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"Older" hotel employees' perceptions of workplace equality in the UK and Ireland.

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The population of Europe is ageing. This has repercussions for the hotel industry which has traditionally relied on "younger" workers. Research has demonstrated that more people suffer from age discrimination than any other form of discrimination. Yet, despite a growth of literature concerning workplace equality for "older" people in recent years, there remains a dearth of research into workplace equality in hotels concerning "older" employees. This article attempts to address this gap in knowledge by discussing the views of "older" workers in hotels. This paper will outline the rationale for the study, examine theories of workplace equality, discuss population ageing and its impact on employment and present findings from interviews with "older" hotel workers in the UK and Ireland concerning workplace equality. The paper will conclude by relating theories on workplace equality to the findings of interviews with "older" hotel employees and will give recommendations for further research.

Introduction

Little is known about the attitudes, experiences and aspirations of "older" workers (Donovan and Street, 2000; Loretto and White, 2006b; Loretto, Vickerstaff and White, 2006) and the subject of hotel workplace equality for "older" employees has never been investigated in-depth, only as an exploratory survey (e.g. Magd, 2003) or part of a wider investigation (e.g. Chiu, Chan, Snape and Redman, 2001; Loretto and White, 2006a). Indeed, "older" workers have largely been marginalised by studies on workplace equality and have been treated not as subjects who are able to speak for themselves but as objects for investigation (Blaikie, 1999). This article attempts to compensate for this imbalance by discussing the views of "older" workers in order to give voice to those who may be profoundly affected by inequality in the workplace.

This article will discuss the issue of hotel workplace equality in relation to "older" employees. For the purposes of this article, an "older" worker refers to a person aged 50 and above. Much research on ageism and equality in employment uses the age-band of fifty and above to define an older worker (e.g, McKay and Middleton, 1998; The Cabinet Office, 2000; OECD, 2004; Loretto, Vickerstaff and White, 2005; Whiting, 2005). However, it should be remembered that old age is an imprecise term (Minois, 1989) and, whilst often conceptualized in biological or psychological terms, old age is a process which is socially and culturally constructed (Wilson, 2000). Therefore, it is difficult to establish a time in a person's life when he or she becomes old (Harris, 1990). Moreover, a person may themselves not realise they have become old as old age is sometimes more apparent to other people than to the individual concerned (de Beauvoir, 1996).

The structure of this paper will be as follows: firstly, the rationale for the study will be outlined; secondly, theories of workplace equality will be examined; thirdly, population ageing and its impact on employment will be discussed and, fourthly, findings from interviews with "older" hotel workers in the UK and Ireland concerning workplace equality will be presented. The paper will conclude by relating theories on workplace equality to the findings of interviews with "older" hotel employees.

Theories concerning workplace equality

Equality is a difficult term to define as it is used to mean different and sometimes contradictory things and its meaning is ambiguous (Levin et al, 1992). According to Baker (1987), as equality is a complicated idea, it is better to think of it not as a single principle but as a group of principles covering basic needs, equal respect, economic equality, political equality and sexual, racial, ethnic and religious equality. It is, however, interesting to note that Baker (1987) makes no mention of equality in relation to age. Invariably, people will be treated differently in the workplace. A salient definition of equality will need to recognize when a difference becomes an inequality (Levin et al, 1992). In determining equality and inequality, a moral judgment has to be made about whether social difference is better or worse (Vincent, 1995).

According to Noon and Blyton (2002), there are three broad perspectives on equality: the liberal perspective, the radical perspective and the reactionary perspective. In relation to the liberal perspective, individuals compete for social rewards in a free and equal manner; the radical perspective addresses structural disadvantage and is concerned with the outcome rather than the process and the reactionary perspective is based on biological essentialism where natural inequality is seen as being due to genetic differences (Noon and Blyton, 2002). Barnard, Deakin and Kilpatrick (2002) identify two types of equality: formal equality and substantive equality. Formal equality refers to a liberal conception of equality, which is reflected in the principle of direct

discrimination whereas substantive equality relates to equality of results, equality of "fairness" and equality of opportunity (Barnard, Deakin and Kilpatrick (2002).

According to Miller (1996), there are four types of equality: ontological equality, equality of opportunity, equality of condition and equality of outcome. Ontological equality refers to equality of need and is based on a belief that human beings are essentially the same; equality of opportunity is associated with a liberal political perspective and attempts to create a level playing field; equality of condition seeks to improve or equalize material conditions for disadvantaged people and equality of outcome is based on a radical political perspective and aims to decisively change the workforce composition by such means as positive discrimination (Miller, 1996, p. 204).

Thompson (2003) recognizes eight processes which are closely associated with inequality: stereotyping, marginalization, invisibilzation, infantilization, welfareism, medicalisation, dehumanization and trivialization. These processes, in turn, will result in different categories of discrimination (e.g. based on age), leading to a form of oppression (e.g. ageism) (Thompson, 2003). According to Young (1990) there are five "faces of oppression", these being exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence and any one of these faces can lead to the oppression of a group. In particular, older people are oppressed by marginalization and cultural imperialism with the former representing the most dangerous type of oppression (Young, 1990). Similarly, Thompson and Thompson (2001) consider that older people represent an oppressed group due to discrimination, marginalization and dehumanization. Thus, Thompson (2006) argues, older people are assigned lower status in the labour market because they are viewed as marginal to the labour market.

Equality, or inequality, is closely related to the concept of justice which is socially constructed and is based on past decisions of fairness (Colquitt et al, 2001). Questions regarding justice arise whenever decisions are made concerning the allocation of resources (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 2001). Justice is generally seen as a force for good which can hold people together whereas injustice is usually considered to be a force which can pull people apart (Folger and Cropanzano, 1998). Injustice refers, primarily, to oppression, a structural phenomenon that immobalises or diminishes a group and domination, where oppressed groups are subject to stereotyping and are rendered invisible (Young, 1990). Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith and Huo (1997) discuss four eras of social justice research: relative deprivation, distributive justice, procedural justice and retributive justice. Relative deprivation concerns satisfaction and dissatisfaction of decisions regarding what people have and what they think they deserve (Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith and Huo, 1997). Distributive justice relates to the "perceived fairness of the procedures used to determine outcomes (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 2001, p. 253). Procedural justice can be explained according to two models; the relational or group value model which focuses on the economic benefits of being a member of a particular group and the instrumental model, which focuses on the economic incentives to promote fairness and (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 2001). Retributive justice concerns the breaking of social rules, the punished to be administered, the type of punishment and the severity of the punishment (Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith and Huo, 1997).

Research on organizational justice is complex, due to the lack of a unifying theory or established research paradigm (Cropanzano and Greenberg, 2001). Moreover, as the effects of distributive justice on employees in the workplace are affected by procedural justice, there is much overlap between these two concepts (De Cremer, 2005). Montada (1998) discusses the concept of a "justice motive" based on justice principles which seek to rectify perceived injustices. Justice, according to Montada (1998), is about choosing from different principles of justice. Thus, in relation to salaries, older workers may wish to apply the seniority concept whereas younger workers may plead for equity based on like work (Montada, 1998).

The notion of equality and inequality is strongly related to political orientation. A central belief of capitalism is the transformation of humans into a factor of production and an instrument of capital where control over the labour process in transferred from the worker to the capitalist (Braverman, 1974). This would invariably result in some groups being treated less favourably than others and lead to social inequalities (Blaikie, 1999). Indeed, in relation to older people, Phillipson (1982) claims that capitalism is incompatible with attempts to meet their needs and reflects the fundamental weaknesses of social welfare and social policy in a capitalist economy. However, Levin et al (1992) claim that, in relation to capitalism, the free-market is a great leveller of prejudice and, over the years, discrimination has been reduced because of the monetary costs involved in pursuing discriminatory practices. However, it is not just capitalism that creates and maintains inequality. Thomson (2003) argues that it is ideology, the "power of ideas", that sustain discrimination, oppression and inequality.

According to Tomei (2003), three models of equality in the workplace can be recognised: the procedural or individual justice model, the group justice model and equality as diversity. The procedural or individual justice model seeks to reduce discrimination by eliminating personal characteristics which are not relevant to the job but which have a negative effect on persons with those characteristics (Tomei, 2003). The main goal of the group justice model is to reduce and, ultimately, eliminate inequalities between dominant and discriminated groups (Tomei, 2003). The equality as diversity model acknowledges diversity as an asset for inclusion, "to introduce work patterns that take into account and reward the different talents, needs and aspirations of different groups on an equal basis" (Tomei, 2003, p. 414). This approach has been popularised by the term: "Diversity Management" or "Managing Diversity".

Managing diversity in organizations has attracted considerable interest in recent times (Konrad, Prasad and Pringle, 2006) and has become a management buzzword (Newell, 1995). However, a universally accepted definition of managing diversity does not exist (Foster and Harris, 2005) and the meaning of the term is contested as numerous versions of it exist (Liff, 1999).. Furthermore, Kaler (2001) believes that there is major difficulty in defining diversity as it has been packaged and repackaged for potential buyers and lacks any definitive formulation whilst Groschl and Doherty (1999) state that neither theorists nor practitioners have a common understanding of the exact characteristics and objectives of diversity management. As the managing diversity approach is still in its infancy, it is perhaps not surprising that it is theoretically underdeveloped (Thompson, 2006).

In the management literature, considerable interest has been shown to managing diversity as a possible way of addressing issues concerning equal opportunities (Cassell, 2006), despite a lack of studies which evaluate their long-tem impact and the need for more research on managing diversity. Miller and Rowney (1999), for example, have commented on the need for considerably more research on managing diversity in organisations. In terms of research on managing diversity in hospitality organisations, it appears that few employers are using a managing diversity approach to harness potential benefits (Maxwell, McDougall and Blair, 2000). These benefits include improved understanding of customers, better communication with customers, greater access to a variety of beliefs and perspectives and an enhanced legitimacy (Anderson and Metcalf, 2003). However, it should be noted that managing diversity has a number of disadvantages which include potentially greater conflict, greater management costs and more complicated internal communication (Anderson and Metcalf, 2003).

Over the last forty years there has been a shift from an equal opportunities perspective in organizations to one based on managing diversity (Lucas, 2004; Noon and Ogbonna, 2001). However, although managing diversity has become particularly prevalent in the USA, it is unclear

to what extent it has become established in businesses and organizations elsewhere (Harris, Brewster and Sparrow, 2004). The increased focus on managing diversity has taken place largely as a result of changes in employment, legal protection, the effects of globalization, the growth of the service sector and changing demographic factors, especially the ageing of the population in the United States of America and Europe (Hays-Thomas, 2004). The next section will address the issue of changing demographic factors with a focus on population ageing in Europe and, more specifically, the UK and its effects on employment in the hotel industry.

Population ageing and its impact on employment

Population ageing is likely to be the most important of all demographic changes for the foreseeable future (Hollywood, Brown, Danson and McQuaid, 2003) and will have major implications for everyone in society (Harper, 2000). Of all regions of the world, Europe will be the most affected by population ageing with the number of people in the 50-64 age group increasing by 26% in the period 1995-2015 (Taylor, 2001, p.1). This is due to falling fertility rates, increased life expectancy, the effects of the "baby-boom" and migration movements, (Commission of the European Communities, 2002). In terms of the fertility rate in the EU, figures for the crude birth rate for EU27 show a decline from 19.2% in 1960-1965 to 10.2% for 200-2005 (Eurostat, 2008). The declining fertility rate is the result of a complex interplay of factors that include higher rates of female participation in the labour market, women having children later in life, an increase in the number of childless women, more women in higher education, increased costs of child rearing and higher divorce rates (Hollywood, Brown, Danson and McQuaid, 2003). Increased life expectancy in the EU is one of the main factors affecting population ageing and it is forecasted that, for the UK, the life expectancy of a male will increase from 76.6 years in 2005 to 82.9 years in 2050 and for a female from 81.1 years to 86.6 years (Eurostat 2008). Similarly, for Ireland the life expectancy of a male will increase from 76.5 years in 2005 to 80.3 years in 2050 and for a female from 81.5 years to 85.1 years (Eurostat 2008).

In the UK, figures for 2006 show that the population aged 50-64 was 17.8%; for Ireland the figure was 15.5% (Eurostat, 2008). The EU country with the highest percentage of people aged 50-64 in 2006 was Finland (21.1%); the lowest Ireland (Eurostat, 2008). In the UK, the median age of the population has risen from 34.1 years in 1971 to 38.6 years in 2004 and is forecasted to rise to 42.9 years in 2031 (www.statistics.gov.uk). There are 19.8 million people aged 50 and over in the UK (www.statistics.gov.uk). This represents a 24% increase since 1961 and the number is projected to increase by a further 37% by 2031 when the UK will possess almost 27 million people aged 50 and over (www.statistics.gov.uk). As the baby-boom generation of the Mid 1960s age, the working age population of the UK will become older and, by 2020, there will be 0.9 million (4%) fewer working people aged below 40 than aged above 40 in the UK (Shaw, 2006).

The decline in economic activity rates of men aged 50 and older in OECD countries over the last thirty years has been remarkable (Duncan, 2003) with participation rates for older males falling on average between 29% and 30% in OECD countries in the period 1970-1990 (Desmond, 2000, p. 241). As is the case with most OECD countries, employment of people aged 50 and over in the UK declined sharply since the 1970s although in the period 1998 to 2002, the number of people aged 50 and over in employment in the UK increased by 650,000 (Disney and Hawkes, 2003). Furthermore, in the period 1997-2004, the employment rate for people in the UK aged 50 and above but below the SPA increased from 64.7% to 70.0% (Kersley et al, 2006). Employment rates for older people vary greatly between different parts of the UK with activity rates being considerably higher in Southern England and considerably lower in Scotland, Wales and Northern England (Brown and Danson, 2003). Furthermore, it is likely that employment opportunities will be influenced by

occupation. Thus, older professional and managerial workers may be able to work part-time into their 70s whilst "manual workers with grotty jobs and few skills often lack the opportunity, or desire, to work past their 50s" (The Guardian, 02/12/03).

According to the OECD (2006), population ageing is one of the key challenges facing OECD countries and the three Ps (population, productivity and participation) are key to address population ageing. The main negative impact of an ageing population on GDP per capita growth relates to the decline in the size of the prime-working population (those aged 20-64) and an increase in the size of the older and younger age groups (OECD, 2006). Extending working opportunities for older people would be one way of addressing this issue. In relation to productivity, a decline in the prime-working population can be offset by a permanent increase in the labour productivity of all workers (OECD, 2006). Higher labour participation rates for older workers would reduce economic dependency ratios, increase public finances and potentially enhance economic growth (OECD, 2006).

The results of the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) confirm the fact that the hospitality industry in the UK employs a predominantly young workforce. Thus 47% of workplaces in the Hotels and Restaurants Industry employed 25% or more employees aged 16 to 21 compared to 15% for all workplaces (Kersley et al, 2006). Furthermore, younger employees, defined as those aged 16 to 21, were absent from 37% of all workplaces compared to 16% of workplaces in the Hotels and Restaurants industry (Kersley et al, 2006). Of all workplaces surveyed for WERS 2004, 32% of workplaces had 25% or more of their workforce aged 50 and above. This compared to only 13% of workplaces in the Hotel and Restaurants industry (Kersley et al, 2006). Moreover, older employees, defined as those aged 50 and above, were absent from 14% of all workplaces compared to 40% of workplaces in the Hotels and Restaurants industry (Kersley et al, 2006).

Interviews with older hotel workers in the UK and Ireland

In order to establish the views of older hotel workers on workplace equality, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with older workers in ten hotels within a hotel chain, 12 in the UK and 11 in Ireland. The "older" workers comprised 11 females and 12 males and included workers from housekeeping, front office, food and beverage, concierge, maintenance, finance and conferencing. Questions were asked regarding previous work experience, perceptions regarding their work, status as "older" worker, recruitment, selection, training, development, retirement, skills and knowledge. The hotel chain was purposefully selected as it was considered to be "typical" of hotel chains in the UK and Ireland and, furthermore, the researcher had corporate-level contacts which made gaining access easier. The hotels where interviews took place were purposefully selected to reflect the geographical coverage of hotels and, furthermore, represent the hotel chain's major brands. Therefore, hotels were selected in Dublin (3), Cork, Limerick, Glasgow, Newcastle, Birmingham, Bristol and London. Interviews took place in the summer of 2005 in the hotels where the older workers were employed. Purposive sampling involves the researcher building up a sample to satisfy specific project needs (Robson, 2002). Although appropriate for qualitative research and the use of the interview method, in common with all non-probability sampling, this sampling technique is not appropriate when generalising from a sample to a population (Robson, 2002). The interview method was selected to investigate older hotel workers' views on workplace equality as the method is a very good for investigating a person's beliefs, perceptions and views of reality (Punch, 2005). Moreover, the choice of an interpretivist methodology to research older hotel workers is consistent with the need to understand the reality, actions, motives and intentions of the research participants (Saunders, 2003) and the interview is a suitable method for achieving this understanding.

When asked the question "Do you consider yourself an "Older" worker?", Peter, Bob, Dave, Eddie, Mark and Helen did not consider themselves "older" whereas Janet, Liz, Paul, Sue, Kath, Ann and Fiona did. Margaret was reflective, aware of the ageing process, saying that "You catch a glimpse of a grey-haired woman. I don't think of myself as old. To me, I don't feel any different than I did 20 years ago". After having had a heart attack with subsequent hospitalization, Jim considered that he had become an older worker but "people are people, age isn't important". Some workers did not like the term "older", preferring the term "mature" instead. For example, John said that "I consider myself mature. Old is a relative term" and Gwen stated that "I consider myself to be more mature. I wouldn't use the term "older".

Respondents were also asked "How old do you have to be in order to be an "older" worker?" Some older employees were quite reflective and did not give a chronological age: "Being sensible and mature can happen at any age", said Liz. According to Tim, "Personally, I wouldn't put an age on it. It is noticeable in Ireland that a number of companies are employing what I now define as "older" workers". Margaret considered an older worker to be someone who actually felt they were slowing down. Paul though that it "depends on the individual and their health". A number of employees ventured to put a chronological age on an "older" worker: for Janet it was someone "From their mid-40s onwards", for Sue, Gwen and Philip it was someone over 50, for Alison it was someone aged 60 but it also depended on the person's health and for Mark it was someone in their 60s. Eddie stated that "a worker is a worker. Age doesn't come into it at all"

Some older workers thought that the management preferred young recruits. For example, Mike thought the preferred age of recruits was "People in their 20s and 30s". Bob commented that management preferred recruits to be between 25 and 35 years of age and that younger managers were more likely to choose younger staff. Peter commented that management preferred to recruit younger people because they believed that they would have less time off through illness whereas Kath said that management preferred younger employees, hoping they would stay. However, Margaret considered that age didn't come into it and management recruited on ability based on those who had applied. Similarly, Paul thought that management just wanted people and didn't discriminate against older people and Gwen, Alison and Fiona stated that management didn't have a preference. Mark commented that management preferred to recruit a mixed age workforce.

Older employees had good contact and interaction with their younger colleagues and felt that, with a few exceptions, they weren't treated any differently because of their age. Liz felt that younger workers looked up to her. Ann commented that younger employees treated her differently, expecting her to be more conscientious. When asked if they were treated differently by managers because of their age, all but three said "no". Tim didn't know and Kath answered "Yes, sometimes. They wouldn't ask you to do anything too strenuous like stacking shelves, mopping floors or lifting". John, having completed a part time degree, felt that the hotel's management had not provided him with the possibility of promotion due to the hotel's "youth orientated promotion strategy".

Employees were asked the type of jobs in the property which would be particularly suitable for older employees and, conversely, jobs which would not be suitable. Jobs considered suitable for older employees included front office, waiting, portering and bar work whilst jobs not considered suitable included housekeeping and kitchen work. John, Jim, Sue and Tim commented that no jobs would be unsuitable and Peter thought that all jobs are suitable once the person had been trained. Margaret believed attitude to be more important than age. Jobs in housekeeping were mentioned by eight respondents as not being suitable for older employees. Janet, for example, stated that she couldn't do the very hard physical work needed to work in housekeeping. The physically demanding nature of the work was also mentioned by Eddie, Philip and Gwen although Gwen

added that "at the end of the day, it depends on the individual". Philip said that it would depend on what the person was used to and "if they're used to it, it isn't a problem. Karen stated that housekeeping was "a backbreaking job" and Helen commented that housekeeping would be a problem for an English worker but not a Polish one.

Older workers were asked what training they had received in the hotel. Almost all of the employees were interested in being trained and had undertaken training in different areas such as information technology, customer care, health and safety, manual handling, first aid and food hygiene. Older employees seemed enthusiastic about training, with Mike stating: "I want to do training. I never refuse any opportunities." This was in stark contrast to Tim who said that "They knew when I came here that I had no ambition to be trained. It's not a productive investment for the hotel. I'm not building a career". All employees answered "yes" to the question: "Do you feel that all age groups are treated the same in terms of access to training in this organisation?" In relation to this question, Helen added "Age doesn't come into it. They (the management) encourage people. Everyone gets trained whatever level they are at".

When asked if age was a barrier to promotion, Janet said that she had applied for an office manager's job but her computer skills were not good enough although "age was not important in the decision to promote". Peter stated that "I'm 60 next birthday and I'm not interested in promotion". Tim, who, prior to joining the hotel, occupied a senior position in a Finance company, stated: "I'm not interested in promotion". Nick hadn't gone for promotion because "I can't write or spell. When I left school I couldn't write my name". For Ann, few promotional possibilities existed in the hotel but "the hotel was five minutes from my home. I didn't want to move. It's great to walk to work". Another reason for not considering promotion possibilities was the worker's desire not to have any extra responsibilities. This was the case as far as Karen was concerned.

Respondents were asked whether they ever felt discriminated against in an interview or selection process because of their age. Some thought not. For example, Mike said: "I've genuinely never felt any discrimination because of my age". Kath commented that "when I went for the interview here, I had no problem getting the job". However, some respondents thought discrimination had taken place. For example, Janet commented that "When I was coming for this job I was 40 at the time. It influenced a number of potential employers. One actually said that they wanted somebody younger". Tim also thought he had been discriminated against in an interview or selection process because of his age: "Yes. At times I could intimidate the interviewer because of my experience". According to John, it was difficult to state whether he had been discriminated against in an interview or selection process because of his age because he never got to the stage of having an interview.

Some older workers did not consider ageism to be a problem although, as Janet pointed out, "Maybe age discrimination does go on but I've never come across it". Ageism was not an issue for Mike who said "I can only speak from personal experience but I have never felt discriminated because of my age". Ann considered the General Manager's attitude important with respect to the employment and treatment of older people in the hotel, stating that "the last GM was very age friendly". John was very critical of the employment for older workers, both in the industry and in his property, stating "The whole hotel industry in the UK is ageist". According to Peter, the UK hotel industry did not employ many people over 40, stating that "older people might not apply for jobs in a hotel because they might think it's a younger person's job. Also, the hotel is always open and there are difficult shift hours, probably off-putting to older people".

Conclusion: theories on workplace equality applied to older worker employment in hotels

From interviews with "older" hotel workers in the UK and Ireland, it would appear that age and older age are relative concepts and the age at which a person becomes "old" will differ according to a range of factors such as health, income, gender, social class and education. Thus, defining an older worker in chronological terms is problematic and research on older workers which uses chronological age as a condition of respondent selection may result in the inclusion of workers who may not define themselves as "older" workers and the exclusion of those who might. Therefore, in researching older worker employment, it may be advantageous to select workers based on whether they consider themselves as older workers, an approach advocated by Riach (2007) as, for some people, a clear boundary into old age does not exist (Wilson, 2000). Furthermore, where older workers stated a chronological age well above the SPA, this may reflect Seabrook's (2003, p. 29-30) comment that "The age at which people admit to growing older has risen".

Some employees commented on the age structure of a particular department which was considered, perhaps, unusual in being staffed by a greater number of older or younger workers. It seems that departmental job segmentation is ageist in that certain departments will be composed of jobs deemed, by management, to be more suitable for a person of a given age. Therefore, segmented internal labour markets (Collinson, Knights and Collinson, 1990) operate which disadvantage, or sometimes benefit, older workers.

Housekeeping was mentioned by nine older workers as being not suitable for older employees as work in this area was considered physically demanding. It may be the case that the job itself could be redesigned so that it is within the physical capacity of the older worker (Doering, Rhodes and Schuster, 1983) but there was little evidence to suggest that housekeeping jobs had been redesigned in any of the properties where interviews with older workers took place. Or it may be the case that housekeeping jobs are age-typed as typically belonging to younger staff (Perry and Finkelstein, 1999). According to Hollinshead, Nicholls and Tailby (2003), structural discrimination results in certain groups being excluded due to certain practices. Thus, in this instance, the practice of choosing employees for housekeeping jobs, with a greater emphasis on physical ability, may represent a form of structural discrimination.

Some older workers did not consider ageism to be a problem with one Irish worker, Janet, stating that "I can only speak from personal experience but I have never felt discriminated because of my age. It's not an issue". Janet also pointed out that "Maybe age discrimination does go on but I've never come across it". This would correspond to Donovan and Street's (2000, p. 28) contention that "People may be victims of a variety of forms of age discrimination without being aware of it". Similarly, it may well be the case that an older worker may feel that he or she has been discriminated against because of their age when this was not the case (Donovan and Street, 2000).

The majority of older workers who were interviewed were interested in being trained and had undertaken a range of training and development courses in such areas as health and safety, customer care and information technology. All employees interviewed answered "yes" to the question: "Do you feel that all age groups are treated the same in terms of access to training in this organisation?" This contradicts the findings of Brooke and Taylor's (2005) research of organisations in the UK and Australia which demonstrated that older workers were excluded from training opportunities, especially in relation to new technology. As far as training is concerned, it is vital that all workers have the same access to such training as older workers tend to have fewer qualifications than younger workers (OECD, 2006b). Otherwise, older workers will be placed at a disadvantage in the workplace. However, it may be the case that the organisation is using training to serve a social

function, helping workers form friendships thus distracting them from the alienating work which they perform (Grugulis, 2006).

Some older employees were not interested in promotion for a variety of reasons. These included caring responsibilities at home, not wanting the extra responsibility, a lack of Information Technology skills and not being interested in promotion. Therefore, a range of reasons explain the possible lack of interest in being promoted and it is also possible that older workers limit their own horizons (Newton, 2006) or internalise negative prejudice and discriminate against themselves (Loretto and White, 2006a). The lack of Information Technology skills, in particular, which was mentioned by many older employees, may represent a challenge to the future prospects of older workers as today's society is characterised by technological change with less respect for tradition (Seabrook, 2003).

This study represents an exploratory examination into "older" hotel employees' perceptions of workplace equality in the UK and Ireland. As such, there are a number of research avenues which arise from this study. Firstly, given recent moves in the UK to legislate against age discrimination in the workplace, a fruitful avenue of research could focus on how these regulations have affected organizational employment policies and practices. It is claimed that the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 are likely to affect many areas of the employment relationship, including the use of recruitment agencies, the use of age limits, experience requirements, graduate recruitment and the whole of the recruitment, selection, training and development process (IRS, 2006). Further research could establish whether this is indeed the case.

Secondly, the effects of EU integration and labour market change on the employment of older workers, especially regarding younger workers from A8 countries, could be a productive topic for research given that, for A8 nationals (citizens from countries that acceded to the EU on the 1st May 2004, namely Estonia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia), the UK issued 270,200 National Insurance numbers in 2005, almost 90% of whom were aged 18-34 (Salt and Millar, 2006). Many of these workers found employment in the hospitality industry. Thus, for the period January 2005 to June 2007, 19% of A8 registered workers were employed in "hospitality and catering" (The Home Office, 2007).

Lastly, there is considerable scope for an investigation into age discrimination in the workplace with reference to "style" workplaces such as boutique hotels, designer bars and celebrity-chef restaurants as much of the hospitality industry is style obsessed. Indeed, the industry seems to be particularly ageist and "The image of beautiful young things dressed in Armani dominates the industry" (Clark, 2000, p.24). In choosing the "right" kind of employee to enhance company image and deliver service quality, potential discriminatory practices may take place (Nickson, Warhurst and Dutton, 2005). Therefore, an interesting research topic could concern the employment of older workers in style workplaces.

This study raises a number of questions. Will the hospitality industry continue to rely on predominantly younger workers, bolstered by the ranks of young, transient labour from Eastern Europe? Will the hospitality industry adopt a more proactive approach to the employment of older workers, having witnessed the benefits reported by non-hospitality firms such as ASDA and B&Q? Will hospitality firms reassess their treatment of older workers given new anti-discrimination legislation focusing on age? Or will older workers be the first to be affected by the icy winds of recession affecting the UK and Ireland?

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