UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF AGE:

When Determining the Capabilities of Leaders in Post-modern Organizations

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Abstract   In this paper, I explore the complex and constantly changing conceptualisation of age, especially older age, its discourses, and the resulting perceptions of leaders' capabilities in post-modern organizations. I specifically aim to establish bridges to the future by attempting to deconstruct discursive constructions of age together with postmodern criticism. Learning to know how we know age and its conceptualisation will serve us in permitting the age concept to travel, to develop, to break away to the fluid state of 'becoming' instead of being caged to narrowing 'bodily' or power derived discourses. Discourses derived from the human body and from power are thought to been constructed in the somewhat same ways as other, originally bodily discourses concerning human attributes like gender, race, and ethnicity. Breaking away from the dominant age discourse and developing age concepts should provide organizations with better, more justified, understanding in determining capabilities of their older leaders. Age should be seen as a much more neutral attribute of Man as is the case today.

Introduction

The age concept has recently emerged in various fields among others, gerontological, psychological, futurological, demographic, legal, political and cultural contexts as an interest of research. Diversity studies have included age among race, gender, creed, ethnicity, background, education, function, and personality differences (Thomas, 1990; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). At the same time, while a vast amount of organizational studies have covered almost every angle of the leadership theme (Kamp, 1999; Baradicco; 1991, Åhman, 2003), the concept of age has largely been ignored. The almost untouched area of the conceptualisation of age, and as a consequence of it, the discursive perception of a leader as well as his/her capabilities needs to be explored and unmasked further. This is particularly important due to the topical importance of age understanding in emergence of the huge demographic changes. At the same time life long training/learning provides individuals with adequate knowledge

throughout their lives, and the march of powerful new technologies will probably have greater impact on human life and its expectancy, and also to the aging process which can be slowed down or even reversed (Featherstone & Hepworht, 1998), than we can even imagine. Bio-technology is marching to such extreme fluid stages where "leakiest" distinction or boundaries will be those between the human and animal, the human and the machine, and the physical and the non-physical*…."* (Wei, 1996: 46, 161) It is essential to understand age also due to its human and organizational significance.

Age is a human attribute that has long been taken for granted. However, we know very little about the age beneath the skin and beyond the body. Older age and the age concept need to be explored from discourses[1] of age that have been constructed over social practices and time since they are ascribed to the leader's identity, especially when using it in relation to the capability perception. Biases, that obviously exist, should be first recognized and then made visible so that those biases could be overcome. Learning to know age would be a leap to a more neutral, more justified, more complete and more whole perception of age in determining leaders' capabilities in the post-modern organization and preparing societies to encounter inevitable changes more efficiently. Two dominant discourses serve as a bridge to new reflection of possible or inevitable developments in understanding age. They are argued to have been constructed a) firstly from *bio-medical models* (Powell & Longino, 2002; Powell & Biggs, 200; Wahidin & Powell, 1998; Katz, 1996) in understanding bodily change through later life and b) secondly from power-based models (Foucault, 1967, 1973, 1982, 1988; Biggs & Powell, 2001; Katz, 1996; Estes & Biggs & Phillipson, 2003).

The focus of this study is intentionally narrowed down to the older leaders in post-modern organizations. Furthermore, these leaders are assumed here to represent the affluent individuals who are able to avoid the predicted negative outcomes when the Western welfare states may be fading away. 'Flirting' attempts with postmodernism throughout this paper may contribute in forming bridges to unlearning[2], to deeper reflection of paradigms, to destructing and reconstructing of knowledge, or in Engeström's term 'breaking away', i.e. developing to the fluid 'becoming'.

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[1] "Different discourses mean different ways of representing aspects of the world." (Fairclough, 2003:215). "Discourses as Foucault identified them are historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth." (Biggs & Powel, 2001:97)

[2] Referring to the patterns of behaviour that might need to be challenged, and not only during times of crisis (Blackman, Balnave & al., 2005).

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, I define the post-modern organization as a context of this study and examine the contemporary leadership thinking. Second, I introduce the two most distinctive, still strongly dominant discourses that may be linked with modern[3] organizational thinking, representing the modern 'grand narratives'. Third, leadership capabilities related to dominant discourses are discussed. Fourth, I draw conclusions and discuss approaches for my further study.

The post-modern organizational framework

It is evident that the organizational context itself is under a constant change process. Indeed, the pace in which the change has happened in recent years has been enormous. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that organizations do not operate in a vacuum but are in constant interaction with their environment. Globalisation, technological innovations, fast and easy communication and global information networks are some of the development trends that have recently affected organizations and 'forced' them to search for a better 'fit' to their environment.

This study of the perception of the age and capabilities of leaders is defined to the contemporary organizations, called here *post-modern* organizations, meaning here by the hyphenated term organizations following the modern ones in (Huczynski &Buchanan, 2001: 58, Legge, 1995). There is no pure representative of a so-called postmodern organization, which would mean purely postmodern thinking applied to it and nothing but it. Postmodernism is highly debated even between postmodernists themselves and it is commonly noted that it is almost impossible to define it. However, there are many features that can be seen to represent postmodernist thinking in the policies and strategies of the post-modern organizations; these organizations that may be thought to be a combination of different degrees of modern and postmodern organizational philosophies. The post-modern organization has been defined according to the 'idealized concept' of Huczynski & Buchanan (2001, 886) as "*a networked, information-rich, delayered, downsized, lean, boundaryless, high-commitment, organization employing highly skilled, well-paid autonomous knowledge workers*". Many labels are used to describe these organizations from hybrid to mycorrhizae (Engeström, 2005) to learning organizations (Senge, 1990), knowledge creating organizations

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[3] Modern refers here to an organization design that derives from the positivist philosophy.

(Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), crazy organizations (Peters, 1994), and smart organizations (Matheson & Matheson, 1998). Common to all of them is the emphasis on the ongoing change processes, meaning that the context within which this study takes place is itself in constant change.

The post-modern organization emphasizes such attitudes like *to learn to take nothing for granted*, and keeping in mind that every claim is based on basic paradigms (Hatch, 1997). Learning to unlearn is vital in such organizations where reflection of the existing paradigms should be constantly challenged. It is obvious that in post-modern organizations, to some extent and in various amounts, the so-called trends of postmodern[4] thinking are winning space and are growing over the so-called modern ones in differing degrees. Therefore, as mentioned earlier the post-modern organizational context itself is in constant change, and flowing in dynamic, complex, and ongoing ways. Consequently, the postmodern thinking may offer a possibility to move beyond modernist narratives that are restrictive, over-generalized, and no longer valid in new contexts.

A trend or trends in philosophy, which may be loosely referred to as postmodernism, have countless interpretations. However, in this paper it has been adopted in order to benefit from its positive sides in destructing the 'truths', in unlearning, and in aiming for a better understanding of the ongoing change processes, especially through its criticism. Some brief definitions are hence provided to ease understanding of the use of terminology in this paper.

Postmodernism

As most authors point out, it is an almost impossible task even to try to define postmodernism. It is a larger than life phenomenon and under constant debate. Huczynski & Buchanan (2001: 886) explain it as follows: "Postmodernism is a mode of thinking, an epistemology, which focuses on the way, in which language is used symbolically and selectively to construct 'truth' and 'reality' to serve the interests of particular social groupings; postmodernism consequently rejects the positivistic approach which underlines modern science (natural and social) as a way of developing our understanding of the world." Many scholars seem to use postmodernist trends of philosophy as useful tools and their critical thinking may, however, force to verify one's paradigms.

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[4]   *Postmodern being a philosophy, an epistemological perspective, a way of looking at, of thinking about, of developing theories, of criticizing organizations* (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2001; Legge, 1995).

<u>Modernism</u>

Before the post-modernist period in time there was, and many ways still is, the so-called modernist era that drew on positivist philosophy. According to (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2001: 886), it is "*a perspective which assumes that the social world and its properties can be studied using objective methods, and not through the use of subjective inference; the organizations in this perspective possesses an objective reality or truth that exists independently of anyone's attitudes towards or interpretations of it.*" Typically the modern organization sees different issues as grand narratives.

<u>Leadership and leaders</u>

In post-modern organizations that draw from the dynamic of continual change, leadership demands expertise, flexibility, adaptability, and ability to adapt to new environments among other things. Therefore, leadership may be dispersed to every level of the organization and may represent individuals that Åhman (2004) calls *'own mind-leaders'*. This kind of new leadership can answer the competition needs more rapidly when time is a competition factor. When networks of various types are increasingly replacing the classic forms of organizations, also leadership takes new forms.

<u>Age discourses</u>

Most of the rapidly intensifying debate in social sciences concerning age has concentrated on the aging societies which have been explored firstly from a political economy perspective (Estes, 1979, 1993; Phillipson, 1998; Walker, 19819), secondly from a humanities perspective (Cole, 1992; Moody, 1992), and most recently from a biographical and narratives approaches (Johnson, 1976; Gubrium, 1993) that have emerged in gerontology. During the last ten years many gerontologists (Powell, Biggs, Povlika, Featherstone, Hepworth, Phillipson and Katz) have discussed two main sources to meaning makings/discourses of age that are body and power. The first one derives from the bio-medical period, from the so-called medicalization of age and the other one from power (Foucault, 1973) that is used to control and regulate the experiences and lives of aging people. Diversity studies, on the other hand, have mainly concentrated to the areas like gender, race, and ethnicity mentioning age constantly as one of the attributes affecting how we perceive identities, capabilities, and differences.

Clearly much of this debate has hardly touched the discourse of age and leadership within organizations or within the framework of the organizational studies. Therefore, when I discuss two specific discursive perspectives of age still prevailing, I assume, that they are touchstones to organizational thinking and serve as a starting point for the further explorations. However, it should be kept in mind that gerontologists often speak of retired people, which differ from the older leaders in many ways.

Typical for the bio-medical discourses have been decline metaphors and these discourses are called here *'bodily'* discourses since they derive from the physics of the human body (Powell & Biggs, 2000; Sims, 1991). The power-based discourses (Foucault, 1982; Biggs & Powell, 2001) are called here *'power'* discourses that take the starting point from the bodily criticising of how the bodily discourses are used in order to use power for controlling and restricting individuals and for achieving desired political goals. These two types of discourses are in many ways interwoven; especially the bodily discourse is full of hidden paradigms of human age, identity, and of human life as a whole. Both serve as bases when aiming to learn to know and expose the older age and its discursive mask from the social contexts where they are embedded in. Stephen Katz (1997) argues that the decline analogy has lead to the relative failure of more broadly based social and life-course approaches to impinge upon thinking about old age. Below I discuss the dominant discourses in more detail.

Bodily discourse

The body was considered as a universal concept in modernist narratives and it was related to race, class and gender (Powell & Longino, 2001). In Powell & Longino's view, especially feminist insights related to the body are still retaining an important explanatory influence, and can form a useful bridge to understanding why the body has had such a powerful explanatory role in the attempts to analyse aging. Feminists have traced ways in which the bodies of women were controlled and dominated by various social institutions, medicines, the law and family in modernist societies (Sontag, 1991; Twigg, 2000). It is difficult to imagine disembodied age research, and yet the body is something that is more often implied than discussed. The lifecourse aspects are easily lost or hidden in discourses that are based on a medicalized body (Foucault, 1973), and the surface aspects are emphasised in bodily paradigms, hidden in them are the paradigms related to physical, psychological and biological dimensions (Longino & Murphy, 1995). Among others, Harry Moody (1998) has criticized

the biomedical model, which has clamed it speaks 'truths' about the adult ageing. The discourses derived from biomedical thinking and the body are about weakening, illnesses, decline, dependency etc. The social processes in environment of the body are forgotten; the vertical memory, lifecourse and other mental richness are ignored in these discourses.

Foucauldian critics have argued that the bio-medical era *colonized* the older age by focusing on preventing physical ageing. In Western culture the aging body is perceived to be the "bottom line," subjecting us to relentless catalogues of "betrayals" through physical deterioration (Turner, 1995). This bodily thinking has been around since 1601, when in England *The Poor Law* divided people into three categories of indigence: children, *able bodied* and infirm. The bio-medical or bodily model has drawn from perceiving aging as a problem and the discourses have therefore been constructed to a great extent of decline, dependency, decay, abnormality and deteriorations, about illnesses and weaknesses (Phillipson, 1998). This study by no means wants to deny or contradict the aging process of the body as such, even when acknowledging that the emerging biotechnology can slow down in many ways the aging process itself and prolong human life by tens of years. The challenge lies in understanding the whole identity in such a way that the body does not dictate the attributes beneath the skin.

Power-based discourse

When Foucault (1998, 216) urges individuals "to refuse what we are", he means that we should refuse to remain tied to fixed identities to which individuals are subjected following the modernist and declining lifecourse thinking. Foucault himself analyses the phenomena of medicalization and the body. He criticizes the controlling discourses that he argues to be used to individualize, particularize and objectify individuals. In Foucault's understanding of the social processes and institutional/organizational practices power remains a central concept for understanding. Foucault builds on *'medical gaze'* referring by it to "discourses, languages, and ways of seeing that shape the understanding of aging into questions that center on, and increase the power of, the health professions, and restrict or de-legitimize other possibilities" (Biggs & Powell, 2001: 95) He emphasizes and pursues political powers behind medical gaze. Foucault's (1977, 1982) claim that identities are kept in place through the deployment of integrated systems of power, knowledge, a routine operation of surveillance and assessment represent attempts to determine the age concept through the power standpoint.

Other scientists (Biggs & Powell, 2001) have shown how discourse has been changing with social welfare thinking, which forms the basis to understanding the age (Katz, 1996), ranging from victim, burden, decline, dependent, controlling, restricting to consumer care management customer.

Learning to know the older age

This paper forms the basis for a further study. Discussed approaches for the more comprehensive study derive from the practice based approaches to knowledge (Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003) that perceive knowledge creation and destruction as deeply embedded in social practices and temporalities, as well as from the cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2001). It is assumed here that from a greater understanding of the discursive practices of age as well as from the contexts under which they were constructed follows also a greater understanding to perceptions of capabilities.

Age as a result of knowledge and *"knowledge construction is an ongoing process of integrating existing explicit and tacit elements of knowledge"* (Polanoy, 1969: 159). Therefore, the most important question when trying to understand the age concept is: How do we know age? And what do we know about it and why do we know in the way we do. How does the knowledge affect our perception of capabilities?

Practice-based approaches to knowledge conceive knowledge as manifesting itself in social actions that are sustained by symbols, technologies and relations (Gherardi 2000; Nicolini, Gherardi & Yanow, 2003). Knowledge is understood to be approached as mediated by socially accumulated artefacts and social realities. Knowledge is never understood as a static entity, but an ongoing process in everyday practice. It is understood as a state of becoming (Styhre 2003). When searching for answers to questions like: Whom the leaders are 'becoming' when aging? Or who they want to be when older? We first need to increase our understanding of knowing the older age. Foucauldian critical approach argued that the key is the question of social welfare in relation to power which combination came to construct older age, and Biggs & Powell (2001) in further explorations of Foucault's theories combine power with social welfare of each period with somewhat differing discourses depending on where the power lies. Biggs & Powell (2001:95) use Foucault's medical "gaze" metaphor to "refer to

discourses, languages, and ways of seeing that shape the understanding of aging into questions that center on, and increase the power of, the health professions, and restrict or de-legitimize other possibilities".

Critical and postmodernist views about discourse of aging have recently increased. At the background, there are factors like the immense demographic change we are facing all over the world, emergence of the bio-technical era to replace the bio-medical period enabling to increase the human life span by tens of years in the not so distant future, and a life long learning tradition that provides individuals with adequate knowledge throughout their lives. However, many of the critical views are not dependent on biomedical or biotechnological interventions in the so-called techno culture, but are attempts to destruct the prevailing discourses and find reasons for why we know as we know. Hepworth (1999:144) notes when reviewing Margaret Gullette's book: Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of Mid-Life (1997):

> "Once we are able to see that a lifecourse oriented around a relentless process of decline is imaginary, that the biological changes associated with aging do not inevitably produce universal and inescapable decline, then not simply one but a wide range of alternative visions become possible. Once we see that the causal connections between the biological, psychological and social aspects of age are narrative connections, which prey on our imagination, then there are defensible grounds for optimism." Gullette herself notes, "The idea that we might escape being aged by culture is breathtaking" (1997:18).

Gullette creates new discourse herself by speaking of *minimal bodies* when desiring an alternative liberated self, *who does not have so much body*.

From what was earlier told about the changing landscape of work (Engeström, 2005), about new organization design, about leadership, it is obvious that working environments are moving towards better practices in order to exist and compete. In emerging popular literature there are in increasing amounts of new age language, e.g. 'spiced women' and 'marinated experiences', which signals the changing thinking when dealing with older age. However, many legal, pension and retirement regulations still follow the age stages model grouping people according merely to the age, which means that they need to be challenged with

adequate knowledge and power structures to accommodate today's needs. Consequently, there is an increasing need for people to be treated fairly as persons who they are, and not solely as a representative of their age group.

Conclusions

This paper has been building on theoretical background from literature in order to understand better the perceptions of age from different perspectives and in different temporalities and practices. The modern 'problem of identity' was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable (Bauman, 1995). According to Featherstone and Hepworth (1998) aging is becoming less and less of unitary process governed by biology, and it is increasingly modified by culture and open to reinterpretation and reconstructions for affluent elderly. They call for 'a new ideology of aging' due to huge changes in economic, cultural and technological environments. It is evident that the perception of capabilities mirrors the prevailing age discourses to a great extent. If a leader is known to approach the retirement age he is thought not to be capable to lead in full force any more. The debate gerontologists have had during the recent years has had very little impact on everyday life so far. In a largely modernist kind of an age culture perspectives of aging focus on age-appropriate behaviours and priorities and many assumptions are made based on them. The institutionalisation of age by laws, pensions, retirement rules have been based on using legal forces, but as Foucault (1976) claims, the maintenance of existing power relations depends not on the use of force, but on the ability to persuade active subjects to reproduce those relations for themselves.

In the same way, however, as other attributes have gained a more neutral status, age needs to gain it as well. Engestöm (2005: 4) discusses the landscape on work and argues that work practices are moving toward increasingly networked, hybrid and weakly bounded forms of organizations, toward what he calls 'mycorrhizae' activities. Emergence of the most recent formations of work: networking, knotworking, mycorrhizae activities, and amoeba organizations changes leadership needs as well. And as Povlika (2000: 226) notes: "One does not have to be a postmodernist to recognize that political, economic, cultural transformations are sweeping the world and undermining traditional sources of identity and conventional notions of 'a good old age'." When the aim is to find better post-modern concepts they arguably will be more fluid states of 'becoming' than the discussed dominant ones and they

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would form bridges to the future. In order to find answers to these questions the discussed approaches for the further study should include practice based approaches to knowledge (Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow, 2003), activity-theoretical studies (CHAT) (Engeström, 2001), discursive approaches and postmodern criticism. My research questions, therefore, are: What are the real capabilities of aging leaders? Is the bodily mask deceiving? Is power playing a role when determining his/her attributes? How the post-modern frame is advancing or hindering unlearning of old knowing and of reconstructing new concepts? New age discourses for leaders should get developed with changing landscapes of work. Who knows, maybe the bodily discourse loses part of its meaning very naturally when communication within new organization designs in increasing amounts happens, not in person, but using electronic forms.

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