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**Sub-theme: 33 Identity work through the ages: Unexamined lives?**

### **Becoming and being an exiting elder**

This paper presents emerging ideas about an 'exiting elder' identity. The paper's stimulus was when an academic seminar presenter introduced herself as an 'exiting elder', a term I had not previously heard. With my interest in identity and in how we discursively position ourselves in relation to others (Garcia & Hardy, 2007; Ybema et al., 2009), and being in my mid fifties and beginning to think about the later stages of my career, the term fascinated and resonated with me. Therefore, I met Greta (pseudonym) to explore what the term meant to her. Greta's belief is that exiting elder may be a 'concept whose time is coming or hasn't yet come' (interview). Therefore, the paper's ideas connect with the sub-theme's interest in how ageing is made real in organizations, and how, why and in what circumstances older age is valued and privileged (Hardy et al, 2015). The paper also begins to explore how and in what circumstances 'exiting elder' may become a salient identity and 'how age works as an organizing principle' (Thomas et al., 2014: 1570).

This paper begins by confirming its social constructionist and discursive understandings of identity and age. It then discusses the grounded theory approach of the planned project before presenting the themes emerging from analysis of Greta's interview. The paper concludes with future directions.

### **Constructing identity and age through discursive practices**

Identity, understood as 'who am I?' (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008) in particular contexts, is a relationally- and discursively-constituted process (Cunliffe, 2008), whereby individuals derive meaning about the self in relation to others, and (re-)construct their self-identities through dialogue and narrative. This social constructionist way of thinking recognizes the ever-emergent process of becoming

(Watson and Harris, 1999; Bryans and Mavin, 2003) and acknowledges that, theoretically, everyone continually does identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), in keeping “*a particular narrative going*” (Giddens, 1991, p.54, emphasis in original). In authoring meaningful self-identities, an individual draws on discursive resources, including self and other-categorizing and positioning (Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Garcia and Hardy, 2007) and concepts made available in his or her culture (Watson and Harris, 1999). Therefore, the individual is an active agent in using narrative and discursive resources to constitute the self (Kondo, 1990).

Age, like other discursive resources, can be employed to construct identities with, for example, the ‘older worker’ being a discursive achievement (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014), positioned as a largely unattractive identity with limited opportunities for agency (Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014). Thus, the discourses of age are deployed as an organizing principle, privileging or disadvantaging organizational members (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014; Thomas et al., 2014).

The paper’s research questions, reflecting an age-related research agenda (Thomas et al., 2014: 1572-3) and the findings that follow the next section, are:

- 1) How and in what circumstances does exiting elder become a salient identity?
- 2) What are the characteristics of becoming/being an exiting elder?
- 3) How do individuals use ‘exiting elder’ as an identity resource to construct, challenge or resist organizational discourses?

### **Research study and method of enquiry**

The proposed study takes a social constructionist grounded theory approach, following Charmaz (2008). This approach includes the following assumptions: (1) reality is multiple, processual, and constructed, under particular conditions; (2) the research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the relativity of the researcher’s and research participants’ perspectives, positions and practices; (4) the researcher and research participants co-construct the data; and (5) the researcher’s reflexivity is important (Charmaz, 2008: 398 and 402).

The interview with Greta, lasting 40 minutes, was held in her office in February 2014. We covered the following areas: Greta’s background; why she described herself as

an exiting elder and what the term meant to her; and times/contexts when Greta has identified strongly with 'being' an exiting elder. Greta might be regarded as an extreme case. Over the course of her public sector working life, Greta has held various positions at all levels including as a health care professional, project manager, clinical and business manager. For 20 of her 33 years of working, she has specialized in organization development (OD). Currently, in addition to being head of OD in her organization, she is an OD consultant. Academically, she holds a doctorate in OD (and 'did a lot on identity in that programme', interview), has co-authored two texts on service improvement, and is a visiting academic at a UK university. Greta is currently researching the concept of 'exiting elder', through the faith literature and in conversations with others, to develop her own and others' understanding of its significance in relation to identity, leadership and OD. She regards the concept of eldership as 'really important' and thinks 'it's either a concept whose time is coming or hasn't yet come' (interview). Therefore, as a proactive researcher of the phenomenon under study, I regard Greta as akin to a co-researcher.

The interview was transcribed professionally and is 6,869 words and 528 lines long. In analysing inductively the data, I listened to the interview recording and undertook line-by-line coding before moving towards more focused coding (Charmaz, 1996). To generate the initial findings presented here I compared themes from Greta's narrative discussed at different points in the interview and interpreted Greta's positioning of self and others. I have not engaged extensively with the literature, wanting the emergent analysis to direct the ongoing research project (Charmaz, 1996).

### ***Main findings***

#### *Becoming an exiting elder – Experiencing a turning point in one's career*

Become an exiting elder is characterized by experiencing a turning point in one's career. The turning point prompts reflection, on the point reached in one's life 'journey', on achievements made (or otherwise) and on the future. Therefore, the concept is employed as a narrative device for negotiating identity in relation to the

passage of time (Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014). Reflecting involves comparing one's own situation with contemporaries.

Greta pinpoints when she started to think of herself as an exiting elder: 'hitting thirty years of service was probably a watershed point a couple of years ago'. '[A] watershed point' conveys the importance of the event as a self-identity turning point. Hitting 30 years generated a realization that she was in the 'last quarter of your career' and provoked reflection. Greta might be regarded as unusual in that, from an early age, she set herself a personal goal: 'one of my goals has always been to do 40 years as a public servant, and that was really personally really important to me'. As in Tomlinson and Colgan's (2014: 1662) study, Greta employs the word 'always' and the narrative of the goal, which features throughout the transcript, serves the purpose of conveying consistency (Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014). The goal narrative also helped her construct the concept of 'exiting' and the sincerity of her intent (Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014) to leave at a particular point:

that formation of that identity [as exiting elder] for me, (pause) ... it helped me think about, "My goodness, I don't, I don't want to stay after 40 years" because what people normally say is "But you won't go, will you?". Well, I will actually, because that's the goal I set myself and that's what I'll do.

Reaching the 30 years' service point prompted Greta to reflect back on her career achievements:

I meet lots of colleagues who are my age and at my point in their career who haven't done the things they wanted to do, but that's not my journey. My journey is I've done everything I wanted to do, and had more opportunities than I ever anticipated or imagined would come my way.

Greta categorizes her contemporaries, based on her assessment of their achievements, describing some as 'frustrated', others as 'really quite angry' and yet others as 'really sad ... sad'. Greta believes that others' negative feelings 'drives' them in different directions regarding their continuing contribution to the organisation:

here I am thinking I'm heading out of something and here's these people gearing up to head *into* something, so what, what is it that I'm gearing into cos I'm the same age as you and the same generation as you, so I suppose that was the bit that spun me into the eldership really

Being 'spun' could imply passivity on Greta's part, but I interpret it as a proactive decision to orient herself, through a self-other oppositional strategy (Down and Reveley, 2004). In contrast to others, Greta has achieved everything she wanted to do and more, and this sense of feeling accomplished ("Gosh, I've had such a fantastic career") seems to sustain her ongoing positive contribution. Whereas others might count down the number of years left like 'it's full of dread', Greta has 'always sort of signalled' her remaining years with a very different sense: 'I still say to people "Look, I haven't got long left and I've got loads of things I still want to do"'.

Forming an exiting elder identity enables individuals to question and construct a future self, beyond work. Discourses of freedom and permission, supporting the centrality of choice and agency (Tomlinson and Colgan, 2014), characterized Greta's constructions of her future provisional identities. Greta is thinking about and planning 'the next stage in my personal development': 'what am I going to do when I'm 57 and I don't come here every day and what is my life going to be?'. Greta associates this life with having the freedom to spend her time as she wishes: '[W]hat have you not have had the freedom in the 40 years to do that with that freedom you'll want to spend your time doing?'. Later in the interview, she picks up the theme of freedom, this time expressed as 'permission':

I do think about it a lot really, about just what am I going to do? And I suppose permission to, in all of that, permission to, to not do anything, to do other things ... my mantra has always been I just want to do interesting work and I still do want to do interesting work. But I feel I've got a choice and that feels like really important.

Through this identity work strategy, Greta constructs a positive exiting elder identity, the characteristics of which I now discuss.

*The nature of eldership: a 'being' rather than a 'doing' and using 'self as instrument'*

Eldership is characterized by a 'being' rather than a 'doing'. This 'being', not in an essentialist sense, involves drawing on one's personal resources (of knowledge, learning, wisdom, hope, challenge, power, and influence) to use 'self as instrument' in supporting and challenging others.

My reading of Greta's narrative of her working life is that she is driven by a strong achievement need. However, Greta draws a distinction between 'the other quarters of your career' where 'there's a 'doing' attached to it' and 'being an exiting elder':

it feels to me that being an exiting elder is much more about a 'being' rather than a 'doing' (*interviewer: that's interesting*) ... I don't know whether it's because I've re-defined myself, or my work, I find myself being with people and helping people access things I've previously learnt, and I suppose wisdom, much more often than I would suggest things and do things to them and with them.

Greta gave two stories of 'the bringing together of the 'doing' and the 'being' for me' of eldership. One related to being asked to set up a regional network of OD practitioners:

I suppose there was the 'doing' of that work and I was asked to do that work because I was an elder. They may not define it that way, but that's what the commissioning conversations were about, it was about 'we think if this can be done, it can only be done by somebody who's got lots of roots into the region, who people would come and talk to you about OD cos they know you know what OD is' ... There was the 'doing' of the bringing of the network together but, for me personally on that day, it was the **being** of being that elder in that room and seeing this, this young guy ... set alight by what we were talking about

Greta's reference to inspiring 'this young guy' aligns with notions of elder as 'a member of a family, tribal group, or village who is advanced in years and has influence and authority within the community' (Online Encarta Dictionary). Her understandings are also informed by research into the 'faith literature' on 'elders as teachers and holders of wisdom, that just appealed to my ego'.

Greta's second example of 'being' an elder, drawing on OD practitioner conceptualizing, refers to 'self as instrument' (Cheung-Judge, 2012):

if you read the sort of OD literature about becoming an OD practitioner, there's a whole piece about self as instrument and that really is about what we're talking about here, which is becoming and becoming so whole that actually what you walk into the room with is yourself and whatever the presenting issue is you're confident that you can cope and be of value in that room as **yourself**

Greta believes that 'that being' creates a 'responsibility as elders of creating the hope that people need', in her case, in the future of the service:

I talk a lot to people about how we create hope now and I feel that that **being**, how you are, how I am, and being able to tell a 30-year-plus journey through the health services that the world continues ... hope becomes part of eldership, it's about we've, I feel I've a responsibility not to do what some of my colleagues do, which is become a gloom merchant

Greta also associates eldership with challenge, related to a form of leadership based on 'personal power, and personal wisdom and knowledge, if they've developed that personal credibility, and people follow for that reason, then we should be the people that can put the challenge into the system gently and kindly'.

#### *Provoking interest in the concept as a discourse of resistance*

As a positive identity, 'exiting elder' can be positioned as a discourse of resistance (Thomas et al., 2014) in addressing assumptions and realities of ageing and maturity associated with decline. Greta uses the identity for self and other categorising, and as 'an opportunity to create different conversations in the organization':

But now, because I do say in presentations and things, I see myself as an exiting elder, people go "Oh, that's really interesting! When you say that, what do you mean?" ... [s]ome people **of my generation** do ask me and say, "What do you mean?" ... it was for me an opportunity to create different conversations in the organisation to say to people it doesn't matter when you



leave and exit, what contribution would you like to make with all those years of service that fits with your mental models of your identity?’

She constructs exiting elder as a positive identity:

‘And I suppose my hope is that, we can create an identity, a hopeful and purposeful identity for those people who are, who are moving towards the end of their, this phase of their life or career, but feel without hope.... we’ve got an organisational responsibility to create an identity that says ‘Yes, that [physical and possibly cognitive decline] will happen’ – it’s like positive ageing isn’t it? Yes, that will happen, but what takes over and what’s the relevance? I suppose that’s my altruistic interest in, in the whole notion of it.’

The ongoing research might explore exiting elder as an identity resource to challenge or resist organizational discourses, thereby bringing new insights from understanding ‘the symbolic meanings of age within organizing practices’ (Thomas et al., 2014: 1569).

### **Future directions**

Going forward, I plan interviews with others for whom exiting elder may (or may not) be a salient identity. Greta’s narrative of becoming an exiting elder gives a positive view of ageing characterized by personal growth, achievement and future personal choice. But how is exiting elder characterized under different personal circumstances? Also, given the long-term planned approach to Greta’s exiting, I intend to involve individuals who exit an organization at short notice, or who join an organization as an elder. In this way, ‘both method and content [will] emerge during the research process’ (Charmaz, 2008: 399).

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