractual, and based on flexible specialization and higher turnover (shorter job tenure).¹ These conditions allow older workers greater flexibility in work arrangements and could be attractive to them. However, employers are likely to see these

¹ Professional occupations typically have a disproportionate number of older workers, especially in positions that require postgraduate degrees.

conditions as somewhat difficult for older workers because of the negative meanings often associated with being older in the workplace.

Figure1: Labor Force Participation (LFP) Rate of workers 65 and over, 1948-2012 and Projected to 2022



Sources: Employment Projections Program, U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau Labor Statistics 2013, 2012, 2009, 2007, 2006; Bureau Labor Statistics <http://data.bls.gov/timeseries>

Today, *unretirement*² (Maestas 2010; Burtless & Quinn, 2000) increasingly marks how several older adults experience their “golden years.” A time once designated and strictly enforced for retirement and leisure consumption is now changing to one of work (Quinn 2010). This retirement shift seems to accelerate the age-work structure of the labor force in which workers tend to remain in the workplace into advanced age. Though labor force participation among older workers declined steadily through to the mid-1980s or early 1990s and has not reached early 1940s levels, to date, older workers’ share of the U.S. labor force has been increasing.³ Quinn (2010) stated, “a century-old trend [in retirement] has come to a halt and reversed” (p. 49). Since the late 1990s, retirement patterns jumped ahead by at least a few years (Hardy 2011; Hedge et al. 2006:25; Quinn 2010:45; Feldman 1994, 1992; Tilly 1991; Ruhm

² In my research, *unretirement* is defined as a new retirement transition in which an individual leaves the labor force or “retires” in the traditional sense, but later reenters (Cahill, Giandrea and Quinn 2013:2) and do so while receiving age benefits. Delayed retirement is the practice of postponing retirement to increase benefits received or have higher levels of economic gain (Munnell 2011).

³ As shown in Figure 1, 27 percent of workers age 65 and older participated in the labor force in 1948, compared with a decline of 12.1 percent in 1996. This increased to 18.5 percent in 2012. The rate is projected to increase to 22 percent by 2022. There is improvement in older workers’ job prospects because of military enlistment of younger individuals (Macnicol 2006:216).

1990a; BLS 2008; 2012; Toossi 2007:33; Dychtwald, Erikson and Morison 2004; Loi and Shultz 2007). In fact, older adults in the United States represent the fastest-growing segment of the country's workforce (Mosisa and Hipple 2006). Concurrently, since 2002, the total labor force participation for younger adults is decreasing (Feldman and Doeringhaus 1992; Hardy 1991; BLS 2008; Goldstein 2010; Sloan Center on Aging & Work, 2012;⁴ Toossi 2013; Toossi 2007:33; Fullerton and Toossi 2001; Dychtwald et al. 2004; Loi and Shultz 2007; U.S. Department of Labor, BLS 2013, 2012, 2009, 2007, 2006; the Employment Benefit Research Institute-EBRI).⁵ Labor force participation has grown steadily for both men and women aged 65 and over and is projected to increase in coming years, particularly for older women (U.S. Bureau Labor Statistics 2013, 2012, 2009, 2007, and 2006). This shift in retirement behavior influences the age-work structure of the labor force such that workers tend to remain in the workplace into advanced ages, which may influence meanings and perceptions of age.

Intellectual Rationale

Although working in later life is occurring today, it is not new. It occurred in the past for some older adults out of need (Macnicol 2015:132),⁶ especially when age-based benefits were not yet established. However, some older workers remained in work because it provided other social benefits and enjoyment. Today, older individuals are staying in work. They are

⁴ The Center on Aging & Work/Workplace Flexibility at Boston College, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, is a unique research center established in 2005. The Center works in partnership with decision-makers at the workplace to design and implement rigorous investigations that will help the American business community to prepare for the opportunities and challenges associated with the aging workforce.

⁵ A combination of demographic, structural, and cyclical factors have affected the overall labor force participation rate, as well as the participation rates of specific groups, in the past (Toossi 2013). The major factor producing this significant decrease for younger adults is an increase in school attendance at all levels, especially summer and secondary school and college (Toossi 2013; BLS 2013).

⁶ In the past, deskilling meant that working class men and women often moved into less physically demanding jobs when they reached in their fifties, sixties and seventies Macnicol (2015). During World War II older adults stayed on the job and some returned to work (Achenbaum 1994: 20). In times of recession (most notably the 1930s) older unskilled urban workers did everything they could to continue working at any job, including very low-grade casualized menial occupations, last resorts being night watchman, caretaker, street vendor, charwomen, cleaner and so on (Macnicol 2015:132).

participating in work patterns, such as partial retirement, bridge employment, and retirement reversals. They are moving into different kinds of jobs, mostly part-time and in rare cases, some are re-careering. Notably, older individuals are engaged in unretirement and doing it for different reasons. Some are unretiring out of choice after a break from first careers. For others, however, it is because of a desperate need. Age-based benefits such as Social Security and other welfare support (e.g. Medicare), which are means to help fund and keep retirement stable, though available, are declining or unsustainable, forcing more older adults to continue working rather than exit work and retire. Thus, unretirement today, though occurring for seemingly similar reasons as the past, is occurring under a different condition for older adults in the U.S., which relates to the age based support. Today, older adults have access to age-based benefits but cannot depend on them age-based benefits. However, in the past, these benefits were not yet available, and when they were instituted, they seemed sustainable to support older adults in retirement, but were also used as a mechanism to force older workers to exit work. Nevertheless, the current unretirement phenomenon seemingly creates an opportunity for new experiences and meanings of age.⁷

In my study, I examine experiences and meanings of aging in a distinctive historical context. We are in a post-industrial society accompanied by significant demographic changes in the national population. There is a graying of the United States marked by millions of baby boomers alive today. Life expectancy has increased, birth rates have declined,⁸ and older Americans are living healthier (Cahill et al. 2013:22). Moen (2013) claims that contextual shifts

⁷ Gilleard and Higgs (2011) lament that “while there is a longstanding tradition of representing old age as a fearful state and the aged body an object of disgust, recent cultural, economic and political changes have begun to undermine the solidity and stability of old age as any such socially secured identity” (p. 140).

⁸ Birth rate decreased from 3.7 in the 1960 to 1.8 (in 2015). Life expectancy at birth in the U.S. increased from 70 years in 1960 to 79 years in 2015. In 1960, it was 73 years for female and 67 in 2015 while males were 67 years in 1960 versus 76 years in 2015 (The World Bank).

affect how society and individuals experience and respond to aging (p. 18). Individual and collective experiences and responses to aging are deeply influenced by the social contexts in which these occur (Moen 2013:14). Similarly, Thane (2003) finds a “close link between demographic [and] cultural change [in which] changing proportions of old people in a society may influence attitudes towards them and affect their own behavior” (p. 96). Angel and Settersten (2013) also argue that changes in these contexts have dramatically altered the perceptions, behaviors, and opportunities for older people, which in turn affect the experiences and meanings of aging for everyone in society (p. 95). This is particularly noticeable given how retirement, and more specifically old age, shifted in meanings from the veneration of the old (mostly in pre-industrial context) to old age as a social problem (during the industrial era)—a highly regulated stage in the life course with standardized expectations for behavior. My study is important because it contributes to emergent research on the perception of aging in work that is no longer strictly “bounded by the limits of the 20th century’s relatively loose labor markets and ‘youngish population’” (Shultz and Adams 2007:305). We are in a post-industrial context, which contains features that distinguish it from the past. Increasing emphasis is placed on consumption and growth in service jobs to serve a consumer-oriented society (Bell 1973; Cohen 2008).

Expectations associated with old age and work today stand in contrast to those of the past when older adults were barred access to paid work due to age. This was a surprising finding in my study. Employers’ currently more positive expectations of older workers mean that industrial era definitions of “ideal” workers being young instead of old need to be reexamined, and the effects of employers’ altered expectations of older workers studied in detail. Some past meanings of old age and age-based practices still broadly apply today. Broad perspectives [do] not change “deeply ingrained stereotypes and beliefs overnight” (Hedge et al. 2006:14). However, assuming

that age sentiments of the industrial period carry over and cause employers and young co-workers to perceive older workers as having less value and competency must be examined. Elders who remain in work may face stigmatization and other age-based discrimination in the workforce today because of how culture and society construct meanings of age—i.e. the older you are, the greater an “old age penalty.” However, newly emergent employment practices in a restructured national (and global) economy may be affecting how age is constructed at work and much beyond.

Macnicol (2006) claims we are in “a time when new post-industrial labor markets are demanding an expansion of labor supply” (p. 206). Older workers may provide a wide range of benefits as they unretire for companies. These include skills, talents, and experience, being reliable and dependable sources of labor, and willing to learn (Macnicol 2006:255). From the early 1990s to the present—driven by the growth of low-paid, part-time, casualized jobs—there has been an emerging consensus that the available supply of [elder] labor should be maximized (Macnicol 2006:2, 255). Thus, retirement trend should be reversed, state pension age should be raised, and older people should work in paid employment later in life (Macnicol 2006:2). Unlike younger workers, older employees are seen as “ideal” workers because they are willing (or forced) to accept the part-time, low paying jobs, with few or no benefits. Their supplemental income enables them to take jobs younger workers cannot afford to take. Companies operate more profitably,⁹ not only because they pay older workers less money for precarious work, but also because they do not need to train these already experienced older workers (who also help train younger workers).

⁹ Younger people may not want and therefore, do not compete for these positions. As the “ideal” worker changes, norms, and expectations surrounding the ideal worker are likely to change too.

Retirement years are no longer the “clearly defined, culturally scripted period they once seemed” (Twigg and Majima 2014:23). The relationship between retirement and old age is not static and controlled, but a continually changing dynamic process that is taking on multiple patterns and less synchronized than it was previously (Brown, Aumann, Pitt-Catsoupes, Galinsky and Bond 2010; see also Atchley 1976; Beehr 1986; Taylor & Shore 1995; Quinn 2010; Ekerdt 2010; Hardy 2011). In other words, my study indicates that the traditional three-stage life cycle model or three successive “boxes” (i.e. education, work, and retirement) indicating that life events occur at predictable times has “metamorphosed” (Macnicol 2015). Each phase is more variable than before as more individuals now learn new skills in old age, thus work years cannot be characterized simply as a straightforward upward movement through the ranks in a single profession or even a single company (Moen 2013). The days of a discrete transition from full-time work to full-time retirement are thus long past.

Today, old age may mark a different configuration of the life course—i.e. the traditional characterization of old age as a distinct social position may be weakening and the behaviors seen as appropriate to it are less clearly prescribed (Gilleard and Higgs 2010), due to unretirees’ divergent paths in and out of retirement. In fact, postmodern lifecourse theorists view aging as a continuous journey across the lifecourse (i.e. not as rigid age-based categories or a series of “stages” such as young, middle age, old, as implied by the older, rather deterministic lifecycle model, which insist on specific behavior for each stage in the life course such what age to marry, work, and retire). Instead, there is diversity in the experience of aging (Macnicol 2015:9; Moen 2013; 2010). Unretirees are now working at a stage in life formerly reserved for leisure and actively and increasingly occupying spaces traditionally reserved for younger workers as employers are hiring them. They are not adhering to the stable life cycle model of the past

(Macnicol 2015). Instead, they are producers selling their labor power, performing labor that produces economic value. Their unretiring may thus be challenging traditional notions of the “ideal” worker.

The ongoing discussion on age and unretirement (Macnicol 2006, 2015; Moen 2013; Gilleard and Higgs 2010; Twigg and Majima 2014 etc.) demonstrates a positive perception of older workers—i.e. as assets or ideal workers. This also sheds new light on the invisibility and exclusionary experiences often associated with growing old—i.e. social, symbolic and physical distancing of individuals as they take on old age identity. Unretiring may defy stereotypes of aging because older adults do not “go quietly into to the night” but remain present and active in more social settings than previously. Since retirement and old age are often equated with the absence of a work identity and a “roleless role” (Szinovacz 2003:12), unretirement may reverse this identity and replace with a productive identity because work remains central in the lives of unretirees (Sicker 2002:1; Hedge et al. 2006). Further, fewer people may see older adults as a homogeneous group strictly adhering to age practices (e.g. retirement). Despite these possible positive effects unretirement brings, it may also signal new forms of exploitation on the part of employers towards older workers as they seek their labor. Therefore, the concept of “old age” itself should be considered anew (Macnicol 2015), which my study explores.

Unretirement may challenge the view of older adults as a needs-based group that is dependent on the state, but it may also erode older workers’ access to earned benefits. On the one hand, older workers are seen as having greater human agency than in the past, but on the other hand, they may lose retirement benefits. According to Macnicol (2015), “there has been increasing pressure [...] to remove the protective walls that have shielded older people and, in the process, to attack their welfare rights” (p. 2). If true, unretirement in part defies ageist notions

like the “compassionate stereotype” which suggests that older adults need and deserve help. Conversely, it speaks to the economic uncertainties older adults face in the three legs of the traditional retirement income stool (Cahill et al. 2013:21)—i.e. it heightens existing public and political concerns about the adequacy and viability of Social Security, health insurance coverage, the future of Medicare and pensions (Quinn 2010:52; Estes 2011). Unretirement suggests a waning of these systematic supports for workers as they age. In other words, it represents a shift in old-age support networks and fiscal responsibilities from predictable and dependable defined-benefit (DB) toward individually directed defined-contribution (DC) retirement plans (Hardy, 2011; see Estes 2011).

Whereas employers and the state used to provide more benefits to aging workers, particularly in preparation for the “Silver Tsunami of Baby Boomers” (Estes 2011), today, such benefits are evaporating and employees have to work harder to accumulate them. According to Estes (2011), this is due in part to a more general crisis for municipal and state governments that have been unable to meet retirement fund requirements that exceed their diminishing budgets. Older workers (and their families) are then being forced to fund their own retirement or are financially responsible due to aging in the neoliberal context—i.e. the “do-it-yourself” (Cahill et al. 2013:2; Quinn 2010) retirement approach. Older “Americans today are relying more on privately held assets than retirees did in the past” (Cahill et al. 2013:2) and many are still returning to work due to the breakdown in these systems or possible limited opportunity to accumulate as many assets.

Thus, I agree with Macnicol’s (2015) claim that given “pure neoliberalism,” if we continue to categorize old age today as a “welfarist construct [it encourages] a false notion of rights” (p. 20). In other words, though welfare state benefits such as old age “rights” exist in

post-industrial America, they are inadequate and seen as “false” age rights as more older adults find themselves in desperate need of work in retirement years because of unsustainable benefits and few have saved enough. Unretirement may thus be the neoliberal answer to the “increasing strain on the deferral budget” for Social Security and Medicare programs (Moen 2013:9). It burdens individuals with offsetting financial insecurities caused by structural changes (Macnicol 2015). Therefore, workers, today may contemplate retirement under different economic conditions and with different expectations and concerns about the future (Cahill et al. 2013:2) than what they planned, or from past retirees. Since old age is constitutive of retirement, any changes to retirement behavior may affect meanings of old age. Further, since many older Americans cannot afford to retire under the new neoliberal regime, several questions arise that relate to age construction. For instance, are conceptions of old age fundamentally and more broadly changing throughout the U.S. society due to unique social changes because they are working again (i.e. unretirement), or due to the persistence of old ones (i.e. pre-existing old age conceptions)? My study addresses these questions.

Older adults, however, are not mere “objects” of broader social structural forces (such as insecure government support) to be acted upon (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Their non-traditional old age behavior indicates they are standing “outside hegemonic worldviews [to] see the role public policies and moral economies play in establishing the worldviews [e.g. retirement, old age, old worker] as what is taken to be factual” (Powell and Hendricks 2009:86). This may allow for new constructions created at the individual level (by unretirees) as well as the societal level. However, though unretirees may be authoring their own life course or biographies (Holstein and Gubrium 2007:344)—i.e. as reflexive agents—, they may not simply do so as they

please (see Marx 1885 [1963]) because existing broader social structures impose limitations on behavior. These structures influence their perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors.

Although I am not the first to analyze *un*-retirement and its attendant meanings, I focus on the actual experiences and concerns of un-retirees and their employers across a variety of worksites in the post-industrial United States. I aim to expand our theoretical understanding of the social construction of age and aging itself through changing conceptions of age and work. Research often explains why older adults work, the prevalence of working beyond retirement years, and some scholars explore the construction age. As of yet, however, few scholars have examined the interaction of these processes comparatively across worksites and among employers and a diversity of older adult workers. My study helps to fill that gap.

Structure of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I explore theoretical insights on the social and cultural construction of age. I draw on the depreciation (traditionalist) and conservative (culturalist) theories to examine how the structure or history of work has affected the construction of age, old age, and retirement. I then turn to the literature on the social construction of reality to revise the theoretical models of age and what new it teaches about age construction given that individuals are engaged in the unretirement phenomenon in a different historical context.

In Chapter 3, I present the methods I used to conduct my study. To study age construction in unretirement one must ensure the phenomenon is occurring. I selected a strategic research site, Kansas, as it exhibits precisely the unretirement pattern, and represents a similar pattern of unretirement in other states across the United States. To answer my question and understand more fully the social construction of age in unretirement in this post-industrial context, one must also go on the inside where unretirement is occurring to see interaction at these worksites. I

combined 33 in-depth semi structured interviews with (27) older workers and 6 employers/supervisors with ethnography to observe and learn more about the social construction of age. In the remainder of the chapter, I explain how I organize my data for further analysis, and limitations of my study.

In Chapter 4, I discuss age construction from the perceptions of employers and older workers. This chapter highlights differences in how these social actors each use age in ways that illustrate several tensions in the construction of age. I focus on how employers use age or meanings and perceptions to construct of old age an asset to impose work and make older employees ideal workers but exploit them in the process. I then show how these same employers construct age as a liability and negatively label older workers when they resist exploitative work. In the rest of the chapter, I focus on how older workers use age as an asset to resist work.

In Chapter 5, I present key motivations toward unretirement from the perspectives of older workers and employers. I discuss the core reasons why unretirement occurs and how it deconstructs meanings of age and retirement for older adults and new meanings are reconstructed in the process. In this chapter, there is some discrepancy between how older individuals plan retirement versus how they actually experience it, which informs how and why they (re)construct meanings of retirement and age today.

In Chapter 6, I focus on how older workers resist the imposition of an old age identity towards ones of agelessness and/or age neutrality. I show that resisting old age is a construction of age in negative terms while embracing agelessness and age neutrality offers a positive view of age. I show that while constructing age positively, economic structures and interaction with other people at work continue to produce old age identity. I discuss the gendered experience in the

construction of age. I show that women experience old age more often than older men do, and as older women, they face greater stereotypes than men in work but challenge these negative labels.

In Chapter 7, I conclude my study by synthesizing the core ideas of each chapter in answering my central question on the social and cultural construction of age in unretirement, presenting my research strengths and areas for future research. My main message gathered from unretirees and employers is that though traditionalist meanings of age linger in the postindustrial context, age is constructed more positively through work than it used to be for older workers. I present changes in the work structure, the graying of America and changes in technology, as all factors contributing to older workers being perceived as assets for companies and constructed as ideal workers. I show the current state of government programs for the old as insecure and changing the work relations, retirement, and aging experiences. Unretirement may be the neoliberal answer to the insecurity in these age-based benefits.

Chapter 2 - Social Constructionism, Age, and Retirement

To live in the social world is to live an ordered and meaningful life. Society is the guardian of order and meaning not only objectively, in its institutional structures, but subjectively as well, in its structuring of individual consciousness

- (Berger 1969:21)

There have been two main theoretical models that capture best how age is constructed: depreciation and conservation. In the first, age is constructed negatively whereby older adults hold less power in society and are relegated to old age social and cultural roles, norms, and behaviors. In the second, age is a positive construct that aligns with the conservative theory on aging. These differences in age meanings coincide and seem to follow with the transformation of society—i.e. changes from industrialization to post-industrialization—and the how the structure of work affected meanings of age, old age, and retirement. These differences in meaning of age matter because they suggest that perceptions of age are changing as the structure of work changes over the decades. Given these constructions of age posited by these theories, I use the constructionist theory to revise the depreciation and conservative models to see what new it teaches or what theory it advances about age and old age construction. I examine changes in policies and programs (i.e. social support), social and economic status, and health status of older adults throughout the decades (Willson 2007:148; Kertzer and Laslett 1995; Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Baars, Dohmen, Grenier and Phillipson 2013:13). I then provide a discussion on the historiography of retirement and the emergence of the older worker identity.

Social Construction of Reality

There is nothing inherent about any given social reality. What we come to know as real such as norms, institutions, and laws are socially constructed. Social reality is “[already] historically encoded with language and culture” (Cole 1995:342). Ian Hacking (1999:2) informs

that social reality is not fixed and inevitable but a “product of historical events, social forces, and ideology” (see also Berger and Luckmann 1966; Morgan and Kunkel 2006; Schütz and Luckmann 1973). It is an ongoing human production created because individuals hold certain shared beliefs (Berger and Luckmann 1966:198) and values, which everyone understands as meaningful within that culture/society.

In fact, all that has meaning in our lives such as knowledge, reason, and right originates within the matrix of social relationships (Gergen and Gergen 2000:283; Holstein and Gubrium 2007). Meanings are socially created and exist in certain ways because of “recurrent patterns of interaction” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:32) between society and individuals, the implementation of “social institutions” (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:5-6), norms, and language use. Even social forms commonly viewed as external social realities, existing beyond the scope of social influence, are products of interactional processes (Holstein and Gubrium 2007:337). Thus, social reality is sustained, reproduced, and institutionalized over time because there is generalized knowledge shared by all through ongoing interaction (intersubjective world, Berger and Luckmann 1966:22). Notably, social reality is an “ordered reality” that “appears already objectified” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:21) due to face-to-face communication and interaction with social agents (socialization via the significant and generalized others).

Structure is powerful in the construction process, carrying “specific ideologies” and “social relationships in mind” (Powell and Hendricks 2009:86). It is unwritten and in many cases unspoken expectations about how things are done. However, structure is “cast into a pattern,” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:23, 24, 50), and becomes an interpretive framework that allows us to make sense of experiences (Holstein and Gubrium 2007:344)—i.e. social realities. Structure makes social reality largely unproblematic because behavior becomes predictable, routinized,

and recognizable by all. Individuals tend to respond with behaviors associated with culturally shared meanings of that construct (Berger and Luckmann 1966:29, 50). However, this objective reality—for instance, age—is partially external to those who produce and create it, but taken-for-granted as a *social fact* (Durkheim 1982 Rules of Sociological Method). As a *social fact*, it takes on a life of its own, imposes limitations on individuals' action and behavior, and exerts power because it is perceived meaningful in everyday life.

In what follows, I discuss the social construction of age, old age, older workers, and retirement from a social constructionist stance. I examine these constructions via the depreciation and conservative theories to uncover how they are created, reproduced, sustained and become meaningful across and within society and culture. I examine the role that institutional structures, social actors, and socio-political and economic forces play in the construction process. It is important to examine these social constructs, particularly age (i.e. old age) and retirement, given the ongoing labor force participation among older adults and the socioeconomic, demographic, and political shifts occurring in the United States today.

Establishing the Social Construction of Age

Age is a socially constructed reality that provides ongoing meanings for individuals because it is assembled in terms of “well-known, culturally shared common sense categories and ideas” (Holstein and Gubrium 2007:344). Settersten and Hagestad (2015:30) claim that age per se is meaningless, but becomes meaningful via changes in social processes, demographic and epidemiological conditions, cultural attitudes, political and economic relations, historical processes, and situated knowledge (see also Macnicol 2006:4; Gergen and Gergen 2000). Between the 16th and 19th centuries, during the Protestant Reformation, Western society was transforming—i.e. the transition from agrarian feudalism to urban capitalism. With the

industrialization period, fertility, morbidity and mortality rates declined. A “popular iconography known as the ages of life was born [which] provided [cognitive] maps and behavioral norms necessary for modern individuals to envision life as a sequence of roles and activities” (Cole 1995:342 see Settersten and Hagestad 2015). This created the life course, which institutionalized age categories that structured individuals’ lives.¹⁰ For instance, in the 17th and 18th centuries, “childhood” did not exist as a distinct life course stage or social age identity. In fact, industrialization initially took full advantage of child labor. It later became unnecessary (and illegal), and formal education became a social institution (Holstein and Gubrium 2007:96). Thus, individuals experienced childhood as a social age construct and behaved in specific ways only when it became regularized as an age-based stage of the life course.

Age appears external to the individuals who created it. It became a “historically encoded” (Cole 1995:342) marker commonly used in different ways such as to arrange people into and out of positions within the social structure; for the division of labor; the allocation of resources; and assign them to roles (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:95, 5). Morgan and Kunkel (2006) argue that age became a ubiquitous social force used by all societies to regulate interaction, organize life, and alter behavior. To this extent, age formed an elaborate and pervasive system as it carried social age norms and cultural attitudes governing interaction so that it took on a life of its own (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:95). Cuddy and Fiske (2004) further state, “noticing age whether consciously or not drives our interactions with others” (p. 3). Thus, age is a socially constructed force and created from the “genesis of human relationships” (Gergen and Gergen 2000:283)—i.e. social

¹⁰ The life course is a “socially constructed, culturally and historically specific sequence of stages” (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:96). In other words, “it is social roles that people are expected to move through as they mature and grow older” (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:96). It is the progression along the age continuum from birth through infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, to old age. The life course emerged when it “became statistically normal to survive to a mature age” (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:30).

interaction. This occurs because age stages were “so thoroughly embedded throughout the cultural fabric of life [they] remain largely invisible to us” (Morgan and Kunkel 2006: 95, 96).

The “normal workings” of social life make age appear “natural” or immutable rather than “artificial” (Powell and Hendricks 2009:85) because there is some level of shared understanding and appropriate behavior in society related to life-course categories. Holstein and Gubrium (2007) indicate that interacting parties assemble age meanings and understandings as they progress through the various “life stages” (p. 337). Meanings are realized through “localized, symbolically” defined actions by a vast spectrum of social actors (Holstein and Gubrium 2007:340). For example, a child is likely to assume a teenage identity if he/she senses others beginning to treat or interact with him/her as a “teenager” (Holstein and Gubrium 2007:338-340). In another example, Settersten and Hagestad (2015) argue that meanings of old age are intersubjective and involve how others perceive the old individual, but also, how older adults respond to his or her aging, and how they see themselves in relation to their younger selves and older imagined selves, and respond to the aging of other older persons (pp. 44-45). I explain old age construction more fully in the next section.

Over time, individuals, and groups as a whole internalized society’s structure and embraced formal as well as informal rules, norms, values, meanings, attitudes, and cultural scripts about age categories (Morgan and Kunkel 2006). In Morgan and Kunkel’s words (2006), “we have some underlying [social/cultural] ideas about various stages in our lives” (p. 95). In the U.S. context, there are “appropriate” social roles and expectations associated with age stages that prescribed events such as when to enter college, marry, enter the labor market, or retire (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:95). By individuals reproducing the life cycle of education-marriage-work-retirement, which is usually associated with specific ages, age meanings and expectations are

reproduced and taken-for-granted (Cuddy and Fiske 2004:3; Morgan and Kunkel 2006:98-99).

Life stages are symbolic and prescribe and proscribe one's behaviors. In other words, individuals come to expect these as acceptable roles. Thus, age is a social clock carrying influential ideologies about what we are supposed to do at specific stages in life (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:96). When members follow the "dictum" to "act your age," an unproblematic socially constructed age reality emerges (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:95).

Each stage imposes itself on an individual and perceives as a force beyond his/her control. It acts as a measure of social control because it enforces limitations on individuals' actions. Once an individual exhibits characteristics of a certain age category (e.g. "old age"), she/he is understood to occupy that age position according to society and acts accordingly. Moreover, there are also formal and informal sanctions concerning age inappropriate behaviors because we are raised with common socio-cultural beliefs associated with each age stage. Since members of a culture share ideas and expectations about how a person of a particular age should behave, it is noticeable "when someone does things out of order or at atypical ages" (Morgan and Kunkel 2006: 95, 96, 98). For instance, a socially perceived older woman is easily noticed who dates a socially perceived younger man and vice versa. Neither adheres to traditional age norms. Furthermore, age sanctions are often echoed in the narrative such as "you're too old or young to do this" or "wear this" within that culture, and are reinforced and reproduced by its members.

One's perception of age often coincides with automatic inferences about social and cognitive competencies, political and religious beliefs, and physical capabilities (Cuddy and Fiske 2004:3). These "socially constructed labels and definitions allow us to treat people as members of [specific] meaningful social categories" (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:7, 17). In particular, there is a cultural perception and expectation for some people to be dependent and

helpless at a certain age (Thane 2003:94) and they are often treated as such. This view is often associated with “old” age and represents a form of compassionate stereotype. According to Macnicol (2006), in American society older adults are often pigeonholed as “rigid, physically unattractive, senile, unproductive, sickly, cranky, impoverished, and sexless” (p. 8). This view is “disguised by patronizing, false praise via “a paternalistic breed of prejudice” whereby old people are “pitied but not respected”” (Macnicol 2006:8). Thus, age expectations allow one to subjectively feel a certain way/age because others expect and allow you to feel that way/age in the interaction process. The formation of that self-concept is also accepted because social structures and forces reinforce that identity. Thus, age, like other social locations (such as race, gender etc.), is a social construction and becomes institutionalized and reproduced.

Social and Cultural Construction of “Old” age

An old age social category does not exist in a vacuum. Instead, meanings are defined and shaped by social systems, structures, power relations, and the emotional commitment of individuals (Hacking 1999). These include institutional or age-defined policies, cultural norms, and values, unspoken assumptions, myths, narratives, socio-economic historical and political forces. I discuss each of these measures of old age to show how meanings and experiences of old age emerged as well as the variability in its construction (Hacking 1999). These measures are helpful in understanding how age is conceptualized as each contributes to how meanings and perceptions of old age emerged, reproduced, and reinforced in society.

Conceptually, old age is a “complex social phenomenon” involving “interrelationships among biological, psychological, social, and cultural processes” (Morgan and Kunkel 2006: 91). However, the dominant view of old age comes from the discourse that conceptualizes old age as “a stage in life medically defined wherein people are in the first instance “at risk” from a set of

specific diseases and thereafter afflicted by them” (Vincent 2006:690).¹¹ Vincent (2006) further states, “what distinguishes old age from youth is its disease status” (p. 690).¹² This perspective suggests that aging as a process of continuing to lead a meaningful life, tends to be reduced solely to *senescing* (i.e. deterioration) and social problems, and the *aged* as distinct from “normal” adults (Baars 2013:15). Thus, old age is treated as a medical problem and without a cure. This view commonly presents “erroneous beliefs about the effects of aging on physical and mental capabilities” of older people (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:4-5). It reinforces a principal notion and image of older adults as unproductive and in poor health (Cole 1995:342).

Unlike the physical realities of the aging process, “old” age is socially created. While “aging” derives from innate biological mechanisms such as a consequence of telomere shortening—i.e. Hayflick theory—and free radicals (Hacking 1999:10), “old” age is not an inherent process. It is not independent of us, but marked as a product of society—it is “constructed through the life course” (Holstein and Gubrium 2007:337). Had society not placed a category or time frame of who or what is “old” and assigned evaluations about this stage, old age would not exist (Hacking 1999). Representations of old age were derived from philosophical or medical texts, literature, paintings, film, recorded expressions of everyday opinion or other sources, which shape individual imaginings and collective action and behavior (Thane 2003:94). Thane (2003) further explains that old age is “cultural” age. Meanings of old age are closely linked to functional and cultural definitions of age. They are “not experientially fixed [far from

¹¹ Old age is the end stage of a sequence of biological developmental processes. Old age is cellular senescence. It is distinguishable from youth by biological markers such as shortened telomeres or less-efficient apoptosis (Vincent 2006:692). This view “detaches old age from the level of the organism and the level of humanity. Older people are rarely specific living human beings and are often merely ‘redundant soma’ – purposeless evolutionary residuals hanging on in an increasingly decrepit state because they have not been eliminated by natural predation. From this point of view the essence of old, age is technical failure, a bodily function at the cellular level preventable by suitable scientific intervention” (Vincent 2006:692).

¹² Cole (1995) argues it is “functional” or biological age that characterizes old age as physical “decline and disease” (p. 342).

automatic] but emerge from context-sensitive meaning-making work” (Holstein and Gubrium 2007:340). In other words, old age is a collection of meanings, contested by different social groups (Hacking 1999; Thane 2003:97), which defines and treats individuals as “old” in accordance with the norms and the value system of a given community. In collectivist cultures such as China, norms of valuing and respecting the elderly— i.e. filial piety—are evident. Younger children and adults are expected to respect their elders for their wisdom (Greenberg, Schimel, and Martens 2004:42-43). Older adults are assigned important roles within the family network such as counselors and advice givers and included in social activities. Within this culture, old age is not associated with “becoming obsolete but as gradually taking on new and important roles” (Greenberg et al. 2004:42-43).

Old age epitomizes different narratives and meanings over time as well, which influences social interaction and “opportunities for individuals in the social world” (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:5). It results in a particular mindset about older people. Even more remarkable, these narratives are shared and become meaningful to older adults themselves. On one end, meanings often entail notions of old age as social dependency, inevitable bodily deterioration, and cognitive decline, and the consequent need for health and medical care (Talarsky 1998:101, 102, 105, 106; see Gergen and Gergen 2000:281-282; Macnicol 2006:134-135); on the other end, narrative capture ideas about progressive aging.¹³ I explain these differences in meanings about old age in the next sections. I place attention on two major theories (i.e. the depreciation and conservative models) across two historical epochs—industrial and post-industrial societies.

¹³ The conservative model or the culturalist view of aging (Cohen 1994; see Tulle-Winton 1999) recognizes that older workers may be considered as “assets that will continue to grow if managed properly” (Yeatts, Folts, Knapp 2000:577). This is closely aligned with aging in post-industrial society. With rapid population and technological changes, declines in labor and capital flows, and significant changes in the work structure there is an emergence of “new aging”, described as “positive,” “successful,” and “productive,” and represented by images of independence, social mobility, and agency (Katz 2005:140; Judy and D’amico 1997:12).

The Social Construction of Old Age and Political Economy: The Depreciation Approach

Old age is a global and recognizable age category, carrying specific ideologies, and social meanings that everyone presumably accepts. However, meanings of age are not static but evolve and change throughout the decades (Hacking 1999). Morgan and Kunkel (2006) state that “our society has many different formal and informal social definitions of age and aging [and] the meanings, definitions, and experiences vary across situations, cultures, and time” (p. 2). One major framework (i.e. the depreciation or traditionalist approach) documents society’s attitudes about age and the effects of the social environment on older adults’ behavior (Hess 2006:379-380). Specifically, the depreciation theory was connected loosely with the industrial period in the United States. However, we are in a post-industrial society but meanings of age connected to the industrial era may still linger and influence how age is constructed today.

As the drive toward industrial “efficiency and scope of manufacturing” grew during the early 20th century (Block 1990:9; Gullette 2011:30), Western economies and industries in particular, underwent profound structural changes (Macnicol 2006).¹⁴ The imposition of structural changes (e.g. flexibility in many work environments, and a need to be more competitive—Yeatts et al. 2000)¹⁵ became endemic in labor markets (Macnicol 2006:229, 263). Women, children, and old people were gradually pushed out by a labor market that was

¹⁴ Such changes include: “widening income inequality; political disenfranchisement of a substantial section of the population who do not actively support the neoliberal project; increasing polarization in labor markets between a well-remunerated, high-skills core and a large hypercasualized, often part-time, low-paid periphery (Macnicol 2015:3).

¹⁵ Sixty and sixty-five are the ages at which state and private pensions are most frequently paid today and common ages of retirement from paid work (Thane 2003:97). These ages became fixed in society in the early 20th century when pensions and retirement gradually became normal features of aging in most developed countries (p. 97). Thane (2003) further argues, “standards of physical fitness of people in their sixties rose in most western countries over the twentieth century. In some countries, ages of retirement were raised or abolished at the end of the century, though in others they fell for reasons connected with the state of the national and international economy, or with personal preference, rather than with physical aptitude. Increasingly, physical condition was detached from social bureaucratic makers of ‘old age’ and established age boundaries were destabilized” (p. 97).

becoming more “masculinist, factory-based, and technologically innovative” (Macnicol 2015:23).

During industrialization characterized by “western science and secular rationality” (Powell and Hendricks 2009:85), new social and cultural meanings, expectations, and interaction processes emerged. These coincided with directives of capitalism (Thane 2003:98). Work practices increased in intensity, pace, and competitiveness. Under this new Western economy, there was an increasing need to restructure labor arrangement—i.e. to stabilize and regulate the workforce with new production technologies and strategies. New technologies and production techniques accelerated reconstructions and transformations at this time. The main objective was to mechanize the workforce to enable peak productivity and increase efficiency (Block 1990:9; Gullette 2011:30). In other words, it placed high value on economic progress, material resources, economic globalization, and the need for government agencies to operate with shrinking budgets/political realignments (Yeatts et al. 2000:578; Fealy, McNamara, Treacy and Lyons 2012; Shultz and Adams 2007; Hedge et al. 2006; Sicker 2002; Kertzer and Laslett 1995:386; Gullette 2011:13, 22; Judy and D’amico 1997:51). This demographic shift “transformed the aging experiences of individuals and families” (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:30). These conditions intensified ageism in social relations (Macnicol 2006) especially for older adults who remained in a workforce that favored younger workers. The “dark” age of aging developed at this time.

Old age was used as a social measure for productive labor based on the belief that someone of a certain chronological age was incapable/capable. In Europe, at least since medieval times, age sixty and seventy denoted the onset of “old” age by formal institutions and individuals were forced to withdraw from public offices and activities. In ancient Rome, people were

categorized as old ranging from the early forties to seventies (Thane 2003). In ancient Greece, men in their fifties were conscripted to the formal obligation such as military service because it did not end until individuals reached age sixty. However, in medieval England, men and women ceased at the chronological age of sixty to be liable for compulsory services under the labor laws, such as for performing military services based on a series of enactments from the Ordinance of Laborers of 1349 (Thane 2003:97). Notably, cultural age appears gendered with “age-pertinent attitudes” and prescribed “roles for each sex” (Powell and Hendricks 2009:90). In most Western societies, old age is often thought to start earlier for women than men. For women, it starts in the late forties or around fifty when the physical concomitants of menopause became visible (Thane 2003)—i.e. “events in the reproductive cycle” (Powell and Hendricks 2009:91). Male old age chronology, however, hinges on employment (Powell and Hendricks 2009). Together, these examples illustrate variability in old age conceptualization across cultures, time, and groups (Thane 2003:98).

As some scholars further put it, during the industrial period, growing old was treated as “solely a disaster” in Western societies (Gergen and Gergen 2000:281). This perception of age was in strict contradiction to aging in pre-industrial times in the U.S. society—old age was mostly constructed based on external, physical signs (Macnicol 2015) or marked by biography. For instance, individuals identified as visibly “old” (i.e. social age signifiers such as an individual “looks old”/gray hair) were well revered, held leadership roles and powerful decision-making positions because of their wisdom, experience, knowledge and economic standing (Powell and Hendricks 2009:85). However, during the industrial period in the United States and the United Kingdom, old age became “a terrible [inevitable] prospect” (Gilleard and Higgs

2010:11) and a qualitative measure of social and economic participation and productive capabilities. The numbers of individuals categorized as old also increased at the same time.

Western societies were becoming age-conscious and age-stratified (Macnicol 2006: 143, 45). In the industrial “political economy,” (Gilleard and Higgs 2002) old age became a politically significant and protected stage by the welfare state (Macnicol 2015:1)—i.e. a “creation of the policies of welfare capitalism” (p. 370). It coincided with “organizational [practices] driven by a human resource philosophy”—a general perspective regarding assistance to older workers who must adapt to changes (Yeatts et al. 2000:577). In particular, regulatory agents such as the federal government and employers systematically enforced age-based practices¹⁶ (Macnicol 2015:1) which became the norm (Shultz and Adams 2007; Hedge et al. 2006). They were used to endorse a socially constructed stage in life eligible for social programs (Gilleard and Higgs 2011:137; Gilleard and Higgs 2010) that never existed before in a formal capacity (i.e. affixing a crude age proxy of 65 to designate the “official” retirement age). In this situation, individuals holding old age membership became automatically entitled to certain benefits and services, such as New Deal legislation of the 1930s, old age pensions and Social Security (Moen 2013:23), once they reached a certain age whether or not she/he actually required them. Thus, old age “began with the enactment of the Social Security Act of 1935 [and other eligibility programs]” (Achenbaum 1994:20). It was through these measures age sixty-five became not only the

¹⁶ These included: formal and informal age-graded social policies which arguably coincided with the implementation of the Social Security Act of 1935; a mandatory retirement age; and private pensions; early retirement inducements; barriers erected by labor unions; even age discriminatory employment practices and other measures such as cultural scripts, and age specific norms (Macnicol 2006: 211, 220, 222; Shultz and Adams 2007; Moen 2010; Ruhm 1996; Quick & Moen 1998; Toossi 2013; 2012; Long 1958:162-163; Hedge et al. 2006; Barker and Clark 1980).

eligibility baseline for benefits, but marked the passage to becoming “old” and retiring in America (Achenbaum 1994:20; Quinn and Burkhauser 1990:307).¹⁷

Although age policies served to structure old age as a stable noticeable process, concurrently, they changed the milieu of social, political, and economic relations. They influenced the interaction process among social actors (government, employers, and workers). They shaped how people behaved or what they did (Morgan and Kunkel 2006), and how members of society perceived that life stage. De Beauvoir (1972) noted, one disconcerting result of social forces might be the treatment of the elderly not “as real people” but as “different, as another being” (pp. 2– 3). They are viewed “not as individuals” but as “old people” or, even worse, referred to with derogatory terms like “old fart, geezer, old-timer, blue-hair, codger, old hag, fossil, or dinosaur” (Greenberg et al. 2004:38), and covered via the media and marketing industries as such.¹⁸ In particular, older workers were characterized as “goods with a limited useful life” (Yeatts et al. 2000:577) and became an unfavorable human resource due to historical events (Yeatts et al. 2000:578; Fealy et al. 2012; Shultz 1961).¹⁹

Age based policies were intended to manipulate the retirement decisions of individuals, to serve the needs of corporations and society as a whole (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:189). These laws (based on false stereotypes, myths, misconceptions, and deep-seated fears of the aging self and older workers (Macnicol 2006: 229, 263)), created old age as a specific “chronologically²⁰

¹⁷ This led to a sense of retirement’s ambiguity—on the one hand enforcing uselessness while on the other hand giving older people unprecedented freedom (Achenbaum 1994:22).

¹⁸ In resource terms, old age is constructed as a burden, “creating intolerable pressures on public expenditures” from governmental coffers (Powell and Hendricks 2009:89).

¹⁹ For instance, in industrial societies, older adults were considered an expendable group in the labor market. Their identity as “older workers” did not correspond with the social expectation and identity of work—the utopian/ideal worker. Older workers were treated as “industrial obsolescence” (Macnicol 2006: 229, 263) for failing to behave according to the societal expectations.

²⁰ Chronological age is calendar time, involving an interaction between biographical time (an individual’s life history) and historical time (the historical context in which individuals’ age, with different cohort and generational experiences) Macnicol 2015 (p. 8).

defined stage of life beyond gainful employment” (Cole 2006:342; Morgan and Kunkel 2006: 95). These age-based practices further propagate ageist beliefs that individuals have entered a stage of life marked by uselessness and might be closer to death (Greenberg et al. 2004: 29-30, 42-43).²¹ They became mechanisms of the labor market to control the flow of workers (Cole 1995:342; Morgan and Kunkel 2006:187; Thane 2003:97). These practices permitted withdrawal from public activities and provided an “acceptable means to rid the public service of those thought to have aged past their usefulness” (Thane 2003:97, 94) or deemed “past their best” in terms of individual labor (Macnicol 2015:22, 23). Individuals deemed “older” were deprived the ability to “sell their labor at the market rates” (Macnicol 2015:20).

The welfare state protection typified old age with a certain kind of individual (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:5) that became generally recognized as a collective identity. It created an image of old age dependency —i.e. a legitimate needs-based group. Macnicol (2015) claims that older adults “themselves [are] a product of the new economic and political agendas” (p. 1)²² because old age is created as an officially dependent period of life in which the state was held accountable for protecting the old.²³ Paradoxically, systematic age-based practices as measures of the welfare state tended to worsen the problems they purport to prevent (Macnicol 2015:15). These were “ostensibly designed to improve the lives of older people, [but instead reinforced] their dependent, marginalized, and disempowered status” (Katz 2005:143). Talarsky (1998)

²¹ The advent of new medical technologies and treatment of chronic diseases positioned older adults as a group closer to death (Gullette 1997). This made old age a threatening stage in life for some—the last stage between life and the unknown or the nearness of death. Foucault informs about the shifts in the understanding of death and their implications for old age. He claims that the aged body became reduced to a state of degeneration where the meanings of old age and the body’s deterioration seemed condemned signifying each other in perpetuity (Foucault, 1973:41).

²² This closely aligns with the modernization theory which saw old age emerging as a discrete category with the development of advanced industrial societies, the growth of welfare state categorizations, the bureaucratization of society, the spread of information retrieval systems and so on (Macnicol 2015:8).

²³ Sociologist John Myles, for example, argues that the American welfare state is unique for focusing so heavily on the needs of the elderly(see John Myles, *Old Age in the Welfare State: The Political Economy of Public Pensions*, Revised ed. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1989:5-27) (See also “Poverty in America,” Congressional Digest 88, no. 7 September 2009:193).

claims old age became problematized as older individuals were seen as socially “dependent, feeble, over-consumptive and nonproductive” (pp. 105-106). Older individuals were typified as helpless, sick and victims deserving and needing protection from the highest structural level (Macnicol 2015:1). They were seen as occupying a place in society in terms of needs and were viewed more as consumers instead of providers of services—i.e. consumer-driven retirement approach (Coughlin 2011). De Beauvoir (1972) states:

“In the capitalist democracies, the aging of the population has raised new difficulties. It is the ‘Mount Everest of the present-day social problems,’ said a British minister of health, Ian Macleod. Not only are there many more aged people than there were, but they no longer spontaneously integrate with the community: society is compelled to decide upon their status, and the decision can only be taken at the governmental level. Old age has become the object of a policy” (p. 222).

Thus, “demands of industrialization and Western welfare states are blamed for constructing later life (aging) and retirement as negative states of decline and dependency” (Katz 2005:140)—i.e. depreciation of individual value (Yeatts et al. 2000:577). In consequence, the labor market became an instrumental site that contributed, created, and reproduced old age as a social construct and helped “shape private experiences and perceptions” (Thane 2003:94) of aging. It structures old age as a social life course stage together with state-implemented programs—an institutionalized age for retirement. Social agents used macro-level social forces formally and informally such as mandatory retirement practices, state policies, discrimination²⁴ and other ageist practices and policies (Katz 2005; Hedge et al. 2006) to construct and reproduce a social identity of old age/worker. These affected older workers and suggest a negative conception of aging. According to Wood, Wilkinson and Harcourt (2008), such practices may be based on “rational choice and labor costs” perspectives in which older workers’ seniority and

²⁴ Although policies such as the ADEA were aimed at protecting older workers, in practice they were limited and seen as a “political sweetener” and “floundering on the rocks of the post-industrial labor market” (Macnicol 2006:256).

associated higher pay may make them “less attractive to employers, particularly if younger workers are deemed equally or more productive” (cited in Chou 2012:30)

Age practices exacerbated the social displacement of older workers or “services of workers who were increasingly judged industrially obsolete in a more competitive economic environment” (Macnicol 2006:143). They were partly motivated to prevent individuals from sharing social resources (e.g. employment services of all kinds, Macnicol 2006:43, 7) and contributing to productive labor, typically associated with the earning of wages (Gergen and Gergen 2000). These practices were major ways to “re-distribute their jobs to the young unemployed” (Macnicol 2006: 214). This was usually done by laying older workers off because they were considered less competent than younger workers Burtless and Quinn 2000; Hedge et al. 2006). Older workers forced out of work before they were ready faced many challenges—for most, retirement meant inadequate food, clothing, housing, and a sense of insecurity (Ball 1950).²⁵

These forces tended to create an out-group homogeneity effect (Cuddy and Fiske 2004:6) or an assumption that positioned older adults as a homogeneous group (Talarsky 1998:101) with presumably the same aging experience,²⁶ even though “human beings age at different rates” (Macnicol 2015:1) and have different experiences. They further implied that as individuals age, they universally regressed and gradually disengaged from active social roles, reduced interaction

²⁵“In the 1940s and early 1950s, fewer than 5 percent of new retirees reported leaving work because of a wish to retire or enjoy more leisure. About 90 percent left because of poor health or a layoff” (Burtless and Quinn 2000:6). Relatively few older workers retire because they want to. Most do because of an employer’s decision or disability. Employers thought it was good business to drop these older workers and hire younger ones to take their places.

²⁶ Old age comprises different stages—i.e. early and late phases—that are markedly different from each other. In the early phase, or the “third age,” this is often facilitated by good health and great potential. The late phase includes a “fourth age” of robust decline (Smith 2000), significant challenges, and hardship, often triggered and punctuated by chronic and acute health conditions that seriously limit functional capacity. These age demarcations are otherwise typified as “young-old,” “old-old,” and “advanced old age” (or “oldest-old”) phases” (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:31).

with others²⁷ (Macnicol 2015:8). Thus, old age and age-based practices secure a stage of life that sets apart older adults from the “collective social body” (Talarsky 1998:106)—i.e. “othering.” They operated to single out, isolate, and stigmatize older adults from mainstream society (Talarsky 1998:102; Macnicol 2006:27; Macnicol 2015). This occurred because social forces created a “cultural construction of old age [as] a form of social difference (Talarsky 1998:102, 105, 106). These cultural messages imply and impose practices and behaviors of inclusion and rejection based on age (Powell and Hendricks 2009:86).

Old age is an offshoot of Western modernity that served as an “age-segregated formation index” (Talarsky 1998:106). It is distinctly defined as “the end of work after a career of full-time jobs” (Feldman 1994:285) towards the “golden years” of retirement—i.e. a time for leisure (Moen 2010; Ruhm 1996; Quick & Moen 1998; Hochschild, 1979; Shanas 1970). Retirement was thus functional as it served to control work participation (or non-participation) of individuals by moving seniors into retirement age and replacing them with younger workers. Older individuals were even deliberately assigned to symbolic and physical enclaves separate from the rest of society (Talarsky 1998:102) such as “age-homogenous institutions” (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:36)—i.e. residential facilities and retirement communities and regions (Greenberg et al. 2004).

These perceptions of age follow the functionalist perspective which claims that the “older person fades as a social actor, leaving individual idiosyncrasy and domestic circumstances to define a residual personal identity” (Gilleard and Higgs 2002:370). In this sense, old age is “defined by a mutually negotiated deinvestment—by the individual and by society—from social action” (Gilleard and Higgs 2002:370). Older individuals are “deprived of the opportunity to

²⁷ These are tenets of the disengagement theory dominant in the 1960s based upon interviews with retirees in Kansas.

exercise a more socially productive identity [cosigning] to the position of a pensioner” (Gilleard and Higgs 2002:370). This became the expected normative behavior upon reaching that age marker because social forces and cultural beliefs encouraged and rewarded disengagement from work through the support of leisurely retirement pensions. Individuals re-socialized themselves to accept and adapt to their new devalued status (Hedge et al. 2006:13; Sicker 2002).

Up until the 1990s, elders supported by these institutional policies consciously became aware of the social demarcation of age by internalizing attitudes that they needed to retire from work, work identity, and even “felt” older. Stable retirement trajectories for older workers became evident (Moen 2010; Ruhm 1996; Quick & Moen 1998; Toossi 2013; BLS 2013, 2012; Long 1958:162-163) especially with the passing of mandatory retirement rule. From the 1940s through the early 1990s, workers retired at growing rates (see Figure 1 Employment Projections Program, U.S. Department of Labor, and U.S. Bureau Labor Statistics 2013, 2012, 2009, 2007, and 2006). The culture of young “adulthood” was forged and constructed as a time in the life course for education, but more importantly, work (Shanas 1970; Moen 2010; Ruhm 1996; Quick & Moen 1998). An abundant supply of younger, cheaper workers replaced and continually “replenished” the workforce, which shifted the old age structure of the workforce downward (Hedge et al. 2006:13).

In the context of work, Hedge et al. (2006) point out that changes and values brought about by the industrial economy contribute to older workers being treated unfairly in the workplace—i.e. economic inequality older adults faced under capitalism (Townsend 1981 cited in Macnicol 2006:8). Modernization theorists posited that once revered aging bodies and minds (i.e. older individuals) were pushed out from the workplace, devalued, even feared, and commonly assumed as unfit to perform expected tasks (Gilleard and Higgs 2011:140; Macnicol

2006:143; Kertzer and Laslett 1995; de Beauvoir 1972; Hazan 1994; Featherstone and Wernick, 1995:1-15; Johnson and Neumark 1997; Thane 2003:97). Employers perceived them as industrial obsolescent, less physically and mentally competent than younger workers, inefficient during an industrial age that sought economic efficiency and speed in work (Macnicol 2006:211; Hedge et al. 2006; see Glover & Branine 1997; Taylor & Walker 1997; Wood et al. 2008 cited in Chou 2012). For instance, the industrial worker was perceived as “old and worn-out” at an age when the farmer was still productively engaged in work (Macnicol 2006:212). Hedge et al. (2006) stated, “employers often voiced concern about the ability of older workers to perform adequately in a fast paced, industrial setting” (pp.13-14; see also Barker and Clark 1980:20). This concern existed because the identity and status of the “older” worker conflicted with cultural norms of the “ideal/utopian worker” (i.e. a younger worker).

Although the category of old age was not “symptomatic of [in]competence” (Morgan and Kunkel 2006:5), the “prevailing images depict[ed] old age as a time of decrepitude and social marginality” (Macnicol 2006:11), unproductivity, inability to perform expected tasks and closely tied to physicality by virtue of “chronological age alone” (Fealy et al. 2012:86; Shultz and Adams 2007:111; Thane 2003:97). This reinforced the “social and cultural ghettoization of older people” (Macnicol 2006:223). It carried a hegemonic cultural belief and symbolism classifying older individuals as physically and cognitively inept (Macnicol 2006). This is because older workers were perceived with diminished human capital and value in the labor market (Macnicol 2006:223)—i.e. diminished agency and social and economic participation (Gergen and Gergen 2000). Gergen and Gergen (2000) claim, the industrial period thrust “the aging population into an alienated and denigrated status” (p. 16). Gergen and Gergen (2000) added, older adults were ““relegated,” “sidelined,” “put out to pasture,” or “has beens”” (p. 2). For instance, in the United

States, older Americans' social status declined (Hedge et al. 2006:13; Sicker 2002). In Britain, older adults were also viewed as a permanent “at risk” group (Talarsky 1998:106) because of the belief that someone “old” is incapable. Old age became a protected stage of life but stipulated by the notion of “difference” with membership into a “community of vulnerability risk” (Gilleard and Higgs 2011:140).

Old age was misconstrued as pathology—i.e. dying of the aging body or a physically degenerative body (Vincent 2006:682), which took normal aging processes such as gray hair or wrinkles and presented them as pathological. Part of this ideology was embedded in the hegemonic notion that “we live in a culture that worships youth and beauty” (Macnicol 2006:11), or glorified youth consciousness/“youthism” and a young “adulthood” (Macnicol 2006:11) culture. These messages increased gerontophobic ideologies (i.e. fear of aging) because old age was seen as a threatening reminder to the young of their diminishing beauty, health, and one’s “own [inevitable] mortality” (Greenberg et al. 2004:29-20, 42-43). Therefore, old age was framed by the social construction of broader life phases—the life course—, and the age-based social norms associated with them (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:36). Old age became increasingly understood as a social problem.

Age in Post-Industrial Era: The Conservative Approach

The construction of age spans multiple decades. The discussion so far closely conveys the social construction of old age particularly during industrial times. Despite these meanings, which present a somewhat grim view of old age (i.e. the depreciation model), American society has transformed yet again. It has since undergone dramatic structural and cultural shifts. We are in a post-industrial era characterized as a “technotronic” society. There is rapid growth in technology,

a growing service sector,²⁸ corporate mergers, downsizing, and offshoring. These realities have presumably altered employers' and employees' perceptions of age and work (Block 1990:10; Bell 1999; Sicker 2002:14; Aronowitz and Di Fazio 1994; Shultz and Adams 2007:14, 225; Hedge et al. 2006:25; Chou 2012; Yeatts et al. 2000). In this information-based network economy and culture, jobs are becoming less physically arduous. According to Block (1990:10), the “weight of goods and production, manufacturing, farming, and mining in [terms of] total employment” that were once a key feature of economic growth and employment opportunities over the past two hundred years are becoming obsolete (see also Sicker 2002:14; Shultz and Adams 2007:14, 225). These transformations may affect or contest previously established constructions of age. This view connects with the conservative framework (Yeatts et al. 2000) (or the culturalist view of aging Cohen 1994; see Tulle-Winton 1999).

The conservative view of age centers on the idea that “a combination of demographic change and socioeconomic development provide[s] the condition for a new cadre of pensioners or late lifers [and this] new generation of retired people finds itself in a position of greater potential agency” (Gilleard and Higgs 2002:370). It further conveys the message that “later life is a time of opportunity and “old age” a state to be resisted” (Gilleard and Higgs 2002: 371). In general, “being old does not necessarily and inevitably means that one is senile, tired, sickly, and frail” (Hurd 2000:419). Hurd (2000) further explained that “older adults actively seek to increase their social power through organizational and political involvement [and most] older people exempt themselves from the stereotypes and strive to distance themselves from those they deem old” (p. 420).

For other cultural theorists, in this new context—i.e. rapid population and technological changes, declines in labor and capital flow, and significant changes in the work structure—, there

²⁸ Block (1990) also refers to this as an information society, service society, or the technotronic society (p. 10).

is an emergence of a “new aging.” It is described as positive, successful, and productive, represented by images of independence, social mobility, and agency (Katz 2005:140; Judy and D’amico 1997:12; Gilleard and Higgs 2002:370). In particular, older workers are observed as “assets that will continue to grow” (Yeatts et al. 2000:577). These views allude to a more positive cultural construction of aging (Overall 2006:130). They present contemporary images towards an ageless identity, but also speak to the value of hiring older workers.

Although social forces that promote retirement are still intact (e.g. Social Security), individuals labeled as “old” especially in the third age, are increasingly participating in the labor market particularly in “liberal market states” (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:32, 33) such as the United States and the United Kingdom.²⁹ An increasing number of older adults are *unretiring* in this post-industrial political economy. This phenomenon contests past constructions of old age, which associates age with disengagement or obsolescence. There is a cultural shift towards “individualization of the life course” (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:33). This opens new possibilities and opportunities for choice for all ages, including those “who are old, to live their lives in ways that are congruent with their personal interests and wishes” (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:32, 33).

Liberalizing old age is “a personal characteristic that is shaped by individual behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions—subjective aging,”³⁰ and it ignores structural changes that are beyond

²⁹ “Liberal market states” are given this label not because they are generous, but because they reflect a free market economy and emphasize personal liberty (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:33).

³⁰ Subjective age or psychological age is an individuals’ own assessment of their age (Macnicol 2015). Individuals experience age subjectively—how old they report feeling, looking and acting (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:38). These factors arranged by several markers which relate to the body and health, time (e.g. increasing focus on time left to live), meaning and generativity (e.g. search for meaning in life, growing concern for younger generations), family experiences (e.g. experiencing the illness or death of parents, crossing the ages at which parents died), social relationship/experiences (e.g. treated by others in ageist ways (positive or negative), experiencing age discrimination, feeling invisible), decreasing libido (e.g. emerging chronic, even multiple, health problems), and housing and policy (e.g. adapt one’s living environment to accommodate health changes, drawing a pension,

individuals' ability to control, even as they are charged with doing so (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:44-45). Although there may be a movement towards liberalizing old age and individualization, this may lead to several outcomes—i.e. intended and unintended consequences for older adults. Individualization and liberalization bring new freedoms whereby older workers can decide when and how to retire or return to work. This, however, means the onus is on older individuals and families to manage risk (such as financial responsibilities) rather than governments, markets, or other entities (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:33). It indicates changes in meanings of age and retirement, but also in the relationship between older Americans and the state—i.e. a broader issue of the welfare state's financial responsibility for its senior citizens. It challenges the idea of old age as “welfarist” (Macnicol 2015) discussed earlier in the chapter (and later the conclusion chapter).

Underlying the perception of “new aging,” however, is “contradictory practices of aging” (Katz 2005:209). There are some exceptions that old age is not always constructed positively, as “new” kinds of negative perceptions emerge. This is evidenced by the vast majority of critical gerontological research, which present negative and positive views of age and older adults in the workplace today (e.g. Hirsch, MacPherson and Hardy 2000; Shore, Goldberg and Cleveland 2003; Parkinson 2002; American Association of Retired Persons 2008a; Yeatts et al. 2000; Shultz and Adams 2007; Shen and Kleiner 2001). This variability in age meanings indicates age is occupying a “cultural space that is ambiguous and dualistic...” (Macnicol 2015:22). Culturalist such as Cohen (2003) explains, “employers view older workers as more reliable and having more experience than younger ones” (cited in Shultz and Adams 2007:41). There is the expectation of “worker-friendly personnel practices [which view] all employees, regardless of

Medicare Eligibility for other “senior” benefits or discounts) (Settersten and Hagestad 2015:38-40). Subjective age or psychological age is an individuals' own assessment of their age (Macnicol 2015).

their age, as renewable assets [because they] can continue to yield a high rate of return for long periods of time if they are adequately educated, trained, and managed” (Yeatts et al. 2000:577). Further, Yeatts et al. (2000) claimed, “an organization’s stated philosophy may not always be its practiced one” (p. 577). Hence, positive views of age may not always exist.

To this point, McCann and Keaton’s (2013) cross-cultural study on ageist stereotypes and perceptions emphasize positive constructions of older workers, but with some qualifications. In their study, participants were asked to provide their level of agreement on questions about trait characteristics of older and younger workers in the workplace. Their study with 267 respondents (ages 18-33) yielded that irrespective of culture (the United States versus Thailand), younger workers stereotypically perceived younger and older workers differently and in specific ways. On one hand, most of the respondents (66.0 percent) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that older workers were more loyal and highly committed to the organization than younger workers. They also agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that older workers had fewer absences, a better attitude toward work, and being cautious on the job (McCann and Keaton 2013:333, 336). However, there was strong agreement that older workers made more mental mistakes than younger workers. Younger respondents from the sample agreed with the statement that younger workers work faster than older workers (39.2 percent either agreed or strongly agreed—McCann and Keaton 2013:334). There is great merit to this study since it extends current work on age perception by providing a cross-cultural examination of age construction in a post-industrial cultural context. While the study is relevant because it indicates that age is constructed both positively and negatively across these cultures even today, it is limited scope as it only captures younger workers’ perceptions in relation to the conceptual delineation of age stereotypes. Due to the unretirement phenomenon occurring today, it would be

important to capture the views by others in the workforce such as older workers who are unretiring and employers who are in need and hiring them especially since older workers are viewed as assets in work. This may provide more conclusive and complete evidence about the conceptualization of age and older workers today, or determine whether age construction reflects/denies perceptions of those captured in this study. My study fills this gap.

Apart from the positive meanings of age, within the contemporary labor market, Hirsch et al. (2000) explain older adults experience more restrictions on job options based on competency or limited mobility/openness when compared to younger workers (see Hutchens 1993 on new hires who were older workers). Often times, the central focus of studies on age construction in the workplace discuss age in relation to competency. This is evidenced by the employer-employee dynamic, and perceptions about the type of work older workers do (or can do), their skills, training, and learning capability (Taylor and Geldhauser cited in Shultz and Adams 2007:40). This relates to areas of computer-based advances in technology, communication, science and medicine and global economic forces (Administration on Aging (AoA) 2008). The technotronic society have changed the workforce and posed concerns about older workers' ability (competence) to adapt to these changes in work environments (Shultz and Adams 2007:19; see also Hirsch et al. 2000; American Association of Retired Persons 2008a; Hassell and Perrewe 1995; McCann and Keaton 2013; Chou 2012; Rupp, Vodanovich and Crede 2006; Grossman 2008).

Using an occupational data set from 1983-1998 which measured the occupational age compensation and employment opportunities for older workers, Hirsch et al. (2000) illustrated that "occupational segregation is substantially greater for older new hires than younger new hires" (p. 140). The scholars further explained that compared to newly hired younger workers,

newly hired older workers were employed in a smaller set of industries and occupations (Hirsch et al. 2000:410). Their study also reflects what they refer to as a “wage tilt” in the age structure which means that “occupations with steeper profiles [skill requirements, working conditions and hours, wage, and union status] are less likely to [hire a] high proportion of older workers” (Hirsch et al. 2000:410). Moreover, occupations requiring computer use not only “employ few older workers, but also are less accessible to older workers [than] other occupations” (Hirsch et al. 2000:410). In addition, occupations with exposure to extreme environmental conditions (noise, chemicals—Hirsch et al. 2000: 412) have fewer older males and are even less likely to hire older females than other workers. Like Hirsch et al.’s (2000) study, I found instances of “occupational segregation” and the “wage tilt.” Although employers hired older workers and favored their labor, I found that older workers were usually characterized as technophobes, and often in occupations with less profile such less physically demanding jobs with low wages and technological skills. I explain further in chapter 4.

Similarly, Lee, Czaja, and Sharit (2009) explained how employees in different organizational settings identify workplace-based beliefs about older workers. However, they explored how older employees perceived *themselves* in these contexts (p. 20). Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches, they gathered information about barriers and obstacles for returning to work, training needs and formats, work experiences, and perceptions of the characteristics of an ideal job. For instance, the focus groups with 37 unemployed adults (51– 76 years old) reported an array of obstacles older adults confronted while looking for a paid job including not knowing someone from inside the company, employers’ expectations about their ability to perform strenuous jobs, employers comparing their performance with younger workers, and insufficient wages. Older workers were less likely to be hired in jobs that require extensive

firm-specific training or occupations requiring computer use and high numerical skill. Age and the lack of needed technology-related skills were the “biggest barriers to paid work [with *age* as the] major impediment to continued employment” (Lee et al. 2009:29). As I found in my study, managers/employers sometimes constructed age negatively as a hindrance in work with the view that older workers “age” seemingly cast them as incapable of learning new technology, incompetent, and carry an aging mindset and were less likely hired to fill high skilled jobs.

Scholars such as Rupp et al. (2006) point out that older workers are characterized by ageist attitudes, which produce an inverse relationship between age and performance recommendations. The study used 353 undergraduate students (juniors and seniors) at a medium-sized public university in the southeastern United States to act as hypothetical managers. Participants read scenarios about an employee’s performance errors and rated various recommendations (p. 1341). The results revealed that older employees received more severe recommendations and sanctions for poor performance (i.e. transfer, request for resignation, demotion) than did their younger counterparts (Rupp et al. 2006:1353). These performance reviews indicate that ageist attitudes (stereotypes, negative attitudes, beliefs about instrumentality, autonomy, and integrity) related to recommendations are biased against older individuals. For instance, individuals with high scores on the ageist attitude scale were significantly more likely to strongly endorse the recommendations to terminate the employment of an older employee or ask for the employee’s resignation (Rupp et al. 2006:1354). This study is important because it conveys a message that older workers though active in productive work, are depicted in certain negative ways that may not accurately reflect them or how they viewed themselves/age. However, this message is continued to be used in the contemporary labor markets to make recommendations about them, which may translate into real consequences for

older workers (e.g. demote the employee—Rupp et al. 2006:1350). The scholars thus showed that older adults become somewhat essentialized possibly because of preconceived notions members of society share about age—i.e. old and young ages. Though the study represents meaningful responses, the main shortcoming of the study is that it investigated the impact of ageism on performance recommendations via hypothetical scenarios, rather than collecting data within a specific organizational context. In my work in actual workplaces, I identify mechanisms that complicate these relationships.

Previous studies indicate that institutional and organizational changes may help create conditions necessary for age construction. What is also noticeable is the strong association between the perceptions of old age “chronology” and discriminatory practices within these workplaces (Hirsch et al. 2000; Shore et al. 2003; McCann and Keaton 2013; Lee et al. 2009). Largely, ageist perceptions and preconceptions affect employability of older workers (see Lee et al. 2009; McCann and Keaton 2013; Brewington & Nassar-McMillan, 2000; Chou 2012; Rupp et al. 2006; Kampfe, John, Wadsworth, Mamboleo and Schonbrun 2008; Mendes 2013). To illustrate this point further, Kampfe et al.’s (2008) meta-analysis on older disabled workers is crucial. The scholars acknowledge the role age itself plays in the employability of older [disabled] workers. They argue that although some “older people with disabilities may need to work, [have] the desire to work, and have the ability to work; they may have problems in securing or maintaining employment” (pp. 338-339). As people with disabilities age, the likelihood that they will be employed decreases (Kampfe et al. 2008). They are given fewer work accommodations than is the case with many other workers. Among people with disabilities, employment rates have been reported as 56% for ages 20–29; 60% for ages 30-39; 42% for ages 50–59; and 28% for ages 60–64 (Kampfe et al. 2008: 339). These rates may be associated with

historical and legal definitions of retirement age and stereotypes of age that assume inaccurately, older people's desire to discontinue work or inability to work as they age (Kampfe et al. 2008). The study, however, clearly shows that the fundamental impediment with regard to employability prospect is "age," not a disability. Although I did not study disabled older workers per se, some older workers voiced concerns about job prospects and finding work in old age while alluding to discrimination and stereotypes about age and the older worker as an impediment to employability. Examining how older disabled workers and employers who hire them construct age offers an area for future research.

In other examples, Parkinson's (2002) study of 1,500 people over the age of 50 suggests that "after about [age] 45, the company does not continue to recognize one's contribution, and further advancement is denied if one is not already at the VP level" (p. 17 cited in Novak 2012). In a survey conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)—Staying Ahead of the Curve,³¹ two-thirds (67 percent) of the 1,500 U.S. workers surveyed between ages 45–74, reported that they have personally experienced or witnessed age discrimination at work. Nine percent claimed they were passed over for a promotion, 6 percent claimed they have been laid off, and 15 percent of those surveyed were not hired because of their age, denied access to training, or being passed up for a raise (AARP RoperASW, 2002). RoperASW (2002) also reported that among the 1,500 U.S. older workers surveyed by AARP, 60 percent viewed age as a liability in the workplace and six in ten (62 percent) believed that their job experience was valued much less than it could be by employers. In my research, I found that although old is perceived negatively in work as a hindrance at times, with the changing work structure, the opposite construction of age

³¹ Staying Ahead of the Curve is based on a national survey conducted for AARP in May and June 2002 by RoperASW. Interviews were conducted with 2,518 workers ages 45 to 74.

exists. Employers view older workers in positive terms as assets as they turn to them for labor supply.

Research continues to demonstrate that age stereotypes (i.e. young and old) shape perceptions and beliefs about older workers, and aging experiences in work—positively and negatively (Hassell and Perrewé 1993; Rupp et al. 2006; Shultz and Adams 2007; Sicker 2002; Kampfe et al. 2008; Fealy et al. 2012; Hedge et al. 2006; Kertzer and Laslett 1995). For instance, in Hassell and Perrewé's (1995) study, data were collected from 179 employees within three organizations—a medium-sized newspaper company, an electrical cooperative (utility), and a governmental state agency (p. 459)—, in relation to beliefs about older workers (i.e. age, education, interaction with older employees, managerial status and gender). The scholars found that “older” supervisors reported more negative beliefs about “older” workers than “younger” supervisors reported (Hassell and Perrewé 1995:466). Interestingly, their study indicates that some supervisors were “old” themselves but psychologically self-deny membership in that category (i.e. as an older worker), to separate themselves from the “older” employee identity. They perceived themselves to be contributing and valued members of the organization. This finding is important because it shows that age is constructed negatively (both socially and psychologically), but in this sense among “older” actors themselves. Hassell and Perrewé (1995) extend previous research on age construction in a number of ways. First, they studied employees from different organizational settings to identify workplace-based beliefs about older workers, including groups of older supervisors. Second, their study includes a large number of female respondents (also males) which provides greater representations and a wider range of informants. Third, the scholars utilized an updated beliefs questionnaire about older workers. While the scholars provide a unique view of age construction (i.e. older supervisors), still missing are the

views from other older employees (i.e. those not in managerial roles or those in regular work roles) and employers. My study seeks to fill this gap.

The Historiography of Retirement and Emergence of Older Worker Identity

The emergence of the social institution of retirement formulated an old age stage in life and older worker identity. Retirement continues to reproduce an “institutional” old age stage, but given the unretirement phenomenon occurring today, the institution of retirement that once strictly enforced old age is changing and less clear. Hence, in this section, I examine the historiography of retirement and what it teaches about old age. Conceptually, the etymology of retirement in America has changed over 365 years (Achenbaum 1994:12). Achenbaum (1994) traced, defined, and recorded it as the act of “withdrawing from a company or from public notice or station,” “the state of being withdrawn,” “private abode; habitation secluded from much of society, or from public life,” “private way of life” (pp. 12-13), a means to withdraw or stop paid work and a time for leisure.³² In my research, individuals experience retirement as an old age force in life that became entrenched in American culture beginning in the early 20th century and emerged as a major social institution in American society.

Before retirement became the major institution it is today, however, society members defined it in personal terms (Achenbaum 1994). Before 1860 in the American Republic, retirement was limited (Achenbaum 1994). Workers’ attitude toward retirement was slowly adopted and even non-existent. A predetermined chronological age did not necessarily signal the end of work. Historically, the average person participated in work until they passed away or became physically incapable (Achenbaum 1994). In most industries and professions, craft and trade groups allowed older adults to work. As Achenbaum (1994) claimed, older adults were

³² Retiracy was the only cognate in use before the American Civil War that presupposed a change in employment status during the course of one’s life. Only a lucky few who amassed wealth could afford to enjoy retiracy in old age (Achenbaum 1994:13).

viewed as “seasoned veterans of productivity” (p. 14).³³ For instance, older farmers remained in activities well into advanced age. This image, however, was for a brief period and the old could not always control their fate.³⁴

By 1907, retirement began to take on new significance and was no longer simply a “matter of individual choice; some other agen[cies] sometimes influenced the decision” (Achenbaum 1994:13). New meanings of working for pay versus “not” working at all emerged and were reflected and sustained by laws and policies at the societal level. These policies restructured meanings of retirement both institutionally and personally. In the United States, this was supported by the passing of Social Security, pension eligibility, special early retirement options, and employer-sponsored insurance (Morgan and Kunkel 2006), requiring individuals to resign. For instance, Congress required naval officers below the rank of vice admiral to resign their commissions at age sixty-two (Achenbaum 1994:16) as well as workers such as civil service employees,³⁵ unlike farmers, military personnel, and the self-employed (Achenbaum 1994:20).

With the rising industrial order, retirement was associated with diminishing the worth of older people grounded by “new conceptions of “senility” (Achenbaum 1994:16).³⁶ However, it had evolved in fundamental ways and seemed more ambiguous today due to the *unretirement* phenomenon. Morgan and Kunkel (2006) state, “many workers do not make a clean break from

³³ There were a few exemptions in which age chronology was applied such as for some in road repairs and paramilitary duty over the age of sixty (Achenbaum 1994).

³⁴ This relates the “superannuation which is the state of being disqualified by years due to debilities usually males over sixty-five. In 1822, at age seventy-nine, a still-active Thomas Jefferson referred to two ancient servants, who [...] have a reasonable claim to repose [...] in the sanctuary of invalids and superannuates” (Achenbaum 1994:15).

³⁵ In 1920, the federal government established a compulsory old age and disability plan for workers (Achenbaum 1994:16) in places like North America. Corporate retirement plans were established.

³⁶ “In search for increased efficiency begotten in modern time by the practical universal worship of the dollar...gray hair has come to be recognized as an unforgivable witness of industrial imbecility, and experience the invariable companion of advancing years, instead of being valued as common sense would require it to be, has become a handicap so great as to make the employment of its possessor, in the performance of tasks and duties for which his life work has fitted him, practically impossible” (Independent Opinions—cited in Achenbaum 1994:16).

employment by moving from full-time jobs one day to no employment the next” (p. 207).

Traditional “retirement” is now a somewhat problematic construct as older adults are unretiring in increasing numbers (BLS 2013 see Chapter 1, also Figure 1). Unretirees may be seen as threatening or dismantling the social institution of retirement because older individuals are rethinking or reimagining what they do in this stage of life. In other words, instead of consuming leisure, older adults are producers of labor power as they unretire. This unique (re)conceptualization of “retirement” behavior may challenge the traditional social construction of old age as older adults find themselves back in work (by choice and out of necessity) at a time culturally designated for traditional retirement. Quinn and Burkhauser (1990) state that “if retirement from the labor force marks the passage into old age, then the old among us has grown considerably younger in recent years” (p. 307) due to unretirement. By this reasoning and understanding about the life course, and against the backdrop of the unretirement phenomenon, social constructions of age and retirement may be contested. There may be some dissonance because individuals are actively choosing not to act the role traditionally assigned to old age—i.e. retire.

Chapter 3 - Case Selection and Methods

To understand how age is constructed in unretirement, I study a cross section of informants from 6 different workplaces in a city in Kansas, interviewing 27 workers who have unretired³⁷ and 6 of their employers/supervisors. I chose Kansas and it is a strategic place to explore age construction in unretirement for a number of reasons. Kansas is one state within the category of highest labor force participation (LFP) among workers 62 years and older in the U.S. The American Community Survey (2006) (ACS) reported eight states—Nebraska, Nevada, Wyoming, South Dakota, Kansas, Iowa, Rhode Island, and Alaska—as having the highest labor participation rates for the retirement-age population compared to other states. These states have experienced LFP rates for the retirement-age population (i.e. 65+) ranging from 17.1 to 20.6 (Holder and Clark 2008; see Kromer and Howard 2013). This is a high LFP rate considering the participation of older workers in other states, and it suggests that older workers are seemingly unretiring more across these states. Most states such as California, Oregon, Utah, Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Texas, and Louisiana, comprised the second highest percentile (13.6 to 17.0 percent). A few other states (Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, West Virginia, Michigan, Arizona, Idaho, and Washington) fall within the lowest range of 10.1 to 13.5 (Holder and Clark 2008).

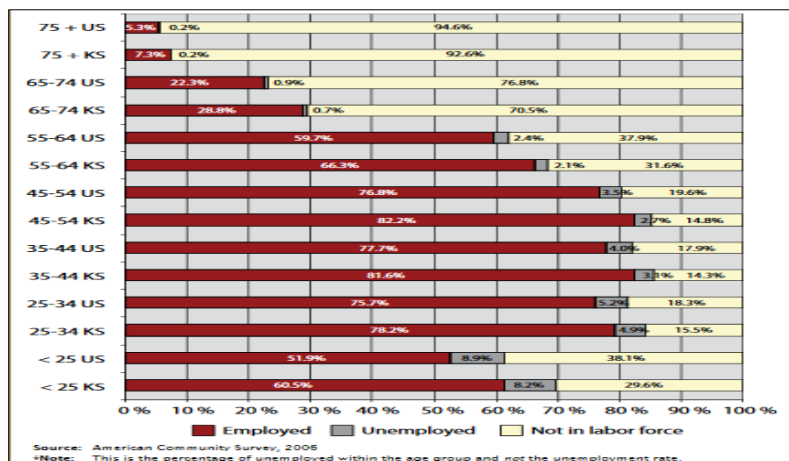
The state of Kansas is also strategic because as of 2006, the ACS reported LFP rate among older adults (55 years +) in Kansas as higher compared to the national level (see Figure 2). From 2001 to 2004, of the one hundred and five counties in Kansas, ninety-nine counties experienced an increase in the percentage of the workforce that was 55 years and older (U.S.

³⁷ Twenty-six informants were fully retired and rejoined the labor force. One informant who worked at the Information Center did not fully retire but took an extended break from work before going back to work at the company.

Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. Census Bureau 2008- see Figure 3). These high rates of older workers in the labor force beyond the retirement age indicate that older individuals in Kansas do not stop working at retirement age but are unretiring which captures the phenomenon of unretirement, and allows me to address how age is constructed in unretirement.

Further, Wong, McNamara, Shulkin, Lettieri, and Careiro (2008) explain that as older Kansans work, they participate in a variety of occupations and sectors³⁸ that are similar to the broader national level. They work in the public sector (i.e. local, state and federal government jobs), the private sector, and some are self-employed work (see Figure 4). Kansas has a balanced selection of sectors that captures older workers at the national level. Thus, Kansas seems a typical case since older workers are unretiring across the country in these sectors and occupation.

Figure 2: Labor Force Participation by Age for Kansas and the National Level (American Community Survey ACS 2006)



³⁸ The American Community Survey (2006) dataset consist of weighted estimates representing 37.2 million people aged 65 and older, of which 5.4 million were workers. ACS (2006) reports that nationally, 23 percent of older workers are self-employed, 63 percent are employed in the private sector, 13 percent in government and 1 percent unpaid family work. Older workers are more likely to be part-time or part-year employees, in sales or management jobs or in single-earner couples. Compared with workers 16 to 64 years old, older workers tend towards less physically-demanding industries and occupations (34.3 percent were employed in management and professional positions, 29.4 percent in sales 17.2 in office Service, 12.1 in production and transportation, 5.4 percent in construction, 0.9 percent in farming, fishing, forestry and 0.6 percent in military jobs or unemployed.

The state of Kansas is also strategic for my study because it operates the Older Kansans Employment Program (OKEP), which has resources (i.e. cases) for researching my question. The organization has been established for over 40 years and received its official designation during the 1970s. OKEP is partially funded by the Older Americans Act through the Kansas Department on Aging and voluntary participant contributions. This is a unique state program offering services in trade areas of Kansas, such as Manhattan, Junction City, Salina, and Emporia. The organization helps older retired or unemployed elders find jobs, often by matching them with employers seeking older workers.³⁹ Since 1982, OKEP successfully assists thousands of job seekers 55 years and older find work in the private and public sectors, in full-time, part-time, seasonal, temporary and permanent work capacities. During 2013 alone, OKEP served 2,591 older individuals and placed 1,360 into full and part-time jobs.

For these reasons mentioned above, the state of Kansas provides me with a strategic opportunity to learn about how age is constructed in unretirement because it emphasizes the patterns of interest to me. I specifically selected an urban city in Kansas to do my study. The city has a total population of about 4,821 individuals 62 years and older (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). The city has a young median resident age well below the state's median age. CNN Money (2007) ranked it one of the top ten places to retire young. Though individuals should retire, this city exhibits patterns of unretirement.⁴⁰ Within this metropolitan city, as of 2015, workers find

³⁹ OKEP offers services that include: job search assistance; job readiness; retention; development and placement assistance; it also advertises the advantages of hiring and retaining older workers to employers; conducts outreach to enhance employer and public awareness; advocates for older job seekers and older workers; solicits job listings from employers; helps older job seekers identify and market their skills to potential employers; provides job seekers with assistance with resumes and completion of applications; and refers qualified workers to potential employers in a wide range of occupations.

⁴⁰ Merton (1987) explains "Strategic Research Material" (SMR) that exhibits the phenomena and which allows for "fruitful investigation" (p. 10-11) to "problems that have long remained intransigent" (p. 11). One such SMR is the strategic research site (SRS). For example, Merton (1987) explains that examining frog lungs microscopically due to their "simplicity and transparency" made studying blood circulation much easier because the lung tissue is transparent. Thus, studying frog lungs with the microscope became a strategic research material for understanding

occupations commonly in industries such as educational services (23 percent), retail trade (12 percent), food services (10 percent), construction (10 percent), and manufacturing (7 percent) (City-Data.com). This city is a typical case as it represents similar industries and occupations in other cities in Kansas (e.g. Lawrence, Overland Park city, Shawnee city)⁴¹ where older adults work. Other occupations include office and administrative support occupations (6 percent), construction and extraction occupations (6 percent), and repair (6 percent), but these are least common occupations in the city (City-Data.com). These occupations also comprise of part-time and full-time jobs. My decision to focus on these sectors and occupations is supported by research indicating that older adults find employment placement within less physically demanding industries and occupation such as management, sales, and service (Wong et al. 2008; American Community Survey 2006 see Table 4 & 5 Appendix A) than occupations requiring higher skills (Hirsch et al. 2000; Lee et al 2009).

My strategy for this study was to get a “good sample of differences” (Stinchcombe 2005:12) among older workers and employers. Specifically, I sought diversity in “young” old versus “old” old, male and female, wealthy and working class. I also wanted to study a diversity of worksites in the retail, manufacturing, and service industries. Local demographics enabled me to maximize variability among unretirees and employers so that I could learn as much as possible about the social construction of age (Katz 1982:134). This comparative perspective gave me a better sense of what mattered in age construction (Stinchcombe 2005:9, 14; Powell and Hendricks 2009).

blood circulation for the first time. Like Merton (1987), I select this city in Kansas as my proverbial “frog lung” (i.e. SMR) because it exemplifies the unretirement phenomenon clearly and “transparently.” It strategic for my study because of the unretirement phenomenon occurring at this time and place, which will help me understand how age is constructed.

⁴¹ Lawrence city in 2015 most common industries are in educational services (17 percent), retail trade (13%), food services (11 percent), construction (9 percent), and manufacturing (8 percent). Overland Park city professional, scientific and technical services are most common industry (17 percent) then retail trade (10 percent). In Shawnee city manufacturing is most common (11 percent) followed by retail trade (10 percent) (City-Data.com)

Regarding access, OKEP provided me with resources in relation to the types of employers, worksites, and job types that were available in the area that potential older workers sought after. In other words, the organization was accessible and a gatekeeper to respondents. It gave me direct access to employers who are seeking older workers or particular types of older workers, older workers who are looking for prospective employers or particular types of employers, the types of jobs employers are offering and what retirees are pursuing or accepting in later life. Thus, like this urban city, which has institutional support for older workers, and unretirees across a variety of industries and occupations, other cities with similar industries, institutional support for older workers, work structure, and occupations with older employees, may also be ideal sites to study how age is constructed in unretirement from the perspectives of older workers and employers unlike places where these are less evident.

Worksite Profiles

The worksites in my study have workforces ranging from about 50 to 500 workers. I selected 6 sites altogether. Three sites offered jobs at the state and federal government levels—the Transportation Company, Information Center, and Senior Service, Center. The remaining three locations—the Retail Store, Manufacturing Company, and Local Shopping Center provided private sector jobs.⁴² I selected these worksites because they represent variations in the unretirement phenomenon as older workers unretire in different occupations and industries. For these worksites, I use pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Worksite 1 the *Transportation Company*, is a department of the school district established since the early 1980s. This worksite

⁴² The American Community Survey (ACS) (2006) dataset consists of weighted estimates representing 37.2 million people aged 65 and older, of which 5.4 million were older workers. ACS (2006) reports that nationally, 23 percent of older workers are self-employed, 63 percent are employed in the private sector, 13 percent in government and 1 percent unpaid family work. Older workers are more likely to be part-time or part-year employees, in sales or management jobs or in single-earner couples. Compared with workers 16 to 64 years old, older workers tend towards less physically-demanding industries and occupations (34.3 percent were employed in management and professional positions, 29.4 percent in sales 17.2 in office Service, 12.1 in production and transportation, 5.4 percent in construction, 0.9 percent in farming, fishing, forestry and 0.6 percent in military jobs or unemployed).

provides services typically by hiring older unretired workers to transport younger patrons. The worksite provides predominantly part-time jobs with the exception of a few full-time managerial positions. At the time of my research, part-time jobs were sometimes filled by college-age job seekers who were usually from the education department at one of the local university in the area. However, older workers (male and female) primarily comprised the organization's core workforce usually in part-time positions, and most had retired from first careers before working at the company. The company's director and supervisors at the time explained that this pattern of unretirement was related to older workers need for work in retirement years (i.e. for flexible work schedules, convenient work, and need to earn supplemental income for daily living and health care), and also employers' need to supplement labor demand. At the time of my research, the company was experiencing an upsurge in the number of retired older adults seeking work in their post-retirement years. It was one of the worksites where I observed older workers at work. These factors made the organization an ideal case to study age construction in unretirement. Across all worksites in my study, the Transportation Company yielded the largest pool of informants (sixteen informants—thirteen older employees and three employers/supervisors).

Worksite 2 was an *Information Center*. It is located in the downtown area of the city and provides services to any resident in the area. The center was established in the early 1900s. Work within the organization includes professional, clerical, part-time, and full-time positions. Older workers represented both full-time and part-time positions. Although I was not provided information on the proportions of these positions, the assistant director informed me that the majority of positions sought and offered were part-time. However, three older informants worked in a full-time capacity and one as part-time but all four worked in professional roles. At the site, employees differed across age cohorts, ranging from ages twenty to about age seventy-five. The

organization represented the second largest pool of research informants (five informants—four female employees and one male employer).

Worksite 3 was the *Local Shopping Center*. This business was established in the late 1980s and located in the downtown area. It offers service-oriented jobs such as customer service positions, store clerks, and managers across a variety of retail stores. I interviewed 6 informants (all female employees). I interviewed 5 informants in their workplaces (stores) and one elsewhere (at a local coffee shop) because she felt more comfortable and relaxed to speak freely at the shop instead of her workplace.

Worksite 4 was a large *Manufacturing Company*, which started in the late 1980s. From the late 1980s to 2012, the company has grown exponentially from two full-time employees to four hundred operating in over twenty-eight states in the United States, including Montana, Oklahoma, Texas, Nevada Wisconsin, Michigan, and Kentucky (remarks from the company's manager). This site yielded only two informants (one older male worker and one manager/employer). Given that the company is a main employer in the city, I selected it to recruit informants on the notion that older people were employed there. Although this is a major employing company is a major in the city, the manager informed me that not many older workers are employed at the company because not many of them apply for manufacturing jobs anymore. The data collected may not be generalizable to all older workers and managers due to the small number of informants. However, my study is not about generalizability and the data help answers my research question.

A *Senior Service Center* presented the fifth site. It serves as the central location for senior-related activities and programs for the city. The Center was built in the 1980s. I conducted

three interviews (two older female informants and one older man) at the center and some hours of observation.

At the sixth site, *The Retail Store*, a large for-profit company, I conducted only one interview with a female manager. Although the company hires older workers, I was unable to interview employees at the company. I visited the worksite over the course of several months trying to recruit older worker informants (sometimes for one and a half to two hours daily). Although I contacted a few older workers at the company, they were all unwilling to participate in an interview. Some were concerned about their work such that they felt the interview would take up too much time and they will miss work (evidently lose money). I informed them that I am available any time that is convenient to them outside of work hours and that I will work around their schedules. Nevertheless, they declined to participate. Other older workers at the company that I approached openly stated that they were “not interested in being interviewed” because they do not like participating in research. Since I successfully interviewed the supervisor, I decided to seek her help to recruit older workers at her company. She mentioned only one older woman she thought may be willing to speak with me. After given the name of the older employee, I made several visits to the company to meet the informant. I was unsuccessful and it became apparent to me she may no longer work at the company. In the limitations section, I explain implications of selecting and using the data collected from the supervisor (see below).

Data Collection Process

Since I want to understand *how* both unretirees and the employers who hire them socially construct age, I chose qualitative methods. As Gubrium and Holstein (2005) argue, the “qualitative approach is better at portraying a world of social processes and emergent meanings” than “a quantitative approach,” which “is more suitable when the subject matter is fixed in

meaning and straightforward in variation” (p. 9). However, this does not necessarily mean that by choosing to apply a qualitative approach, other research options cannot be used (Stiles 1993). Qualitative interviewing is a relevant and appropriate method of inquiry for my study given the questions I am trying to answer. In particular, “qualitative research [on] the experiences of aging and old age from the perspective of the older persons themselves are uniquely important because they question many generalizations, prejudices, stereotypes, and taboos related to older persons, aging and old age” (Zeman and Zeman 2015:74). Zeman and Zeman (2015) further explained it “enable the voices of older persons to tell and present personal, individual experiences of old age and aging, that can certainly contribute to changing of public perception of old age, and its de-tabooing” (p. 74). It allows me to see how age is constructed (i.e. their perceptions, experiences, beliefs, and processes) within these work contexts, and find unexpected age occurrences or see what is mainly going on (Stinchcombe 2005:13-14). According to Schwalbe (1985), this method allows me to capture the emotions, meanings, and feelings of respondents with regard to age status that is not easily addressed or visible with survey data. I rely on in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample.⁴³ I also conducted on-site observation. Utilizing these processes, (i.e. data from interviews and observations/field notes) strengthen my analysis (Esterberg 2002). These data helped me establish the credibility of my study because I present different perspectives rather than relying on a single theory (Esterberg 2002).

In-depth Interviews

For this study, I used different data collection strategies. I combined in-depth interviews with observation. From September 2014 to August 2015, I conducted face-to face interviews

⁴³Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton 2002). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, Hoagwood 2015:534).

with a variety of informants (i.e. employees and employers) selected from the following worksites in an urban city in Kansas: the Transportation Company, Retail Store, Local Shopping Center, Information Center, Senior Service Center, and Manufacturing Company. I sort variations in these sites to achieve a broader understanding of age construction as I compare how social actors (employers and workers) across these sites construct age. I selected semi-structured in-depth interviews because informants' stories facilitate rich descriptions in discussing age in the social phenomena of unretirement as these informants present different versions of age reality in work. According to Seidman (1998), the purpose of interviews is to allow the researcher to "truly understand the interviewee's experience" (p. 3). Interviews enable me to "access different levels of information about people's motivation, beliefs, meanings, feelings and practices [in] other words, the culture they use," and to "go beyond what people say to how they say it" (Pugh 2013:50, 54). In my study, I apply pseudonyms for all informants, worksites, and locations.

Why Ethnography

My in-depth interviews with older unretirees and employers across a variety of workplaces in Kansas provide me with details about aging in a general sense, but also their personal understandings of age. I selected unretirees and employers because both participate in unretirement in the same work context, but each takes on a different role. To learn more about how age is constructed, I wanted to go on the inside and observe these actors in unretirement itself as they engage and interact in work—I wanted to be part of informants' work sphere, the epicenter for unretirement reality. In other words, ethnography offered me an intimate opportunity to "enter the culturally specific world of subjects" (Katz 1997:404) of older workers and employers to observe how they construct age. My observation provided additional data to

confirm with or check against data I collected from my interviews that revealed how my informants experienced and perceived age in these post-industrial workplaces. It increases the validity of my study and allowed me to gather further insights about age construction not only by what informants say in interviews but also by observing their behavior and interactions.

I chose ethnography because through my observations, I was exposed to what was happening in these settings or how older workers and employers interacted with each other, with co-workers, and clients, which matters because it allowed me to observe and listen to their discussion with others in the workplace whenever possible. For instance, I got to see firsthand instances of how older and younger workers interacted in the natural work setting. This allowed me to observe what informants were doing in work and compare or verify this in relation to what they said in the interviews. This also enabled me to study how/whether interactions between older workers and their employers, as well as other workers and customers or clients affected how age was constructed across the different settings. This approach will help me distinguish “between matters of relevance and irrelevance,” (Katz 1997:399) in the construction of age in un-retirement. As Katz (1997) states “ethnographic methods, by looking beyond [everyday realities], will reveal and can correct errors” (p. 397).

I conducted site observation in a few workplaces and for a limited period. This was partly because of the nature of the jobs themselves, type of workplace, and the fact that my observation was during the height of productive work hours (I was not an employee). Particularly, in worksite 1 (the Transportation Company), I was allowed to “hang out” at the main office and observe, but I was unable to go on ride-a-longs with informants because I was not certified or trained. For the Information Center, I became a patron so I could participate in interaction with workers themselves while I observed how they interacted with other workers (and the public)

when possible. In all worksites, I made myself visible to informants. My presence became somewhat “habituated” (Esterberg 2002:71) such that some informants thought I was waiting to conduct an interview or applying for a job. However, it did not appear that my presence at these sites inhibited conversations and interactions of individuals. For the most part, I usually sat in the break rooms and in public waiting areas at these sites such as the Information Center, Senior Service, Center, and Local Shopping Center. In what follows, I describe participants in my study and how I was able to reach and gain rapport with them.

Research Informants

My recruitment process first started with me contacting the OKEP organization local chapter. In general, older adults are considered a vulnerable population to access in doing research and I anticipated this as a potential problem in recruiting. However, given approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I felt assured I would recruit successfully. I also needed older participants based on specific criteria. To be included in my study, participants had to be fully retired and unretiring, at least age 62, and working for pay. Although some of these criteria may be more discernable such as noticing unretirement trends, others were not—such as whether or not older workers were fully retired. I, however, felt confident because of my interaction with the OKEP’s contact personnel—the agency’s local program supervisor. She was the gatekeeper to unretirees and employers in the area. She agreed to assist me but also willing to participate in an interview, which would have been extremely helpful and useful to my study. However, due to work commitments, the official withdrew from both assisting and participating in the study. She provided me contact for an alternative agent. This was also a less than viable option to assist with initial recruitment. I did not anticipate this hurdle in my research given the assurances in my preliminary steps of the research process. My recruitment process was delayed

and somewhat daunting given the unavailability of the agency's support. However, I attempted independent recruitment. After several attempts on my own with a low success rate, I solicited the help of the Director at a well-known Center on Aging (COA) in the city. With her assistance, I was provided contact information of a major worksite—the Transportation Company. I then recruited informants at the company independently (first, the employer then older workers).

At the end of the data collection period, my sample consisted of 36 informants whom I met during the year across six worksites. I dropped three older informants from my sample for various reasons. One participant (affiliated with the Transportation Company) provided an incomplete interview. During the interview process, he perceived his responses were “inadequate” and opted to end the session stating, “I don’t think I’m giving you what you want here.” Since participation in my research was voluntary and informants can stop the research procedure or withdraw at any time, I honored his request and ended the interview. Another informant who worked with the Information Center rescheduled his interview twice. After meeting with him, he informed me that he was no longer interested in participating. The last individual was mainly a resource informant. He did not fit the criteria of my research because he worked in a volunteering capacity. I ultimately end up with a final sample of thirty-three informants (27 older unretired workers and 6 employers/supervisors). To reiterate, each informant and worksite are assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity.

The majority of unretirees in my study were women (about 66 percent). Men accounted for the other 33 percent. One eligibility factor was age chronology, with an age of 62 or older.⁴⁴ At the time I collected the data, unretired participants ranged in age from 63 to 83. All of my informants were non-contractual workers. Approximately 81 percent of older workers were

⁴⁴ This is the earliest age an individual can retire and receive nationalized age-based assistances such as Social Security. Age 62 culturally marks the transitioning and institutionalized age constituting “old age” and retirement in most Western states such as the U.S.

employed in a non-regular work capacity (i.e. not full-time but part-time doing so for less than 35 hours per week—the United States Department of Labor). About 18 percent of retirees were “full-time unretirees” and worked at the companies before retiring. All full-time older workers held managerial positions while the majority of workers were classified as “semi-skilled” and “low skilled.” In relation to race, 88 percent of informants were white. Education ranged from elementary level to graduate level (22 percent with bachelor’s degrees, about 29 percent with high school level, 14 percent with masters degrees and 33 percent with other—technical college, some college, and elementary). Over half of my informants were married (55 percent), about 18 percent never married, 11 percent were divorced, and 14 percent were widowed. A full report of demographic information on unretirees is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 Brief Demographics of Sample Older Unretirees

		Number of Total Unretirees	Percent of Total Unretirees
Gender			
	Men	9	33.33%
	Women	18	66.66%
	TOTAL	27	100%
Age			
	Young old (62-74)	23	85.18%
	‘Old’ old (75+)	4	14.81%
	TOTAL	27	100%
Marital Status			
	Married	15	55.55%
	Never Married	5	18.51%
	Divorced	3	11.11%
	Widowed	4	14.81%
	TOTAL	27	100%
Race			
	White	24	88.88%
	African American	3	11.11%
	TOTAL	27	100%
Work Position			
	Part-Time	22	81.48%
	Full-Time	5	18.51%
	TOTAL	27	100%

Table 2 Extended Demographics of Sample Older Unretirees

Interview Informant**	Age	Worksite	Work Position	Gender	Race	Human Capital
Victor	66	Transportation Company	PT	Male	White	Tech. Col*
Daisy	72	Senior Service Center	PT	Female	AA	BA
Henry	75	Transportation Company	PT	Male	AA	HS
Don	63	Senior Service Center	PT	Male	White	MA
Sylvia	71	Local Shopping Center	PT	Female	AA	HS
Ned	74	Manufacturing Company	FT	Male	White	BA
Jenny	64	Information Center	FT	Female	White	BA
Denice	68	Local Shopping Center	PT	Female	White	BA
Charmayne	67	Local Shopping Center	PT	Female	White	Beauty school
Gretta	83	Local Shopping Center	PT	Female	White	HS
Reba	63	Information Center	FT	Female	White	Some college
Amber	68	Transportation Company	PT	Female	White	HS
Nancy	74	Local Shopping Center	PT	Female	White	Some college
Ingrid	63	Local Shopping Center	FT	Female	White	Some college
Adeline	73	Information Center	PT	Female	White	MA
Sonia	68	Information Center	FT	Female	White	MA
Lola	63	Transportation Company	PT	Female	White	HS
Jeff	67	Transportation Company	PT	Male	White	
Vin	73	Transportation Company	PT	Male	White	BA
Elvin	81	Transportation Company	PT	Male	White	
Hatti	71	Transportation Company	PT	Female	White	Elementary
Robert	70	Transportation Company	PT	Male	White	HS
Nelly	75	Senior Service center	PT	Female	White	MA
Sherry	73	Transportation Company	PT	Female	White	HS
Nati	70	Transportation Company	PT	Female	White	Tech. Col*
Hank	64	Transportation Company	PT	Male	White	HS
Tory	73	Transportation Company	PT	Female	White	HS
** Pseudonyms are used for each informant and worksite			*Technical College		Transportation Company	
Information Center		Local Shopping Center	Manufacturing Company		Senior Service Center	

Six employers/bosses participated in the study (four men and two women). Of the six informants, one was a director and another was an assistant director (all men). The remaining three were supervisors (one male and two female). Employers/bosses who hired older workers were chronologically younger (age range is 35-55 years) than unretirees. They represented companies in the service, retail, and manufacturing industries (not-for profit and for-profit companies).

Limitations of Study

I specifically aimed to speak with older workers and employers to learn more about how age is constructed by social actors engaged in unretirement. Speaking with them provides

different perspectives on age construction. Across most worksites, I was often able to speak with both older workers and employers at the same company, which was ideal to understand the dynamics between workers and employers as they construct age. At one worksite—the Retail Store—, though I was unable to speak with both older workers and employer, I collected data from one supervisor at the company. Interviewing this informant provided me with valid data since the informant presented a perspective on how age is constructed. The data I obtained from the supervisor also presented information about older workers (and others) at the company. However, since I was unable to interview older workers at the same company, I cannot generalize the opinions of the supervisor as those of older workers. Including older workers at this site could offer a contrast to the supervisor. However, data collected from older workers at other worksites sufficiently answered my question and used as supporting/disputing evidence.

Given my research focus, I excluded older adults who worked in an unpaid capacity such as volunteering. Including unpaid workers may add another layer or perspective to how age is constructed in a different context of work and by workers who presumably are not in a desperate need for work and money, compared to those in paid work (e.g. several of my informants). However, given the focus of my research question, excluding unpaid workers may not significantly affect my findings. I was able to study a variety of informants in paid work (i.e. those who worked for financial and non-financial reasons, which offers a nuanced understanding of how age is constructed).

I excluded younger workers from my study as my focus was on older workers and employers. Given that informants often referenced interactions with younger workers and illustrated how younger workers perceived older workers (mostly unfavorable or in stereotypical ways), expanding the frame of my study focus to include the views of younger workers may

provide a more in-depth understanding on how they are constructing age compared to older workers and employers. However, given the variety of older workers and employers across different worksites and the general focus of my research, my findings remain valid without studying younger workers.

Though social class standing may affect how individuals unretire or the conditions under which they do, in my study, though I selected informants from different social class I neglected to ask informants about socioeconomic status (SES) directly. However, as my informants provided stories about their work histories, education, and the determinants for unretiring, they provided some idea of their class standing. Class standing may presumably influence individuals' experiences and meanings of age and retirement, which may influence how they construct age.

Given these limitations of my study, future studies should include these areas to tease out differences in age construction in unretirement and beyond (see chapter 7 for strengths of study and suggestions for future research).

Gaining Rapport, Conducting Interviews and Observation

At these worksites, my interview respondents (especially the older workers) were generally friendly, and easy to talk with. Some were even eager to talk with me. However, we were unfamiliar with each other. I always provided details about my research agenda and myself to each person. I presented myself as a doctoral student in sociology studying aging and presented several forms of identification, business cards, and online contact links for verification. I was also aware that my informants perceived me as an international scholar given my non-American accent and would be curious to learn about me. My “exotic” accent seemed to captivate the interest of my informants and became useful in developing a rapport with them.

Some would ask me where I was from and why I am in Kansas even before I introduced myself to them. I always willingly replied and shared a personal story about my birth country, Grenada. The story I shared was about the United States-led invasion, “Operation Urgent Fury,” in 1983. Some of the older informants especially in the Transportation Company heard about my country because of this event. In fact, one older male informant who worked at the company spoke of a friend who fought in the invasion as he excitedly claimed, “Yes, I had a friend that fought there. It was the liberation war. You probably weren’t born yet!” Another informant excitedly claimed, “I went there when I took a Caribbean cruise after I retired!” I believed this shared frame of reference (knowledge of my country and some personal details) provided rapport and trust between my informants and myself and an ease especially for those who may have been nervous about being tape-recorded or my note-taking. I felt it was this “getting to know me” (the researcher) and my openness to share personal information that brought us closer, and made my informants more relaxed and willing to share their stories with me. As we continued to talk, my respondents became more open with me. As Esterberg (2002) states, “if the person you are interviewing doesn’t trust you or feel comfortable in your presence, then the interview is unlikely to go well” (p. 91).

I also shared with informants my passion for gerontology and that I teach courses on aging at the University. This intrigued my informants given their age. They were impressed that someone as “young” as I am (I did not disclose my age but they perceived me as being young) was interested in studying aging and learning more about them, listening to their life stories and oral histories. This appeared to provide a sort of commonality of interest that aided in “getting in” and developing closeness and showing them that I have their “best interest in mind” (Esterberg 2001:92). As Esterberg (2001) states, “in the traditional view of interviewing,

researchers define the boundaries of the relationship; thus, they do not necessarily keep interviewees' best interest in mind" (Esterberg 2002:92). Following Esterberg (2002), I was "willing to risk disclosing personal information and developing real relationships" (p. 91) with my informants. Nevertheless, I became conscious of how informants viewed and interacted with me being a non-American scholar, and how their view of me might influence what they shared with me. I took notes on my socialization process and informants' reactions to my research. My frequent visits in the field over the year evidently seemed to aid in developing a rapport with informants.

After gaining entrée to my first worksite (the Transportation Company), I contacted the employer/director at the time via telephone. He confirmed participation in my research and invited me to the worksite the following day. At the site, I formally introduced my research goals and myself. The director introduced me to one unretired worker who voiced interest in an interview and at the time was doing administrative work at the company as he recovered from a hand surgery, which prevented him from his regular job at the company. Since I went prepared to start interviewing, and the respondent was available to be interviewed, I conducted my first one with him right then and there, in the break room area, which was not occupied at that time. I recruited other informants at this worksite during my daily visits. For all other worksites in my study, I used the same strategy of site visits, telephone, and/ or email to contact informants and schedule interviews. However, in the Information Center worksite, I contacted the assistant director after a referral by an informant (supervisor) who became very close to me. I then independently contacted the assistant director. On my first encounter with him at the company, I introduced myself and informed him of my research agenda. I sent a follow-up email as he requested after leaving. He circulated my correspondence and contact information to all

employees in the workplace over the age of 62. The assistant director, however, did not directly introduce me to any employees. Subsequently, I received several emails from older workers (and him) who were interested in participating in my study. I visited with them on-site to introduce myself and to schedule formal interviews in person.

In the cases of older workers, I conducted most interviews on-site⁴⁵ as they requested. Although most interviews occurred on-site, I conducted them in a private room such as an office or conference room to maintain privacy. This allowed informants' narratives to unfold freely and for them to be more forthcoming without constraints by others listening in on the conversation. I audio recorded the interviews and made informants aware that the information would be stored on a secure computer, which only I have access. I later transcribed verbatim the information and deleted all recordings. To reiterate, I assigned pseudonyms in reporting and writing to protect the rights and identities of my informants and worksites.

For several weeks, I interviewed older workers in the Information Center. This was done in a conference room space at the company. In the Transportation Company, I interviewed older workers in an empty supervisor's office and the training room at the site. I also conducted an interview with one older worker in his personal office at his workplace—the Manufacturing Company. Some participants requested that I interview them outside their workplaces. This occurred sometimes on a bench, in an open area, but no one else was in sight. In one case, I interviewed the older informant in the local mall, food court area. I interviewed informants from the Local Shopping Center at their workplaces. However, one worker at the center requested I conduct the interview at a local coffee shop. I interviewed all informants at the Senior Service Center on-site. For all employers/supervisors, I interviewed them in their offices at work, with

⁴⁵ Conducting on-site interviews was strategic and important because it gave me an opportunity to observe workplace dynamics such as interaction processes between workers and between employers and workers. These sites provided me an organic setting for observation and studying age especially among those unretiring.

the exception of the supervisor from the Retail Store. I interviewed her at university's student union.

I scheduled interview sessions to last from 45 minutes to 2 hours. This schedule provided ample time and opportunity for respondents to elaborate on questions asked. Most interviews lasted from one to two plus hours. However, one employer (the Manufacturing Company) lasted approximately 35 minutes. The employer seemed tentative to respond to questions. He provided short abrupt responses to my questions asked, and refused to elaborate even when I probed. For three other informants, I scheduled subsequent interviews because they exceeded the two-hour time limit. These informants wanted to continue with the interviews, but I stopped it and informed them why I did so—adhering to the timeline stipulated in my IRB approval form.

At times, I conducted interviews weekly but I also experienced lull periods during the process because of unavailable respondents. This situation presented a challenge for me in terms of completing my data collection in a timely fashion. It extended my research well beyond the allotted timeline. However, to maximize my chances of reaching my targeted number of informants, I strategically visited other worksites and did so at different times during the day because of workers' schedules. This ranged from early morning visits (usually 8 a.m.) or late afternoon periods. Employers and other workers informed me that morning visits were the best times. Older workers were usually present between these times based on their part-time work schedules. In addition, because of their flexible work schedules (given the nature of their jobs), my informants had ample time to complete interviews without feeling rushed. This allowed them to provide detailed responses, which they may miss if time is limited. I chose to jot down short notes as I asked questions because it was not practical to take extensive notes and conduct a

proper interview. I also recorded in my notes my interviewees' behavior such as smiles, interjections, and other emotions (laughter, frustrations).

I presented each informant with consent forms on the day of the interviews stating their willingness to participate in the study and freedom to withdraw participation at any time. I explained to them why I was conducting my research and the importance of their contributions to it. In a few cases, informants felt that they did not have much to tell me but ended up offering great data. Others had pertinent questions related to why am I interested in interviewing them. I explained to them the importance of their participation since they were the experts and I wanted to learn more from them.

I interviewed my older respondents following questions stated in the interview schedule. I developed my questions for my study from my general observation of older workers as I did my weekly shopping. These observations triggered my curiosity to learn more about what I was seeing and about how age is constructed in a post-industrial context by older workers and employers. The interviews allowed me to learn more about how they construct age in unretirement and in the larger society as I asked questions aimed at informants' perceptions of age and old age in the current unretirement spaces. I asked questions in the beginning of the interview process that provided demographic information about informants. I then followed with a question that asked for information about their working lives both past and present, and their experiences of aging. Other questions aimed at capturing their life course related to childhood and what it was like growing up, particularly their chances for education and steps taken after graduation. I asked my respondents to describe the different types of responsibilities or roles they perform within their jobs since being hired in post-retirement years, how often these tasks changed, and the roles they observed of other workers. I also asked them to describe how they

interacted with others such as co-workers, supervisors, and those they serve (clients), and how others interacted with them—i.e. to give me examples of specific interactions. Other questions included: what are their thoughts about working in later life; the kinds of work they should be doing or should “not” be doing; how much work older workers should do; the demands of their jobs; how they feel about their jobs; general feelings about their age as they work; decisions to go back to work and what was it like; what their thoughts of aging were before and are now; reasons to leave work and barriers and opportunities encountered in their specific jobs; and to compare their work lives as young adults with their work lives today or how it is similar or different.

The interview schedule was comprised of semi-structured and open-ended questions (probing questions when necessary to obtain deeper answers from informants). This also allowed each participant to provide subjective interpretations to questions relating their experiences and meanings of age in their own way. In some cases, informants offered up information that was not requested but I allowed them to talk without interjection because ultimately, the information was relevant to my central question. In terms of employers, I asked questions related to why fully retired older individuals seek employment at their organization and what types of jobs they advertise for potential employees. I also asked employers about the job description for jobs offered to older workers as well as other workers, what needs they have in terms of employees or employing older workers, how older and younger workers get along, their star employees, and the work structure. For all informants, the structure of these questions was important because it enabled me to identify what is most important to participants, rather than me assuming or imposing my own ideas that may be irrelevant or distracting. In other words, these questions

avoided swaying informants' responses about age construction and for me to maintain a "value-neutral position" (Berg and Lune 2009:200).

After interviewing informants, I usually "hung out" in the workplaces observing whenever possible. For instance, I observed unretirees as they interacted with other work colleagues, customers, and patrons—i.e. I observed what they were doing and saying. I sometimes engaged in informal conversations with them. As I observed them, I made brief notes using my small notepad (on rare occasions I made brief notes on my "note" application on my telephone) to remind me about what I was seeing and hearing (i.e. inscribe social discourse or "write it down" (Geertz 1973). I also took mental notes on what was happening particularly on workplace interaction. I recorded full write-up of field notes immediately after leaving the field (usually while in my car in the parking lot of these workplaces).

Analytic Process and Thematic Coding Procedure

I transcribed all 33 interviews verbatim as data for my analysis. There is no consensus on analyzing qualitative data but there are some commonly used features. According to Puge (2013), the "analytic process involves several steps, in which the researcher turns to the informants' words, again and again, coding them for persistent ideas, gleaning relevant themes from these data, repeatedly returning to the texts to check and recheck themes, and linking codes and themes into analytic memos" (p. 56). Although I did not code my data into "analytic memos" as Puge (2013) mentions, I followed some of the processes for analysis such as turning to my "informants' words, again and again" to obtain relevant themes (I explain below).

I began by managing my data, labeling each interview transcription using the initials of my informants' real names, the interview date, and the worksites' names (I later used pseudonyms). I developed the same data management technique for my field notes. After

managing my data, I then immersed myself in it through the process of reading transcripts and field notes to find themes individuals use in everyday experiences and the language they use to present themselves and create narratives about their lives (Pugh 2013). As I analyzed the data, I then followed closely the work of Jack Katz (1982). I employed his method of “analytic induction” to search for “data that differ” from what is “previously recorded” by other scholars (Katz 1982:137) about the social construction of age. In other words, I looked for recurring themes but also seek variations and negative cases, which are important for refining my analysis and improving accuracy. This approach allows the empirical data to tell me what the meaningful categories are in relation to my central question. I used an open coding system⁴⁶ from the interview text and then field notes to create concepts and categories until no new insights emerged. Using open coding prevented me from missing the range of themes in the data (Esterberg 2002). As Esterberg (2002) claims, “you don’t want to limit potential insights by rigidly applying preestablished codes to your data. Instead, you want to use the process of coding to begin to reveal potential meanings” (p. 158), especially in the initial coding process.

Given the volume of compiled transcripts (close to 300 pages), it took me several reads and rereads of the data (i.e. word for word and line-by-line) to familiarize myself with what was going on as a whole, before I could figure out how to decipher what was important and relevant to answering my central question. This was done to figure out themes and interpret what cultural meanings can be abstracted about age, aging, and old age from the data; how these meanings are supported through the references/narratives expressed by informants from their stories and their behaviors observed in the field. Therefore, I examined how my informants talked about or know age in their experiences in the context of work (i.e. unretirement).

⁴⁶ Data from interviews were marked or labeled and the codes were based exclusively on meanings that result from empirical material, and not on some already existing theory or typology (Zeman and Zeman 2015:76-77).

During the initial analysis phase, I coded the data writing side notes on each transcript as I went along if I noticed themes about age construction in unretirement. I then continued sorting the data manually by mapping out repeated patterns that related to my central question across transcripts by unretirees and employers. For unretirees, I mapped the data after careful readings of the transcripts and field notes that were common in meanings as well as those that varied but answered my question. After completing the initial coding (using a color-coded system to mark narratives that were similar or repeatedly mentioned by informants), I clustered all similar narratives (or same color-coded narratives) to create core themes that captured age construction. I then assigned each core theme the same color marker representing sub-themes/narratives. I repeated the same process for narratives from employers and supervisors to capture their views about how age is being socially constructed.

After the coding of all data, I organized the data and realized that age is constructed as three major sets of themes: (1) age is a construct to impose and resist work. This theme illustrates a tension in age construction whereby age (i.e. old age) is constructed as an asset for employers to impose work and for older workers to resist work. This theme also captures age in negative terms as a liability in work. In part, these constructions of age coincide with the depreciation and conservative model I discussed in chapter two, but there is a tilt more towards a positive construction of old age; (2) age is constructed a stage of “insecurity” (i.e. social and financial) which voluntarily and involuntarily forces older adults back to work towards security. It illustrates a disruption in old age and retirement meanings and norms; (3) this theme illustrates a construction towards agelessness and age neutrality and tensions to achieve these constructions of age, especially for older women. Collectively, these themes should make a solid contribution to the field as they explore age in unretirement in a post-industrial context. In what follows I

present my analysis of the data that addresses my central question from the perspective of unretirees and employers in Kansas.

Chapter 4 - Constructing Age to Impose and Resist Work

In this chapter, I analyze how employers and older workers construct age across a variety of worksites in an urban city in post-industrial Kansas. Two opposing kinds of employer narratives exist. On one hand, managers construct old age as an asset for hireability due to work conditions and employers' needs. Most jobs at these companies are part-time, low paid, and usually with little or no benefits. Older workers have access to other sources of income due to their retirement status—i.e. institutional old age. This makes them attractive to employers who need part-time workers for the low paid positions offered at their companies that career-oriented applicants might eschew. Older workers bring accrued knowledge and skills to jobs for which they are compensated at low rates. Older workers train and mentor less experienced workers, which saves employers money on training and enables all employees to work more productively. By contrast, these same employers regard old age as a liability when they perceive that the skills older workers possess do not fit the tasks they want their employees to perform. Managers may perceive older workers as incapable of adapting to new technologies based on their ideologies of age. Similarly, for jobs that are physically demanding or require that older workers report to younger managers, tensions may arise that are rooted in younger managers' negative conceptions of old age. When managers and employers construct age as a hindrance, employee alienation tends to be most evident.

In employers' and older employees' narratives about age and work, I detect a deeper struggle between employers who attempt to extract unpaid labor from older workers and older workers who seek meaning and enjoyment in the work they do in "unretirement." At times, these efforts align, such that employers capitalize on how older workers seek to find meaning and use that to make low-paid jobs seem more attractive to older workers who bring many skills to their

jobs. In these interactions, managers and older employees tend to mutually construct age as an asset, even though older workers are exploited in the process. When these efforts conflict, by contrast, managers are more likely to pronounce stereotypes about older workers, labeling them as inflexible, incapable of learning, or carrying an “aging mindset.”

Where tensions arise between employers (or other workers) and older workers over questions of adaptability, there is usually something else happening. Rather than older workers being unwilling, labeled as obsolete, or unable to engage in new technologies, in reality, older workers are confident about their ability to learn but lack the motivation to do so when they are required to perform tasks or jobs they feel are meaningless and exploitative to them, or that pay too little. They instead use “age” in a variety of ways to resist being pressed into undesirable or harder work. When they resist, older workers themselves may employ negative constructions of old age or reinforce stereotypes of age. By contrast (again), older workers tend to construct age as an asset when doing so benefits them and enables them to choose not only the type of work they want to do, but also how many hours to work, and what roles to occupy, even when they are returning to work not necessarily out of choice but rather, economic necessity. I explain these constructions of age and processes in what follows.

Why Re-hire the Un-retired?

Old Age as an Asset

Most employers, supervisors, and older workers across the worksites that I studied indicated that holding “unretired” status makes one a desired human resource in the workplace. However, age plays an instrumental role because of the type of work or the structure of work at the companies, and beliefs about age. My informants’ narratives illustrate that “old age” status (which culturally emerges as one retires/unretires) produce rewards for both employers and

employees. That said, my informants reveal that “old age” is an asset (i.e. providing economic advantages), which primarily benefit *employers* and their businesses, and some businesses more than others. One company, in particular, illustrates this most clearly, and I present several reasons how and why it targets older workers. Guss, the middle-aged director of this service-oriented, medium-sized, Transportation Company, expressed the company faces a major organizational issue. There is a serious labor supply problem. As he explained, “because of the nature of the job we are always looking for people.” When I probed, he explained:

There is always a need. We are always trying to hire. We don’t ever have enough people. My full-time staff is not supposed to drive a bus. Our [full-time employees’] primary responsibility is to support the drivers and monitors, whether it’s through discipline, dispatch, or scheduling. Their primary responsibility is not driving the bus, but sometimes we do have to do that. I have basically ten full-time employees, and then substitute drivers. The cold hard reality is that we are always running ten to twelve people short and we still get the job done, and it’s not just for our organization. It’s for the industry. It’s a nationwide problem because it’s supplemental.

As Diane, a younger female supervisor at the company put it, “turnover is high. People leave because of health benefits and pay. At the company, work is mostly part-time and do not entail benefits. Only staff is covered.” Drivers are not considered staff in this sense and thus, they do not qualify for benefits. The crisis and apparent desperation Guss and Diane identify about labor supply may suggest willingness for the company and others within this industry, to hire anyone if no one is readily available to solve the labor issue. However, as Guss and Diane explained the conditions of the labor market,—i.e. labor shortage problem and the nature of work—elder labor is particularly attractive. An outspoken older bus driver, seventy-three-year-old Vin, who has worked with the company for well over eight years post-retirement, noted:

[Chuckles] They needed someone; they’ll take any older person. Once you can breathe, they’ll take you. It’s a different type of work. For someone who does not have the work ethic, it will be difficult. You have no night life. There is a process you go through by human resource. I did not even do an interview.

Vin suggests that the company will hire anyone who can breathe, but he also indicates that the candidate must have a strong work ethic and willingness to accept lacking a “night life.” He links these qualities with older workers, and suggests that the company does, as well, when he says, “they’ll take any older person.” In fact, he notes, he was not even interviewed for the job—just hired. Sixty-six-year-old Victor, another older worker at the company, supports Vin’s assertion and explains why lacking a night life is essential: “...the hours are another thing. Some young people do not want to get up at 5 in the morning to drive....” Both employers and employees—at least from Guss’s, Diane’s, Victor’s, and Vin’s perspectives—regard older workers as being ideal workers given the nature of work and how older versus younger workers or old age are perceived.

Guss indicated he even used strategic advertising invariably to reach older and younger workers. When I asked to “describe the types of jobs you advertise for potential employees,” he elaborated instead, how he advertised for workers:

Guss: We do it [advertising] in different ways. We have a banner outside. We have it in the newspaper. I’ve bought a radio ad and that radio ad targets folks. It’s how I market that job to them. When I talk to the marketing person from the radio station I say here is my target audience, and they do it.

Nicole: Can you give me an example of how this works? [*Probe*]

Guss: So in August my target audience is students so the marketing person tells me you need to advertise on B 104 and 101.5. But then around November and December I know people are going to retire on around December 31, then they [marketing person] say now you have to put it on KMAN or 1350 A.M. radio station because the demographic for that radio station is older folks. 1350 A.M. is talk radio and that’s what they are listening to. They [marketing person] understand demographics trust me. People into marketing are into demographics. No online thing [advertising] unless if it’s the Mercury.

The employer demonstrates targeted efforts to ensure he recruits the right kind of worker—i.e. older or younger ones. Marketing these jobs is akin to my own observations in the field. On one occasion, I encountered a female recruiter/bus driver from the company while attending a job talk at the Area Agency on Aging for older adults seeking work.

Though the transportation company does employ younger workers, supervisors and the director indicate a greater preference for hiring older workers and embracing their “aged” identity. Since work at this company is typically part-time, the employment offered may not appeal to a broad pool of potential workers who want to build a career or derive an adequate income from a single job. As Diane, the female supervisor states frankly, “this is not seen as a career job.” Many older workers, however, possess economic resources in the forms of Social Security benefits, old age pensions, and savings from previous careers. Their supplemental sources of income supposedly allow them to work in jobs of the part-time structure and tolerate or survive being paid very low wages. Thus, they are seen as a particularly desired labor source for the company. When I asked the director, Guss, what his greatest need was in hiring older workers, he replied:

That’s a tough question [*chuckles*] because it [hiring] is more [*sic*] based upon our need and not their need. It’s more [*sic*] based on my need and I need people to be consistent and come in every day and do their job and do it safely.... We target [...] those people that need other than full-time work. I would love to offer a full-time career to a college graduate but the funding isn’t there. I cannot pay that kind of money and yet I need stability for the routes. I can’t offer that for people who need that kind of money to make a living. So I do target people who, this is not going to be their primary source of income. And I see a lot of this with the older population. They do have another source of income because they collect Social Security, and they are not dependent on this job, some may, but they are not all dependent. They may have some other source of income.

In Guss’s estimation, it is clear that “un-retired” workers are an asset because they have access to multiple economic resources, as they previously retired and collect age-based benefits from the welfare state and former employers, but they are also consistent, reliable workers despite accepting the low pay. This positive construction of “old” age results in preferring older workers for the company’s labor supply. Thus, Guss solves two problems with one practice: In hiring older workers he gets stable committed employees, and at a low cost to the company.

In another example, Patrick, a young supervisor at the company for about six years, reinforces the idealized view of older workers. Although Patrick identifies younger workers as suited for this job, like Guss, he distinguishes that because older workers have other resources to draw on (supplemental income, which younger workers do not possess), they are ideal. In addition, they are usually not seeking a career trajectory at this stage in life, plus in his view, some older workers utilize this work environment as a strategy to ease into retirement and given the structure of work, they can successfully achieve their goal:

Patrick: I found that with the college kids they probably graduated and moved on or find better employment opportunities. The flip side is the retirees. For these folks, this is their second or third job because they retire. When I started, we had a lot of schoolteachers. For former schoolteachers, it was a way to ease into retirement. Those now [older workers] have been around longer, some retire from teaching coaching.

Nicole: What kinds of job opportunities/positions do you offer?

Patrick: This workplace provides a really great opportunity for college students and retirees. Basically, anybody that has alternate forms of supplemental income especially retirees. The way that we're set up is that we have full-time employees, but it's primarily set up like part-time and seasonal. It's great for retirees because they collect Social Security but need more money.

However, the construction of old age as an asset for hireability and potential economic gains for the company is not based on age *per se*. Indeed unretirees' "oldness" provides the advantage of being "hirable" (i.e. it creates a low-priced, yet quality labor the company desires). The dynamics of the current structure of work is also important. Given the current job market conditions—the job requirement—, without buying "aged" labor, which comes at a low price, or in the absence of this type of labor supply, the company stands a risk of operating at a loss or even worse, going out of business. Individuals with certain attributes are important assets and a seemingly coveted labor source. For instance, Guss expresses a need for "consistent," "safe," "punctual/regular," and "stable/structured" workers. He considers them central in this line of work. The director (and

several older workers) also expressed accruing age or time is an indicator that older workers may possess these valuable attributes that match the company's needs. He elaborates:

You know, I started to work here when I was a college student. This was my part-time job and I got to interact with people [older workers] that were my grandparent's age. Making that interaction was always good. Sometimes you learn how to deal with kids from them. That's the dynamic you get here. It's intergenerational. We're talking about college students and people of retirement age working together and I think it's always been positive....Older workers, many have children and grandchildren and so they understand how to handle the kids on the bus. There are some younger ones that don't understand kids today and sometimes that could be a hindrance. But having that ability for that younger worker to interact with that older worker is good and it goes both ways. The younger ones tell the older ones this is how it is today; this is what the kids are going through today. Kids are kids you have to treat them as a broken record. You might have to keep telling Johnny or Sally to sit down and repeat it every 5 minutes. So we're after people that know kids, not just those to hold the steering wheel.

Guss describes unretirees as well-experienced workers. Reflecting on his early work life at the company, he recalls how much he learned from older workers because of their experiences. Even today, as the director, he continues to hold older workers in the highest regard. They possess other positive traits or benefits such as better "understanding," "wisdom," and "patience" which he believes arises with aging. Though these attributes tend to benefit older workers themselves, he shows they are important to the company because they offer services to a specific clientele—i.e. young children/parents. Guss also suggests these traits are equivalent, sometimes more important than, or work to enhance other skills that older workers are compensated to provide (such as being paid as drivers). While the director acknowledges that younger workers may understand children because they are closer in age and experience, and they may be able to handle their job just as well as older workers, unlike unretirees, he labels younger workers as a "hindrance" and associates younger workers with a possible lack of understanding in "handling" kids. From Guss's perspective, younger workers, however, share information with older workers about what is happening with youth. Consequently, older workers not only gain this information

but also have all of their own accumulated knowledge and experience, which younger workers supposedly lack.

Older workers were also idealized in terms of longevity. Hal, the assistant director of the Information Center, explained, “we’re fortunate that we have several long-term workers. In fact, we have quite a few older ones.” By contrast, he says “then we tend to have those [workers] that turn over real fast because this is a university town...” implying younger workers. Hal continues:

[...] We do have people just about any age. We had a gentleman as a custodian who was in his 80s, he retired and came here but he left. At the circulation desk, we tend to get some younger workers because those jobs tend to turnover. We tend to have younger students in technology with computers to assist. Then there is the typical public library position. We have the professional librarians, those in plan and programs, and those that provide information. We have clerical positions, those who check the materials, reshelve materials.

Hal profiles several positions at the company but then he later said that older workers are concentrated in long-term professional positions:

Most of the folks [older workers] at the department management level either have their Master’s degree in library science or advanced degree or have specialization skills. For instance, the manager for information technology who is in charge of all the computers is older. Some work in technical services by ordering materials and cataloging.

Hal further voiced this when I asked about how many workers are employed or in what capacity, and the jobs they do:

When I went in and looked, [*referring to computer files of employees*] I found seven older workers. [...] it looks like at least three are managers or department heads that have been here some time. One was a professional librarian who I believe retired as a school librarian. We have a couple working in our technical services but again in professional positions. So it looks like the older adults have longevity and some work themselves into managerial positions.

In Hal’s observation, “it looks like the older adults have longevity,” something he needs at the company. Although having longevity is an asset and he seems to acquire it from older workers, this does not necessarily mean that old age constitutes longevity. Instead, he was fortunate that

older workers stayed on longer in the company, which then becomes assets for him. I encountered two older workers at the company (73-year-old Adeline who works as a professional librarian, and 68-year-old Sonia a department manager) who, after returning to work, hold professional positions and have been working for several years at the Center. Hal even rewards longevity stating, “there is some additional leave time for longevity. The benefits are quite nice.” He described more directly:

There are many reasons I think we have people applying for positions here. They have worked in other libraries and retired and so they gravitate to the same type of organization. I have some applying because they love the library and if they have to work, why not. The environment is a big draw.

Unlike other worksites, workers (part-time/full-time) with workplace longevity at the Information Center seem to gain economic benefits for accruing time/age in work. Hal rewards longevity with benefits, and professional work and longevity seem mutually beneficial to the company and worker. Even though the director of the transportation company, like Hal, hints at a need for longevity especially given the work structure and demographics where the company operates, he does not compensate his employees for it—older workers are paid little and denied benefits, but yet continue to work at the company. In this college town that has rapid employee turnover rates among younger workers who apparently are not seeking careers, employers increasingly need older workers who seem more stable and remain longer in work.

Using Age to Extract Labor versus Resisting Exploitation

Age carries certain connotations for employers based on ideology about age and work, which distinguishes older workers from other employees. In the next section, I explore more examples of how/when age becomes an asset or how it is used to extract labor, how it is exploited in work, but also, how unretirees use their age to resist exploitation. Supervisors tend to idealize older workers capturing a notion of “difference.” For instance, though the

Transportation Company hires younger employees, when I asked about the star employee, without hesitation the supervisors identified an older worker(s) and explained key attributes associated with his/her age such as strong work ethic to capture the notion of difference between older workers and others. In supervisor Diane's words, "older workers are all my stars because each has their own way with the kids....They do their job. Older people they know how to work." More specifically, the director added that older workers possess core values such as a different and more positive work ethic, understanding, and commitment to the job, which he admires and idealizes. He described in a slightly louder tone:

Well, it goes to that older age, and it is their work ethic. They do have a different work ethic than the young ones. They have a different idea of what they are supposed to do and that's because this is not their first career. They understand what it's like to get up and go to work every day. They understand that they have to do a job and they're older than me. At first, I thought that would be a hindrance to me and it's because they have a level of respect for people in authority. Maybe they worked for younger people before. I don't know... Again, this is not their first career and so they have that understanding.

As the analysis unfolded, I noticed that both managers and older employees may engage stereotypes about age to assign or achieve specific tasks, respectively. Managers construct age to extract from older employees the kind of labor they desire for profitability, while older workers may construct age to resist having their labor power squeezed out of them. For example, in the Retail Store, a middle-aged female customer service manager (CSM) relays:

Angela: ...There are people from 20-70s in here. The front-door greeters are older people, on the register are younger workers, CSM's are the ones that run the front. Some are older than me and we interact in a unique way.

Nicole: Can you tell me why greeters are older workers and the registers are younger workers? [*Probe*]

Angela: The Company is service as I said and really has the tradition, the warm friendly smile to greet people and make customers feel comfortable and that is important. They [older workers] want this kind of work more than doing the registers. I think it is the technology. Technology scares them and I think the fast pace. They are from a generation where the interaction is different. There is some reluctance. They do not want to learn a new skill. I think they are scared. This [front-door greeter] is easier for them because they

get to interact with kids and families.... I think the interaction is unique to your older worker. Whereas the younger ones, we learn to multitask.

At least from Angela's narratives, "agedness" seems an important asset given the company's need to maintain a friendly, family-oriented image. Employees' strategic placement in work roles seems a result of not only of the work structure but also the manager's ideology of "age"—i.e. her own understandings or internalization of social/cultural meanings of age (i.e. the aging body) in relation to different kinds of work she believes older people should be doing. Older workers' "oldness" is more advantageous to the company for jobs such as door greeting because as the manager suggests, older workers seem more warm and interactive than perhaps younger workers. When I asked the supervisor specifically about the greatest need in terms of employing older workers, she responded:

The store as a structure has express, self-checkout, etc. I try to put the older workers on express. The young ones like self-check. I had one [older worker] I put on express. I told her I think you will like it. She said, "why?" Because you're older [*chuckles*]! She did like it. She said, "thanks, Angela, can I ask for it all the time [*smiles*]?" I try to put them on express. If you put older workers on bulk it would wear them and tire them out. Sometimes doing a cart loaded with stuff makes you tired. I don't want when you [customer] comes up the cashier is hunched over. The younger ones might not be that connected to people so we put them on the conveyor. That's the difference between the young and old. On the express, they [older worker] interact with you. They enjoy it.

In this work context, when workers consent to the work assignments the manager gives, sometimes based on stereotypes of age, old age is constructed positively. At this worksite, I was prohibited from interviewing employees. Thus, I cannot generalize or take management's word as those of older workers at the company. However, the narrative suggests that older workers themselves may play upon Angela's stereotypical images of agedness or use it to their advantage to get "lighter" work assignments (e.g. door greeting—greeting customers is likely less stressful than speedily checking them out. While both greeters and checkers are likely monitored, only the latter may logically be pressed into performing more repetitive tasks faster). As her narrative

suggests, older workers like these placements as they stated, “thanks, Angela, can I ask for it all the time?” Thus, they tended to manipulate the companies for preferred hours and tasks because they perceived themselves as “old.” In fact, at other sites, older informants indicated a preference for certain jobs in retirement years that coincided with Angela’s views. They find great difficulty especially in jobs that are physically arduous. For example, seventy-three-year-old, Tory, an older female bus monitor claims:

Even being a Walmart greeter is something. That gets them out into the public and you can see people. I got a friend that works at Burger King. I think she just walks around and greets people. She gives out samples. She used to be one of the cooks in school before. She is in her late eighties.

However, in Angela’s narrative above, she emphasizes that older employees can negatively affect the image of the company or become costly if they are not correctly placed in work—i.e. due to perceptions of older workers or aging, they are labeled less efficient, unproductive, tired, unattractive, and seemingly useless. She blatantly calls out one’s “oldness” while suggesting it is the reason for placing older workers on registers where they would not become exhausted and tired and become “hunched” over. Her deliberate rearranging of employees, especially older ones, may show they are a flexible form of labor, but this practice sends an important message about how the organization perceives and uses aging workers or their “age” itself to get the most value out of workers. Angela attempts to “manage” them (i.e. their bodies) by assigning roles she *believes* they are best at or will provide the greatest rewards and success for the company. In other words, using age stereotypes to reshuffle older workers to extract labor to meet the company’s needs/image, may underutilize other talents older workers possess or they may be passed over.

Angela illustrates a negative construction of age as an “old age mentality” that she believes older workers have as she tries to squeeze more labor from them. However, this seems

an inaccurate construction of age as older workers may not necessarily adhere to an old age mentality, but instead, they are resisting work they find exploitative or meaningless to them. For example, Angela explained:

Among the workers, there is a huge gap in terms of computer and technology literacy. Older workers have not grown technology wise. When we need register help we have to call people to the flow. Every day when we get the daily roster we have 25 people but we have about 5 older workers. They're not tech savvy.... I had this older guy who said "I do not do the register and I am not going to do it now." I think anybody can run the register. It's pretty simple. I think there is fear and it's a fast-paced environment. Let's be honest, they did not have to when they were hired, and things evolved and change. I tell older workers when Christmas season came we needed help up front they did not come up. That was my complaint. They would flat out refuse. No way!

In her opinion, older workers seem averse to technology (technophobes) and "change-up." She labels them as being "set in their ways," rigid, resistant to change, stubborn, and incapable of learning new technology. Angela suggests this mentality may prevent some from venturing into new areas of work, and this stifles their growth. Rather than stifling their growth, older workers' behavior is more likely about protecting themselves while reducing company profits. When I pressed Angela further, I realized that she attributed these behaviors to workers when she assigned tasks/jobs they found unappealing or meaningless. In other words, when employees resist being pressed into harder or more stressful work, they are labeled as "incompetent"—i.e. their agedness. For example, when retirees resist cashier assignments, Angela accuses them of being "out-of-date" in work. She also describes an incident at work between her and older workers in which she continuously draws on the fact that "age" is driving a personal behavior (i.e. resistance):

[The Retail Store] got these credit cards and each cashier had to ask customers if they would like one. One of the challenges I faced is for older workers to give people the credit cards. We had a long discussion about it and it becomes a fighting match with them. They don't see the importance of it [credit cards] and flat out refuse. I had two or three curse me out. The women are not so bad, the men, oh yeah. It's been quite a challenge. People like me, if you refuse to do something like that, you're out. How could

these people [*shakes head*]? That was a wake-up call for me. I looked at what is driving these people. I think what's driving it; they've been in employment so long they don't see the need to change....

It is doubtful that employees being pressed to do harder labor would receive better compensation. As the supervisor describes the incident, she indicates the resistance on the part of older workers is due to not seeing the "importance" in selling the cards or the need for "change." As she further stated, "when we sell the credit card it goes to the store and my share and they don't see the importance of it. It's like a business. They measure things." In the case of the cashiers at the Retail Store, it is possible that rather than resisting credit card technology, they did not see the value in it. Had Angela explained the meaningfulness, and had the workers felt a sense of dignity or pride in the work they were doing, they may not have resisted. Thus, while Angela made the dispute about age, I argue it may have actually been about employee dignity at work. It became apparent to me that Angela's negative construction of age only exists as she tries to extract labor that older workers resist, such that those who resist certain roles are marked negatively. Although I did not capture the views of older workers at the company, I noticed that in other worksites, old age is not necessarily a negative construction, but instead, older workers are using it as an asset to resist work or to choose how they work, and the roles they take on in unretirement.

For example, Reba, a sixty-three-year-old woman who works at the information center performing duties such as distributing books for homebound older adults, demonstrates this "tension of age." When I asked, "do you consider your age to be an asset to your job or a liability to your job," she said:

It's a little of both, I suppose. It's an asset because of experience and wisdom acquired. You can have a Masters in library science but you need to be on the job to get the skills. I have a lot of skills. The readers' advisory I can do. The liability is the motivation to learn technology. This isn't there for me as it is for younger people [workers]. They have a

whole career ahead of them. They want to conquer everything.... As I get older I think it's going to be so much easier. I learn new skills so much more [sic] easier.

Reba notes that due to her age, she is able to learn quickly which goes counter to old age stereotypes. Thus, *if* motivated, she could learn the technology, but she chooses not to do so given that her career may be winding down. She continued:

I could quit at any time. I'm working just because I enjoy it. I am grateful I don't have to work. It's not a lot of people who feel they can retire. I'm just taking it month by month. I enjoy it [work] and will keep doing it and I get money. In a lot of ways, it's sad to see so many young people struggling to get jobs. I feel sometimes I have to give up my job to give them my job. I think once they are physically able to handle a job. I do see I don't have the memory that I used to and the desire to learn the technology that some people that are younger have. There definitely comes a time when people should recognize that others could do a better job. I don't have the motivation that I used to have. That is a problem for older workers. You just don't want to work as hard.

In fact, most of the 27 older workers viewed themselves as “slowing down” due to their age and more easily accepted or rejected certain jobs in post-retirement. Meanings about age (i.e. old age) become a sort of proxy that quantifies the amount of time spent in work or how much work to do. Though variations exist amongst informants in terms of the exact quantity of hours worked in old age, several older workers were resolute and made clear that old age is a time for reduced work roles and hour—i.e. semi-retirement. Seventy-year-old Daisy explains how much work older adults “should” be doing by stating, “I don't think a 40 hour week or more is feasible for the elder. Twenty to thirty hours is fine and it goes back to energy level, the physical energy level is less.” Sixty-six-year-old Victor, however, explains, “it depends on how much they want to work. I don't like those 10 hour days. But we don't do it all the time.... It makes a long day.” Victor further expresses, “I don't work for many hours. 2-3 hours in the morning and afternoon. When I was a fireman it was 24-hour shifts. What I do today it's lots less stress. It's fun.”

Seventy-three-year-old Sherry, who retired from her last job as a driver for a local church, transporting special needs children and the elderly, described when asked about her

aspirations “I am right where I want to be. Now if I had been maybe 35 years again, yeah, maybe I would have done something else. But right now, no....” Even some informants in full-time jobs consider changing to less demanding roles as they age. For example, Ingrid, a sixty-three-year-old unretiree at the Local Shopping Center claims, “....I won’t be able to do my full-time job forever. I think eventually in a couple years I will go down to part time but still management. But it depends.” Further, sixty-three-year-old Reba, who works full-time at the Information Center echoes similar sentiments. She expressed:

I don’t aspire to anything more. I don’t have an MLS [Masters in library science]. I don’t want to pursue one at my age. It will take too much money and time. It would not benefit me. My coworkers have but I am not interested in moving up to administration jobs.

In one case, Amber, the sixty-eight-year-old bus monitor idealizes work in retirement as:

Something like what I’m doing. I’ve seen people around my age at Walmart greeting. I think that’s what they should be doing because they don’t have to do the physical labor. Now my husband does a lot of physical work. I don’t think I could. Well for me 5 hours a day is good.

Amber’s statement suggests that there is some variability among older workers especially in terms doing work that involves physical labor. Seventy-three-year old Sherry further stated:

[...] I’ve seen a lot of receptionists in hospitals asking people if they need help. I think there is a type of work but I can do whatever I want to. If the time comes when I don’t want to drive anymore, I will volunteer at the hospital, I don’t mind going to the nursing home, anything to do with kids. I drove for head start. I loved every minute of it. I would volunteer, I’m looking down the line, I see it as an important thing in my life.

Nancy, a seventy-four-year-old who works as a store clerk in the Local Shopping Center captures that age permits her to enjoy herself as she unretires by choosing work without feeling pressured. She distinguishes between her work lives as a young adult versus an unretiree and shows that today, like other unretirees, she resists certain types of jobs that may not bring her full enjoyment, but also suggests that today she does not work as hard and have greater control in how she works. Sitting on a small stool behind the cash-out counter, Nancy recalls the jobs she

did back then (pre-retirement career), as nothing comparable to her current position. She labels herself as “lazy” and technology-averse. This comparison of her work lives pre versus post retirement indicates to me how age influences or changes work roles. While she may have likely enjoyed her past job, as she ages, Nancy minimizes her tasks and does so because it seems work today is more about fulfillment. She smiled and seemed content and happy describing her job today as something quite “simple,” “mindless,” and “easy,” hinting she is of an “age” that gives her the ability to do so, and it is precisely the kind of work she finds rewarding and enjoyable.

She expresses:

[...] I was a vault teller with Capital Federal Trust Company for a long time. I got to order the money. I worked there for many years. Now I’m pretty lazy. When I came here after I retired it was kind of a joke. I was having coffee with my friends and one of the gentlemen asked me, “if you were to go back to work what you would want?” I told him “a desk with a phone, pencils, and paper, not a lot of responsibility. I do not want to deal with the computer. I am telling him what I’m not going to deal with, and he said “if I hear about a job, I’ll tell you....” There are no similarities between this job and what I did in the past. I had more responsibility when I was in the banking business.

Now that Nancy is winding down (i.e. aging), the notion of enjoyment in work seems to take on new meanings compared to her younger working life. Like Sherry mentioned above, Nancy also speaks about age in relation to her aspiration stating, “I aspire to nothing. I would not want to own this business or be responsible for owning it because I am at an age where the responsibility I have is enough. The responsibility I have is for my home, vehicle, and dog. I just don’t feel like doing much more. It’s not my cup of tea right now.”

Other older workers indicated age as an asset because it allows them to resist against jobs that are physically demanding and strenuous, and accept those that are part-time—positions vastly different from their pre-retirement careers. At the Transportation Company, Hatti, the seventy-eight-year-old female bus monitor, said, “actually, going back part-time, it does not wear me out. It’s easy work and that’s what I wanted. I did not want to go out and do hard labor and

this has been a fulfilling job. I'm 78. This is part-time and it's not strenuous. So for my age, this is good for me." Hatti presents her image that symbolizes appropriately enjoyable versus unsatisfying work and utilizes age as the determinant. However, in her case (like Angela's earlier narrative) the process of "aging" can negatively affect working certain types of jobs (e.g. more physically demanding ones, which she finds unappealing at this stage in life). Hatti, however, suggests that although she has scaled back on work, she seeks a job that is meaningful in unretirement and something she wants to do. Like Angela, Hatti further explained what kind of work will bring enjoyment for older workers and she also draws on old age stereotypes:

I think something like me [bus monitor]. Nothing too strenuous because I think after a while they would be exhausted. Like if I was working in a restaurant running up and down the aisles, that I think that I would get me exhausted and after a while, you will think no. But here, it is very easy, even if you are a bus driver you know it's still not anything too strenuous. I think the amount of hours they should do is the about what their health would allow.

Thus, based on these narratives indicating how and why older workers are resisting work in unretirement, I argue that Angela may have misperceived what is happening with older workers at the company, and cast employees in a negative light. Notably, some supervisors argue against stereotyping age or using age for easier job placement. For example, Patrick, a male supervisor in the Transportation Company, elaborates on how the construction of age can alternately enhance or diminish dignity at work for unretirees. He discusses an ideal place to work, distinguishing the jobs his company offers from those at other workplaces as providing an optimal experience for older workers. He states:

I think that there is a stigma surrounding other jobs such as fast food or door greeter. Working here you still have that sense of accomplishment because you are giving back to the community because you are helping out the school district. Even if it's just a bus driver or custodial staff you are still working with the school district as opposed to being a greeter. I think the nature of the job has a lot to do with it. I think the people that work here like to work with kids. You have an impact on the kids' day and their education.

One informant, Henry, who works at the transportation company, describes his ideals of work in sharp contrast to other informants. Like Patrick, Henry believes individuals should engage in work according to their skills and preferences, unrelated to age. Importantly, as Henry's story unfolds, he points out his disapproval about "stereotyping" or labeling individuals "old," and stipulating what they can or cannot do. He explained:

Those [older workers] that are really good with the administration, you know at some office desk and using their brain and experiences to problem-solving and so forth in that capacity, I think they should be seeking things that keep them inside and out of the weather. I always had physical jobs. So if you're anything like me it has to require something that's physical. Other than that I don't like to stereotype older people so I really don't feel good about categorizing what they should be doing.

The evidence strongly suggests that age is an asset for employers and their companies, and older workers themselves. Within the present labor market and work structures, attributes associated with age are highly desired and beneficial to employers. When managers and employees agree on work tasks, they tend to construct age positively, if at all. By contrast, when workers' and managers' interests conflict, they tend to—inadvertently or not—construct age negatively.

Older Workers Benefit from "Old" Age Status

Despite employers' implementation of "lean and flexible" (Block 1990) employment practices characteristic of post-industrial America, older informants across these worksites continue to perceive themselves as desired assets. Unretirees possess certain attributes associated with becoming "old" or by accumulating time and age (i.e. accrued skills and knowledge) that make them feel valuable. For example, seventy-three-year-old Vin at the Transportation Company explained:

Age is an asset. It brings experiences in life, being able to look at the situation and perhaps maybe give a better take on it. That's just my own experience. I could listen to kids. I am able to talk to them. I can give them a better answer.

Similarly, sixty-three-year-old Don, a “young old” employee who retired from his career as a case worker after earning his masters, and now works part-time as an assistant cook at the Senior Service Center after a short retirement, expresses that it is a disservice to the wider society to not utilize elder labor/talent. He boldly claimed, “[...] I think it will be a waste to society not to use their experience and knowledge.” Daisy, a seventy-two-year-old, who unretires part-time as a receptionist at the same Senior Service Center after retiring from her forty-year-old career as a clerk describes interacting daily with several older patrons, providing them with information and answering questions. Daisy believes there is a strict distinction between older and younger workers. She alluded to the accumulation of human capital older workers possess when she remarked:

[...] I think it is to the advantage of the employer to hire older people because of the skills they've acquired and the knowledge that they have. They know the history of the area, which the younger generation has, no clue... So I think it is an added advantage for employers to hire them if they are physically and mentally able to do it...

Moreover, sixty-six-year-old Victor, a driver for the Transportation Company, uses his age as he illustrates the “notion of difference” between “him” and other “younger” workers, but perceives his age as an asset. Victor explains:

I'll say an asset because I know the town really well. There are some other people that come here and I'm not sure if they should be driving a bus. I think your age could be an asset. I think for me it's an asset. I can deal with the kids. Some of the 30-year-old drivers have not learned how to deal with the kids. I think that's one thing being older provides. You probably raised some children or you've been around someone's kids.

Older workers have key qualities they may acquire throughout their lives or through accumulated job experiences by accruing years in work, which is important and should be utilized in work ultimately to the company's advantage. Nati, a seventy-year-old female bus

monitor with a cheerful personality, highlighted her competency and confidence in monitoring children, which she developed over the course of her career. She conveys this by recalling an experience monitoring on the bus and how she draws on her patience, previously learned skills, and knowledge (e.g. Certified Nurse Assistant), and caring qualities (e.g. being a grandmother) to make the bus trip pleasant and successful, and despite receiving low wages. She explained:

We don't make that much money here, it's not about the money. It's about taking care of these children that need to be taken care of. I am a big advocate of that.... My job is to take care of the ones that have special needs and I need to be able to do that. People don't understand them; they have no patience with children that have special needs. When I get a new child I ask the parents what can I do to make their trip better. They are in my care and in my driver's care too. Between us, him being a former firefighter and me with my CNA [certified nursing assistant] training, we are like a doctor. We get stuff done and we take care of these children. We handle a lot of kids. We want to take care of these children using our abilities and to the best of our ability. All of the monitors that we have now are the same way and if they are not they won't be here long. I guarantee you. We do it with all our heart. We sing the ABC on the bus, we play games we talk about trees, we talk about colors, and I read to them, you name it... I have grandbabies. I know what they like... I ask permission if I can give them [children] a little peck on the forehead if they don't feel good or to hold their hands if they are crying.... When they [children] come on the bus I just giggle and giggle to make them happy. They never get off the bus without me saying bye, see you tomorrow, you were a good girl or good boy, I just love em [sic]. That's important especially if they have a bad day at school... They miss their mama.

When I asked Nati why she came back to work, she enthusiastically stated, “because I love it! I love taking care of people and children.” This work seemingly reflects her prior occupation (i.e. a nursing assistant) a “caring” occupation, which may make it easy and enjoyable for her to return. She described coming back as “wonderful.” In a slightly raised voice, placing her hand across her heart and smiling, she stated, “I love my job. I do. I really do. Sometimes I don't like getting up at 4 in the morning but I love my job.” For her, work “means I can live [laughs]. It's fun. I love the kids. I get my baby fix [laughs].” Similarly, another shared experience is seventy-five-year-old Henry, one of the oldest male bus drivers for the company, who described how he implemented some of his lived experiences and skills on the job. As he relayed his story, I

noticed his calm disposition, resilience, and many life experiences. He described his first day on the job:

I was nervous. I had a lot of anxiety. I had never driven a bus. I picked up the kids and made sure I go [*sic*] in the right spots and do it in a timely fashion. There are some hot head kids. I wasn't nervous about the kids and had my thoughts about how I will address the kids. These are not men. As a person who is the common force within my large family, I use some of my experiences on those kids. Well, the first day I stopped the bus. They were noisy. I introduced myself and I discussed my life and experiences. I told them about segregation and I survived well. I said, I was shot at and hit. I told them about the military and my short job as a police officer and I survived that. After that they were quiet. I let them absorbed that and then I said I understand there are pecking orders, now after this moment, there is no pecking order. I said the reputation that you will have is the one that you and I will establish together. I told them I could be the best advocate for you, their best friend. But you must allow me to do that. That was the best bus I've ever had [smiles]. So that was my first day on the job.

Henry's narrative presents a paradox. He explains that in spite of his nervousness about performing his role as a driver, he was not worried about dealing with the "kids"—i.e. self-efficacy. Henry even seemed truly proud of the way he handled his first day on the job and smiled as he told the story. His accumulated life experiences and the way he made a personal connection with the children by making himself relatable, both seemed critical towards the successful first day and many others that followed. These offered him great frames of reference, which he successfully utilized in interaction with students. The success in work he experienced, however, was not wholly about age *per se*, but because he had more stories to tell his clients (children) as a result of having a longer life full of these rich experiences.

Nati and Henry present themselves as autonomous, mature, flexible workers, all traits the employer finds crucial for the job. While both perform set roles as driver and monitor, they, however, are providing additional, yet uncompensated services/roles for the company. For instance, Henry illustrates he is not only a safe driver—a job he is paid to do— but also offers an extra service for “free” because he is older and experienced. For Nati, this also rings true. Her

job as a monitor is primarily to ensure the children are seated and safe. However, Nati expresses engaging in extra activities to make them happy and comfortable. At least in the cases of Henry and Nati, their attributes ultimately provide economic gains for the company, without the company having to invest in expensive training. To some extent, it seems their uniqueness in talents/human capital may provide an economic strain on the company or may be costly to replace if they are replaced with younger workers. Younger workers (e.g. younger drivers), even with job experience and skills are likely to be much more expensive than older workers are because they lack the supplemental income that unretirees possess—i.e. retirement income due to attaining old age. Older workers are thus cheaper in the sense that their “old” age is a reason employers pay them less (discriminatory), or some workers, because of age, may work for “non-economic” reasons (e.g. Guss stated earlier “some say I am not here for the money”) and perceived to be just as competent, if not more so, than younger workers.

In another example, seventy-three-year-old Tory, an older monitor, claims “in one way it [age] is an asset because I’m dealing with kids, and I have dealt with kids for a long, long [*sic*] time, different types of kids. I don’t really like to deal with those that are aggressive, the problem causing ones. I don’t really like to deal with those. But as someone that’s more knowledgeable from experiences in the years past, I can handle them.” Although I did not interview or observe younger workers, and though it is possible that younger workers with job experience may be able to handle the job as expertly as these older unretirees, I noted how older employees (and employers) spoke about younger workers—in such a way that older workers labeled themselves differently using age attributes (whether or not it is true). For instance, Tory is not claiming that younger workers lack years of experience or cannot do the same job, but she is suggesting that being older benefits her.

On many occasions, older workers expressed that younger workers often deliberately seek out their advice, training, and mentorship, which they (i.e. older workers) aligned to age/maturity. Seventy-four-year-old Ned, a male senior estimator, and full-time unretiree presented himself as a storehouse of knowledge and experience. After taking a short, one-year retirement, Ned returned to work at the large, Manufacturing Company, the same company he worked at when he retired. He sees himself as valued and a central part of the organization:

Well, I'm not saying it's all 100% age so to speak but somebody coming into this job will not have the skills. Like we have some kids upstairs that are doing some things that I am doing, they don't know anything that happened in the past. I have people that call me from Denver on projects that were done 20 years ago. But these young kids only know of things from the point of hire. They don't know anything from the past on the construction management program. They have to ask me these questions because they know I know the answers [smiles]. I think my age is an asset to this organization because of my life experiences. If it wasn't for that how would they know these things?

Particularly in the Transportation Company, older employees reveal their need to advise younger workers and that they are often looked upon to provide it because of their age. Seventy-three-year-old Sherry, who drives for the company, said, "in here I think they look at me as the oldest one for advice. They would say "you're the oldest one, what do you think, you're here longer than anybody." Like the director who mentioned earlier how much he learned from older workers when he was younger, Tory and Vin (older workers at the company) explained their need to mentor and train younger, less-experienced workers. This is captured in the narratives below:

Sometimes we feel we have to take the younger ones under our wings and try to see if we can encourage them. Sometimes the younger people here ask for guidance. But if they don't want to be mothered, well we leave them (Tory).

Some of the younger drivers get into some bad habits. They [younger workers] don't want to follow the rules. I think younger people are not raised as people my age. They don't have the work ethic like us. It's more like 'I do what I want, I don't have to do what you tell me to do attitude.' I kind of teach them the right way to do it and explain to them the reasons for all these rules that we have. But you still see some of them every day

doing it wrong. I just think they [younger workers] don't care. All they want is a paycheck (Vin).

The narrative also implies that “older workers” are different from other “younger” workers. To an extent, these informants expressed that because of age, it is their “duty” to guide younger workers, which exhibits a sort of welcomed maternalistic/paternalistic behavior/interaction between older and younger workers. Diane, a female supervisor in her mid-forties added:

You know the older ones take the younger ones in as their children. And it's that extra parent, they take them under their wing. The younger workers see the older ones as guiding. The younger ones respect them. I can use myself as an example. A lot of the older drivers consider me their daughter but especially the monitors. There are a couple [older] monitors that have been here as long as I have, and I'm like their daughter and my kids are like their grandkids. They call them that when we see them.

The narratives suggest that these older workers embrace an “agedness” identity through their beliefs and mindset about age in general and aging in the workplace. For them, “old” age carries specific meanings and attributes, which make them capable of behaviors such as mentoring younger workers or openly viewing their supervisors as children. In this context, it creates a sort of power relation in work (i.e. between older and younger workers) whereby older workers proactively use age to position themselves as superior or preferred workers (this is not always the case, which I examine in the sections on liabilities of age, and stereotypes). Older workers also seem to derive meaning from the relationships—rather than “just collecting a paycheck,” as they accuse the younger workers of doing, by mentoring younger workers, they find greater meaning in their work. Though it would have been useful to see what younger workers thought as a contrast or confirmation, this is outside the scope of my study. However, as their examples unfold, they illustrate that this practice also saves employers' money on training and increases productivity.

Some employers seem to capitalize on elder labor as they pay low wages and provide little or no benefits, but older workers gravitate to these work environments nevertheless. For example, at the Transportation Company, Guss's narrative suggests that older workers, though exploited, find other benefits in the job, which partly explains why they seek out work at the company:

Well, the position itself as a bus driver is somewhat part-time in nature and so that creates a situation where people don't stay long. But we do have employees that have stayed on for 20 years. It varies by person and we target people who need a part-time job, not full time in nature. We target students and folks who are possibly retired. [...] We have retired folks that come in and work for an additional 10-15 years as a second career.... [...] it's dependent on the person and what they are looking for. We know the college students that come in will work for a short while because they are looking for careers that pay better. We know we have a limited time with them. With the older ones, we know we have a limited time too because some want to work a couple years maybe until they get to collect Medicare.... But for quite a few they come in their 60s and stay until their 70s and just enjoy it. I had some of them who have said this gives me a reason to get up in the morning and I get my summers off. So for some of them, it is fulfilling, they can work with the children, and then for some it's fulfilling because they can continue to contribute to society, so some of those folks that's big for them. In my experience, that's what I have seen. And it's tough to tell how long they will stay.

Likewise, Diane at the transportation company expressed other perks of the job may entice them:

This job would be good because a lot of them [older people] can make only so much a year and being with the school district we have a lot of time off. We have all the summer holidays. It gives them the job that they don't have to quite sit there and go 'oh I don't want to work here because they're not very flexible with our older population.' There is lots of flexibility here.

Seventy-three-year-old Sherry who works as a driver at the company reflects on the flexibility Diane touts as a benefit for older people working at the company. She said:

From experience, I would say I'm working close to seven hours a day, which is fine because you do need that break. On the ATA bus, I did not get a break sometimes I work 13-14 hours. I said, "I'm too old for this".... Here [transportation company] after my route I go home eat my breakfast take a nap.... I think 5-6 hours for the elderly are plenty as long as they have the breaks and not be on their feet. I would not give up my driving to be in the office because I like being out. I got to have visibility with people. I like working in dispatching, but now it's more complicated even when I was in there for a while. I rather be [*sic*] a driver....

Diane and Sherry both argue that older workers need flexibility in employment, and they both rely on similar constructions of age to make this argument. However, whereas flexible employment produces profit for the company, it does the opposite for the employee especially those in need of money. When companies can readily lay off workers, or hire them part-time, they save money by reducing their commitments (salaries and benefits) to workers. Companies ultimately get stability and flexibility in addition to economic benefits by hiring older workers. This is an unusual combination.

Tellingly, Angela the supervisor at the Retail Store recognizes that old age at times takes on a positive construction by allowing workers more flexibility, choice, and freedom in work. For instance, as she mentioned above while older workers could “flat out refuse” to do work e.g. sell credit cards, other workers (possibly younger like herself) cannot (“people like me, if you refuse to do something like that, you’re out). Thus, she notes older workers’ resistance against what they consider ideal versus “non-ideal” or “ill-fitted” work at this stage in their lives. Although they may need the job for money, unretirees are still reluctant to perform some tasks they feel are meaningless to them.

Seventy-three-year-old Adeline, who works part-time, at the Information Center, compares her work life before retirement with today. She identifies her age as an asset that allows her choice. Her perspective about work expectations changed after taking up retirement and she now has the ability to choose what jobs to do. She said:

I am not the boss. I come in and I do what I have to do, and I go home and don’t think about it [*work*]. I’m not the administrator here. That’s one of the reasons I stayed here because I don’t have that responsibility. I come to do a job, interact, and go home and don’t think about it. When I was in the school it was different. Maybe that’s how I look at the world. I’m too old to apply for anything. I don’t want a job, maybe if I was younger. The only promotion here would be my supervisors’ job, which I don’t want. There are some people who retired and are in administrative positions here. That’s not for me.

Adeline seems content doing her part-time job, and speaks about being “too old” for another position, maybe unless she can reverse time—i.e. become young again. The evidence, however, did not indicate to me a yearning for work or those years back. Instead, during the interview, she seemed adamant about not wanting any other position except the one she currently holds. To some degree, old age status may provide her with some semblance of human agency the “right” to choose the job she deems ideal (right for her “age”) or one where she does not have to take it home with her. However, as I reveal later (chapter 5), Adeline’s need to work shows that the agency she feels which her old age permits is compromised. She is not as free as she may like because of her need for financial and “social security” (see next chapter). Similarly, Nati, whom I mentioned earlier explains, “I could have been a bus driver if I wanted to or work in the office. I did not want to. Not now, if I was younger maybe. I’d rather take care of the children.” Adeline’s and Nati’s financial needs indicate they have to work, but rather than take on heavy workloads, they still have the ability to seek out jobs in which they can limit how much work takes over their lives.

For these informants, “age” seems to provide a sense of freedom from strains, hassles, and rigors, often associated with career jobs. Instead, it draws them towards jobs that are familiar, comfortable, and somewhat easy with limited responsibility and shorter hours.

“It’s Not About the Money”? Exploiting Aged Labor

Employers justifying hiring older workers to provide quality labor at very low wages construct age in such a way as to argue that the job, for them, is “not about the money,” but about seeking meanings in the work they do in unretirement. However, it is all about the money ultimately. Guss explains:

They [older workers] enjoy the interaction with children. They enjoy being part of the educational system, and this is the part of the educational system where we get children to and from school. This is the part where some children are transported to get their meals. For the drivers, I think that's very rewarding. They are part of that system, they are providing for those needy students. The bottom line is, (and that's a motto), "we don't haul furniture." Our cargo is interactive, it's irreplaceable and we treat it that way. To think you are just going to come here to drive a huge vehicle because you enjoy driving a large vehicle that's just a small part of what we do. Because we are the first faces of the school that many of these students see every morning and often the last they see at night as an interaction from school, and that's a crucial part of the education system. That is why we always smile when we greet them. These older adults understand. Some say, "I am not here for the money."

In this narrative, older workers play a critical role in the education system and seem to offer emotional labor to the benefit of the company as they interact with younger passengers. The job may be meaningful to older workers, as Guss implies that it is, but the idea that older workers will provide extra, emotional labor for "free" is understood here since they are not compensated monetarily or otherwise for the extra roles they perform at work, which ultimately benefits the company.

Another example of employers using "meaning" in work to extract unpaid value from older workers' labor stems from Diane's comments that older workers gravitate to this job/company because "I think it's that grandparent thing. Some of them don't get to see their grandkids. I hear them say, "oh this one is the same age as mine [grandchild]." They get to go back to that parenting life." I explain views from older workers in another section illustrating that certain needs push them back to work, including seeking out meanings and social connections in later life. Here, Diane suggests that older employees are drawn to this workplace for exactly this reason. In so doing, the employer can capitalize on how older workers seek to find meanings in unretirement, which she uses to make low-paid jobs more attractive to workers who also bring skills to the workplace.

From my observation, however, older workers seemed to enjoy passing on knowledge or training workers. However, across these companies, some informants continue to show how these traits eventually convert into economic benefits, for the companies they serve. Since companies utilize older workers' skills and experiences to train and mentor other workers without being compensated, unretirees in return may help reduce expenditures or provide organizational resources for training new hires and save on cost. Thus, the company may not invest in additional resources for training or see the need to hire additional employees solely with these qualities. Older workers may become a sort of exploited human resource.

Within the transportation company, for example, my informants indicate that the economic advantages gained from "age" are not mutually beneficial—economic rewards seem only beneficial to employers. Based on some supervisors' and the director's stories, older workers are an important and valued labor source for the profitability of the company. They are a needed human resource because they are cheap labor. As Guss openly disclosed earlier, it is more about the company's needs and less about workers' needs. His assertions suggest to me that it is the company's sole interest to guarantee it's a successful business. The company capitalizes on older workers' labor, exchanged for limited wages while also ignoring workers' needs or desires to perhaps earn a full or higher salary—jobs are part-time with little or no benefits. This seems exploitative on the part of the company as it tries to avoid costs, or pay equitable competitive wages by extracting the most labor from older workers for its own economic gains without adequately compensating them. Like women working in the 20th century who were largely uncompensated or underpaid under the façade that men in their lives were the primary breadwinner and therefore, employers need not pay them much, so too, older workers at the company are likely working under a similar situation like women of the past. Since older

workers are provided with external support (e.g. state benefits such as Social Security and pensions), employers may not see the need to better their wages and they remain poorly compensated as employers take advantage of their labor.

Although the company's desperate need for older workers should offer them more clout to bargain for better wages and benefits, they showed no indication of negotiating or demanding higher wages from the company they served. In fact, I observed that workers at the company often congregated in the break room in their down time, sometimes waiting for another route, eating breakfast/lunch and socializing with peers. These workers were not isolated from each other; they had an opportunity to express concerns or organize to possibly press employers for higher wages and benefits. From my observations, this did not occur. Within the larger group setting, I noticed their conversations revolved around more casual talks of everyday happenings (e.g. grandkids visits, doctor's appointments, food, weather, sharing jokes etc.). These conversations varied greatly from their private stories shared with me during the interviews in which they expressed that wages and benefits are low at the company (e.g. Victor, Vin etc.).

Although poor wages were a common concern, their silence of not sharing financial concerns in the larger group setting, or their lack of collective action may partly explain why the administration does not see it necessary to pay them equitably and possibly why employers exploit their labor, which makes them highly desired. While employees worked under these conditions, and while some were in dire need of money, and complained to me about low wages, they were made aware upfront about the wage and benefit situations at the company but nevertheless accepted the position because of lack of job prospects for older workers in the city. I illustrate later that some older workers voiced concerns about limited job prospects and experiences of age discrimination as they seek employment post-retirement. These circumstances

present feelings of uncertainty and possibly fear about finding work, in which they may not want to demand higher wages presumably for fear of getting fired. They may not demand higher wages and benefits, and simply accept the working situation in efforts to secure employment, especially those in need of economic security. Others simply may not negotiate wages because they are unretired and doing so for non-economic reasons (such as seeking social connection) in which wages do not matter as much (I discuss this in chapter 5).

Tensions of Old Age: Liability and Asset

Several informants suggested that age conveys knowledge and skills essential in work. However, meanings related to it could also diminish their enthusiasm for work. Some older workers shy away from seeking certain jobs, even ones they would like to pursue. Sixty-eight-year-old Amber, a female bus monitor, describes how her acquired life experiences are valuable in work, but even with these experiences, Amber views her aging as limiting not in terms of mental ability but physical ability:

I'm getting old enough where I can't do [raise] the little kids anymore. I'm doing the bigger kids now. I can't lift the physical things. The kids also asked me questions that they won't ask parents because they think their parents are not old enough to know....

In another example, seventy-three-year-old Adeline, who worked 37 years prior to retirement as a librarian at a junior high school, and now as a part-time worker at the Information Center (for financial reasons), seems confident about her people skills, but more daunted by technology than Reba mentioned earlier. Adeline states:

Well, I notice my age as a liability because I am not as familiar with trendy things and I depend on the girls. It's an asset with some people. I don't have any trouble dealing with youngsters or older people [patrons]. To do things for teenagers or college students I don't have a problem but sometimes I feel challenged by the mechanical things.

Sixty-three-year-old Lola similarly argued that her age is "...a liability sometimes. Let's just say when the boss took over he was trying to find the fault in a lot of people." While she was

reluctant to answer when probed further, she felt one could be “faulted” by top-level management for being old. It seems some managers, supervisors, and coworkers do pronounce blatant stereotypes about older workers—usually labeling them as inflexible, incapable of learning or carrying an “aging mindset”—while at other times singing older workers’ praises. I argue that this contradiction can be explained by whether older employees seem to fully consent to work by complying with managers’ directives at work or, by contrast, resisting work. When they resist, they themselves may use constructions of old age to do so, or they may be labeled as “bad workers” based on their age.

Supervisor Diane at the Transportation Company, who labeled old workers as “star” employees earlier, also at times, described unretirees as “rigid” when they resist changes in work. She argued that older workers dislike “change-up” in work, and in comparing them with younger workers, accused them of rigidity:

Diane: Oh yeah. A couple of them [older workers] don’t like when we reroute. One day I had to reroute all the special ed. buses for high schools and they [older workers] came to me and ask why do you do this? They don’t understand we have to save. We can’t have one bus following the other bus to the same place. Change with some of the older ones it’s like they don’t like it, they are not well with it. The older ones have a problem with change the younger ones do not.

Nicole: Why do you think there is a problem with the change? [*Probe*]

Diane: I think it’s the connection with the kids. Some of them have some of their kids for many years. One older monitor has one student for 16 years.

In certain contexts, managers label older workers as inflexible or incapable of learning. In reality, older workers are confident about their ability to learn but become unmotivated when they are required to perform tasks or jobs they feel are meaningless or unfulfilling (or for which they are “not paid” or “not paid enough”). As a result, I argue that age is more likely to be constructed negatively when older workers resist being exploited by their employers. Rather than resisting change *per se* as Diane perceives, it seems the older workers find meaning in low-wage

jobs through the relationships they develop with clients (i.e. the children). Just as was the case with Reba, who knew she could learn new technology if she was motivated to do so, the older drivers know that their true motivation for retaining routes is to retain relationships.

Chapter Summary

In the post-industrial Kansas economy, old age is an important “social clock” (Morgan and Kunkel 2006) reinforcing certain ideologies about older adults. In this chapter, age is constructed not only as an asset towards economic benefits for employers and employees but also as a hindrance. To some degree, the narrative illustrates that old age and the visible signs or changes and beliefs culturally associated with it shapes work behaviors/decisions (i.e. positively or negatively). This is in terms of what jobs older workers do/fit, or why they are favored for some positions over other workers. Informants reveal that being older and unretired is an essential resource for hireability. Unretirees contribute towards greater economic rewards for employers because of the work structure in which they provide cheap, low-wage, though high-quality labor. This seems essential for successful business operations especially given that work is increasingly part-time, flexible and often poorly-paid. Employers also capitalize on older workers’ by extracting attributes they possess from previous training and talents to eliminate the costs of training—both for the older workers themselves and for younger workers who older workers mentor and train. Old age is commonly affiliated with qualities such as interpersonal skills, lived experiences (knowledge and talents) that are desired in work because these help companies save money. Some older workers derive greater dignity and meaning in work through these relationships. However, being older also counts as a liability in work when the skills unretirees possess appear not to fit the market, or when they resist being pressed into work they do not wish to do. In many cases, older workers do or could possess the desired skills but are

unmotivated to apply them or are seeking other meanings in unretirement that are misaligned with some companies or tasks. When this resistance occurs, a negative construction of age emerges.

Chapter 5 - Disrupting Aging and Retirement: Motivations toward Un-retirement

My informants' narratives suggest that they do not, or cannot strictly adhere to the past cultural and social norm of retirement, even when they wish to do so. They reflect an "off-time" life-course. In other words, older workers are not marching sequentially or synchronizing with the previously established old-age trajectory of retirement, but instead, something is pulling them towards "unretirement." While the earlier chapter illustrates how employers hire older workers to squeeze whatever they can out of them to turn a profit, in this chapter, I present the views primarily from older employees. Older workers are using unretirement to squeeze the system to secure a better "retirement" and aging experience, now and for the future.

All older workers in this study are seeking different types of securities, which they believe eroded when they retire. Some are stabilizing "insecure" Social Security and rising health care costs. As they experience out-of-pocket health-care expenses and insufficient Social Security benefits, "unretirement" tends to offer a pathway towards increasing their "nest egg." Others, who are more fiscally secure, use unretirement to stabilize against social and personal losses when they first exited work and retire. These workers seek to achieve "social security," though not Social Security. Still, some older workers, especially those in need of "social security," are also unretiring to guard against "mortality," which they believe will occur if they stay in traditional retirement.

Older workers seeking financial security perceive retirement and age negatively, as they felt forced back into work. Many of them would prefer the conventional retirement, but cannot afford it, and partly blame government support for still needing to work. They receive retirement income for older Americans, provided by social programs—particularly Social Security.

However, these are inadequate and sometimes unavailable to some older workers because they are not “old” enough (e.g. Medicare). Retirement cannot be taken-for-granted in the way they hoped. Thus, they unretire. Insecure benefits prevent older adults from retiring as intended because they are unable to fulfill older adults needs as they once did. Based on my analysis, I argue that unretirement undermines *true* or traditional expectations and meanings about old age—i.e. leisure consumption for retirees who adhere to traditional retirement norms.

Older workers, however, present a negative but deeper construction of age and retirement. This construction lies in the neoliberalization of retirement, suggesting that provisions or privileges that previously were granted to the status of “old” age in welfare states are shrinking.⁴⁷ While historically the state provided a meaningful support for the aging population as it encourages labor force exit of older workers (Macnicol 2015), my informants show currently, state benefits are inadequate. Older workers tend to experience a wide gap between what the government provides for retirement and what they need, and use unretirement to squeeze what they can to remedy this widening gap. I thus argue that unretirement may be the neoliberal answer to what the government cannot provide for retirement. Unretirement embodies a “new” arrangement of funding an insecure retirement.

Older workers indicate provisions by the modern welfare state are not only failing to meet their financial needs but also are increasingly transferring responsibility to them (and possibly employers) for security in retirement years. Some workers feel forced into engaging in a

⁴⁷ “The central neoliberal principle when applied to older people, the prescription implies that old age should be defined down to residual category, and that older people should work as late in life as possible. Retirement should be self-funded and privatized: citizens should only retire when they can afford to do so, sustained by savings accrued during work life and by financial products purchased from private providers. The role of the state would be limited to a residual, means-tested social assistance akin to the nineteenth century Poor Law. Neoliberalism argues that old age should not be a specially protected stage of life and that the privileged status hitherto accorded to it in welfare states can no longer be justified. Older people should therefore be forced to work later in life (whether or not there are jobs for them) or become equal competitors in an enlarged reserve army of unemployed labor, and state pension support should be withdrawn” (Macnicol 2015: 20-21).

“do-it-yourself” effort towards improving economic stability. They perceive it as an imposition and do not want this responsibility, and use being “old” to justify why the state should provide for them. However, even though they unretire, it may not protect or improve their needs. Older workers find themselves in workplaces, but often in jobs that are part-time, with minimum or low wages, conditional or no benefits, or working for companies in a financial “pinch” themselves. They thus may remain an economically vulnerable group and become increasingly frustrated with unretirement, even though at times, they receive unexpected benefits, and perhaps this remains the only option towards economic security. Thus, these factors likely prolong their stay in unretirement and seemingly construct age and retirement negatively.

By contrast, older workers experiencing what I term “social *insecurity*,” felt less forced back into work and perceived retirement and old age more successfully and positively than counterparts struggling with “Social *inSecurity*.” This situation occurs as unretirement allows them to regain social connection, activeness, routines, and structure that were lost when they left productive work the first time. Unlike older workers seeking economic stability, and who generally view traditional retirement as the ideal of old age, those seeking “social security” reject the traditionalist view. Work is all they know and felt loss without. As I mentioned earlier, they may be experiencing a “roleless-role (Szinovacz 2003:12) because work remains central in their lives (Sicker 2002:1; Hedge et al. 2006). They perceived unretirement as the ideal retirement and aging experience.

Surprisingly, I also detected a deeper meaning about old age as workers “undo” retirement especially among those seeking out social stability. At times, they deliberately use unretirement as a mechanism to reduce fears about their mortality. Unretirement is a shield/buffer against getting closer to “death,” or slowing it down, which seemingly emerges

with the onset of retirement—i.e. old age—as they give up productive work life. By accruing “time” again in work as opposed to “time” in customary retirement, these older workers tend to deny their own mortality and “oldness.” When they perceive unretirement in this way, they redefine meanings and experiences of retirement and age in a positive light. However, when older workers perceive “mortality,” as synonymous with “old” age, and unretirement as punctuating it or the “right” way to retire, they “other” those who embrace conventional retirement.

The Health Care Problem—Can Unretirement “Fix” It?

Despite diversity among older workers in terms of where they worked prior to retirement, the types of jobs older workers unretire into, socioeconomic standing (educational attainment and work history are proxies for SES), and gender, their narratives reflected serious economic concerns in retirement years. Across the variety of hiring companies, several informants consistently expressed insecurity in the current health care system (i.e. the cost and availability of health coverage), but also called attention to their future health care. As they transition into retirement, health care is negatively affected. They find themselves with a reduction in benefits or coverage and rising health care costs, which they struggle to pay. Even more, some older workers though retired, do not yet qualify for some age benefits such as Medicare to help cover health-care costs. For example, sixty-three-year-old Ingrid, who earned a high school diploma and attended one year of business school, worked many jobs before retirement (such as a sales clerk at Sears, book keeping at Meredith Corp, and an office manager for a car dealership). She returned to work in a full-time capacity as a store sales manager at the Local Shopping Center. After working multiple jobs and taking an early retirement at age 62, Ingrid explained she unretired because she worried about insecurity in health care and finances. For her, working,

[...] is a paycheck... If I didn't need the money, I probably wouldn't be working full-time. I have investments and I am financially ok but I worry about the future, about my health care cost and I don't want to let go of that income. It's hard work. I sometimes climb ladders, I put up displays, and I change windows. I do a lot a lot [sic] of physical labor too, it's very hard, and I'm on my feet all day...

Ingrid alluded to some financial investments but she seemed concerned about her future finances particularly in relation to health care security. Though she did not provide details about healthcare, she mentioned feeling worried about the future in relation to health care cost. Ingrid envisions money might become an issue and is apparently trying to accumulate as much as possible to keep her secure in the future. To some extent, this concern may inform why she continues to work despite her claims of having investments and resources. Her need to hold on to money also influences how she is “doing” retirement. To earn enough money (possibly to safeguard health care costs and coverage), Ingrid unretires in a full-time capacity and even doing so in “hard work” that is physically demanding. When she decides to make a change or anticipates leaving work again, she still sees herself as not “fully” retiring, but working some more years perhaps to squeeze together as much savings as she can, not only for health care security but also towards leisure retirement. However, Ingrid later remarks wanting to leave the workplace and has a specific time when she plans to leave because there are other things she wants to do. She expressed:

My plan in pencil is to go part-time maybe at age 65 when I could get full Social Security. I'm not collecting yet [Social Security benefits] and I plan to travel. My husband and I have started some of that. I want to continue my writing. I think the physical demands will make me leave. It's the reason I don't want to work. I don't want to all the time.

Ingrid suggests that though she needs unretirement, she may be doing so unwillingly given the intensity of work, her age, and her other retirement dreams. She seems conflicted. She stated earlier “I worry about the future, about my health care cost and I do not want to let go of that

income.” Yet, even though she indicates a need for unretirement, she does not foresee herself working well into advanced age either, especially in a job of this nature. However, Ingrid further expressed that money and “lots” of it will keep her working longer, yet she also indicates she does not want to work longer and that she also wants to have fun—leisure retirement. When I asked her about reasons for working in this bridge job or another, Ingrid stated frankly “not much. I guess it has to be something big like a lot of money but I don’t know if I see myself here for a while.” Her emphasis on a need for money or “a lot of money” as a reason to stay, and her earlier claims of “having investments and being financially ok” but still working, suggest to me that she thinks about the need for savings and wealth. However, it is about accruing “more” of it so she can have fun and feel more secure about future expenses such as health care cost. Money is important, and Ingrid does not want to let it go now that she is older. Hence, she may stay in unretirement longer as opposed to enjoying leisure retirement.

In another example, consider sixty-seven-year-old Charmayne, a “young-old” woman unretired under similar circumstances as Ingrid. Charmayne attended beauty school after graduating high school and worked at a beauty shop as a young adult, but later left because the hair sprays and perms bothered her. She later worked at Hobby Lobby in Dodge City as a sales clerk before retiring and then unretiring. As Charmayne distinguishes between her work lives before retirement and today, health care and income security are important to her. She claimed:

Well, I think growing up we work to get money to have extra income. It was not to supplement any income. Today it’s different. In 1997, my husband became disabled. I needed health insurance after my husband got sick. Now, I work to support myself. I do this job and I’m also a part-time network marketer. I hope to quit this job and do network marketing full-time.

Charmayne suggests that she has experiences in later life such as health care needs that she did not anticipate when she initially went to work that makes her think about money more. Similarly,

seventy-three-year-old Sherry, who has several revenue streams, also uses unretirement as a safety net—especially now that her husband is sick. She explained why she decided to go back to work as:

My house is not paid for yet. I am the type of person; I like to have a little extra money. My husband has money coming in from his Social Security and I do too. I got my retirement but it's just kind of [*sic*] nice to have some extra income because my husband has been very sick so, we needed the extra money.

To some extent, at least from Ingrid's, Charmayne's, and Sherry's stories, if they had enough financial resources, they possibly would not work. Sherry and Charmayne struggle to work while caring for an ailing spouse, but they feel they must do so while they are still able. When I asked about leaving the workforce Sherry said,

I tell my husband, as soon as the house is paid for. I thought as long as I feel good, as long as my body is saying I can still do that [work]. I might work for another couple years. It just depends on my husband's health.

As my informants explain the economic need for “unretirement,” they also tell a story about “retirement.” Several indicated that their retirement years turned unpleasant as finances started to decline, alluding to insufficient benefits provided by the welfare state. These benefits are seen as inadequate and cannot fund retirement. For example, Charmayne (I analyze further examples in the next section) expresses that although she has access to a constant income stream, current age-based retirement benefits are insufficient, forcing her back to work, and for many hours. When I asked: “what do you think about working in later life? What kind of work do you think older workers should do in later life?” She remarked:

Well, I enjoy it. I know working in later life, I would not be able to do this and that with grandkids and kids but I don't know what else to do. I think so many of us older people have to work to supplement Social Security because it's not enough to keep us going and cover health care. I think maybe volunteer work and do things that they want to do instead of working because they have to. I think maybe because, over the years, you give to your kids and doing for others than yourself, so as you get older, you should do things that you want to

do. I think it depends upon the person. I don't mind putting in 35 hours per week. Some [older workers] may do five or ten hours.

Charmayne feels working gives her purpose and enjoyment, even if she has less time for family. However, she also seemingly would prefer to engage in activities other than work (perhaps leisure, volunteering, or even spending time with her family), but has little or no other choice given the insecurity in "Social Security" she feels. Unretirement is the only way to secure her life and she indicates becoming personally responsible, taking matters into her own hands by unretiring—i.e. transference of responsibility from the institution (government) to the individual (I provide more examples in the next section). In other words, work remains essential for keeping or maintaining a secure and healthy in old age and retirement. When I inquired about cutting back on her hours at work, Charmayne firmly stated, "No! Well, I guess I work just to get that extra pay because you still have to go to the doctor and pay that bill. Everything goes up!" She further stated what would keep her in the current bridge job (or another) as:

It would be the financial part of it, to supplement income. Well, I had divorced after 39 years of marriage and after my husband died, I was able to take his widow's benefit so I work to supplement and keep health insurance.

Thus, given her current economic circumstances (i.e. insecurities in health care and income), Charmayne experiences and understands age as possibly an insecure period in life if she remains retired. Although she plans to modify her work life—as she mentioned earlier, "I hope to quit this job"—she also expressed she will stay longer in work, perhaps in another full-time job—network marketing—to secure her finances, as opposed to maybe exiting work permanently.

Other informants specify that efforts towards income security via the practice of unretirement represent negative consequences for age. In other words, securing economic needs seemingly comes at the cost. It interrupts or postpones retirement dreams for some. Don, a sixty-three-year-old man, whom I mentioned in the previous chapter, unretires as an assistant cook for

the Senior Service Center after retiring as a caseworker for adolescents, the mentally ill, the elderly, and prison sex offenders. He also experiences health care and income insecurities, which influence his decision to return to work to provide security for him and his wife. In fact, he, like other informants (e.g. Ingrid), identified these needs as the only reasons why he is working in old age. Don expressed:

Actually, I think it's [work is] a very good idea as long as it's like part-time. I think working is necessary nowadays. Also, I think there are more opportunities for older people, and older people wanting to work and needing to work. For me, it's to take care of myself and wife. There is no real dental insurance available and that's why I am working so I can help my wife with the implants.

As Don explains his motivations for unretirement, he indicates that at this stage in life, healthy secure aging is important to him and his wife, but unmet if he stays retired. However, he indicates it is not only him that needs or wants work in old age, but other older people are doing the same, and possibly for similar health care security reasons. For example, Charmayne as noted above, stated that "I think so many of us older people have to work to supplement Social Security because it's not enough to keep us going and cover health care." Thus, Don and others demonstrate that many older adults face economic insecurities. This may inform us about the gravity of the finance insecurity issue that is affecting many older Americans or their experiences of age and retirement today.

However, my informants recognize that unretirement does not easily provide security. Unretirement, though needed, seems daunting for many older employees, which stems from the structure of work or the labor market more broadly—i.e. job availability. Don bluntly stated, "After retirement, finding a job was not as easy to do." Although he stated earlier that there are "more opportunities for older people, and older people wanting to work and needing to work," in

his reality, opportunities are still limited. I observed some frustration in his voice as he recalled experiences of finding work given the Kansas job market. He elaborated:

My wife needed dental work so I went back for that. The job prospects, here [in the city], they're actually terrible. There are very few jobs. I think it's because of the nature of the city. It's all students in my opinion. I've seen some older people when I go to Walmart. Actually, most are older than I am....

Despite being well-educated, earning two Masters Degrees (Philosophy and Psychology), and being highly skilled, Don believed holding old age membership makes it difficult for him (i.e. a liability) to find work because he must compete with students. This challenge may ultimately impede his ability to secure health care in old age. This situation may not give him any confidence or assurance that he can provide the security he needs and may explain why he works as an assistant cook, a position vastly different from his lifelong career. Although Don is taking matters into his own hands by working in old age, given the depressed job market in the region and his current work position, he may continue to face financial burdens in aging. For example, when I asked how he felt about his job, Don boldly expressed, "I like it. The pay is hideous. Kansas pays terribly. The people are great." He later informed me that there are "no changes in pay or promotions offered." Moreover, he stated that what will keep him in this job was, "Just more money. The environment is very nice, the people are very good as long as you do your job." Though Don gets enjoyment out of work, there is no doubt that he needs or is concerned about money now that he is older. He may remain insecure, not due to lack of trying/working, but because of low job prospects for older adults in Kansas, terrible wages, lack of promotions, and lack of alternatives.

Although older workers show that unretirement as a pathway towards economic stability is not at all stable or secure (an unreliable mechanism), for many, it is the only solution available. The director of the Transportation Company, one of the main companies hiring older workers in

my study, indicated that health care security might become unrealistic for older workers at the company. Although he hires unretirees because they offer valuable economic (and other) rewards, Guss understands that “unretirement” does not equally benefit workers (i.e. economically). Although older workers work at the company to garner wages for medical costs, the director openly admits that the company offers little or no benefits such as health care. Only workers with full-time status, which older workers seldom hold, have access to health insurance or benefits. Guss elaborated:

There are not a lot of benefits here but we offer sick leave, attendance bonuses, and a minimum amount of personal leave but it is pretty low. Then the [workers] are eligible to get dental and vision but not health insurance. That may change, and in the event that it does, it may make life easier and then it may not. I think it will help. There are some of them who retire and may not be eligible for Medicare. They may not be old enough for Medicare but they are old enough to retire. So, we are a bridge for them to earn some extra income.

Guss clearly states that “we are a bridge for them to earn some extra income,” but he does not offer adequate benefits and some older workers are ineligible for other age benefits due to their “age” (old enough to retire but not old enough for Medicare to help cover health care costs). Likewise, Patrick, who supervises at the company, expressed that there is limited insurance and, when available, older workers often do not qualify. He states, “from the way that I understand it we have vision and dental and for staff, we have the health insurance. Now for the upcoming year, I don’t know if that’s going to change. Some elderly folks that come in here are already on insurance plans but I do believe if we have health care plans we will get more [older people] in this day and age...”

The economic insecurity older workers feel seems to be perpetuated as they unretire because of the structure of work itself. As Guss described in an earlier chapter, (see chapter 4)

jobs at the company are generally supplemental, part-time, and wages are low. One older man, sixty-six-year-old Victor, who works at the company, agrees:

It's [work is] not full-time, it's also seasonal. It's kinda [*sic*] hard to make a living on that. There are no benefits. You get some sick leave and vacation. The hours are another thing... This is the school district so they can't pay that much.

Victor suggests that given the structure of the business and lack of adequate pay, older workers may be unable to get the economic provisions they need in unretirement. Another employer Hal, the assistant director of the Information Center who also hires older workers and characterizes them as assets (see chapter 4), purports that though benefits are available at his company, they are also conditional depending on hours worked (part-time/full-time). Only certain types of workers are eligible for benefits:

It's not related to age but any employee who's considered part-time. Those under 20 hours are hourly, and there are no benefits attached, but full-time workers have the opportunity to participate in health insurance under the same plan as [this city]. They have dental insurance. All employees above 20 hours pay into KPERS. It is a public employer retirement system. There is also basically paid vacation leave based on number of hours you work. There is some additional leave time for longevity. The benefits are quite nice.

Hal denied that benefits such as health care were an “aging” issue *per se*. However, one must either work in full-time positions or stay with the company for many years to obtain such security/benefit. This view is on par with some of my older informants opting to work in full-time positions at the company. In fact, all my informants at the company (Jenny, Reba, Sonia) worked in a full-time capacity except Adeline, who works part-time; but as I illustrate in the upcoming section, Adeline struggles in unretirement as it falls short of her aging ideal—i.e. retirement.

Although unretirees largely returned to work to improve their economic standing, after suffering from illness or finding needs or desires for more income in later life, they also found

other benefits in it. Despite poor wages and job prospects, Don is not averse to working in old age, “actually, I think it’s [work is] a very good idea...” because it gives him a sense of enjoyment. For him, work means, “exercise, money and helps me organize my time better.” Ingrid who unretired for economic reasons and who might have preferred traditional retirement said she unexpectedly receives other rewards while unretiring. When I asked her about working in later life, she expressed:

I think one, I wish I was just rich and did not have to work. I wish I could live out in Hollywood. The other side, it’s [work is] good for everyone. It keeps you active and I know myself. I need structure. I need structure [sic] and if I were not working, I would have Netflix marathons. It’s scary and I watched as my dad did that. I think it’s [work is] crucial in some capacity. You have to do something. Whatever they have a flair for or interest in, and it does not have to be financial, just something, whatever makes them happy. My husband is a photographer and plans not to retire. You do what you can do at any age. It keeps you human.

Charmayne mentioned earlier that work actually provides some enjoyment for her. When I asked her specifically about what work means to her, however, she pondered and stated, “Wow! I’ve never stopped to think. Well, I think it gives me a reason to get up in the morning and work and be around people...” Apart from the unexpected non-economic rewards of unretirement or working in old age, Charmayne did not actually seem elated about working. It seems there is a difference between the idea of staying busy through work, and the actuality of it, which is less pleasant. For seventy-three-year-old Sherry, however, unretiring is rewarding for her as she explains what work means to her:

Hmmm, I really don’t know. I’m comfortable with it. I’m satisfied with it, there are times that things go in a way that I’m not very pleased but then a lot of times you don’t know the whole story of what’s gone on so I just kinda [kind of] talk to the driver myself. Of course, I am a trainer too. I was a trainer for some years. I’ve been training for 5 years now. I did first aid, driving. I like this job. It means a lot to me.

Sherry added, “I feel comfortable and satisfied. I am enthusiastic. I want to get up in the morning and come to work whereas before when I worked with [another company] I did not.” In contrast

to Charmayne, Sherry became more convinced about the benefits of work as she reflected on the details of her job.

These findings illustrate that older workers, though they vary (e.g. by social standing), experience insecurity issues such as health care in similar ways. They express an uncertainty not only about their present but also about future retirement years and how can they secure or sustain healthy aging. Healthcare insecurities in old age also highlight problems with major institutions—i.e. our health care system. Their need for more health care security and unretiring to secure it may suggest that current social programs for the aged in the U.S. are inadequate and problematic of retirees. Given the work structure and labor market (i.e. usually low wages, limited benefits, part-time work, limited job prospects), older workers are often unable to meet their economic goals in unretirement, though some do encounter a sense of structure, enjoyment, and purpose in their work.

The “Insecurity” of Social Security and the “Undoing” of Retirement

Some older workers are in need of extra income for fun and entertainment. Others are in desperate need of money or extra income particularly to bolster Social Security. They perceive aging and retirement as a time of “insecure” Social Security and worsening economic conditions. Most unretirees receive government age-based assistance because they attained the mark constituting old age —i.e. retirement. Some, however, identify inadequacy in these benefits (i.e. Social Security) as forcing them back to work. For example, seventy-three-year-old Vin, unretiring for over eight years at the Transportation Company, works precisely for this reason. When I asked about working in later life, Vin vehemently expressed:

Outside of the fact that there is no law against it and in fact, there should be a law against it [working in late life]. We should be sitting by the riverside fishing or playing golf. Older people that have worked did their deal already you know and shouldn't have to go back to work. We should get enough Social Security but it isn't going to happen!

Vin contributed to Social Security for many years. He stated, “I was contributing into Social Security since 1955.” He then took a risk on starting a company, lost money, and his Social Security benefits were inadequate to support him. He expressed that, after graduating from college,

I went on to work in Alabama and worked in a corporation and moved up in it. Then I decided to come back to Kansas in 1976. When I came back I started working for a major utility company, both gas, and electric. I worked all over the state. I retired in 1998. Then I did odd things. I started a business but it did not work out. I used up all my saving.

Vin suggests that in the absence of significant savings, he could not survive on Social Security alone. He further elaborated that insufficient funds are why he remains in work. When I asked him about what will keep him in this job or another bridge job, Vin stated “my finances. If someone offers me something more, I will go there. I don’t make much here.” He remarked when I asked about his plans to leave the workplace:

You may take retirement whenever you have sufficient funds to do so. It may be 35, 20 or 70 years old. It is based on the financial ability of the person to have money. Because why would you work if you have sufficient funds. I plan to leave when I have enough money.

Many other unretirees expressed that the need for unretirement or reliance on working longer as a policy issue. They also tend to suggest that government benefits as their main form of financial support in retirement years. Sixty-eight-year-old Sonia, who is well educated and worked full-time at the Information Center, described accruing time/age working beyond the legal retirement age to maximize or collect as many state benefits as possible. In this sense, she is strategically preparing for a more secure retirement and aging (i.e. securing Social Security and Medicare). She expressed:

I don’t talk about this here at work because I think there are some disadvantages to having your employers know what your plans are but when I talk to my family and close friends I say to them, when I turn sixty-eight I plan to leave again. I could do it now and

still get benefits because of my age, but I want to get the most Social Security. It's very close to the maximum I will ever get but also at seventy-five, I will qualify for Medicare because I will reach that age you know. So these are the two things that I am waiting for.

Even as Sonia unretired, I noticed some reservations about her views related to working at this stage in life. She said:

So honestly, work is not where I take my life satisfaction. It's what you have to do to sustain yourself. It's just money. I do not aspire to any other position. There was an opportunity that I could have applied for, an administrative position but I felt it distanced me even more from the public....

Although she needs income and is staying longer in work to secure more benefits, Sonia seems less excited about the process.

We Dream of “Retirement”

Several informants wish they could retire and do whatever they want. In being forced to work to cover their finances, they may be expending energy they wish they could channel into activities other than work. Vin and his wife note that they would rather relax and do charitable work, but will likely continue working as long as they have energy, making it less likely they will get to do what they want in retirement (if they burn out). In Vin's words:

I would really like to say, “I am retired.” I've been promising myself that I would play golf 3 times a week; I have not done it. Travel more. I have so many things I would love to do, sitting under a tree, watching the clouds it's very relaxing, or doing charity work, just whatever it is in the present time, a positive thing. Help someone, but I have to work.

Although Vin holds on to this tradition of retirement or wants the rewards for his lifetime social participation and contribution in work, his idea of the golden years has been halted by unretirement. Seventy-three-year-old Tory started working with the same company in December 2011. She claimed, “I came back for money and being with people.” Like her husband, Tory sees herself unretiring well into advanced age or contingent on her husband's work prospects. When I asked her about plans to leave the workforce, she remarked:

Well, probably a lot will have to do with the financial situation or something happens and I don't feel I can do my job correctly. Then I will look at not coming in anymore. I want to try to work as long as I can. Situations tend to change. As long as I can, I will try to do it [work]. If I am still physically capable, I'll do it even into age 80....

Although Tory indicated working longer, she later showed some preference to working less at this stage in life and doing other activities. However, she cannot afford it. Tory feels that being older, work is somewhat “chaotic” for her while “home” provides “order” in her life. She captured this view expressing her aspirations stating:

I'm 73, why would I think about doing anything [*laughs*]. Right now, I aspire to be home and getting my house back into order. It has not been looked after. Two years ago, I had carpal tunnel surgery and my house suffered. I couldn't sew, garden. So I would just like to be able to have enough money to do what I want to do and be able to go home and have some sort of semblance of order at home.

In another example, sixty-four-year-old Jenny works at the Information Center to accrue income for herself and family. Jenny unretired in a non-traditional sense—i.e. she took a long vacation from the center, then returned doing the same job in the adult service department. She seems to carry a social perspective of old age as a life stage to retreat from work life and transition to a less regimented life of traditional retirement—i.e. leisure. Nevertheless, with her needs, she works. Jenny expressed:

Um, mostly finances will keep me working. We [Jenny and her husband] wanted to spend time outdoors. I would consider retiring from here and do something part-time. If I could work part-time, somewhere thoughtless that does not take time and thought I will do it.

As she seeks to expand her economic welfare, it comes at a cost—i.e. forfeiting her retirement by staying longer at work. She claimed:

It's [work is] important. I'm at a point I would like to quit but we can't afford it. We [Jenny and her husband] are trying to help our kids pay student loans and car payment. It's important. I like what we are doing but it is not the biggest part of life....

Unretiring but Still Insecure

Unretirement acts as a “double-edged sword.” Although there is an opportunity for work, older workers may not necessarily acquire the economic resources they need. Across the worksites, the majority of unretirees (twenty-two) worked in part-time positions. Most worked in low-paying jobs with limited or no benefits. There are few opportunities to receive promotions and raises. These circumstances raise another issue for many workers related to the economic security they need. Older workers find themselves unretiring to make up for the inadequacy of Social Security, but find themselves not much improved. At the transportation company, Guss notes, “there are no promotions but annually there is a merit increase. Some years, there is a cost of living increase but very modest.” Seventy-three-year-old Tory who works at the transportation company noted:

Well, you have people in dispatch, someone that works in the office. Unless they’re fired or quit, you don’t get much of an opportunity and to be honest with you I don’t think I want any of them. I found sitting in the office when I was a secretary is too much sitting.

In another example, sixty-four-year-old Jenny works full-time but still feels insecure demonstrating limited wages where she works. She expressed:

When I was first hired, we were being paid just a little over minimum wage but they gave us 4 weeks’ vacation to make up. Then about five years later the city did a city-wide pay evaluation so our pay was bumped up almost double because workers in other agencies were getting paid almost twice as much if they had college degrees. Our wages are horrible in relation to the cost of living. We can get a merit raise if evaluations are great. We don’t really have those unless you want to be a manager or so, which I’m not.

Sixty-eight-year-old Denise, who works part-time, at the Local Shopping Center, expressed that though she thinks about money more, and although she works, it is harder to acquire at this stage in her life. She remarked:

Well to be reminded, you don’t make the money. You have to think about the money situation. Me being denied anything because of my age, no, nothing I can think of. I do ask about my senior discount and I get it....

At times, Denice utilizes senior discounts to save on costs because money is tight.

Unretirement seems to allow some workers the opportunity to get closer to their dream of retirement/aging –i.e. earning extra income towards leisure consumption—but in so doing, it infringes on their actual leisure and retirement time. At the same time, regardless of the need for unretirement and amidst the frustrations that emerge with it, some older workers derive unexpected benefits. For example, unlike Vin who saw unretirement purely as a means to an end, his wife Tory showed she receives other benefits from work. When I asked her specifically about what work means to her, she said:

Well, I guess it's a day you can come in and see different ones that you know. It seems that is always some kind of learning experience. Regardless of what you're doing it seems that something is different each time. You learn to adjust to different things.

Hatti works under the same work structure as Vin. She, however, seems to experience a different outcome in unretirement. In fact, not only is Hatti able to obtain the extra income she needs towards leisure consumption (i.e. fun and vacationing), but I also noticed unretirement provides her with other added benefits. She expressed favorability towards unretirement. She stated her meaning of work as “It pays. It means I can live [laughs]. It's fun. I love the kids. I get baby [pause] “oh I lost the word,” I get my child fix. Hatti expressed other meanings of work as well:

Actually to help with expenses but I had everything paid for. You still need money. You have taxes. You have insurance on the house although my house is paid for. I still have the taxes and insurance. It also makes me feel better I don't just want to sit at home. I mean, I sit at home for a while, watch TV, clean, but then I will be bored and then if I want to go out shopping, I have no money [laughs].

Hatti further said,

Um, when I worked before I did not go to work until things got harder. Cost of living went up, my husbands' paycheck didn't. So I went to work and work there in the bakery for all my life. It's a lot easier what I do now. Actually, it's part-time; I'm retired which I have money coming in but this [job] gives me more. So I work part-time to help with expenses and save for my vacation. The workload is easier. I monitor on the bus. I can

play with the kids, we can sing, tell jokes, they tell me secrets. So it's fun, it's a part-time job, and it helps bring the extra finance I need.

In other examples, unretirement offers positive meanings for age, which may motivate workers to stay longer even if they are not meeting their main economic goals. Jenny expressed:

In a lot of ways, I like it because I feel like I am keeping up with technology. Reba [another informant] and I talk and say in 10 years we are going to be those people that come in and say, "my kids gave me this technology, how do I work this, can you show me?" But it's nice, we keeping up with technology here. I love it, we are keeping up with the kids in circulation. I had one girl, she would come to me for advice, and we talked a lot about moving. I still stay in touch with her.... I think it's completely how people feel and what they want to do. I know some are limited by Social Security if you earn a certain amount then they cut back. I think this is ridiculous if you are willing to work and paying into the system there is no reason why you should not get a salary and Social Security. Maybe you pay higher taxes but you should get both.

For Denice, she will continue to work in this job or another bridge job because it offers her additional benefits related to regaining her sense of self and "belonging." She said,

Just the comradery. One thing I noticed after I left K-State [past job], I did not belong anywhere. I did not have any place that I belong. I'm surprised that this just came to my mind. Now I feel I am getting my identity back. I say I work at Christopher banks. I was shocked when I figured that out. When I was leaving K-State, I felt I did not belong. I felt like a mom leaving her kid. Well, not mine because I was working with the college kids a lot.

These older workers' narratives illustrate that although they vary in economic status, they consistently showed a need for secure finances in old age. Whether or not they needed income for everyday expenses, health care, to supplement Social Security, or for recreational purposes, together these unretirees illustrate they are not financially sound in retirement years. Unretiring under these conditions mostly denotes a negative understanding of age and retirement. Other informants present an image of age and retirement as a time for leisure. However, it is unrealized by declining resources/savings and a need for unretirement. Several informants expressed a dim view of "retirement" after remaining in it for a while. Retirement did not offer them the

enjoyment they sought in old age, while unretirement is now favored as offering a more positive construction of aging and retirement.

From Social “*Insecurity*” to Social “*Security*”

While the majority of informants are concerned with the economic side of retirement and aging, others experience personal or social loss in interaction, production, being visible, maintaining structured active lives, and routines. They disengage from retirement because of the dullness it brings to their lives. Keeping busy remains a significant part of their well-being towards positive experiences in aging. These workers represent a different reality of age and retirement compared to others like Vin, Sonia, Charmayne and Don who unretire under financial circumstances. They find themselves financially secure, but socially insecure—social capital rather than pension Social Security. Ned, a seventy-four-year-old unretired man, who works as a senior estimator at the Manufacturing Company six days per week, though his motive is not financially driven claimed:

I’ve known too many people that retired into to their 50s and 60s and basically, they don’t have a goal. One of my best friends works at Walt Disney still. He does it [work] because he enjoys it. I have one that works at a bank. I had a friend his goal in life was to be a greeter at Walmart. The main thing is contact. You need to be physically active but use your mind to. Some [people] retire and after 6 months, they go back because they get bored. I’m full-time now and I don’t have to be but I want to. It keeps me sharp. Maybe I’ll go down to 3 days. I basically work 6 days a week.

Ned feels retirement creates experiences of “boredom” and decline in physical, social, and even mental acuity, while working could prevent these states. He works because,

Well, it’s something I enjoy. People I know. I’m 74 now and people ask when I will retire. I don’t have much hobbies. They really just not important in my life. I don’t need to work. Financially, I don’t need to work but it’s something to do. That’s not a really good answer but it’s something to do I don’t want to sit around the house. My wife and I married 51 years it’s not that we don’t get along at all but you can just stand each other that long and go to that many coffee shops [*laughs*]. It’s [work is] some place to go, something to do. I look forward to tomorrow. Take like the [university] building for example. The new one, I put all that together. Here is all the dimension in that building

[shows me his plans]. I have to type up the architect information and give a bid to do the projects. I have many many [*sic*] projects. I go all over the country.

Ned seeks a sense of accomplishment and appreciation in old age through his ongoing work.

Work seems all he knows and may age less successful and feels loss without it. In another example, 83-year-old Gretta who worked part-time as a customer service representative excitingly remarked:

I'll keep working here. I have no intention to leave. Before my boss signed the lease for this place, I was worried. I have thought what I will do in two years if she leaves. I've given it some thought I think I will go to my good buddy who runs a private business and ask for a job. I don't want to stop. The only thing will stop me is if I could not drive. Why wouldn't I keep working? It keeps my mind alert. I don't want to do anything but work. Some lady came up and asks me the other day "why are you still working?" I said, "why wouldn't I!"

While informants unretiring for economic reasons construct age and retirement negatively, those seeking "social security" perceive age more positively in unretirement because it averts those social losses. One older woman described, it is important for older adults to keep active and remain in work. Sixty-eight-year-old Denice, who works as a part-time sales agent in the Local Shopping Center, explains reasons how she decided to go back to work as:

I was just spending money all the time. Then you don't have a routine. I just didn't have one. I was just getting fat and lazy....When I retired I had to think what I wanted to do. I worked at Bed Bath and beyond but it was only a Christmas job. I just walked into this one [job] and that was it. I had to do sale. I have been working here about one year.

Like Ned, the absence of a work identity seems to create a sense of loss and void for her. As Denice describes her decision to unretire, she explains what her retirement experience was like. After being in retirement as a "natural" step in the life course, she begins to experience what seems a period of dissatisfaction. Remaining retired has negative implications on her aging experience and well-being. She seems to flounder after retiring trying to find a structured lifestyle and routine. In other words, Denice holds an unfavorable perception of the traditional

retirement behavior, a view markedly different from Vin and others. Returning to work offers a source of control and enjoyment in retirement years and mitigates these social losses associated with it. She also perceives remaining in retirement as even physically disadvantageous towards her health. As noted previously, securing health is an important need for aging adults and one reason some informants opt to unretire. Here, Denice shows that unretiring provides an opportunity to enjoy healthy aging and regain what she values in old age—i.e. an active, productive, social life. She elaborated when I asked about working in later life, and how much work should older workers do as:

Well, I was not in the busy mode anymore when I retired, but you have to do something if not you will turn into mush. I think anything they [older adults] enjoy they should do it. The lady that lives next to me is 91. She works part-time at burger king. When I told her I would retire, again she said: “what are you going to do?” She thought I was going to die off or something. She was concerned for me. Young people think I should stay home. Well, that will all depend on health. Once you are active, you are healthy. You should do something to keep you mobile not like telemarketing because you’re just sitting.

The negative association with retirement is reinforced when her ninety-one-year-old neighbor somewhat informally sanctions her for indicating retiring again.

Unretirement, a Guard against Mortality

“Social security” remains essential in the lives of several older workers and unretirement offers a mechanism to attain it. However, they raise another interesting point that I refer to as the “hastening one’s mortality,” why they return to work. Denice whom I mentioned above relates retirement as “getting” closer to death. As she communicated with a much older friend, she indicates perhaps if she retires, death is inevitable or as she stated, she will “turn to mush” or “going to die off.” Seventy-three-year-old, Adeline, described, “I’ll have to do something. I need to be engaged in something because I will just sit and wither away.” Adeline seems to feel some sense of hopelessness in retirement. Like Denice, she also alluded to the notion of the “hastening

one's mortality" if remaining in retirement, and possibly warding it off by unretiring. In this sense, Adeline (and Denice) tend to construct old age and traditional retirement negatively as taking her to the end of the life course (i.e. death—"wither away") or quickening it. Instead, unretirement constructs aging more positively towards a sense of denying "mortality."

In a similar vein, Angela, the middle-aged supervisor of the Retail Store describes her thoughts about why older individuals retire or unretire capturing that work prevents them from "withering away." In this context, Angela feels retirement is a less appealing stage that older individuals should refrain. As she explains below, retirement seems to disengage individuals and leads to them "physically" fading out. Angela stated:

Older people want to stay active and don't wither away. Some have that mindset. I think older workers who have worked at Fort Riley or K-State who has not had a transition or challenge in life or life changing event they grew up and have that mindset that at 65 I need to retire and scoot away. But that's not so for others. You have to get out that mindset....

Interestingly, other informants like Tory who works because of economic constraints perceives unretirement/retirement experiences in strict juxtapositions as "life versus death," "activity versus inactivity," and "happiness" versus "unhappiness." She expressed:

Well, whether it's work or volunteering or doing something else, I believe that the more a person has or that they can do to keep busy and active the happier they are going to be, probably the longer they are going to live. Because I am sure you probably heard stories of people who retire and sit in rocking chairs, have nothing that they want to do but just sit there for the rest of their life, and that's not very long usually [referring to dying].

In particular, Tory suggests remaining active seems to promote a positive, happy and satisfying aging experience that in the absence of doing so, leads to decline, unhappiness and perhaps the "end of life." To this extent, Tory seems to imply that if one is more active in old age, they can have a longer life. As she asserts, those who retire, sit, and do nothing, are hastening death. This

thinking suggests that engaging in productive work becomes a catalyst to punctuate biological aging (senescence) or one can control longevity.

Denial of Sameness

Overall, older workers' who unretire to retain "social security" endorse an ideal way to "age" and retire. However, as they hold this perception, they present themselves as different from peers that adhere to the traditional retirement route. For example, Tory's narrative earlier formulated an idea of an older life stage that does not only involves a sort of "busy-ness" ideal, but she indicates some sort of social and physical distancing from the traditions of "oldness" (i.e. retirement) if one remains active and busy. In her case, unretiring offers the opportunity to undo old age traditions. In a further example, Greta's perception about older individuals who keep busy in unretirement versus those who retire in the traditional way illustrates many benefits work brings as oppose retirement (e.g. preventing loneliness and depression). However, Greta seems to label peers negatively or "other" them as they retire in the traditional sense. When asked about friends her age that works, Greta suggested that they failed to retire in the "right" way unlike herself who is doing it right. Greta expressed:

None of my friends as far as I know work. You know what I tell them they're doing, sitting on their lazy asses, going to get coffee and their hair done. You know what, this is a really hard question [ponders on question]. Some are actually in the nursing homes. I love working. I wish more people would do it. Oh, you got [*sic*] to keep going. You have to make yourself get up. If you don't depression sets up, loneliness. I had a friend that did not work and she is going downhill. She did not do anything and got old real fast. I cannot stand that. I do this job. I have three acres I take care of. I have a garden. I fish a lot. My friend and I go to the nursing home every Wednesday and sing. I play the tambourine and he plays the banjo. I think I miss my calling [*laughs*].

To some degree, there seems to be a lack of empathy on Greta's part towards her peers who want to be retired in the traditional sense and find enjoyment in it. In addition, she may not consider older adults who cannot work because of aging issues.

This section illustrates that some informants envisioned “old age” as a stage in life with experiences of social insecurity, personal and psychological losses associated with traditional retirement. For these workers, old age takes on a negative connotation as one stays in retirement, which results in loss, inactiveness, loneliness, and hastening one’s own mortality. These perceptions seem to capture a sort of “right” versus “wrong” way to age and retire. My informants indicate that old age and retirement experiences are not about ending work careers and becoming inactive. Instead, “old age” reality constitutes engagement in a productive system of work and maintaining social activity. The fact that my informants are removing themselves from retirement, and reestablishing a different course in later life, influence their understandings of age and retirement today. As they embrace unretirement, their meanings tilt toward a more successful, positive rendering of age and retirement.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, my informants illustrate reasons prompting unretirement. Several older informants seemed relatively disadvantaged financially. Being old represents problems such as health care and declining resources such as a lack of adequate services and social programs available to them. These represent key motivators that affect how age and retirement are constructed. For some older workers, there is little economic exchange value for coming into old age as they find themselves forced back to work for financial reasons. Older workers are taking on a more individualistic action via unretirement towards accruing economic resources for a secure aging and retirement even though they receive age-based benefits from the government and former employers. They are forced to work again after leaving full-time career (FTC) because the neoliberalization of the economy forced them to go back to work to survive.

Borrowing from Gilliard and Higgs (2012), my informants indicate that their insecure economic standing may be providing the condition for a “new cadre of pensioners or late lifers” (Gilliard and Higgs 2012:370)—lifelong unretirees. Since they continue to work and depend on that source of income to support them financially, their notion of dependency associated with age-based state support seems waning. Elders today cannot survive on income from the state today like their predecessors. By extension, my informants are questioning the sustainability of the welfare state systems, which influences how they think about aging. It is questioning where we stand on state and national pension and even, more importantly, social insurance schemes for the old. Cahill et al. (2013) explain because of major changes in state support (i.e. the three legs of traditional retirement income—Social Security, private pension and saving, and possible cutbacks in Medicare), this alters what older individuals do in later life (p. 21).

Importantly, the analysis demonstrates that unretiring to secure economic needs is not an easy process. Several older workers are engaged in work under poor conditions, comprised of low wages and limited benefits. Given the structure of work in this post-industrial economy, older workers find themselves “bridging to nowhere” financially sound, and may ultimately accrue more time in work than desired to meet their economic needs. Unretirement does not offer a secure way out of economic insecurity in old age. For older workers working out of a desperate need or to supplement income, age is usually constructed negatively. Their imagination of ideal age—i.e. retirement (a positive construction)—is unrealized with unretirement (a negative construction). Amidst these negative outcomes of unretirement, older workers receive unexpected benefits.

My informants’ “needs” for unretiring, ultimately question the social institution of retirement. At least in their stories, they reveal that old age/retirement as a specific life cycle

stage is no longer a norm, or as secured as it once was. Cahill et al. (2013) states, a “combination of permanent changes in the retirement environment and a lengthy cyclical downturn may have long-lasting effects and suggests that the concept of retirement in the United States will continue to evolve” (p. 22). Given the economic insecure situations some older workers are facing, they are creating a “new aging” (Katz 2005:140). It seems vastly different from the meanings Americans commonly construct around old age and retirement. They offer aging identities that contradicts with cultural notions of the old.

The analysis further illustrates that some older workers, especially those who are more financially secure, are refusing to make clean breaks from employment (Morgan and Kunkel 2006) by restricting the “pensioner’s role” (Jonson 2012:203). Unretirement is not about stabilizing economic insecurities *per se*, but to secure social and personal losses which retirement brings. These informants are in need of active aging, regaining routines and structure, social interaction, to deny their own “mortality.” These unretirees seem to be authoring their own or new life courses or biographies (Holstein and Curium 2007:344). They (and those who hire them) offer a way of rethinking about aging and retirement especially in terms of the rigid stereotypes (ageism) associated with growing old and working. I address this idea more fully in the upcoming section. As workers seek out “social security” in unretirement, they, however, tend to label peers negatively for embracing traditional retirement.

Upcoming Chapter

In the next chapter, I present narratives from informants who capture age as notions of agedness, agelessness, and age neutrality. Both older workers and employers embrace agedness identity in unretirement, which is based on their ideology of old age. Older workers embrace agedness in unretirement through interaction with others and carrying an aging mindset.

Employers and supervisors often do through their hiring practices. However, other older workers emphasize a struggle with older age status and instead subscribe to the agelessness status. They reject old age labels imposed on them in work. I show that social and economic forces remind them of their agedness. Older workers faced blatant forms of ageism. When these “old” age labels are used, older workers experience marginalization and stigmatization in the workplace and a negative perception of age arise. However, older workers are fighting back against these social labels and those who impose the construction onto them. My findings, however, illustrate that since older workers need unretirement (whether towards defying age or for reasons discussed in the previous sections), they often engaged in work for extended periods in retirement years. Although some workers can easily exit work (i.e. those working for social reasons), the majority of my informants especially those unretiring for financial reasons have no other choices to accumulate capital, but unretirement. Their presence in work for longer periods to meet their needs (e.g. healthcare and income) informs that they experience ageism for much longer periods especially those adhering to an ageless identity. Consequently, age is negatively conceptualized and internalized.

Chapter 6 - Resisting Old Age, Towards a Construction of Agelessness and Age Neutrality

Out with “Agedness” in with “Agelessness”—We Are “Not” that “Old”

Some older workers are “doing” old age according to social and cultural beliefs and meanings of old age—acting age” (Berg 2007:149). Others are resisting it and using unretirement to do so. Although workers resisting old age observe physical changes occurring to them (i.e. the aging process) and are aware of “old age” chronology, they view themselves as “not” old. Instead, they adhere to an “ageless” identity and often associate it with their return or ability to work, or how working makes them feel. These older workers also tend to conceptualize a positive feeling about age as they adhere to the ageless identity or what I refer to as “age neutrality”—i.e. no change, difference, or detecting of an old age identity. However, by unretiring or working, age neutrality or an ageless identity is possible. For example, sixty-six-year-old Victor, who worked as a part-time bus driver at the Transportation Company, expressed his perception of age, which he aligned with the fact that he worked: “I don’t really feel any different. Basically, I feel pretty good. I don’t feel like I’m old. I feel that I’m not older because I get up and do this job every day.”

Victor seems to conceal or not notice “oldness” or deny its existence due to *work* itself. He even tells himself that he is “not” old distinctly stating, “I am not older” because “I do this job every day.” Since work/working is contrary to the American cultural norms associated with old age, then unretirement may foster ageless or neutral feelings about age or compensate Victor by making him feel productive again—paid work is often equated with productivity and a valued

cultural identity that does not constitute old age.⁴⁸ Perhaps Victor is abiding by knowledge or belief that work life entails an age other than “old,” or because he works, he does not think about it. I later asked him to describe how he feels about age, and he responded, “I don’t think about age.”

Similarly, for sixty-three-year-old Don, employed at the Senior Service Center as a part-time assistant cook, “old” age seemed to go unseen, which he also associated with work life. When I asked him directly about situations he experienced because of age, he replied, “no nothing, no, because I retired when I was 62 and I am still working.” At least in Victor’s and Don’s experiences, unretirement (i.e. working) appears to influence their meanings and understandings of *age* in which *old* age identity ceases to exist. Returning to work tends to place them back into productive life, which matters to them. In Victor’s case,

“[work is] important because I have the same kids unless they graduate, and they all know you. If they get [sic] switched with another driver, they [children] get upset, it messes up their routine, so I offer a constant for them.”

For Don, work also allows him to attain social and economic rewards, or “exercise, money, and I organize my time better.” Even though Victor and Don differ in numeric age, conceptually, they hold a similar belief about it. It is a feeling of agelessness, which differs from those who embrace “agedness,” mentioned earlier (e.g. Vin see Chapters 4 and 5), and which they reinforce as they keep working. However, it did not mean they believed they were chronologically “younger” or preferred others to identify them as such, nor did they reject old age social support (I explain later).

As they work, older employees likely feel like they are not getting older, and view age somewhat statically. However, in some cases, their view of age goes beyond work *per se* to

⁴⁸ Given the life course trajectory and interplay with cultural norms of work, traditional work life in the U.S. context is often associated with an age other than old.

include one's health status, which may then affect their ability to work (which they associate with a non-old age identity), but also, why they view themselves as ageless or in "age-neutral" terms. In the case of Don, he perceives "no" change in age from the point of retirement onwards as he alludes above, but he also does not recognize his age any differently today compared to the past. Don shares how he thinks about aging before and now as:

Not very often. I was always healthy and active. I really don't feel any different. I still feel the same. I don't think about it as a disadvantage because of my health and activity. I don't really think about my age.

Don seems to suggest that old age or even aging did not occur to him (physically and psychologically) because he still feels the same physically and rarely thinks about old age. In his views, whatever *age* that exists or he identifies with (i.e. age neutrality) is "right" given his health and activity status. He also alludes to possibly noticing old age more if he faces physical declines, which may prevent him from working (which may result in aging). In this context, Don also seems to construct old age as synonymous with decline and a negative identity—a disadvantage.

These older male employees' accounts showed that their "age neutral" or "ageless" identities were possible once they engaged in work and maintained a healthy status that allowed them to work and stay actively engaged. However, as I explain later in the chapter, gender intersects with age, and plays a vital role in the sustaining or dismantling of an aged, ageless and age neutral identity, regardless of one's perception of age. I demonstrate that across the workplaces, older women especially experience ongoing struggles and challenges to secure these identities than older men.

Tensions in Maintaining Agelessness and Age Neutral Identity

A “non-old” age status resonated with several unretirees. However, regardless of feeling “ageless” or “no” change in age, two major forces impose old age identity onto workers—state economic support for older adults,⁴⁹ and social interactions (i.e. with co-workers, patrons, clients, and bosses). A contradiction between how older workers perceive themselves and how they feel others perceive them was noticeable. In the United States, welfare state benefits qualify and (re)produce individuals as “chronologically” or “institutionally” old as they identify eligibility for retirement. All older informants qualified and either received or understood old age benefits as a legally instituted right authorized by the government as they retired. Although in previous chapters my informants illustrated age-based rewards were “limited” and “inadequate” and a primary intention for unretiring (chapter 5), these benefits nonetheless exist and serve to remind older workers of their institutional old age today. Regardless of their personal beliefs, feelings, and meanings about age (such as those constituting agelessness and age neutrality), the normative state benefits thus reinforce old age as a seemingly unavoidable identity to them. For example, Victor embraced *agelessness*, but upon reaching age 65 and qualifying for standardized age-based benefits, he was reminded of “old age” as a sort of “natural” status:

Victor: I get discounts at restaurants, but I have to ask most times, maybe because I look young (laughs). I file for Social Security because I came of age.

Nicole: What do you mean by ‘I came of age’?

Victor: I guess I got to the age to cash-in.

Nicole: What do you mean?

Victor: Well, I was 65 years then. I get a government check in the mail every month for my first career but I have to work.

⁴⁹ Powell and Hendricks suggested that qualifying features of state structure filters through to shape personal attitudes and behaviors about age (2009:86).

Victor indicates that Social Security⁵⁰ is awarded solely for old age, as a distinct institutionalized life course stage. This makes him feel that old age is “naturalized”⁵¹ even though it is not inherent but a socially created identity. While Victor receives benefits because he “came of age,” in his mind they did not necessarily make him feel any different. In fact, he seemed to passively accept that he is “of age,” and is tickled that he has to argue for his benefits because he looked young to other people he encountered. Accepting eligibility thus does not make him embrace old age status. Victor alluded before that he feels an “absence” of old age (i.e. agelessness/neutrality) because he works. Other people help reinforce this “non-old” or age-neutral identity to him by neglecting to offer age-based discounts. Like Victor, one of my oldest informants, seventy-five-year-old Henry, expresses having to verify his eligibility for discounts and finding that somewhat humorous:

At 65, I couldn’t get a discount unless I asked. I had to ask, and then they would still not believe me. They think I look too young [laughs]. I had to show my identification card, and then I get it.

In both Victor’s and Henry’s assertions, I detect they do not have to work hard at “not” passing as old, and they both rely on similar constructions of age to reinforce it. Other individuals helped strengthen their non-old perception or agelessness,⁵² and even though economic reminders through the state (re)produced them as old, they did not internalize or seemed unchanged by them. In fact, Henry argued that people should not have to behave according to stereotypes or categories of age, saying, “[...] I don’t like the stereotype “older

⁵⁰ Old age was created out of the “policies of welfare capitalism” in which the “social reality of later life, was largely determined by compulsory retirement, the old age pension (Social Security), and stage maintained systems of long-term care (Gilleard and Higgs 2012:370).

⁵¹ Age as “natural” creates the impression that socially constructed age categories, like old, have a natural basis, and can somehow be clearly differentiated from, say, “middle age” (Calasanti and Slevin 2001: 9).

⁵² It may be similar to age “blindness”/“age-neutral” in which “age does not matter” (Calasanti and Slevin 2001:46). According to Calasanti and Slevin (2001), most old people see themselves as younger than their chronological age, leading to an inevitable tension between inner experience (“I feel young”) and outward appearance (“I look old”) (p. 19).

people” so I really don’t feel good about categorizing what they should be doing.” An aspect of older age neutrality for Henry thus involves freedom to do what he wants, irrespective of how others “age” him. This view also implies that Henry believes old age status is constraining.⁵³

While economic forces institutionalize “old age” as discussed above, the ways in which other people talked about, perceived and behaved toward older workers affected how and whether older workers actually internalized such status. In particular, some older workers described the interaction in work with clients and employers when they were “not” perceived as old. At the Transportation Company, several older men held this sentiment. For example, Henry not only distanced himself from the old age identity but also believed that *others*, in these instances children, did too:

Despite my age, I’ve maintained the physical capability, so I have no disabilities, so I have a great air of confidence in how I perform at work, how I relate to the kids, and what I think the kids see in me. They don’t see me as an old person.

However, Henry (like Don above) attributes his view of age to his ability to uphold physical capability or lack of disabilities, which allows him to “perform” work without anyone noticing that he is “older.” Thus, in his experience, physical appearance and ability seem to conceal or deceive perceptions of “oldness” in the traditional sense—it goes undetected. There is no shortage of evidence that Henry feels ageless due his attributes, thinking of age, and through the reinforcement of others (e.g. children). Even when he recognizes his numeric “old” age, he seems truly proud of it because he “passes” as “not” old. He expressed:

Like if, I never had an age.... and I’m lucky enough that that holds true. I am blessed. Now that you are this age, no one believes, so it makes me proud to be 75. No one believes [*smiles*]...

⁵³ It comes to represent an unspoken value and idea of a group that may be inaccurately represented. Calasanti and Slevin (2001) state the term “old both reifies a socially constructed process of aging and treats a diverse population as though they were all the same—that is, it sets boundaries around and makes solid what is fluid and amorphous” (p.9).

He later expressed even employers seems not to detect his age, or if they do, they are not concerned about it, stating,

...my age has always been an asset for me rather than a barrier. To be physically able and have the mental aptitude like me, it made employers more anxious to hire me and not question my age.

Henry suggests great satisfaction “not” passing as old not only by his personal denial, but also by how meanings of age are interwoven into how children, employers, and other people help stabilize this non-old identity. The pride he feels towards being chronologically old but not feeling or being perceived in that way, further indicates that Henry recognizes particular cultural meanings of age in American society—i.e. old age as a negative identity he does not adhere to. In seeing himself as overcoming such negativity, he develops a positive self-image. This perception may complicate the notion of age-neutrality, suggesting that the act of triumphing over or evading a negative label produces this positive feeling and self-image.⁵⁴ This may suggest a process of age construction that includes “old age subversion” whereby older workers’ lean towards evading old age labels towards a positive conceptualization of age.

Mixed Messages of Age at Work

While some informants successfully evade or subvert negative age labels and thus self-identify positively—ageless or age neutral—, others demonstrate challenges in doing so. They demonstrate a disparity between how they perceive age and how others do. Although these informants hold non-conventional beliefs about age or embrace an ageless identity, at times, others they interact with (e.g. coworkers and clients) label them *old* following strict traditional old age scripts during the interaction. Some scripts produce a positive view of old age as “competence.” Other times (see later examples), age stereotypes characterize them as

⁵⁴ This view of age is observed an ‘anti-aging’ discourse which in reality is ageist by placing little value on growing old—an internalized ageism (Cruikshank, 2003:153).

“incompetent” fostering a negative view of old age. Nevertheless, as workers face this age identity struggle, they resist it and aim to control, minimize, and stop it. Nati, a seventy-year-old woman, who works part-time at the Transportation Company, grapples with how labels are applied to her as she interacts with clients:

Nicole: Since turning 62 years old, what situations have you personally experienced because of your age?

Nati: I see a few people when I go to Walmart, and they want to help me. That may be because of my age.

Nicole: Can you tell me how?

Nati: I think it's because I have the gray hair because I'm "Grandma." People with gray hair are "grandmas," and a lot of people want to help the elderly and now after all these years, I'm one of the people. I am [pause] an elderly. I don't want to be. But I think it's the hair, and I think that is why the babies love me. I see a child, and they gravitate to me. I swear. I don't have to do anything, and they come to me. I was at the doctor's office and this lady with this little girl she came running to me and threw her arms around me and I say, "hi sweetie." Her mom told her that was not polite. I say, "oh no, that's fine." I say children just gravitate to me. I don't know if it's the hair or I look like their grammie. I don't know I don't know what it is. I experience it but not in a bad way.

Nicole: What about situations at work?

Nati: I have the little kids. The kids see me as a grandma. I think it's because of my hair is gray. I remind them of maybe their grandma.... I'm doing this for about 3 years I had children on there that call me grammie. I said, "that's ok I can be your grammie on the bus." I love them.

Unlike Henry or Victor whose ageless identity goes undisturbed or remains intact as they interacted with children and other people, Nati's experiences are opposite. She demonstrated that certain physiological old age signs such as her "gray" hair—a universal symbol attached to aging—as possibly why people, especially children, interacted with her in those ways. In this context, the visible old age symbol identified and applied to her appeared to weaken the non-old identity or age neutrality she embraced. Despite her recognition of old age symbols and seemingly allowing clients to label or refer to her in aging terms (e.g. "grammie"), Nati restricts old age "naming." At work, while she may say it is "okay" for children to "call" or refer to her using aging terms, she, however, limits this old age identity to interacting with children only on

the bus. Neither did she refer to herself in those terms. Instead, Nati emphasized it is others who “named,” “called” or “perceived” her old. I also noticed when she experienced “old” age labeling and messages from others in interactions; she seemed to pacify these meanings at times. Her statement “I experience it [age] but not in a bad way,” further indicates to me that she does not truly embrace old age. Perhaps it is because she assumes being labeled old is negative like her male coworkers Victor and Henry, who viewed old age as constraining them and they were successful in rejecting the label. These differences in age meanings such as between Nati and clients as she interacts with them, demonstrate that she may be experiencing a struggle in the construction of age—i.e. inconsistent meanings. She further claimed “I am [pause] an elderly. I don’t want to be,” indicates she notices old age identity and reaffirms a distancing from it.

Nati’s narrative, however, raises an important point, which shows how gender and age interact. At the company, Nati, an older woman, and other male coworkers such as Victor and Henry feel like children have a positive relationship with them. Victor and Henry believe children recognize them as “competent” for their “strength,” but it is not based on their age (i.e. old age) as they alluded to earlier. Nati and other women at the company (e.g. Hatti, explained next), feels like children recognize her as also “competent.” However, unlike her older male coworkers, her competence is measured by the production of the “grandma” role she takes on which is rooted in old age identity. Although Nati does not see herself old, she is still unable to reject or dodge negative aspects of the label entirely and instead seizes some aspect of old age identity she believes, or perceives other people regard, as positive. She and others try to make the best of the label⁵⁵ (i.e. grandma). It is an ideal “bus monitor role” with children because it

⁵⁵ Mainstream society stereotypes elderly people as warm (a positive part of the elderly stereotype), but also as incompetent (negative) which predicts the kinds of emotional prejudices they are likely to face (Cuddy et al. 2005:266). In research on stereotype content, American respondents rated rosters of 24 social groups (e.g. Asians, disabled people, homeless people) on lists of traits reflecting warmth (e.g. friendly, good-natured, sincere, warm)

conveys a sense of “comfort,” “caring,” “nurturing,” and “wisdom” for them—based on stereotypes, which are compatible with idealized older woman’s roles.

Tatti, the seventy-eight-year-old woman, who works part-time also as a bus monitor at the Transportation Company, explains age emerges with others in and out of work. Like Nati, Tatti’s perception of old age is fixed in interaction, which organizes behavior and discourse between her and others:

Actually, I think it’s [age is] an asset because the kids, they respect what I have to say and I do think that it’s because of my age. They do like me. I can be a grandma. They see me in that way. The kids know that I am old. This happens on the bus where sometimes they’ll say, “Ms. Tatti can I help you” and they always say, “Ms. Tatti” and I think it has to do with my age. When I go out, I think people give me special attention like at the restaurant or something. They see I am older, but it’s like it’s ok they’re not trying to say, old lady. It’s a kindness. They are not putting you down. You go to a restaurant or something the guy [the waiter] will see you, and he will pull out your chair or something.

Tatti commented it is other people (not herself), who formulated meanings about her age (such as, how the “kids” on the bus interacted with her). Many of the children referred to her as “Ms.” Tatti. Though “Ms.” is associated with youth, in her case it signifies respect and maturity related to her “old” age. The children also seem to notice her age as “weakness” and offer to help her. However, compared to Victor and Henry who also interacted with children regularly, no one provided such assistance to them, possibly because they felt children noticed their strength instead.

Akin to Nati’s experience of age, Tatti illustrates a dual identity intersection between old age and gender to produce a compatible role and identity—i.e. “grandma”—that makes her an ideal worker because it conveys messages of “authority,” “nurturing,” and “wisdom”—but it

and competence (e.g., capable, competent, intelligent, skillful). The group “elderly people” wound up in the high warmth, low competence cluster. They were viewed as possessing far fewer competence traits than warmth traits. Compared to younger people, elderly people have been rated as warmer and friendlier, but also as less ambitious, less responsible and less intellectually competent (Cuddy et al. 2005: 268).

conveys weakness in a gendered fashion. At work, these constructions occur only in certain context (e.g. on the bus) and by young children, but outside of work, Tatti notices old age experiences even more as she receives “special attention” commonly aligned with social behaviors towards the old. In her estimation, she tries to downplay others who exhibit old age behaviors towards her as weak, infirm, incapable or identify her old (at work and outside of it), as acts done in kindness. As she stated, “they’re not trying to say old lady” or “it’s a kindness.” They are not trying to put you down.” Like Nati, this reasoning perhaps suggests that Tatti is tacitly struggling to accept old age herself as she notices some negative connotation associated with the identity. Hence, when it is imposed on her, she seems to replace it instead with what she considers a positive label (i.e. kindness).

Old Age as Incompetence

Many of the women workers identify as ageless but are labeled old⁵⁶ in interaction with clients, coworkers, and other people who treat them “kindly.” Eighty-three-year-old Gretta, who works at the Local Shopping Center and unretired part-time in customer service, indicated that younger workers disregard her based on their perception of her age. Thus, some unretirees are labeled old through kindly treatment, while others are labeled old when younger workers disregard or ignore them. Gretta expressed:

The younger kids [workers] that I have to work with see me differently [old]. The ones in their 50s and 60s they don’t feel that way at all [view her as different]. We’re all the same. It’s like saying we do things a certain way. They [younger workers] don’t listen, and they are going to do it their way.

⁵⁶Cuddy et al. (2005) claims that studies have uncovered the elderly incompetence stereotype in the workplace, where older employees are believed to be less effective than younger employees in various job-related tasks. However, several studies have shown that older employees are at least, and sometimes more, competent than younger employees in their jobs (p. 269).

Unlike younger co-workers, other mature co-workers viewed her equally to themselves despite their numeric age difference (some in the 50s and 60s, Gretta in her 80s). It is also apparent that she also sees her co-workers' "younger" age and formulates some beliefs about them. Gretta recalled an unpleasant incident at work when I asked her about experiences of age, but her story revealed also that she was being labeled "inferior," "ignorant," "irrelevant" as constructions of old age identity, but other conceptualizations of age emerge:

At my age, and this is my opinion, the young kids today look down on you, oh yeah! That's what it is. They think you're old, and you don't know anything. I'm more capable of doing this job, oh yeah! As a matter of fact, I had an experience the other day I worked with one [younger worker]. We have a certain place to put our sandwiches so when we're busy we know where it is, we can reach in and don't give out the wrong one. So I worked with the young lady, and she just threw them in there, and I told her to change it around. Well, guess what, today same darn thing happened only [the boss] was here, so I went to her and said, "the sandwiches are messed up," and the young lady says to me, "well you're the only one that cares." So I say, "[boss] excuse don't these sandwiches go in a certain way?" [The boss] trained me and trained me to do it in a certain way. The young lady has been ticked off with me since then. It's the same with the cookie making. She told me she wants six but [the boss] wants eight. I said, "I'm putting eight if you want to take it off you take it off." So she took it off. That's what I run into. The younger ones don't take me seriously they don't think I know what I'm doing.

Gretta felt younger workers treated her with contempt; however, she felt capable of doing her job and took pride in it. She feels she has to fight for respect from them. For instance, she resists against a coworker by asserting herself, pointing out to the coworker that she is wrong, as she (Gretta) emphasizes how "things" are done on the job. Gretta even consults with her boss who proved her right and validated her capabilities. This implies someone in a position of power is required to validate her in the eyes of younger co-workers who then get angry. She also seemed to feel good about her actions towards coworkers who judged her wrong. In fact, she perceives herself as better as or more capable than younger co-workers stating, "I just realized I'm normal. I'm happy that I can do what I do, as a matter of fact, I outdo the others [workers]. My boss thinks I am an asset." However, Gretta may presumably face this kind of ageist treatment for

longer periods, as she mentioned earlier staying in unretiring because it keeps her active, and does not intend to stop anytime soon (chapter 5). Thus, she may have to try harder to prove herself capable to co-workers as she stays in unretirement. It also seems to me a greater tension or an intergenerational conflict exists between younger and older workers at this worksite, which may perpetuate stereotypes of age—i.e. not only younger workers constructing older workers negatively, but also older workers may start viewing younger workers less favorably.

Gretta is not alone in these experiences. In other workplaces, although older workers are aware of the chronological old age identity, they do not view themselves as “older.” Instead, coworkers, clients, and patrons are the ones who treat older workers as if they are unfit to work. These constructions of incompetence created work environments in which older workers were treated unfairly and must guard against negative constructions of age imposed on them. However, older workers contest, confront, and try to eliminate the imposition of “old.” Nancy, a seventy-four-year-old store clerk, who works part-time at the Local Shopping Center and the only older employee in the store where she works, elaborates how she struggles with coworkers to contest old age labels in interactions at work. Nancy recounted several occurrences:

You will be surprised, but the UPS man [courier agent] will bring in merchandise, and he will say, “this one’s heavy where do you want it.” Now I don’t know if he does this with the young ones [workers], but he does with me. When I worked at the grocery store before this job, the guys were pretty good, too. I used to laugh because one time they caught me on top the refrigeration unit and one of the guys looked at me and said, “what on earth are you doing up there?” He is about my granddaughter’s age. I looked at him and said, “do I ask you to get up here” [front of the store where she usually worked], and he said, “no that’s different,” and I said, “tell me how it’s different.” I said I feel if you could do it [climb the refrigeration unit] then I should be able to do it too.

In Nancy’s interaction with the UPS agent, it could be that he made the request to help her because he presumed she is old. Although I cannot say for sure that it is about age, nor does Nancy, as she claimed, “I don’t know if he does this with the *younger* ones,” she notices it as a

behavior towards her—an *older woman*. Notably, her experience in this instance also suggests some understanding that possibly gender stereotyping are intersecting with age and shaping the courier agent's opinions/behavior of wanting to help⁵⁷ her (e.g. the male courier agent to assist the older woman to lift “heavy” boxes). She pointed out being surprised when he mentioned, “this one’s heavy,” which is to suggest that she sees herself as able to carry the merchandise, but the agent presumably perceives her (i.e. gender coupled with age stereotypes) as weaker and unable to move the “heavy” stock.

In her second encounter at work, Nancy identified a related experience. Some coworkers indirectly pointed out to her an “old” age identity or held certain notions about how she should behave, or what she can do at work. Her view is similar to Victor’s and Henry’s earlier comment about old age labels as negative, which other people use to dictate what someone can or cannot do. This thinking may exist due to social norms attached to old age status or because of a culture associated with traditional perceptions of age and work—old age aligns with retirement, not work. From Nancy’s account, it seems a default assumption is cast that stigmatizes her as somewhat incapable or engaging in “risky” behavior (she is too old to be “on top the refrigeration unit”) for her “age,” or gender, even though she feels equally capable to her younger co-worker. My sense also is that Nancy is not embarrassed by her co-worker’s remarks. Instead, she embarrasses him by rejecting his discourse, challenging his old age labels, as she directly questions him. In this situation, Nancy holds a similar view to Don, Victor, and Henry, as she sees herself as strong and capable and possibly for others to not “notice” age. She, however, must dodge the label but feels “good” vanquishing it.

Unlike the older male workers who may seem to transition smoothly and easily into an ageless identity, Nancy experiences greater difficulty towards identifying as ageless when tries

⁵⁷ A form of compassionate stereotype that older adults deserve and in need of help.

as coworkers notice her age and gender. For instance, when the younger coworker questions her being on top the refrigeration unit, she defends herself because she wants her coworker to identify her as a competent employee, instead of an older woman. Nancy also indicates that in work, she is not only “saying” she is “not” old, but also, not “doing” it. That said, she comes into conflict with those who impose the identity on her or questioned her capabilities. Like other informants (Victor, Henry) she did not indicate an appeal for coworkers to view her younger (neither did she perceived herself in that way), but to not recognize or label her differently (i.e. old) or label her at all. Nancy’s story also points to the notion of neutrality that several older workers embrace. Unlike older men whose age seems to go unnoticed as they interacted with others (e.g. Henry mentions that the kids do not see him old or no one mentions age), Nancy gets called out for performing “dangerous” tasks that are only flagged as such because she is an older woman performing them which seemed to undermine her age neutrality. Thus, the men feel as though they can successfully deflect old age labeling in most of their work activities, while women are less sure.

In some workplaces, old age was unnoticeable to employers, coworkers, and clients as some older workers, particularly men, interacted with them in “non-old” ways. Like these workers (e.g. Victor, Don, Henry), on rare occasions, older female workers indicated that by just not “acting old,” it prevented people from recognizing them as old. For example, sixty-eight-year-old Denice who works part-time as a sales associate at a clothing store in the Local Shopping Center responded to my question about her age at work by saying:

I honestly don’t think they [the boss] knew how old I was. It never came up because I don’t act as no [sic] old lady [smiles]. It was never mentioned, and then it came up somehow in the conversation, they were pretty surprised. I don’t know if they would have hired me because I was 67. I’ve never seen any restrictions. I just think I would be old if I stayed home and then I would become handicap in more ways than one. I would not have the socialization the energy, I think doing anything you should do it to not age.

Denice dodges old age labels as she gives off a non-old performance by not “acting old”—i.e. by working as opposed to staying home, socializing, having “energy.” She also seems successful vanquishing old age because those she interacts with seems oblivious to recognizing her old age, unlike other older women who try to pass ageless but struggle (e.g. Nati, Nancy, Gretta, and Hatti) as coworkers and children notice old age. Denice’s success could also possibly relate to the demographics of her coworkers (particularly their “age”), the nature of the job or place where she works compared to other worksites and jobs informants do. For instance, Denice operates in a store that sells clothing but to a more mature clientele. For instance, as she describes a typical day at work, she informs about who works at the store as:

There’re two ladies that work at night. They have a little more authority. There are five other employees, one is in college, and then there is me and the assistant or manager she maybe about my age maybe a little younger. The manager comes in but not every day if someone cannot be on duty she fills in.

Denice, however, later explained that the ageless identity or neutrality she feels as “temporary” or “fragile” as she interacted with customers in which her “old” age became exposed to all.

When I asked her about barriers or opportunities encountered at this job, she expressed,

None, not on this job. I worked here a couple months before my aging came up and I thought I would get [sic] fired because maybe there is an age limit, but they did not do that. One day there was someone that came in the store that I knew, and the person said “why are you still working after you retired...”

Denice indicates the customer/acquaintance pointing out her retired status (i.e. the cultural marker of old age) may compromise the non-old identity she is trying to protect at work.

Notably, she notices there may be negative consequences for occupying old age identity, and seems scared or worries that if someone discovers she is “old,” she will be fired. Not “acting old” may thus be her mechanism of protecting not just an ageless identity, but protecting her livelihood—i.e. job—since she works due to economic insecurity (see Chapter 5).

The Interlocking of Age and Gender Stereotypes, Facing Blatant Discrimination

Informants may notice their “old” age identity, but do not necessarily identify as old. Female informants, in particular, expressed experiences of blatant forms of ageism in work. They sensed discrimination based on age identity and gender. Although some older women (e.g. Nati and Hatti) demonstrate that age and gender interact to make them “ideal workers” (often based on age and gender stereotypes), in other cases, age, and gender interact to create discord between ideal worker roles and social roles. Negative stereotypes aligned with gender reinforced age (in a general sense women may be assumed to be “young,” implying immaturity, incompetence, lack of knowledge), that then limits older female workers, or make them seemed incompatible or flawed compared to younger workers or older male workers (e.g. Henry mentioned above). Gender and age can be interpreted as (1) “young and immature” or (2) “old and incompetent.” Both interpretations indicate “incompetence.” Margaret Cruikshank (2013) claims that older women “are seen as old bodies” (p. 5). They share with colonized people characteristics where they are viewed to be less intelligent than the dominant group, judged solely by appearance, encouraged to imitate the dominant group, they are scapegoated, they may internalize messages of their inferiority, and their movements may be controlled (Cruikshank 2013:4-5). In fact, several old women present experiences that parallel these ideas. At the Information Center, one older woman recalled feeling stigmatized by co-workers and male patrons. Sixty-four-year-old Jenny is well educated and works in the Adult Services Department at the center because she needs financial security (see Chapter 5). She expresses:

I think it's [age is] an asset in a lot of ways because of life experiences which make you not take things so seriously at times, not react emotional at times and let things go. The only thing, I think is it a detriment I think for women. It's harder to be an older woman in any job. It's partly why I still color my hair, and my kids make fun of me. Try being in your 60s in a job and have people talk down to you because they think you don't know things. These are some things that happen even with coworkers here. We have a couple

of younger coworkers. There is one that is really great about saying, “I really appreciate the experience you guys have.” There is another one saying, “I have a Master’s degree, so I know more than you.” So it’s kind of interesting. I do think older women have a harder time than men, and I see it here from both co-workers and patrons. It’s really interesting. We used to have a young guy at circulation. He was a college student, but when men had a question they would not stop at the information desk when I was there, they would go to him even if he did not have the answer. They assumed that he might be the boss. He will send them to me.

Although Jenny considered herself an asset in work, she experienced incidences of outright discrimination and disrespect by coworkers because of how they viewed/“judged” her appearance. Her age identity seemed tightly linked with her gender identity, in such ways that suggest being an older woman, she is seen as “an old body.” She is “judged” by appearance as “less intelligent” (Cruikshank 2013) than the “younger” male coworker who is regarded as having more knowledge and authority than she has even though she is well experienced. These experiences may present for Jenny “messages of inferiority” (Cruikshank 2013:4), creating conflict and negative consequences where she feels marginalized and alienated in work.

In her commentary, Jenny alluded to feeling this inferiority when male patrons disregarded her, and instead visited with the young college student, though he did not know the answers. In this interaction at work, it is possible that both traditional gender and age stereotypes are used, which positions her as being less powerful than younger male workers. This experience is unlike other older male workers such as Victor and Henry who illustrated earlier that those they serve saw them as having authority. In Jenny’s case, it may partly explain why she tries to conceal at least one of her disadvantages (i.e. old age by “coloring” her hair). However, her attempts to mask aging appearance does not seem to help her gain authority or power because being a *woman* and “older” she is already perceived as an “old body” (Cruikshank 2013). These statuses characterize her as less powerful or incompetent than the “dominant group” (i.e. younger male workers).

Jenny's experiences and other older women parallel Correll, Bernard and Paik's (2007) idea of role incongruence (p. 1332). They explain, "cultural understandings of the motherhood role exist in tension with the cultural understandings of the "ideal worker" role. [This] tension between incompatible cultural understandings, [leads] evaluators, perhaps unconsciously, to expect mothers to be less competent and less committed to their jobs" (p. 1298) than non-mothers and fathers are.⁵⁸ In a similar way, stereotypical beliefs about gender, age, and work influence interaction in which holding older woman's status—a status characteristic⁵⁹—results in biases against them. Like motherhood is viewed as a devalued status in the workplace and as mothers are judged by harsher standards than non-mothers are, I argue that older women have a similar experience in which they are judged more harshly than men in work. Older female employees are viewed as lower status individuals based on a common, but flawed assumption that they are incompetent (e.g. Jenny). By contrast, younger male workers are advantaged based on cultural beliefs that they are competent (e.g. Jenny's co-worker). In another example, sixty-eight-year-old Sonia who worked full-time at the same company as Jenny as a department manager recalled how she struggles with age in work:

Sonia: I personally am struggling with it [age]...About 3 years ago, I became aware of how people treat me. I don't know if it has to do with age or sex or both it seems. For many years I colored my hair dark, I let it grow out now, and I almost immediately notice people treat me differently.

Nicole: Can you tell me about how people treat you differently? [*Probe*]

Sonia: They marginalize me. When stakeholders come to talk, I'm often not invited to those meetings. They are a little bit younger than me, both male and female. Over time, I got to the point where I think I'm moving on and they won't know what they are missing.

⁵⁸ To the extent that mothers are believed to be "less committed to the workplace, we argue that employers will subtly discriminate against mothers when making evaluations that affect hiring, promotion, and salary decisions. Fathers will experience these types of workplace disadvantages since understandings of what it means to be a good father are not seen in our culture as incompatible with understandings of what it means to be a good worker" (Correll et al. 2007:1298).

⁵⁹ "A status characteristic is a categorical distinction among people such as a personal attribute (e.g., race, gender) or a role (e.g., motherhood, manager), that has attached to it widely held beliefs in the culture that associate greater status worthiness and competence with one category of the distinction than with others" (Correll et al. 2007:1301)

That is part of the reason why I wanted to move on, and the other reason is that I wanted to do other things. In work, young males look at you [me] as a mother figure and take you as an authority. Middle-aged males look at you as a person that no longer has an attraction, and young females look at you as someone that has nothing in common with their lives. It's just amazing to me, and it has come as a colossal surprise because in my head I am still about 21. The only thing is that I am just smarter now than I ever was. The sad thing is that I think it does not happen the same for men. Men get powerful as they get older.

Despite working in a respectable position and being well educated and highly qualified, Sonia felt marginalized, minimized, and left behind by top-level management. I observed that she seemed genuinely surprised and taken off-guard concerning how she is treated by stakeholders, and other coworkers, especially since she perceives herself (i.e. her age) differently—i.e. “smart” and even “younger.” Like Jenny, Sonia notices that negative experiences in work result not only from the social location of age but also notably, it intersects with gender. In particular, she links sexuality (implicitly heterosexuality) to attaining power, including her own. Sonia illustrates gender becomes a second and possibly a more noticeable hindrance in work which primarily affects *older* women more negatively (i.e. a loss of sexuality results in loss of power) as opposed older men who gain “power” or experience and positive reinforcement at work. Sonia sees instead that power is derived from social status (such as being young and male), in which she (an older woman) is viewed as sexually unappealing (less powerful). In this work context, cultural and very stereotypical beliefs about gender matter and, at least from Sonia's perspective, position her unequally. Gender and age stereotypes tend to shape not only coworkers' behavior towards Sonia but also how she views her age. She behaved in ways such as feeling pressured to dye her hair—a behavior that is often gender unique to women—to help her ‘fit’ in and perhaps present as more sexually attractive (and younger), which may reinstate power.

Chou and Choi (2011) explain that the baby boomers constitute 40 percent of the U.S. workforce and two-thirds of older adults intend to continue to work after retirement age (p. 1054). With more older workers in the adult workforce, it is possible that more are likely to more regularly face younger generations while working than they would if they retired and spent more time with people in the same age group they occupy. Thus, even though they identify as ageless, as workers remain in work, they may be more exposed to reminders of “agedness” especially as they interact with co-workers, patrons, and clients than if they presumably stay retired. Scholars (Cruikshank 2013; Jonson 2012; Marshall 2007; Cuddy et al. 2005) have previously found that older workers’ exposure to younger workers tends to generate harmful stereotypes (I explain this further below). This view is not to suggest that they will not be labeled old in interaction with individuals in the same age cohort or that it will erase their sense of old age. It is likely that being with peers their age may reinforce age as they see themselves reflected in others like them (i.e. retirees) and are reminded of age.

In addition, as I demonstrated by several examples earlier, not all older workers will likely experience the same effects while interacting with younger generations (e.g. older women compared to older men tended to have experiences that are more negative). Although I cannot say for sure that older workers will suffer discrimination longer because I did not study older adults in retirement, I am, however, uncovering regular interactions at work that could exacerbate harmful experiences for older workers, especially for older female workers than men. Referencing Sonia, she accrued time/age working beyond the legal retirement age to maximize or collect as much Social Security possible (Chapter 5). Given this need in which unretirement is her only option and Sonia’s accounts of discrimination mentioned in this chapter, she may

experience more marginalization and alienation in work as she stays on in this workplace towards greater Social Security. Jenny also will likely face the same dilemma.

In other instances, informants explained consequences and ageist experiences associated with old age *before* unretirement. Although their stories revealed experiences before getting in, they are nonetheless important because they represent challenges or limitations elders face within the broader labor market as they seek work. Such problems finding work may prolong search time for jobs and exposure to discrimination. In some cases, older job seekers are in desperate need of money and need work promptly. However, they find themselves searching for work longer than when they first entered the job market. Seventy-three-year-old Vin, an older male bus driver whom I mentioned earlier (Chapter 5), idealizes retirement, but unfortunately, cannot afford it. He captured his experience in his search for work after retiring illustrating difficulty in finding work in old age:

Ha. Well, I know when I tried to get a different job one time when I retired they kept pushing me around. When they tell you you're over qualified, you just know. Because they know that, you know more than they do with all the experiences and they don't want you there.

Vin illustrates he is competent and qualified to work but as he seeks out work, others view his experiences/skills less favorably. In this sense, being competent works against or blocks him from finding work. However, earlier he identifies that older workers offer benefits for employers because of these experiences they amass (Chapter 4). In another example, sixty-three-year-old Ingrid remembered a very difficult and upsetting experience as she searched for employment at a variety of companies after retiring. While Vin was regarded as over qualified, which prevented him from landing work, Ingrid, though she viewed herself competently, was labeled incapable by others:

Oh my gosh! It was awful. It was awful. I had interviews with the University of Arizona, and the Alzheimer's association where I was doing volunteer work. I was a support group facilitator so I thought I am a shoo-in. The Alzheimer's Association went with someone that spoke Spanish and much younger. The university never contacted me. I had three interviews with Wells Fargo Bank and I felt age discrimination. It was unbelievable. Wells Fargo, it was a group interview. It was for a teller position. The first two went ok. I was the oldest person in the room. By the third interview, these kids sitting around the table pitted us against each other. I was like, this is ridiculous, I'm not buying into this and I wanted to get up and leave but I didn't, and I'm sure it showed on my face. I don't know, maybe 10 minutes into the interview and they would not even look at my face. It was like I'm not interested in you; you might as well give it up. I could just see it on their faces. I felt it, and it was like the next day I got an email to work at this place [meaning where she currently works]. I was so tempted to write a discrimination letter to Wells Fargo Bank, but I did not want to spend the energy. You know, I guess I thought it wouldn't happen to me. I feel like I'm 30 years old. I don't think that I act like an old lady that's incapable of doing bank teller business. I had it in my favor that I have something people want, experience. But nope, you don't have the look that we want... I don't feel like I thought of what an old person would think.

In the examples of Vin and Ingrid, it is possible that something else is at play that prevents them from finding work after retirement. Whether competent or not, their experiences in finding work after retiring were similar. According to Butler (1975), "ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves; thus, they subtly cease to identify with the elders as human beings" (p. 12).⁶⁰ Angus and Reeve (2006) claim that Ageism—the discrimination against individuals based on their age—is "widespread and generally accepted and largely ignored. Stereotypes that underlay the pervasiveness of ageism have become so embedded in our perceptions of human life that they are taken for granted and have become unexamined tacit assumptions" (p. 138).⁶¹ In this sense, older workers experiencing ageism feel ignored and "othered." Being "othered" regularly is, as Ingrid indicated, harmful—i.e. seeing

⁶⁰ Cuddy et al. (2005) claim it is a pan-cultural ageism not a Westerner stand-alone perception of elderly people—Hong Kong, Japan, Israel, South Korea, Belgium, Costa Rica (p. 272).

⁶¹ Ageism stems from "deeply entrenched value patterns in Western society characterized by a strong performance orientation that celebrates economic productivity and independence. They generate an "unconscious overflow" of values and assumptions about the lives of older people. Ageist assumptions become ingrained in social structures such as the workplace, bureaucracy, public institutions, and the health care system" (Angus and Reeve 2006:138). Cuddy et al. (2005) ageism is a uniquely Western problem and that other, perhaps more genocratic, cultures accord the elderly respect and veneration.

older individuals as different and not equal (cast them as “non-humans” Jonson 2012:199).⁶² To some degree, Ingrid also showed that these hiring sites were engaged in stereotyping or sending a message to elders who want to remain working, that it is time to leave the labor force—a sort of “age sanctioning” (Marshall 2007: 11).

Referring to Ingrid’s economic need for work, she experiences significant obstacles trying to get back to work promptly to improve her status. These institutional barriers made her question her thoughts about age and might dampen her self-esteem about being an older female worker. If Ingrid and others are more frequently exposed to younger generations through work, whereas in retirement they may spend more time with people in the same age cohort, they may be more likely to be treated as “different” more often. As Cruikshank (2013) claims, “when an old woman becomes “the other,” fundamentally different from others, those in the dominant group create emotional distance from her by exaggerating difference and overlooking shared characteristics” (p. 5).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I showed how older workers are attempting to reject “agedness” and embraced an “ageless” identity or age neutrality. The research, however, demonstrates that as informants reject old age, they construct it negatively, while identifying as ageless offers a positive construction of age. The construction of “ageless age,” however, is more nuanced as some older workers find themselves readily embracing it, but are sometimes still reminded of old age as a “natural” status by economic structures through state benefits such as Social Security for the old as they enter the institutionalized old age. In addition, interaction with co-workers, patrons, clients, and employers can also reinforce old age identity. This is more common the

⁶² Older people are cast as different from younger people. The otherness of older people appears in language that signifies difference, for example, as “dirty old men”, “hags,” “geezer,” and “fossils” (Jonson 2012:199).

experiences of by women. At the Transportation Company, older men are viewed as competent, which is often associated with authority and strength while their age goes unnoticed. For older female workers, however, competence aligns with the noticing of age with an understanding that older women are nurturing, caring and friendlier than men are. In limited situations, older female workers seem to reproduce meanings and understandings of an older female employee (e.g. a bus monitor) as they allow themselves to be called out in those aging terms (e.g. grandma).

Across the worksites, older men's performance at work or their ability to work and maintain good health were reasons why they were able to triumph over coworkers or clients negatively labeling them old. However, older female workers doing the same as older men face major challenges passing or identifying as ageless. In some worksites such as the Information Center and the Local Shopping Center, they were perceived as old and this status interacted with gender which made them then feel stigmatized, experience blatant forms of ageism, denied employment (some men also), lose power or held less power (compared to younger and male coworkers), and alienated in work. As scholars such as Cuddy et al. (2005) claim "older people often face the cold shoulder in workplace settings, through hiring practices and pressure to retire. Older individuals who want or need to work have trouble finding jobs and keeping jobs, often because of unfair and inaccurate assessments of their presumed or actual productivity" (p. 277). At these sites, older workers particularly women contested the negative labels of age (i.e. being treated as irrelevant, ignorant, and worthless). However, it was not to necessarily pass as younger or a member of another age, but to be treated equally in work and to prevent others from determining what roles they should or should not do. In challenging these negative labels, older women and men attempt to triumph over coworkers' and clients' application of old age labels, which they do not embrace.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

My study explored how age is constructed in the changing social context of unretirement, by major social actors engaged in the phenomenon—older workers, and employers who hire them. Through ethnography and in-depth interviews with 33 older workers and employers/supervisors across six medium-to-large companies in Kansas in the service, retail, and manufacturing industries, I have gained an in-depth understanding of how age is constructed in unretirement. In the 21st century post-industrial America, employers are turning to older workers to fill jobs to augment labor supply and turn a profit, and older workers are valued and culturally characterized in positive terms indicating a new aging may have emerged.

Implications of Study

I argue that while 20th century negative meanings and perceptions of old age linger in the 21st century post-industrial context, overall age is now constructed more positively through work than it used to be. From all employers' and supervisors' accounts, older employees are assets for hireability due to significant changes in the structure of work. Employers turn to older workers to fill jobs, augment their labor supply, and help businesses operate profitably given the work structure. Across these companies such as the Transportation Company, Information Center, and the Retail Store, employers show a strong preference for elder labor which they align to the niche services these companies provide and clientele they serve in the Kansas area. Employers hold an objective social identity of what it means to be old in this post-industrial economy. They characterize older workers as possessing valuable attributes such as being reliable, strong work ethic, good social and interpersonal skills, friendliness, warmth, grandparent-like qualities (e.g. gray hair), and accruing human capital (i.e. a lifetime of skills, knowledge, and experience), which make them “ideal workers,” and which employers believed other younger workers

seemingly lack. As assets, older workers today seem to alter the notion of the ideal/utopian worker.

Though employers and managers constructed old age positively, they tended to formulate this view based on stereotypes or traditional meanings of aging such that they perceived older workers as “rigid,” which sometimes coincided with but also differed from older workers’ view of age. Employers associated older workers with certain types of jobs due to attributes they believed older workers possessed. Some companies construct old age as a “right fit” as they hire older workers to fill specific roles such as company “greeters” as opposed to cash register agents because of the family-friendly message or appearance the company wants to convey to customers, whereby they perceived older employees as “friendlier” or having a more “pleasant” face than younger workers. In these instances, supervisors tend to use physiological old age qualities (such as the appearance of aging— e.g. gray hair) to place older workers into certain work positions that they idealized as well suited for them. Though the placement of workers in these positions benefited the company as it satisfied the organization’s needs (i.e. a “graying” older person provides a family-like and approachable image), they reproduced older workers as a specific type of worker. Thus, across these companies, employers construct older workers as assets as they “managed” them into roles that provided value (i.e. profits) for the companies. As Yeatts et al. (2000) inform, older workers are “assets that will continue to grow if managed properly” (p. 577).

In part, my analysis further indicates the positive construction of age aligns directly with the economic needs of employing companies. Older workers are assets that yield returns for companies—i.e. profits. Recall that in this post-industrial labor market, companies are service-oriented with predominantly low paid, part-time, and flexible jobs, with limited or no benefits.

Career-oriented applicants may avoid these less attractive jobs. Given these features of the work structure, not having the right type of worker becomes problematic for these companies. Older workers are an ideal form of labor supply because these companies are seeking employees who have alternative revenue streams. Though other employees are hired at these companies, employers indicate that unretirees may have access to other forms of income because of their retired old age status (younger workers do not qualify) and are sought after precisely to fill these jobs. In other words, employers recognized that older workers often have supplemental income and benefits from the welfare state and previous employers, and they can thus pay them less than they would otherwise have to. Further, unretirees themselves desired additional work or deliberately engaged in part-time jobs as opposed to full-time such as those offered by these companies.

Older workers are assets because employers capitalized on the skills and talents they accumulated over their life by accruing time/age. Employers utilize their previously acquired skills to help train other workers without paying them. Hiring older workers under these conditions provides a great opportunity for these companies to turn a profit especially those faced with fiscal burdens like the Transportation Company. Though this is exploitative, older workers nonetheless came to see themselves as valuable resources and assets to their employers as they mentored and trained younger workers. As they shared with other workers, it brought them dignity and a sense of worth.

As employers embraced and idealized older workers, they inform how they socially construct their reality of age—i.e. not only “old” age but also “young” age. In these workplaces, employers and managers reproduced age, specifically old age identity as assets and valued in work but they did in ways that reinforced stereotypes of age such as hiring or desiring older

workers labor to fit specific roles (e.g. greeting customers, mentoring, or working with young children and the public). Employers view these roles as more compatible with old age due to the ideology they hold about age chronology (i.e. “oldness” as opposed to “youngness”). When work roles seemed based on cultural beliefs and symbolic meanings of age, a positive construction of old age/older worker is evident. Thus, employers using age chronology in this way to determine roles for employees may determine older people’s ability and value more broadly in society. To some extent, employers hiring of older workers also promote ideas of inclusion and visibility of older workers in a space (i.e. work) where those holding old age status are often excluded and discriminated against. This positive perception of old age counters previous 20th century ideologies that cast older workers negatively “as industrial obsolescence” (Macnicol 2006: 229, 263).

Apart from employers, my study reveals the older workers used their agedness as an asset to resist exploitation. When older workers dislike tasks assigned to them or found them meaningless, they used their old age status to resist by selecting jobs they considered ideal and enjoyable in unretirement—such as jobs with less responsibility that offered flexibility and few hours. This was particularly true of employees at the Transportation Company and Local Shopping Center who used age to secure better shifts, spend more time with children, family or clients. To them, old age is an asset but as they embraced age, it often involved invoking stereotypes of old age to get out of doing certain tasks and jobs. Thus, they reinforce ageist stereotypes about themselves in the process.

Despite the positive renderings of age that made older employees “ideal” and desirable workers, being “older” in work is not always perceived as an asset. Employers and supervisors who qualify age as an asset at times constructed it in negative terms as a hindrance. My analysis

revealed this occurred in workspaces when older workers resisted work they did not want to do, which created conflict between older workers and employers and other workers. Old age is negatively constructed also depending on the work structure and employers' stereotypical perceptions of age. To this extent, I argue there is a 20th "hangover" in meanings of age, in which employers draw on negative symbolism or stereotypes of age to cast agedness as a hindrance in work. Older workers are labeled as "technophobes," "less adaptable," "incapable," "inefficient," "inflexible," sometimes "unattractive," and carrying an "aging mindset" when they refused to perform certain tasks or to speed up their work (Chapter 4). Thus, the aging body has become an evaluative marker, culturally judged in ways that define worth (Calasanti and Slevin 2001:53).

Other findings demonstrate that a different work-retirement philosophy has emerged as older workers march back to work. Retirement may be becoming somewhat "fuzzy"—the standardization of the life course is coming undone because older workers are not staying retired (Henretta 1997). Retirement is not as secure as it once was and presumably may "not" be here to stay as the future of work and government programs for older workers are changing in fundamental ways. These changes create new meanings about the social institution of retirement and age today. Based on my informants' behaviors, old age is no longer "singular, industrialized experience based on prescribed developmental social roles terminating in old age, but a more indeterminate process with several beginning, overlapping, and end points and contingent life transitions" (Katz 2005:14). As Kojola and Moen (2016) argues, "for boomers, retirement is no longer a distinct event and life stage; the stark division between full-time work and full-time leisure has blurred" (p. 67).

The majority of older workers face financial uncertainty. Though the welfare state continues to define and reward old age as a normative and distinctive stage in the life course—

i.e. a politically driven system imposed by the capitalist life course regimes (Katz 2005:143)—, my study indicates that age-based support systems have weakened and retirees cannot “drain public coffers” (Calasanti and Slevin 2001:20). Calasanti and Slevin (2001) assert that the passage of Social Security in 1935 constructed old age as an economic problem—retirees drawing Social Security benefits were depicted as “too dependent or too greedy” draining “public coffers” (p. 20). Fast forward eight decades and my study indicates an opposite scenario. Older informants clearly indicate that inadequacies in policies influence labor force participation to secure themselves. These informants indicate that decisions to stay retired or unretire are driven by individual motivation, but mainly by situational constraints such as health care needs, “personal financial health” (Katz 2005:149) or limited social insurance programs (e.g. Social Security)—the main financial leg in their retirement stool (Cahill et al. 2013). Thus, if age benefits from the government continue to be inadequate and employers make fewer commitments to employees, more older workers would be compelled to think differently about aging, retirement, and how they will survive later in life. Thus, unretirement may be the neoliberal answer to their economic uncertainty.

Given the neoliberal context that now prevails, older individuals must now take responsibility for saving for their retirement. Thus, older workers and the employers who hire them seem to be moving towards an “anti-welfarist” system (Macnicol 2015; Katz 2005:58-59). This seemingly “new aging” represents a shift from past images of old age or contrasts traditional meanings and expectations of retirement and old age as a somewhat paternalistic relationship—i.e. the “dependent” older adult who is reliant on the government to provide security. As Katz (2005) claimed, “demands of industrialization and Western welfare states are blamed for constructing later life and retirement as negative states of decline and dependency”

(p. 140). The opposite seems apparent in my study. Older workers seem less reliant on the state and aim to self-fund aging through some kind of work participation—unretirement.

The unretirement trend may lead to what may be perceived as a deinstitutionalization of retirement in which it cannot become the taken-for-granted event in older adults lives especially as some older individuals indicated they lack the financial savings for retirement. However, as they do, job opportunities and the structure of work make it difficult for older workers secure finances or keep up with rising costs of living. As my study reveals, unretirees find themselves in less stable positions in post-retirement years—usually part-time work with no or little benefits (which they need). Although unretirement offers a way for older workers to make money, I found that some older workers continue to face major obstacles towards security in the Kansas labor market regardless of the industry in which they worked or how much employers need them.

Older adults who face serious health problems, or whose spouses do, may struggle acutely in the new “do-it-yourself” funding system of retirement. Thus, there is a great possibility that if economic security remains unmet, unretirement may become more pronounced in years to come and older workers may presumably find themselves unretiring for a long time. This may inform about not only current experiences of aging and retirement by current unretirees, but of future unretirees in the U.S. This retirement experience may indicate real economic hardship for many future retirees and suggests that greater priority should be given to age-based policies.

Even though older workers unretire to fill or secure income in retirement years, and though they received unexpected social benefits, for these workers, unretirement constructed age experiences negatively. In this sense, it is older workers that view age negatively while employers view them as assets as they are able to capitalize on the labor (i.e. older worker need

for work). These older workers perceive old age as a time for traditional retirement or considered it a time to leave work and take up leisure which they romanticized —anti-work philosophy (Chapter 5). However, they felt forced to return to work given their economic need and unsustainable government support. Therefore, age-based policies such as Medicare and Social Security need to be reevaluated to improve the economic conditions of older Americans.

Though economic factors are important reasons why older adults return to work and affect experiences and meanings of age and retirement, other factors are considered. Social “insecurity” played a major role in why they return to work—i.e. maintaining social connections and companionship. Although these unretirees received economic gains while seeking out “social security,” their unretiring suggests retirement and old age as an insecure time in life. They experience a sense of loss as they retired and some felt lonely in retirement. Unlike retirement, “unretirement” seems to mitigate these insecurities as it offers them structure, routines, activeness and engagement, a sense of productivity, and reinstalls a work role/identity. Although it seemed like an oxymoron, “work” for these older individuals is ideal “retirement” because they interacted with people during their shifts and felt less isolated than they would have if forced to retire and retreat.

While older workers seeking economic security viewed unretirement as unfavorable because it interfered with their perceptions of age and ideal retirement, those seeking “social security” denounced retirement, intentionally select unretirement, and constructed age more positively. They are not simply “pawns” that accept traditional retirement. They understood or associated someone to be old if they were inactive or not part of work. These workers also took on a “non-old” identity to distinguish themselves from “old” peers. Workers distanced themselves from retirement, and retired peers, which they signified as inactivity and frailty

associated with growing old. By this construction, I noticed these informants “othered” (Simmel 1950) the infirm or those they deemed old as they tried to differentiate themselves from the “other,” and largely, I argue, to distance themselves from their sense of mortality.

Some older workers unretired because they feared “aging” and thought that going back to work would allow them to deny their mortality and agedness—they did not perceive themselves as old or nearing death. This mentality possibly follows Calasanti’s and Slevin’s (2001) explanation that “the old themselves shun [old] label and reserve it for those in obvious physical or mental decline; they treat chronological [old] age as irrelevant” (p. 19). Older workers tend to perceive mortality and retirement as synonymous. This perception may reinforce the belief that aging is negative and older individuals who are unable to work or remain active are “failed beings.” This is not to say that these informants do not recognize aging, but when they do, it is outside of their own selves. Though informants acknowledged physical age changes to their bodies as an unavoidable process, they embraced agelessness status. They did not classify themselves as old *per se*; rather, they felt “ageless.” Thus, while other social actors such as employers and co-workers impose old age labels, and some older workers themselves may internalize meanings associated with aging in work such as retirement, some do not accept or identify with these labels and behavior. This may suggest that a complete identity change is symbolically occurring among older workers—i.e. a change from agedness to agelessness/age neutrality.

Though individuals may embrace an ageless identity, economic forces reminded one of agedness as they received old age benefits associated with the “institutionalized” age imposed by the state. Furthermore, coworkers, clients, patrons, and employers at times played a key role in reproducing old age as a life course stage. Some used chronological age to treat workers as “old”

and used that identity to diminish them in work. Older workers are sometimes bypass on the job by these actors in favor of younger workers. Hedge et al. (2006) pointed out that change in the industrial economy contributed to older workers being treated unfairly in the workplace. In these instances, negative age messages lingered—i.e. depreciation/traditionalist meanings of age.

As my analysis unfolded, the belief of old age shapes behavior such that older workers were singled out and treated differently in work in relation to gender. Being older and male versus female in work carried different meanings. Calasanti and Slevin (2001:24) assert, “bodies serve as markers of age,” but people mark bodies as aged in different ways. The intersection of age and gender in work generated barriers to workers. Older men were more successful than women were in “passing” as ageless at work. In general, older men’s ageless identity stayed intact—because no one mentioned or in any way referred to it—as they interacted with co-workers and clients of any age. By contrast, older female workers were prone to report that younger co-workers and clients often applied age and gender stereotypes to them—i.e. age sanctions. Co-workers judged them harshly as incompetent and “too old” and “incapable” of work, which was clearly guided by gender. This construction of age coincided with negative labels such as viewing older women as “weak,” needing “help,” and “incompetent” which diminished their relevance in work—the traditionalist or depreciation model of age. For men, they were seen more positively as holding authority and power—the conservative or culturalist conception of age.

In my study, I found that older women and the co-workers and clients with whom they interacted regarded gray hair on women as a sign of decrepitude or incompetence, whereas it seemed to go unremarked for men. Many people may mark gray hair as a sign of older age. However, they ascribe different meanings to it depending on who is wearing it. Two women in

my study dyed their gray hair a darker color because they believed that younger clients and patrons would take them more seriously at work. Even while their younger relatives teased them for dying their hair, these older women persisted because they were tired of being treated as obsolete or incapable of work by those who interpreted their gray hair as a sign of “oldness” and “decline.” Thus, it is apparent that aging bodies are bearers of strict cultural and social meaning [i.e. unproductivity and devaluation] closely tied to one’s physicality by virtue of “chronological age alone” (Fealy et al. 2012:86; Shultz and Adams 2007:111). Older women also felt judged by a yardstick of attractiveness in which “youth is good, desirable, and beautiful; old age is bad, repulsive, and ugly” (Hurd 2011:29). As my research shows, “such a Manichaean picture [i.e. youth is “in,” old is undeniably “out”] strictly taken, does not recognize gradation and nuances of age” (Geiger Zeman and Zeman 2014:224). Nor does it recognize how older men may either be regarded as more competent as their physical signs of age emerge or the same as always (i.e. people with whom they interact will neglect to call out older men’s signs of aging).

Several older female workers experienced unfair and unequal treatment in work locations—i.e. marginalization, social exclusion and stigmatization in the workplace which entailed a significant devaluation of them as workers. Some older women indicated that although they are competent and qualified, their co-workers, patrons, and supervisors treated them as “goods with a limited useful life” (Yeatts et al. 2000:577). It is objectifying older workers (and others in that age bracket) as “the Other” and “not “like them” [i.e. coworkers] and possibly making it easier to see the old as “not humans” (Calasanti and Slevin 2001:19). In those instances of negative labeling, employee alienation occurs. It seemed to me that older female workers experienced intergenerational inequalities due to ideas formulated around old age as a declining social identity.

Older women in my study resisted these age labels by criticizing coworkers who rendered them obsolete by labeling them incapable. This resistance indicated a debunking of traditionally held cultural old age meanings. To some extent, their struggle was about feeling and being treated equally in the workplace though predicated on meanings of age. Women felt successful when age is rejected and unsuccessful when imposed, but men typically felt more successful at this than women did. Given the gendered experience in unretirement, future studies can explore more on gender discrimination in unretirement and the impact on age construction in post-industrial America.

Strengths and Suggestions for Further Research

Older workers represented a group of individuals often discussed in research, but also often excluded from the discussion on aging. In general, older adults are not always given the opportunity to tell their stories (see Esterberg 2002:87). My research gives a voice to them. Their voices help “us better understand the position of older people within society, cultural attitudes regarding older adults, the attitudes and expectations of older people themselves, and also the interaction of older people within the social context” (Powell and Hendricks 2009:87) of work. I also included the voices of employers because I wanted to understand how they constructed age given that more older adults are returning to work. Together, my inclusion of employers and older workers is a research strength because they allow me to see how these social actors with widely differing stakes and roles (Soafer 1999 see also Katz 1982; Ely 1991:58; Seidman 1998:3; Terre Blanche and Kelly 1999), construct age in unretirement. Obtaining data from both groups offers more rigorous analysis and theoretical development.

My study yields insights about meanings of age and retirement that builds upon other models of age—i.e. the depreciation and conservative approaches. As I discussed, the

construction of old age carries negative meanings that are contingent on a variable of factors that include the structure of work, aging stereotypes and employers' and other people's ideology about age and work. However, in this 21st century post-industrial America, work is central in the lives of many older adults, and older workers are considered ideal workers. In the case of Kansas (at least in my study), as employers seek flexible, low-wage workers with ample previous training and strong work ethics to increase profits, they may increasingly turn to older workers now and in the future. Older workers rarely conceived of themselves as incapable. They were confident about their ability but not willing to perform tasks they felt were meaningless to them. In some cases, they possessed the desired skills but were unmotivated, or were seeking other meanings in unretirement that did not match the employer's tasks.

As work becomes more precarious, poorly remunerated, and unpleasant (workers are more heavily surveilled at work, given less interesting and more fragmented assignments, and forced to work more quickly for less money) (Davis 2009), older workers may increasingly be pressed to resist by invoking negative stereotypes about older age. Absent unions and effective means for battling offshoring and downsizing, workers in the United States today have fewer resources upon which to draw to defend themselves against exploitation. Further, as more older adults return to the workforce, labor supply may increase, potentially increasing competition for jobs between them and younger workers, and driving down wages. Although this could create a positive experience for older adults, as it would emphasize strengths of age, it also undermines "agelessness." Rather than just getting to be or do whatever they want, older workers may be forced to present themselves as ageless, and they may feel pigeonholed as a result.

Even though unretirees identify as ageless, and have new opportunities in work, they experience negative constructions of age (i.e. agedness and consequences of it) and presumably,

for longer periods than they would if they could retire, because the majority cannot easily leave work without experiencing further financial and social insecurity. This could be problematic for older employees who unretire especially for financial security and need to remain in work longer. My study exposed ongoing discrimination possibly due to decades of ageist beliefs and practices aimed at older workers. Social actors tended to perpetuate stereotypical beliefs about old age in these workplaces based on traditional meanings formulated about work life and old age chronology. Notions of physical and cognitive functionality associated with aging tend to influence perceptions of older workers. Old age seemed to portray workers obsolete especially related to technology, which leads to stigmatizing them as incompetent workers. To this extent, older workers became an unfavorable human resource (Yeatts et al. 2000:578; Fealy et al. 2012; Shultz 1961). My research shows that age chronology may be a too simplistic and a misleading measure of older workers worth in the workplace given that they are considered assets and desired labor.

Although my study is not representative, it may be more broadly generalizable to gender in the sense that it may speak to studies on the social and cultural construction of “ideal workers” more generally. For example, my study may show how an “ideal aging” worker is constructed or reproduced in work and the outcomes of this age construction similarly to how gender, is constructed and experienced in the workplace. This may be applicable in two ways: First, it may relate to research on the motherhood penalty because “mother” like “elder” are social constructs derived from cultural norms that sometimes [carry negative meanings when intersected with work]. For instance, it is the idea that a role conflict exists between the status positions of “mother” and “worker.” The role of mother is culturally believed to be in tension with the ideal worker role. Thus, “mother” as a culturally created construct connotes harsh devaluation in status

and judge harsher (i.e. less competent and committed) or penalized in the workplace (subtly discriminatory practices such as less promotion and lower salaries as opposed to non-mother Correll, et al. 2007:1298). Looking over the history of older workers, the U.S. labor market reveals a pattern that is akin to the “motherhood penalty”—A categorization of “elder” as a construct, which summons forth a penalty. Although older workers have been “judged” as less than or a devalued group compared to younger workers, my study questions are this still the case today (i.e. “older worker” conflicts with good worker) in a U.S society that is different? Second, from my research, it seems that older workers are becoming an ideal and sort after labor supply for specific types of work. They are meeting the demands of employers in efforts to mitigate the workforce shortage. This is especially important for policy direction makers and other potential employers in coming years by promoting unretirees as sort after human resource especially in the U.S. context that is increasing graying in population. Thus, negative rhetoric associated with old age must change since meaning are not fixed and they are not all negative (Vincent 2006: 682). As Block (1990) states, if we are in a society whereby change is occurring at the level of ideas and understanding (p. 11) is it possible to change a “persuasive master concept [aging] for making sense of our own society” (Block 1990:11).

My research shows that work remains important in the lives of individuals beyond the traditional retirement age and shed some light on the aging workforce and right to work. It may suggest that as employers engage in hiring practices seeking out older individuals, they are important actors aiding in changing the institution of retirement and the age-work structure. Since older individuals are working past retirement age and contributing productively to the modern economy, additional research on how work in later life affects aging is all the more important. It would be interesting to investigate other sectors and regions of the U.S. that are

experiencing the unretirement phenomenon. Doing so can provide an opportunity for more comparative analysis. Related to this point, future studies can examine whether there are worksites that are particularly targeting older workers as the main labor supply and how these places socially construct aging compared to worksites that are less targeted. Worksites are different and may vary in how age is constructed.

Since we are facing a growth in older population and unretirees in this new post-modern turn, more research is needed in areas related to aging, old age, work, and retirement. My research is a start in the right direction. It would be important to take on more research that explores an intersectional approach since social locations such as gender, race, class can influence old age experience and meanings. I propose that to continue our understandings of age construction it is important to include individuals labeled as older.

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Appendix A - Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule Sample Questions

Employee:

1. Describe what kind of work you do
2. Describe your current occupation/position and what it means to you
3. While you've been searching for a job, what have you done, if anything, to increase your chances of being hired?
4. Since you've been hired are there any changes in your pay?
5. How many of your friends your age do you see still working?
6. How do you feel about your job?
7. What tasks have you taken on since being hired?
8. Have you tried to do less physically or mentally demanding tasks?
9. Are you given less physically or mentally demanding tasks to do?
10. Since you've started working, have you cut back on your hours at work, or not? Why?
11. In general, do you consider your age to be an asset to your job or a liability to your job?
12. Since turning 60 years old, what situations have you personally experienced because of your age
13. Have you worried about your ability to do your job because of your age
14. Describe the amount of physical effort your job requires
15. Describe in general how you feel about your age
16. how they interact with others in the workplace and others to them

17. When you do plan to leave the workforce, what do you expect will be your reason or reasons to leave?
18. What barriers or opportunities did you encounter for this specific job
19. When you do plan to leave the workforce, what do you expect will be your reason or reasons to leave?
20. What will keep you working in this bridge job or another bridge job, i.e., personal reasons and/or organizational support?

Employers:

1. Tell me about your company/business? What is it you do?
2. How long have you been in business in the city?
3. How has your business grown or changed over the years?
4. What kinds of job opportunities/positions do you offer? How has that changed?
5. How long have employees been with your company/business? Why do employees stay or leave?
6. Who most often applies for positions in your company? What needs do you have in terms of employees?
7. What is the greatest need in terms of employing older workers?
8. What benefits do you provide?
9. How well do older and younger workers get along? Can you give me some examples?
10. Could you tell me about your star employees?
11. Have you had problems with your workforce?

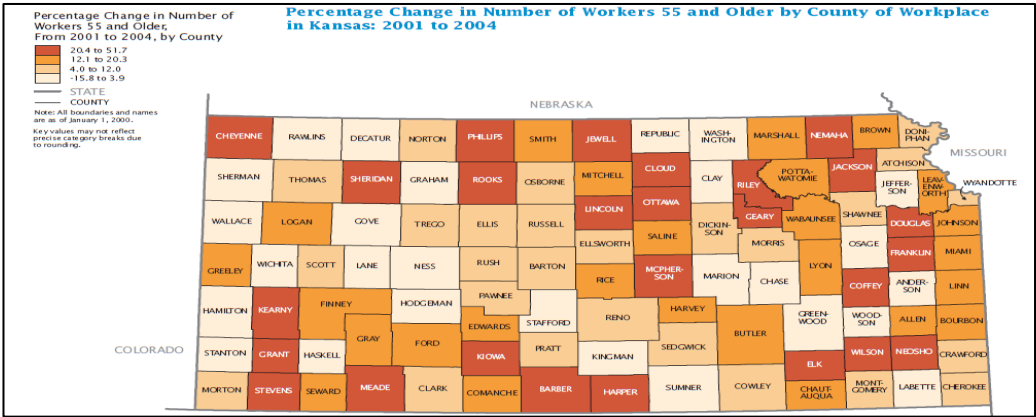
12. Why did you decide to contact FHAAA? When did you start? What are your plans with FHAAA in coming years?
13. How many workers do you employ or in what capacity? What jobs do they do?
14. Are employees working under contract? How long have they been working with you?
15. What is the work structure like? Tell me about the job criteria/description?
16. How flexible are jobs? What ratio of work is part-time and full-time? Which age groups fill these positions?
17. How much change-up do you make in terms of what workers can do?
18. What are the job stipulations?
19. How are positions coordinated? Are they in work teams? Why?
20. Describe why you think older workers seek employment at your organization?
21. Describe the types of jobs you advertise for potential employees?
22. Tell me more about the job description for jobs offered to older workers as well as other workers?

Table 3: Labor Force Participation (LFP) Rate of workers 65 and over, 1948-2012 and Projected to 2022

Year	Total, 65 and older	Year	Total, 65 and older	Year	Total, 65 and older	Year	Total, 65 and older	Year	Total, 65 and older
1948	27	1961	20.1	1974	14	1987	11.1	2000	12.9
1949	27.3	1962	19.1	1975	13.7	1988	11.5	2001	13
1950	26.7	1963	17.9	1976	13.1	1989	11.8	2002	13.2
1951	25.8	1964	18	1977	13	1990	11.8	2003	14
1952	24.8	1965	17.8	1978	13.3	1991	11.5	2004	14.4
1953	24.8	1966	17.2	1979	13.1	1992	11.5	2005	15.1
1954	23.9	1967	17.2	1980	12.5	1993	11.2	2006	15.4
1955	24.1	1968	17.2	1981	12.2	1994	12.4	2007	16
1956	24.3	1969	17.3	1982	11.9	1995	12.1	2008	16.8
1957	22.9	1970	17	1983	11.7	1996	12.1	2010	17.4
1958	21.8	1971	16.2	1984	11.1	1997	12.2	2012	18.5
1959	21.1	1972	15.6	1985	10.8	1998	11.9	2018	22.4
1960	20.8	1973	14.6	1986	10.9	1999	12.3	2020	22.6
								2022	23

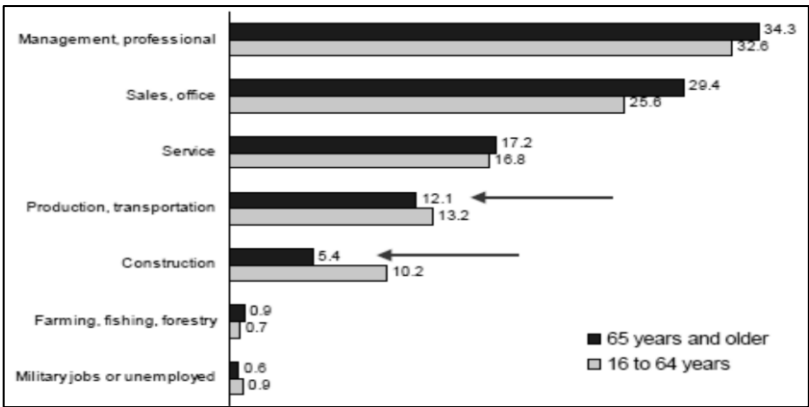
Data: Employment Projections Program, U.S. Department of Labor,
U.S. Bureau Labor Statistics 2013, 2012, 2009, 2007, 2006

Figure 3: Percentage Change in Number of Workers 55 and Older by County of Workplace in Kansas: 2001 to 2004



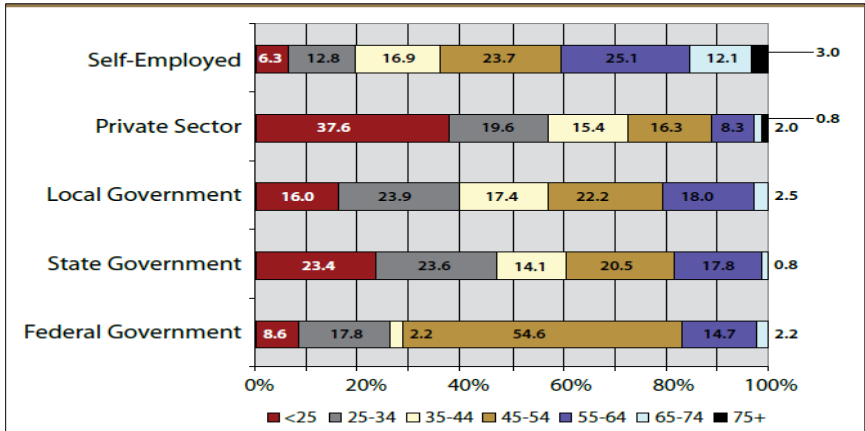
U.S. Census Bureau the Geographic Distribution and Characteristics of Older Workers in Kansas: 2004

Figure 4:National Percent Distribution Industries and Occupation by Age Group



Source: American Community Survey, 2006

Figure 5: Age of Kansas Workforce in the Public and Private Sector, and Self-Employed Groups



Source: Wong (2008) Data from ACS 2006