

Employer Policy and Practice Towards Older Workers in Hong Kong: The Role of Shifting Intergenerational Dynamics

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Research ethics statement

As part of the application for funding process, an ethics checklist was completed through Edinburgh Napier University's research management system. This checklist was approved by the Edinburgh Napier University Business School ethics approver. A full application to Edinburgh Napier University Business School Research Integrity Committee for ethical approval was not required.

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Abstract

Many governments are seeking to encourage the extension of working lives to counteract potential labor market shortages that might result from population aging. Nevertheless, research shows that older workers continue to face a range of barriers to their labor market participation. However, this research has not tended to take a holistic view of the factors shaping employer policy and practice, or acknowledge that older workers' experiences are embedded within broader social structures and age dynamics. This paper reports on exploratory qualitative research undertaken in Hong Kong. It demonstrates how employer policy and practice towards older workers are shaped by intergenerational dynamics and by the social responsibility that employers feel towards different generations. It is argued that in order to more fully understand employer policy and practice towards older workers, an approach that acknowledges the social context and position of different age groups is required.

Key words: Older workers; employer policy and practice; intergenerational dynamics; Hong Kong

Introduction

Internationally, many populations are aging (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2015) and governments are seeking to encourage the extension of working lives (Eurofound, 2016; IES, 2016; World Bank, 2016) in order to counteract potential associated labor market shortages (Szinovacz, 2011). Yet, employers do not necessarily see the extension of working lives as a solution to potential labor shortages, and older workers face a range of barriers to their labor market participation (Heywood & Jirjahn, 2016; Taylor & McLoughlin, 2015).

This paper draws upon exploratory and inductive in-depth qualitative research undertaken in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's population is aging more rapidly, when compared to many countries in Asia, Europe and North America (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2015). There are concerns that this will exacerbate existing labor shortages (e.g. The Hong Kong Management Association, 2015). However, older workers face persistent barriers to their labor market participation (e.g. Consumer Search Hong Kong Limited, 2016).

The exploratory research presented in this paper sought to understand why employers do not see older workers as a solution to labour market shortages in Hong Kong, i.e. in labour process terms, why are they not making the most of this potential labour (Thompson & Smith, 2009)? The research findings suggest that employer policy and practice are, in part, shaped by the social responsibility that employers feel towards different generations of workers. This is an issue that has not been explicitly articulated or explored in previous research – although there has been explicit consideration of how later life employment is shaped by household and family contexts (e.g. Phillipson, Vickerstaffe & Lain, 2016). As such, it is argued that the research presented in this paper supports calls to consider aging as a process, which “*is actively negotiated through, experienced in and constituted alongside sociocultural settings*” (Hales & Riach, 2017, p.113), when examining employer policy and practice towards older workers.

The Aging Workforce in Hong Kong

Hong Kong's population is aging rapidly (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2015). Concerns have been expressed, both by government and business, that the aging of the population alongside the low birth rate will exacerbate existing labor shortages compromising economic growth (Civil Service Bureau, 2015; Leung, 2015; Ng, 2015; Siu, 2014; The Hong Kong Management Association, 2015; Yip, 2014). Some have argued that older adults, who are able and willing to keep working, could counter the shrinking labor force and could be key players in a knowledge-based economy that emphasizes life experience

(Chan & Liang, 2012; Chan, Ma, Lu, & Lau, 2009). However, workers in Hong Kong retire much earlier than in many other countries. Even though there is no statutory retirement age, there is a ‘generally accepted’ retirement age that ranges from 55 to 60 years (Mak & Woo, 2013; Siu, 2014; Zou, 2015). Thus, government is increasingly looking at unleashing the potential of older workers and has raised the retirement age to 65 years for civil servants and 60 years for those working in disciplined services; perhaps with the expectation that private sector employers will follow suit (Civil Service Bureau, 2015; Leung, 2015; Ng, 2015; Siu, 2014; Yip, 2014).

Employers do not necessarily see the extension of working lives as a solution to potential labor shortages. Despite efforts to extend working lives in Hong Kong, older workers continue to be subjected to workplace age discrimination and negative stereotypes about their abilities (Cheung, Ping, & Man-hung Ngan, 2011; Chiu, Chan, Snape, & Redman, 2001; Consumer Search Hong Kong Limited, 2016; Heywood, Ho, & Wei, 1999; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Zou, 2015). Government efforts to encourage the extension of working lives have been criticized for not intervening in human resource processes and not been prescriptive in tackling age discrimination. They have tended to be limited to encouraging voluntary good practice (Flynn, Schröder, & Chan, 2017; Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2006; Higgins & Vyas, 2017). Few companies have developed formalized strategies to take into account the aging of the population, and every effort to introduce age discrimination legislation or change retirement arrangements has been opposed by businesses. This opposition is underpinned by the belief that current human resources practices are adequate and effective, and that more flexible work arrangements would be administratively cumbersome (Chan et al., 2015; Consumer Search Hong Kong Limited, 2016; Flynn, 2016) or would hinder the economic efficiency of Hong Kong’s flexible labor market.

Generations and the Workplace in Hong Kong

As previously detailed in this paper, research in Hong Kong highlights that older workers face a range of employer policy and practice related barriers to their labor market participation – mirroring international trends ([AUTHOR]; Heywood & Jirjahn, 2016; Taylor & McLoughlin, 2015). While this research has drawn attention to workplace age discrimination and negative stereotypes about the abilities of older workers, it has not explicitly articulated or explored broader aging dynamics. The exploratory research presented in this paper highlights the need to locate employer policy and practice towards older workers within the cultural, social, and organizational context *“of intergenerational social relationships which constrain older workers’ choices”* (Flynn et al., 2017, p. 506). The findings presented in this paper draw attention to two issues: (1) generational stereotypes in relation to organizational and societal intergenerational dynamics; and (2) employers’ responsibilities towards different generations. In the wider academic literature, there is *“a fascination with generations and the impact that these socially constructed groupings may have on a variety of organizational outcomes”* (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2017, p. 109). There is an extensive human resources literature that argues for the need to understand the wants, and optimize the talents, of different generations. This literature however, often employs generational stereotypes (e.g Cogin, 2012; Conway & Monks, 2017; Greenwood, 2013; Haeger & Lingham, 2013; McGuire, Todnem By, & Hutchings, 2007 PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011) which may create false assumptions about expected behaviour, and are often not supported by valid and robust empirical evidence (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015, 2017; Joshi, Dencker, & Franz, 2011; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry & Urwin, 2017). However as research on the experiences of older workers reveals, these generational stereotypes continue to be key barriers to the extension of working lives (Cheung et al., 2011; Chiu et al., 2001; Consumer Search Hong Kong Limited, 2016; Heywood et al., 1999; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Zou, 2015).

This paper reveals how intergenerational relations embed employer policy and practice and details some of the social responsibilities employers feel towards different generations. In Hong Kong, social development has emphasized youthfulness. Thus, older workers are seen as blocking opportunities, and should make way, for their younger colleagues (Chan et al., 2009). This idea of job-blocking is also apparent internationally (e.g. ILC-UK and The Uncertain Futures Research Consortium, 2017). Traditionally, retirement and dependence on adult children has been considered a ‘normal’ part of aging and an indication of social status in Hong Kong (Chan & Wang, 2009; Chiu & Ngan, 1999). This is bound up with the traditional Confucian doctrine of filial piety, which encompasses attributes such as “*showing respect, being obedient, taking material as well as emotional care of aged parents*” (Chong & Liu, 2016, p. 4). Therefore, in this context, if government seeks to extend working lives, they may be seen as immoral (Chan & Wang, 2009; Ng, Phillips, & Lee, 2002). While one might expect that older people are valued members of society because of this doctrine, they are also framed as having “*lost the ability and right of social participation and are categorized as a burden to the family and society*” (Cheng, Mujin, & Zhiyuan, 2007, p. 462). Hence, research finds perceptions that younger workers should have priority in terms of training opportunities and employment; therefore employers may be less willing to invest in older workers (Chiu et al., 2001; Heywood et al., 1999). This focus on the training and development of younger workers is an international trend (Canduela et al., 2012; Carmichael & Ercolani, 2015; McNair, Flynn & Dutton, 2007). However, with regards to filial piety, research shows that expectations for filial piety are not apparent in UK-born older people (Laidlaw, Wang, Coelho & Power, 2010).

While older workers are expected to make way for their younger colleagues, filial expectations of, and the support provided by, the younger generation in Hong Kong are declining. The reasons for this include cultural attitudes, reduced intergenerational contact and co-residence in urban areas, prolonged life expectancy, and the changing patterns of work (Cheung & Kwan,

2011; Ng et al., 2002). Family relationships may now be more grounded in reciprocity and pragmatic utilitarianism rather than responsibility and obligation (Lee & Law, 2004; Lee & Hong-Kin, 2005; Lum et al., 2016; Ng et al., 2002; Ng, 2016). Thus in this context, middle-aged adults in Hong Kong may not expect that they can depend on their family networks for support during retirement (Lee & Law, 2004). Bai (2018), shows that older people in Hong Kong do not have a stable retirement income, and are reluctant to ask for, or are not expecting, to receive financial support from their adult children. In this context, financial care expectations are increasingly focused on formal (i.e. state) sources, rather than informal (i.e. family) sources.

Yet, it has been identified that formal sources of financial support in retirement in Hong Kong, may not be developed enough to meet this demand. It has been argued that the insecurity that older people may experience is arguably exacerbated by the very limited public and third sector formal support available in Hong Kong (Ng et al., 2002). Many workers might not be making private savings for retirement (Chou et al., 2014). The financial security provided by the public pension system is also limited: the Mandatory Provident Fund, a compulsory pension fund, was only introduced in December 2000 (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2015), and even once the scheme is mature, the extent to which it will be able to support older people has been questioned (OECD, 2013; Ng, 2016). It is, therefore, interesting to consider whether changing filial expectations and the resultant intergenerational relations are shifting the position and status of older workers. Given the decline of filial piety, is the labor market participation of older workers more generally accepted by employers? Or is still the expectation amongst employers that older people should withdraw from the labor market, and that young people should be enabled to progress? What are the responsibilities that employers feels towards different generations?

Methods

The aim of this exploratory research was to understand the impact of the aging workforce in Hong Kong and why older workers are not being seen by employers as a solution to labor market shortages. The research focused upon the service sector, which has been growing rapidly in Hong Kong and in 2015, contributed to 92.5% of Hong Kong's overall Gross Domestic Product (Census and Statistics Department, 2016). In-depth qualitative research was undertaken with key informants and Hong Kong employers in order to understand: the main threats and opportunities to workforce planning in the service sector; employers' opinions of current demographic trends; how are employers dealing with the effects of an aging population in their workforce; whether employers support older workers; and the opportunities and challenges for older workers to extend their working-lives. Recruitment, data collection, and data analysis were carried out between September 2016 and August 2017. The research adhered to the Code of Practice on Research Integrity of [UNIVERSITY]. The research team did acknowledge the difficulties and lack of clarity surrounding attempts to define the 'older worker'. Older workers have been defined as those aged 35-plus (Heywood, Ho & Wei, 1999), 45-plus (Ho, Wei & Voon, 2000), 50-plus (Chou & Chow, 2005) and 55-64 years (OECD, 2018). Other research identifies that workers may face age discrimination in Hong Kong from the age of 43 (Chiu et al., 2001). In order to strike a balance, for the purpose of this research, the research team broadly defined 'older workers' as those aged 50-plus, but participants were also asked to define an older worker from their perspective.

Key informants' interviews

Thirteen 'key informant' semi-structured interviews were conducted. Both one-to-one and joint interviews were undertaken (15 individual interviewees in total). A purposive sampling approach was used. The 15 individual key informants included: representatives from employer groups and associations (n=4), older people's organizations and social enterprises supporting

older people (n=3), representatives of organizations set up by the government/government bodies (n=4), and academics and representatives from other organizations with expertise in the subject area (n=4). Key informants were identified using contacts and networks already known to the authors and their colleagues. Internet searches and analysis of the academic literature were also used to identify key informants.

The interview schedule was designed so that it was exploratory, as one purpose of these interviews was to help refine research priority areas, as well as adding to the research team's knowledge of the Hong Kong context. Issues identified in the academic literature and the demographic data also shaped the interview schedule design. The interviews gauged key informants' views on the impact of population aging on employers in the service sector, the policy and practice employers have in place, the opportunities and challenges for later life working in Hong Kong, and directions for future policy and practice. The majority of participants were Hong Kong based. The interviews were conducted in English and were primarily conducted face-to-face in Hong Kong, with a small number via Skype, during January 2017 (written or verbal consent was taken from participants).

Employers' interviews

Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with service sector employers. Both one-to-one and joint interviews were undertaken (22 individual interviewees in total). The interviews were conducted face-to-face in English in Hong Kong during March 2017 (written consent was taken from participants). A purposive sampling approach was used. Employers were identified using contacts and networks already known to the authors and their colleagues. Internet searches and mining of online employer databases were also used to identify employers. The participating employers encompassed a range of industries within the service sector, and included SMEs and larger companies, and businesses operating internationally and in Hong Kong only. The

participants, all with Human Resources (HR) experience, included managing directors, heads of HR departments, and company founders/proprietors.

The interview schedule included issues highlighted in the key informant interviews, and identified in the academic literature and demographic data as relevant to the study. The interviews explored participant's opinions with regards to future company trends and the impact of demographic change, as well as their attitudes and policy/practice towards older workers. Some participants requested that they were interviewed as a 'professional with service sector HR experience', rather than representing a particular company for reason of confidentiality or retirement. In these instances, the interview schedule was generic and did not include specific questions about the company that the participant was, or had been, working for. Table 1 provides an overview of the employer participants. Where a generic interview schedule was used, details regarding organizational size cannot be provided.

[Table 1 about here]

Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission. The interviews were transcribed and systematic, but iterative, thematic analysis was applied to identify key themes in the data with the assistance of the computer software NVivo11. As an exploratory piece of research, the analysis followed an inductive approach. It should be noted that key informant interviews and the employer interviews were analyzed separately, as the purpose of the key informant interviews was to help refine research priority areas for the employer interviews. However, the data from both groups of participants is presented together in the following sections, as a further step of the data analysis involved reviewing key themes across both sets of data to identify common issues, and similarities and differences in views. In order to reduce researcher bias and to increase the internal validity or credibility of the analysis, [AUTHOR] were involved in the coding of the transcripts. While [AUTHOR] led the coding for a number of transcripts,

their analysis was ‘checked’ by [AUTHOR], and recoding was undertaken as necessary. Construct validity was achieved by seeking feedback and direction from the Research Advisory Group – composed by six academics and four members of other relevant organizations – who were invited to offer guidance and support throughout the research stages.

Findings

The key informant and employer interviews sought to understand more fully the impact of the aging workforce in Hong Kong’s service sector and whether employers consider older workers as a solution to labor market shortages.

The key informants outlined how government awareness and discussion of population aging had increased across policy areas. However, the majority of the key informants felt that while employers were aware of population aging, they had not necessarily taken any action yet to counter any negative effects on their workforce or to support their older workers. These assertions are supported by the accounts given by employers in terms of their policy and practice towards older workers. This was despite some employers viewing the extension of working lives as a solution to population aging.

The analysis of the key informant and employer transcripts highlighted that employer policy and practice towards older workers, could in part be explained by feelings of social responsibility towards ‘younger people’ (although exactly who/what ages constitute this group was not always clear) in the context of demographic change and shifting intergenerational dynamics. The presentation of the findings is structured into sections developed from three overarching themes emerging from the analysis: (1) generational stereotypes; (2) employers’ social responsibilities towards younger and older generations; and (3) how intergenerational relations and generational stereotypes, and employers’ responsibilities shape policy and practice towards older workers, and thus opportunities to extend working lives. The three sections are sub-divided into sub-themes.

Generational Stereotypes

The first overarching theme presented from both the key informant and employer interviews relates to the stereotypes associated with different age groups. While older workers are ‘easier’ to manage, they are not felt to have the ‘right’ skills.

Defining the older worker.

In both the key informant and employer interviews, the characteristics that ‘defined’ older workers were discussed, revealing a number of pervasive stereotypes that mirror some of those used in the HR literature about the capabilities of workers based on their age. The stereotypes, in terms of ‘defining’ characteristics, often compared older and younger workers in terms of their skills and deficits. In terms of positive stereotypes, older workers were said to be loyal, hardworking, knowledgeable, experienced, patient and kind. In terms of negative stereotypes, older workers were characterized as not very good with IT, dislike taking orders from younger colleagues, less able, less flexible, slow, likely to take sick leave, and have poor health. Put into the context of the features of the modern workplace as defined by the participants (who mentioned increased use of technology, flatter organizational structures and the fast-pace of working), older workers were perceived as not having the skills required and younger workers were felt to be better suited. As such aging is understood in terms of deficit with regards to the skills needed by employers. For example, one employer stated their reasons for employing those in their 20s and 30s:

To be very frank, we need to employ people with young age because they are maybe more adapt to the new business environment and secondly they are more intelligent with the computer. And also the thinking is more open-minded (Employer, Logistics)

Key informants also mentioned that employees’ mind-set and self-esteem could be a barrier to the extension of working lives, as they could think less of their own abilities compared to other employees and have self-defeating perceptions.

In some industries (e.g. education, retail), perceived client demand also drove the focus on younger workers. The emphasis by employers in the hospitality and retail sectors on the appearance and aesthetics of their employees, at the detriment of older workers, has been noted elsewhere (Nickson & Baum, 2017). However, in other industries (e.g. healthcare, law) employers saw being older as an advantage as age was equated with experience.

Managing and retaining younger workers.

Comparisons between older and younger workers were made, with it becoming apparent that the skills attributed to younger workers (e.g. technological skills) were valued. These were skills that older workers were felt to lack. However, although attention was focused on recruiting and providing opportunities to younger workers, a common theme across the employer interviews in particular, was the difficulties faced in understanding and managing young people (i.e. millennials born in the 1980s and 1990s). Links can be made here to the extensive youth studies literature that highlight the more general social concerns about young people in Hong Kong (Groves, Siu, & Ho, 2014; Lee, 1998) and their political values (Chan, 2014; Ortmann, 2015). In terms of the workplace, management styles and practices were not necessarily felt to have caught up with the values and expectations of the younger generation.

[The] younger generation, now is not looking so much for a fixed job in a very defined hierarchy where they can see themselves moving up. So I think [it's fair to say they are looking for] quite flat structure, whilst being quite fluid (Employer, Finance)

Hence, managers did not always understand their younger workers. Whereas money previously was a key motivator for older workers, younger generations did not put as much value on salary as their older colleagues. One key informant felt that this could be explained by political uncertainty, and a realization by young people that, given the economic context, they were never going to be as financially secure as their parents. At the same time, some employers also felt that younger workers additionally wanted to rapidly progress, have high

salaries, and be challenged in their work. Satisfying these expectations was a concern for many employers – especially in the context of some industries (e.g. law) where building experience gradually over time was central to progression, or where there were an ‘oversupply’ of graduates/younger workers. Employers felt that younger workers were unable to provide long-term stability to a workplace, and retention was a challenge for many employers, as young people often changed jobs frequently in an effort to progress rapidly. In many cases, younger employees job expectations (e.g. in terms of salary, challenge, career opportunities) were not being met.

[The finance industry] may not have enough jobs that will require university graduates ... 30 years ago...we recruited a high school graduate for a clerk position. Now we recruited University graduate for a clerk position. So, how can we satisfy the young people in the job? (Employer, Finance)

In summary, while employers valued younger workers in terms of their perceived skills, they struggled to manage and retain these employees. This presented challenges in terms of organizational stability and sustainability. Older workers were ‘easier’ to manage, but were not felt to have the ‘right’ skills and attributes.

Social Responsibilities Towards Different Generations

The second overarching theme relates to the social responsibilities employers feel towards younger and older generations. Employers do not necessarily feel that they have a responsibility towards older workers, although at the same time they recognize that filial piety is declining.

The labour market positions of older and young workers.

Employers felt that they had a broader social responsibility to allow young people to progress in the labor market. Key informants outlined that while older people were respected in society generally, there was at the same time an expectation that older workers should withdraw from the labor market so that they were not impeding the promotion of younger

workers. These views were reiterated by the employers, who outlined that while being aware of population aging and labor market shortages, they did not want to stall younger workers.

How do you accommodate older workforce, how do you do that, without stalling the younger people's career path (Employer, Law)

This desire to provide opportunities for younger workers can also be linked to the characteristics associated with different age groups, with young people being seen as 'fresh'.

I guess if our retirement age was 65 or 67 and people could stay longer, then fewer jobs would be available for younger people to take and I think that our company is probably conscious of the need to support, to try to encourage young people to join our firm.

Because we need new young fresh people, young blood (Employer, Retail)

In this context, there was an expectation that older people should scale back and withdraw from the labor market. Recruiters did not present companies with older candidates and managers were not encouraged to hire older workers. Employers also felt that older workers demanded higher salaries because of their age. With a focus on recruiting and promoting the progression of younger staff, some employers had fixed retirement ages, used early retirement packages, or laid-off older workers. Examples were also given where employers may increase the workload of older workers to such an extent that they choose to leave their job, because they cannot cope with the pressure.

Filial piety.

It was clear from many of the interviews, that employers do not necessarily feel that they have a social or moral responsibility towards their older workers, with however a few exceptions. It is therefore interesting to consider whether this attitude could be explained by an expectation that older people would be supported by their families (i.e. filial piety).

This lack of feelings of responsibility by employers is especially problematic for those older workers who might have no choice but to remain in work because of financial necessity.

These workers were often in low-skilled and low-pay occupations and did not have adequate private savings. Participants were aware that those in low-skilled and low-pay occupations might have no choice financially but to carry on working. Many of the key informants did not feel that the Mandatory Provident Fund was sufficient to support people in retirement. When discussing the situation of these older workers, mention was not necessarily made of these workers being supported by their families (i.e. filial piety). Instead, their financial situation was framed in terms of a lack of formal retirement safety net or savings.

For the lower income group, because of the lack of labour protection, and very low retirement benefit and low saving, as a result, they want to extend their working life
(Employer, Finance)

As previous research has shown, as a result of a range of factors, filial piety is declining (Cheung & Kwan, 2011; Lee & Hong-Kin, 2005; Lee & Law, 2004; Lum et al., 2016; Ng et al., 2002; Ng, 2016), so many older people cannot rely on their adult-children to support them in retirement. When reflecting on their own situation, some participants themselves highlighted that they did not expect to be supported by their children. Although interestingly these participants did want to support their own parents.

If my role is daughter or son, I don't want my parents to work like 60 or 65. Yeah I want them to enjoy their life but I respect their decisions (Employer, Hospitality)

An important consideration mentioned by participants was that when considering the extension of working lives for the current generation of older workers, it needed to be acknowledged that older workers may need to carry on working as they are financially supporting their parent and also their children who are still in school or college.

First they have to support their parents for this much longer. Second they get married a little bit late...by their 50s...their children are still in college age. So they have to support them (Key Informant 5)

However, going forward, it is unclear whether future generations of older workers will have these same filial responsibilities, although the employer quoted below argued that one reason for encouraging the integration of young people into the labour market, was that they could support an ageing population.

There is less young people to work in this society, who are going to raise the old people.

So you will need a lot of more young people to work in the society to pay tax. To raise the older people (Employer, Finance)

Extending Working Lives

The third theme, considers how intergenerational relations and generational stereotypes, and employers' responsibilities shape policy and practice towards older workers, and thus opportunities to extend working lives.

Opportunities for extending working lives.

As can be gleaned from the findings presented above, older workers do not occupy a valued position within the labor market. They are expected to make way for younger workers and are not seen to bring valuable skills to the workplace. However, there were some opportunities for older workers to extend their working lives. For example, horizontal and/or sideways job opportunities might be provided. Older workers could continue on short-term contracts or as freelance consultants, often mentoring younger colleagues. Those in senior high-skilled positions continued to work well beyond the normative retirement ages, as seniority in the workplace is still respected.

We do have a number of them that have already reach 60, but they are still with us. But with different kind of the nature of the employment. They work for us as the kind of the consultant (Employer, Retail)

Yet, contract and freelance work is precarious as older workers do not have the guarantee of continued employment, and not all older workers are provided with the opportunity to extend

their working lives. Those in contract and freelance work could face annual reviews, thus their continued employment was not guaranteed. As such it can be argued that labour market precarity affects younger and older workers alike (Standing, 2011). Indeed, older workers could be “*a driving force for the growth of the precariat*” (Krekula, Engstrom & Alvinus, 2017, p. 165).

For the certain position that we want, we will extend the employment for them. And that’s reviewed case-by-case or year-by-year (Employer, Hospitality)

Older workers on these contracts might also be barred from management roles in order that the younger generation can take these positions. It is also questionable as to whether these opportunities were available to those in low-paid and low-skilled work. Self-reflection by some of the participants in particular highlighted the inequalities in terms of opportunities depending on a worker’s position within an organization. Those who were company owners/employers had choice in terms of their retirement timing. Employees lacked this choice.

It so happened that I am the employer. So I can choose my retirement age. But then I also thinking let’s say I am an employee working for somebody else, what will happen to me when I have to retire when I am 60 (Employer, Logistics)

Future labour market opportunities for older workers.

There was a suggestion by some of the interviewees that older workers might in the future occupy more certain position in the labor market as a result of the difficulties that employers have in retaining their younger colleagues. For one employer, this behavior by younger workers could be attributed to them knowing that at age 50 they may be forced out of the labor market, together with the lack of family and social support in their old age. This meant that individuals felt the need to earn as much as possible when they were young, and to progress as quickly as possible. This could mean that younger people changed jobs regularly, trying to get a higher salary.

Employees want to get most money when they are young. They know after age 50, it's very difficult to get money...people have to protect themselves, and they have to change job once every three or four years in order to get more money, save up more money for the retirement etcetera (Employer 14)

This higher turnover of younger staff members was also attributed to poor employment protection in Hong Kong; and to the fact that young people were looking to advance in their career, but also to travel and experience different things before settling on a career. In this context, some employers felt that they had no choice but to retain older staff because of the high turnover of younger cohorts. Thus, there is a suggestion that some employers see a need to maintain older workers as they offer stability, experience, and soft skills built up over time that younger workers do not. However, it is hard to generalize whether this suggests a change in attitude towards older workers because of the small, self-selecting sample. The interviews also suggest that in multigenerational workplaces, stereotypes about older workers are still pervasive, and the onus is on older workers to modify their behaviors in order to integrate with younger workers. It is not clear whether there are the same expectations of younger workers.

Discussion

Hong Kong's population is aging rapidly (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2015) and there are concerns that this will exacerbate existing labor shortages, compromising economic growth (Civil Service Bureau, 2015; Leung, 2015; Ng, 2015; Siu, 2014; The Hong Kong Management Association, 2015; Yip, 2014). While government has sought to encourage the extension of working lives – albeit these efforts have been limited in their scope (Flynn et al., 2017) – older workers face a range of employer related barriers to their extended or prolonged labor market participation (Cheung et al., 2011; Chiu et al., 2001; Consumer Search Hong Kong Limited, 2016; Heywood et al., 1999; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Zou, 2015). Employers have not necessarily taken any action despite a rapidly aging population,

growing skills gaps, and labor market shortages. This exploratory research has shown that this lack of employer action, needs to be understood within the broader intergenerational dynamics, and the position of older and younger people within Hong Kong's society. To date, the research base regarding older workers and the extension of working lives has tended to locate age at the individual level, rather than taking an 'embedded' view of aging within broader social structures and age dynamics (Hales & Riach, 2017). In this paper it has been highlighted that in order to understand employer policy and practice towards older workers, and make progress in terms of addressing potential labor market shortages that might result from this demographic change, an approach that pays attention to the social position of both younger and older workers in the organization and society is required. As such, policy solutions need to take into account the intergenerational dynamics in Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong, social development has emphasized youthfulness and the need to prevent older workers from blocking the opportunities of the younger generations (Chan et al., 2009). While it could be argued, that this trend could be unique to the Hong Kong and/or Asian labor market context, notions of job-blocking have been identified elsewhere (ILC-UK and The Uncertain Futures Research Consortium, 2017). Employers participating in this research felt that they had a social obligation to allow young people to progress in the labor market, and therefore they did not necessarily view the extension of working lives as a solution to labor market shortages. Filial expectations of, and the support provided by, the younger generation are declining (Cheung & Kwan, 2011; Lee & Law, 2004; Lee & Hong-Kin, 2005; Lum et al., 2016; Ng et al., 2002; Ng, 2016). It could be argued that filial expectations in Hong Kong increasingly mirror those in other countries (Laidlaw, Wang, Coelho & Power, 2010). Added to this, self-reflection from participants highlighted that going forward they did not expect support from their children, although the participants themselves said they would support their parents. In response to the question posed earlier in the paper, with regards to whether the labor market participation of older

workers more generally accepted by employers given the decline of filial piety: employer attitudes, are not keeping up with these changing expectations, and they do not necessarily feel that they have a social or moral responsibility towards their older workers. Thus it can be suggested that employers feel more responsibility towards younger generations, than to older generations.

There were some opportunities for older workers to extend their working lives as consultants, but often these workers might be barred from management roles. Although it must be noted that the abilities of older workers were recognized, employers often fell back onto negative stereotypes which mirror those observed internationally (see for example Cugin, 2012; Greenwood, 2013; McGuire et al., 2007; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). There were positive stereotypes associated with older worker, often discussed alongside perceived problems associated with younger workers. Thus, it is apparent that while employers may feel a responsibility towards younger workers, and they value the skills associated with them, they do not necessarily find them unproblematic employees. Employers felt that younger workers did not provide them with workplace long-term stability. Whether this is the result of younger workers being aware that they may be forced to withdraw from the labor market as they get older, requires further research. In this context, some employers felt that they had no choice but to retain older workers. However, it is hard to generalize whether this suggests that employers are increasingly valuing older workers. More generally the research suggests that negative stereotypes are pervasive, and the onus is on older workers to modify their behaviors in order to integrate with younger workers.

The authors of this paper would suggest that these findings indicate an approach that acknowledges that aging is a process that is experienced and constituted alongside socio-cultural settings. As demonstrated in this paper, experiences of aging in the workplace, are shaped by the ways in which *“organisations both react to and interact with...external*

environmental factors” (Hales & Riach, 2017, p. 122). This paper has revealed the broader landscape of what aging at work means, as well as the differences between how aging is understood in the home versus the workplace. As exemplified in this paper, the doctrine of filial piety sees older people are valued members of society, but within the workplace aging is understood in terms of deficit in terms of the skills needed by employers.

Limitations

There are research limitations in this study. The sample size was small, which raises questions about the external validity or transferability of the findings, although it should be noted that the aim of qualitative research is seldom generalization (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). As a result of the sample size, the diversity of policies, practices, and attitudes may not be revealed, and therefore, further research with a larger sample may be required. Nevertheless, this study reveals the importance of considering intergenerational relations when researching older workers and the extension of working lives. The research does not examine the experiences of older workers themselves, as it is beyond the scope of this study. Further research in this area would be pertinent. It has been suggested that Hong Kong diverges from other national contexts in terms of the importance of intergenerational social relationships (Flynn et al., 2017), and further research would be also useful to ascertain whether employer policy and practice are embedded within the social responsibilities that employers feel towards different generations to the same extent in other national contexts. Respondents were not asked to disclose their age during the interviews, therefore conclusions cannot be drawn as to whether this influenced their attitudes – although there was some self-reflection from the respondents in terms of them being (older) workers, and/or some did disclose their age incidentally during the course of the interview.

Conclusion

Drawing on in-depth qualitative research undertaken in Hong Kong, this paper locates employer policy and practice within the social responsibilities that employers feel towards different generations and the 'value' attached to different age groups in the context of demographic change and shifting intergenerational dynamics. It has highlighted the need to locate employer policy and practice towards older workers within the cultural, social, and organizational context. For example, in terms of the contributions of these three contexts to older workers outcomes, filial piety is declining and there is limited alternative socioeconomic support for older people. Stereotypes towards older workers are pervasive, and youthfulness is emphasized in social development. In terms of organizations, perceived client demand on the one hand driving the focus on younger workers, but on the other hand, management styles and practices were not necessarily felt to have caught up with the values and expectations of the younger generation. Thus, the experience of aging as an insecure process, but could be ameliorated by specific policy responses. For instance, the promotion of the business case for an age diverse workforce could contribute to a change in employers' and society's attitudes towards older workers. Anti-age discrimination and the introduction of a minimum retirement age could reduce insecurity and inequality in the aging process. Initiatives to increase lifelong learning opportunities could extend working lives while at the same time limiting business opposition to previous mentioned measures. All these policy initiatives could facilitate the extension of, more secure and less precarious, working lives and create more secure aging processes. However, a key message from this research is that those responsible for developing and implementing these policy solutions need to take a holistic view of the factors shaping employer policy and practice towards older workers, and the aging process.

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