

Aesthetic wisdom of older workers

Wisdom of
older workers

Kristiina Niemi-Kaija

The Summer University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

171

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to propose the notion of the value and contribution of the wisdom of older workers in working life.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a framework of organisational aesthetics, this paper presents an empirical case study analysing the material collected from Finnish municipal home care services and sheltered accommodation designed for older people. Through the analysis of the stories of older and younger employees, the case study shows how workers construct ideas of skills related to ageing, how the wisdom of older workers has been transformed into practices and how aesthetic wisdom might benefit this social process.

Findings – The findings reveal three characteristics of ageing wisdom – caring, graceful and joyful wisdom – that all present focused sensitivity, emphasizing the subject's experience, feelings and emotions. The findings also illustrate how the authority of older workers made visible this feeling-driven wisdom and values, and through these means, enhanced the skills of younger employees.

Social implications – The present paper challenges the debate on ageing which has mainly focused on the problems of older workers in a social context.

Originality/value – This paper provides new insights into the skills of older workers in the empirical and theoretical framework of organisational aesthetics.

Keywords Wisdom, Ageing, Aesthetics, Intergenerational interaction

Paper type Research paper

Received 18 August 2020

Revised 2 May 2021

15 September 2021

Accepted 23 September 2021

Introduction

In this paper, I present a qualitative case study conducted in a municipal nursing home. I show an example of an organisation where ageing is understood as a resource for the entire work community. Older workers, and especially older women (Thomas *et al.*, 2014), often face old-fashioned stereotypes (Nickson and Baum, 2016) and negative attitudes related to their skills (Posthuma and Campion, 2009). In some cultures, older workers are even treated as a homogeneous age group or seen as “a topic that is taboo” (Aaltio *et al.*, 2017, p. 5). This is reflected in public debate where concerns have been raised about the ability of older workers to perform their professional duties in line with the latest employment requirements (Aaltio *et al.*, 2014; Thomas *et al.*, 2014; Zanoni, 2011). Also, researchers have often looked at age issues from a limited perspective and presented them as problematic for contemporary organisations (Scheuer and Mills, 2017).

I suggest that organisations have not fully understood the multidimensional value of older workers. It is true that the growth of the over-60 age group into the largest age group poses particular challenges for the economic and social fabric of society (Parry and McCarthy, 2017). However, negative discussions about older workers are harmful if we take into account labour shortages in certain sectors, which can already be seen, especially in the health sector. In reflecting upon what will happen as older workers retire, Calo (2008) notes that there is a significant risk of losing valuable knowledge and wisdom possessed by ageing workers. If the wisdom has not been transferred or captured within the organisation's collective memory,



© Kristiina Niemi-Kaija. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

This research was supported in part by grant from The Finnish Work Environment Fund.

Qualitative Research in
Organizations and Management:
An International Journal
Vol. 17 No. 2, 2022
pp. 171-182
Emerald Publishing Limited
1746-5648
DOI 10.1108/QROM-08-2020-2012

an enormous loss of human capital is a likely near-future reality. Even though there are also positive valuations of ageing (Aaltio *et al.*, 2017), there is still much more to learn about the positive implications of older workers at work.

My aim is to contribute to research on age issues by presenting the value of the older workforce in working life. More precisely, I am interested in what meanings are given to the wisdom of the elderly. I do not assume that wisdom is only related to ageing. As Lincoln and Guba (2013), in the context of relativism, knowledge is created in the social environment and are relative to persons, groups or social interests. It exists only in the minds of those who contemplate it. Behind our personal aesthetics is our own lived history, our activities with other people, institutions and the meanings that have formed in this interaction (Taylor, 2020). However, the significance of age cannot be ignored and also a positively tinted discussion about agelessness can turn against itself, overlooking the good things related to age (Andrews, 1999; Fineman, 2014). In this paper, I have taken an aesthetic perspective in order to understand older workers' competence that embraces aesthetic wisdom. When I refer to aesthetic knowledge it includes "sensory knowledge and felt meaning of objects and experiences" (Hansen *et al.*, 2007, p. 545). I will clarify this perspective and the literature review in the next section.

The research material consists of the stories of the employees who work in municipal home care services and sheltered accommodation designed for older people. Firstly, what makes this organisation relevant is the current political debate in Finland about reforming the municipal health systems in order to cope with future health costs. Therefore, there has been a debate on how to continue the careers of older workers, and on the other hand, how to do more work with less labour force. Meanwhile, it has been found that nursing staff are leaving their profession early and even changing their career. All this poses challenges both for management and the survival of workers at work. Secondly, the reason I chose this particular organisation is because there are several workers of different ages, and among the workforce, older workers are well represented.

I have converted a book chapter based on qualitative research to form this paper and polished the ideas about the wisdom of older people. More precisely, I look at how workers construct ideas about skills in relation to ageing in this particular organisation. I consider how the wisdom of older workers has been transformed into practices in the social context. I also show how aesthetic wisdom might benefit this social process.

The paper starts with a review of established literature on ageing, which I consider in light of aesthetic wisdom. After the methodological approach of the research is presented, the results, drawing on the interviews of workers, are described in three categories, each illuminating an aspect of the wisdom associated with age. These categories are caring wisdom, graceful wisdom and finally joyful wisdom. The article concludes with a summary of the research findings while highlighting the main conclusions.

Aesthetic wisdom and ageing

The ancient Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus expressed his respect for age by saying "strength and beauty are goods of youth, soundness of mind the flower of age" (Taylor, 1999, p. 51). This is an example of how old people are supposed to possess special wisdom, to be an archetypal character who advises and guides younger people. Human capital theories (e.g. Crook *et al.*, 2011) have proposed that several features of intelligence improve with age such as crystallised intelligence associated with accumulated job skills, fluid intelligence and cognitive abilities (Cattell, 1987; Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004). Similarly, research suggests that emotional intelligence, such as self-control, self-awareness and self-exploration increase with age (Peterson and Spiker, 2005). For example, research has shown that burnout decreases during a long career among health-care professionals (Cascio *et al.*, 2017). In work

that focuses on social-emotional skills (e.g. teachers, nurses), goals directed towards emotion regulation tend to be more important for older workers than younger workers (Hertel *et al.*, 2013). What is also emphasised is that older nurses defined as over the age of 40 are more likely to maintain their professional competence by participating in continuing professional development than younger nurses (Lammintakanen and Kivinen, 2012; Pool *et al.*, 2012).

Although the positive aspects of ageing are frequently expressed, existing research has tended to focus on cognitive and intellectual or rational and logical skills. What is relevant in this paper is rather a sensuous and sensitive knowledge (Antonacopoulou and Taylor, 2019; Bathurts *et al.*, 2010; Gagliardi, 1996; Harding, 2002; Koivunen, 2009; Springborg, 2010; Strati, 2003) related to the older workforce. Therefore, the principal concern of this paper is the importance of aesthetic wisdom that can come with age. As Sandelands and Boudens (2000) suggest, people do not just intellectualise their own work and results objectively. It is a matter of aesthetic consciousness and sensitivity “to beauty and pleasure as well as to ethical responsibility” (Hatch *et al.*, 2005, p. 15). Because we are sentient creatures – who feel as well as think, the aesthetic experience informed by our preferences and liking is an important aspect of what it means to be human. The potential meanings of qualities and appreciations depend primarily on the intuited meaning of quality and appreciation motivated by how things are experienced and felt (Mitias, 1988; Rochberg-Halton, 1986).

Even though the aesthetic experience is subjective, it can also be interpersonal knowledge (Kuepers, 2011; Strati, 2003; Ropo *et al.*, 2002) and the tacit dimension of social relationships (Ahmas and Koivunen, 2017) that is grounded on an immediate perception of the social world (Barrett, 2012). Therefore, this paper’s contribution is to show the “transformational potential of aesthetics” (Kuepers, 2011, p. 24) grounded on an immediate perception of the social world (Barrett, 2012) gained by sensory faculties (Strati, 1999). Wisdom is developed and learned indirectly through our own and others’ experiences and reflections (Kuepers, 2011) by being present and receiving signals and reactions (Ladkin, 2013). As Kuepers (2011, p. 25) states, “with its critical capacity to call into question the locked senses of what is *real* and offering imaginative perspectives on what is possible”.

As different people can have different experiences of the same situation, it is interesting, as Railton (2000, pp. 13–14) argues, to note that “to whose taste, then, do we actually pay some attention, i.e. attribute some normative force, and why would this count as authority about beauty?”. What is permitted and valued can be motivated by how things are experienced sensually (Antonacopoulou and Taylor, 2019) and expressed by an aesthetic judgement of appearance (Hancock and Tyler, 2000). Therefore, this study draws attention not only to intellectual expectations but also to the appreciation of the style of performance and knowledge of older workers that comes from sensory experiences.

Stories as research data and a method for analysis

The study was carried out in a Finnish municipal nursing home located in a small municipality. Each municipality must provide health services and organise home care services and institutional care for those who need them. All the workers participated in the interviews, a total of 17 professionals (nurses, enrolled nurses and homemakers). They worked together in the municipal home care services and sheltered accommodation designed for older people. Home service workers did their jobs alone and others worked in teams. However, they were in close contact with each other almost daily. Apart from one person, all of the workers were women.

The age distribution was weighted so that 63% of the interviewees were over 45; 33% of them were over 55 years of age; 37% of the interviewees were younger than 45; and 47% of them were under the age of 30. I have marked the quotations as follows: Y (age under

45 years), M (age 45–54 years), A (age 55 years and over). However, when I talk about older workers in the text, I refer to every respondent over 45 years of age. This division is based on a [Finnish government report \(2017\)](#) that talks about older people being over the age of 45, stating that finding employment after losing their job would be more difficult ([Table 1](#)).

The material was collected by interviewing the workers for about an hour during working hours. When I came to the organisation and walked into the hall, everyone greeted me kindly and smiled. I was directed to the room where the interviews were supposed to be conducted. The manager came to ask if I would like to have breakfast before I start interviewing. The atmosphere was relaxed, and the hall and the interview room were decorated in a homely fashion. A similar feeling was present during the interviews. There was an atmosphere of general good humour with frequent laughter. Some of them said openly right at the beginning that they are a bit afraid of the interview and especially because it would be recorded. As the interviews progressed, it was astonishing to see how comfortable they seemed to be and how similar their stories were. The workers described their own work community so positively. In recent years, public discussions have raised concerns about the workload of care workers. Due to poor working conditions, care work is said to be physically and mentally stressful. Therefore, it was a little surprising to see how content every interviewee seemed to be about their work conditions. I started to wonder if they were trying to create a positive impression for me about their workplace. To reduce my own suspicions, at the end of the interview, I decided to ask a few of the workers if the work community was used to maintaining a public image that is only positive. Everyone answered in the same way that they do have such a good workplace and work community. I could feel the good atmosphere and I was grateful to be able to meet workers who felt that they were working in an ideal environment.

The research design was guided by the thematic interview approach, as I asked about their duties and what kinds of skills were needed. As the interview continued, they were asked to describe moments when they failed or made a mistake, how they felt at that moment and how they perceived the behaviour of others. The purpose was to reveal their feelings and the style and tone of their own actions and those of others. Age was not separately highlighted as an issue, unless the interviewees raised it themselves. If they raised age-related issues, I would then ask follow-up questions or just look for evidence of age-related issues in the analysis stage. The aim was to bring up such aspects that the workers themselves considered important.

After reading the material over and over again, I chose three categories that best described the workers' feelings-based wisdom according to focused sensitivity, which is an important aspect from an aesthetic point of view. The analysis was led by the questions: How do workers construct ideas about skills related to ageing in this particular organisation? How have these skills been transformed into practices? And how do aesthetic aspects benefit this process? The three categories – caring wisdom, graceful wisdom and joyful wisdom – each illuminated the aesthetic wisdom associated with age. They were also themes that came up frequently in the interviews. The first theme showed how caring was a sensitive attitude taking into account historical sensitiveness. The second theme presented the constructs construed through the lens of Grace, which is an aesthetic category that reveals elegance and merciful attitudes. The third theme presented constructs that produced happiness and enthusiasm, “a collective knowable doing” ([Gherardi, 2016](#), p. 280). [Table 2](#) summarises some of the examples of the analysis.

Table 1.
The age distribution of
the interviewees

Older workers	Younger workers
A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6 Interviewees over 55 years	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5 Interviewees between 45 and 55
	Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4, Y5, Y6 Interviewees under the age of 45

Workers' constructions of aesthetic wisdom

Focused sensitivity

One of the recurring themes in the workers' stories was that authority in the organisation was never based on superior rank. Rather, respect was achieved primarily by treating other people beautifully. These judgements of human action are described in what follows through the themes of caring, graceful and joyful wisdom.

These themes intersect with each other as they shed light on the same issue: focused sensitivity. The approach to performing is not formed cognitively but rather through "wisdom that consists of looking and listening" (Kostera, 2003). In particular, older workers described the importance of listening with a *sensitive ear* (A3) as an essential skill in working life. They activated their own faculties and made choices based on sensations and feelings. For example, as is demonstrated in the following story of an older worker, you need to be open to other people's experience and willing to shape your own behaviour intuitively based on what you see, hear and feel:

You need to listen to those worries. There should be time to meet another person, whether it is a client or a colleague. It's not always in your hands, but then you have to think about what really matters. It's a choice, whether you listen to that person or fuss about something else. You should not hurry and ruin the moment. Here, people are ready to listen and say things. You get to know intuitively how to approach another person. Sometimes it's enough to just take a look at someone. It is a matter of acquaintance. You just have to learn to approach others. (A1)

Caring wisdom

Dealing with the past experience of failure is later explored under the theme of graceful wisdom. However, the appreciation of *the lived history* is noteworthy here. Preferences and aesthetic judgements in caring wisdom were not only a matter of cognition but also of a sensitivity to the social-historical context. In the stories of older workers, caring wisdom emphasised time sensitivity and historical awareness, a collective memory, in everyday relationships. Instead of reducing the historical diversity of people, actions or events to simple variables and causality (Maréchal, 2009; Williams and Connell, 2010), older workers activated their ability to perceive, sense and feel other people's "pasts as it is remembered" (Assman, 2008, p. 113). Most of the older workers had lived in the town for a long time, so they knew the

Aesthetic
wisdom
Based on
focused
sensitivity

Transformation of skills

The benefit of aesthetic wisdom in the
process

Caring wisdom	Historical awareness: <i>You need to bring up memories from the past</i> (A1)	Sensitivity to the past experiences creates compassion: <i>She treats us as people who also have their own lives. She always takes care of our wellbeing</i> (Y6)
Graceful wisdom	Co-reflection: <i>And we can reflect on things together quickly</i> (A1)	A gracious attitude transformed together strengthens the courage to act: <i>And you sort of feel confident, when you see that others support you</i> (Y4)
Joyful wisdom	Shared expression: <i>All you have learned from these old ones, yes I will take it forward, this joy</i> (Y5)	Feeling-driven desire to play diminish the boredom: <i>And we have music playing alongside work. Suddenly you stop and take someone to dance with you</i> (Y5)

Table 2.
Examples of the
analyses

life histories of the residents. All this prepared them to care for the residents at the emotional level and to be sensitive to their past choices and lives:

You need to bring up memories from the past. You do not just ask where you are in pain. Do you remember how many fish there were in that pond? Or do you remember how you milked your cows? This is what I advise young people. Our residents must be treated with respect and it is completely useless to criticise or blame them. Of course, it is sometimes difficult for young people to understand what that world was like in the 20s or 50s. (A1)

Here, the fact that older workers have a sensitivity to the past is set against the notion that younger workers' understanding of social and historical events is incomplete. Therefore, the older workers aimed to share their own knowledge with their younger colleagues. Older workers also remembered their negative experience in previous jobs at the beginning of their career, when they were humiliated or left out of the group. Based on these previous experiences, older workers focused on promoting respectful behaviour towards younger workers when they, in turn, started their career, as the following comment illustrates:

For example, when a trainee starts, I immediately seek to get to know him or her. I ask – Where do you come from? So that everyone feels like they are welcome and belong to the group. (M1)

Further, younger workers respected and embraced the historical awareness of the older workers and as one of the younger workers explained, they later passed it on to newcomers. Respect for the wisdom of the older workers is highlighted, for example, in the following comment, as the younger worker valued the older worker's caring and motherly approach derived from their own life experience:

Older workers know what has been before, when it has been more difficult and otherwise, you see in them the certainty that experience brings (Y4).

One repeating theme in the stories was that older and younger workers also appreciated their leader's lived experience. This is illustrated by the following story:

Our leader has seen different aspects of life and understands people. We have a leader who takes care of us. Thinks a lot about us. I have never met the kind of leader I have here. Sometimes I wonder how she manages to be so empathetic towards us too. That we are not just her workers. She treats us as people who also have their own lives. She always takes care of our well-being. (Y6)

Instead of focusing on rational managerial methods and techniques to seek operational productivity and objective outcomes, esteemed leadership is positioned here based on empathetic, sensitive, caring wisdom that brings out the best in others. Caring wisdom and sensitivity to the environment seems to extend throughout the organisation and has created a feeling of belonging together:

We're like friends and co-workers. And sometimes we're even closer than friends. It just goes, like, everybody cares about each other. And then we also care about the residents. (A2)

Graceful wisdom

As considered previously, caring wisdom embodied in sensitivity to the environment and past experiences were an integral part of the workers' professionalism. Another recurring feature closely linked to caring wisdom was graceful wisdom. As an aesthetic category, gracefulness expresses "the elegance of behaviour" and the "politeness" that evokes "the feeling of comfort" (Strati, 1999, p. 188).

In the workers' stories, the graceful wisdom of older workers was valued particularly when workers were failing or making a mistake. All the workers explained that they need to be constantly careful in treatment procedures because mistakes may even be harmful to the

patients. All the workers also emphasised responsibility and accountability as important criteria for their professionalism. However, mistakes and failures occurred, and their own inner expectations of perfection made them sometimes feel disappointed in themselves. It was an internal standard, not some external one they had broken:

Well, it's probably because I'm a perfectionist. Everything should be done well. I plan things first and that's how I strive for quality work. It may be inside your own head. (Y3)

When the interviewees were asked how they cope with failure, a recurring theme in the stories was that the gracious attitude of the work community and co-reflection was crucial. Younger workers explained that especially older workers supported them when they felt disappointment. Older workers repeatedly explained that they seek to convince younger workers that they need not be *superhuman* and they are allowed to be *inadequate* or *stupid*. As an example, such a graceful attitude can be seen in these comments:

As you get older and make mistakes, you will somehow be more forgiving of yourself. (A 1)

And then, in this work community, we have raised younger people to understand we do not have to be perfect. That we are not perfect. Mistakes are made by each one of us, that's life. It's part of working life as well as private life to have such challenges. (A6)

Here, older workers, with their own authority, created the gracious atmosphere that strengthened everyone's courage to act despite the negative experiences. By linking the organisational members' constructions of imperfection with aesthetic qualities, older workers' preferences did not focus on the instrumental interests of perfection, a heroic individual who achieves success in attaining a goal (Hatch *et al.*, 2005) but rather on the feeling of imperfection and the tolerance of incompleteness. They understood that mistakes happen even when you are deeply committed to your work. For example, here a younger worker describes the feeling she had when she told other workers about a mistake she made in a client's situation:

I felt this great energy. With others, I noticed that they want to encourage me, and if I'm feeling upset or anxious, they will help me to get rid of that feeling. It immediately became a good experience. And you sort of feel confident, when you see that others support you. (Y4)

This kind of gracious manner described above appeared repeatedly. They described the style of performance with words like reciprocal, equal, friendly and supportive. When new workers arrived at the workplace, it was made clear also to them that mistakes would be resolved and co-reflected together. All this prepared them for the fact that mistakes were not hidden and no one feared losing face in front of others. Everyone dared to talk freely and reflect on things together quickly as the following comments suggest:

Although mistakes and blunders may happen, we are all blowing onto one coal [1]. (A2)

I also think it's good that you dare to speak up in this work community even about those things where you have not succeeded. After all, you would hide mistakes if they were criticised. And then once you've shared that experience, it's easier for someone else to say if he or she has experienced something similar. (A4)

A shared sense of graceful wisdom was also directed at differences. Diverse personalities and work habits were accepted and seen to enrich the work community. As the following story of an older worker suggests, the polite acceptance of diverse personalities and emphasising good qualities is linked to survival in the face of crises:

We each have pros and cons and these should be accepted. Those good sides should be promoted more than the bad ones. That would help in the long run. Since life can sometimes go down in flames and you may not be able to do anything. We should encourage so that you can go on (A)

Joyful wisdom

Having looked at caring and graceful wisdom, here the third aspect of wisdom describes a shared expression of joy and enthusiasm in the work of the interviewees. As one older interviewee described, joy was foremost a “felt meaning” shared with others:

I hope that other workplaces have the same joy and enthusiasm about work as we do. Such a pleasure to work together. (M2)

Joyful wisdom was the glue that bonded the work community together. As [Taylor \(2020, p. 22\)](#) suggests, “we feel connection in a direct sensory way” because “it resonates with our personal aesthetic”. Like caring and graceful wisdom, joyful wisdom was a sense-based knowledge and feeling-driven understanding that came from the ability to hear and see, and an instinct for what is happening around everyone. For example, as this younger worker said, a sudden pleasant moment inspired and created a joyful moment for everyone. The value of joy was learned from the older workers and the younger workers intended to keep valuing it in the future:

I believe it goes the same way as what these elders have taught us. All you have learned from these old ones, yes, I will take it forward, this joy. And we have music playing alongside work. Suddenly you stop and take someone to dance with you. That’s what I’m taking forward. To throw yourself into the moment. Work does not have to be so deadly serious. (Y5)

This kind of joyfulness was linked to the sense of *cheerful* and *polite* humour, which was a theme that came up in several of the stories told by the interviewees.

Everyone here has a sense of humour. Everyone has such a relaxed attitude . . . And then, when you find those suitable people for work are just as humorous, common good is created. (Y2)

And the wings of humour keep you from falling in many hard situations. (A5)

The stories expressed humour repeatedly also as a selection criteria in recruitment. As one of the older workers said, you instinctively notice whether someone has a sense of humour or not. And you need to have a sense of humour if you want to be hired by the organisation:

We have had temporary workers who for some reason have left of their own free will, those who do not have a sense of humour.

It seems to me that here no one manipulates negativity in a way. That they have then gone elsewhere, those who keep their mouthpieces down in every meeting, or who find the negative side in every case.

Negative attitudes were set on the opposite side to humour. More than in other forms of wisdom, humour was also seen as a personal feature that is more difficult to teach. However, joy can be learned and conveyed to others:

Let’s make it a good day from the beginning. I bring joy to my co-workers, and it is agreed that we will have a good day today. So, everyone has a good day and the work goes well. (A2)

Conclusion and discussion

In this study, to outline an aesthetic perspective on ageing, I interviewed workers who work in municipal home care services and sheltered accommodation designed for older people. Based on this empirical study, I showed how workers construct ideas of skill related to ageing, and how the wisdom of older workers is valued and transformed into practices in intergenerational interaction. By doing so, this study contributes suggestions to the debate on ageing, which has focused on the benefit of older employees at work. I provided an example in which skills developed with age are positioned not as a challenge but rather as a benefit for the entire work community.

In unpacking the understanding of the value of older workers in working life, I draw upon the notion of the meanings given to the wisdom of the elderly. The analysis identified three characteristics of ageing wisdom relying on an aesthetic approach: caring, graceful and joyful wisdom. Each describes wisdom from a slightly different perspective but also supports the other as they all contain a focused sensitivity. The findings are consistent with the notion that older workers possess a high level of emotional capital (Peterson and Piker, 2005) and prioritise emotional-related goals (Truxillo *et al.*, 2014). The aesthetic approach expands this viewpoint further to consider a philosophical rather than psychological perspective on the skills of older workers in which emotions and feelings are not rationalised and controlled judgements about experiences. Through this case study, I suggest that the wisdom of older workers was also based on subjective perceptions and intuitive feelings at the moment when something happens (e.g. Harding, 2002; Koivunen, 2009; Springborg, 2010; Strati, 1999) actualised in a human style of performance and focused presence. As Gherardi and Rodeschini (2016, p. 270) suggest in their ethnographic study in a nursing home, practices defined as “ways of doing things together” focus on the knowledge deriving from the senses.

The findings illustrate how the authority of older workers made visible historical awareness emerged in caring wisdom, co-reflection emerged in graceful wisdom and the commonly shared expression emerged in joyful wisdom and thereby enhanced the aesthetic skills of younger employees and broadened their perspectives on working life. It took the shape of a social process that inspired others and was inspired by others. I argue that if an organisation recognises that the experience of a long life and the wisdom of older workers may benefit the whole organisation, there is also space for them to broaden the perspectives of younger workers in regard to working life. When older workers are aesthetic experts who can track aesthetic value (Lopes, 2015, p. 235), they transmit the meanings and style of being and doing and even an ideology that goes beyond the rational and systemic (Hancock, 2005, p. 31). The focus is on a normativity based on subjective liking, enjoyment and the sensory forms of quality (Railton, 2000, p. 20) as an alternative to technical and cognitively constructed skills independent of the subject’s experience, feelings and emotions. At the same time, authority carries responsibility as you have a power to transmit your own values and attitudes to others.

This paper has also addressed that the wisdom of older employees can be transformed into an aesthetic force that bonds older and younger workers together. The results here oppose those studies which have shown that there is conflict and negative interaction between younger and older workers in working life (e.g. Ho and Yeung, 2020). Further, the findings are consistent with the notion that older adults are better at solving interpersonal problems (Blanchard-Fields, 2007). In this case study, this became apparent when the ability of older workers to participate sensitively in the work community as well as to encourage and transform sensory experiences positively brought people together in friendship and respect, strengthening the mutual sympathy, understanding and fellowship. As a result, older and younger workers felt a connection to each other. As Taylor (2020) suggests, “the more that we share a personal aesthetic with someone else, the more connected to them we feel”. It can be assumed that this was a shared culture that all workers had created together over a long time.

The results also highlighted that the values of younger and older may not be completely different at the experience level. In this study, older and younger workers had a mutual agreement about the wisdom that older workers bring with their experience. Since the stories were consistent and the way older people portrayed themselves was also in harmony with the image that younger workers had of them, it seemed that they described a reality that they were living together. The aim was not to give a favourable image of the organisation or a socially desirable picture of the work community but rather to share their positive experiences.

I agree that there are practical limitations in this study, as these aspects of working life are not definitely suitable for all kinds of organisations. Since we constantly read in the media

that people leave work early and even change their career often, especially in the health-care sector, it was rather surprising how content the interviewees were about their work conditions. This organisation may be a true exception because the aesthetic wisdom of the older workers passed through the entire organisation. Further, the interviewees in this study worked in a small organisation situated in a small town and they knew each other well, and, therefore, all the results cannot be generalised across large organisations.

Despite these limitations, the core ideas of this study provide an example of universal human perspectives of wisdom in older workers that can be considered ideal for those who value aesthetic wisdom in organisational life. The findings might open up new ideas on the theoretical development and empirical analysis of ageing as a positive resource for the entire work community and on perspectives that bring together older and younger workers in working life. As a practical conclusion, organisations should consider how to pass such forms of knowledge and skill embodied in older workers to others through education and training (Truxillo *et al.*, 2014). Further, it would be interesting to explore how the relationship between power and value creation in the discussion of the ageing workforce can be understood in the context of social dynamics by using a longitudinal research design. In conclusion, there is a need for studies that focus on the wisdom of older workers, in which skills developed with age are positioned not as a challenge but rather as a benefit for the entire work community. A broader understanding of ageing wisdom can enable the whole organisation to better prepare for future changes as a greater number of older people are retiring and labour shortages are also facing the health-care sector.

Note

1. A Finnish saying that means all working toward the same goal.

References

- Aaltio, I., Salminen, H. and Koponen, S. (2014), "Ageing employees and human resource management evidence of gender-sensitivity? Equality, diversity and inclusion", *An International Journal*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 160-176.
- Aaltio, I., Mills, A.J. and Mills, J.H. (2017), "Introduction: why to study ageing in organizations?", in Aaltio, I., Mills, A.J. and Mills, J. (Eds), *Ageing. Organisations and Management. Constructive Discourse and Critical Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 3-16.
- Ahmas, K. and Koivunen, N. (2017), "Guerilla knitting. An emerging approach to organize a museum project", *Organizational Aesthetics*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 57-79.
- Andrews, M. (1999), "The seductiveness of agelessness", *Ageing and Society*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 301-318.
- Antonacopoulou, E., P. and Taylor, S.S. (2019), *Sensuous Learning for Practical Judgement in Professional Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Assman, J. (2008), "Communicative and cultural memory", in Erll, A. and Nünning, A. (Eds), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin, New York, pp. 109-118.
- Barrett, F.J. (2012), *Yes to the Mess*, Harvard Business Review, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Bathurst, R., Jackson, B. and Statler, M. (2010), "Leading aesthetically in uncertain times", *Leadership*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 311-330.
- Blanchard-Fields, F. (2007), "Everyday problem solving and emotion: an adult developmental perspective", *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 26-31.
- Calo, T. (2008), "Talent management in the era of the aging workforce: the critical role of knowledge transfer", *Public Personnel Management*, Vol. 37 No. 4, pp. 403-416.
- Cascio, M.I., Magnano, P. and Parenti, I. (2017), "The role of emotional intelligence in health care professionals burnout", *International Journal of Healthcare and Medical Sciences*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 8-16.

- Cattell, R.B. (1987), *Intelligence: its Structure, Growth, and Action*, North-Holland, Amsterdam.
- Crook, T.R., Todd, S.Y., Combs, J.G., Woehr, D.J. and Ketchen, D.J. (2011), "Does human capital matter? A meta-analysis of the relationship between human capital and firm performance", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 96, pp. 443-456.
- Fineman, S. (2014), "Age matters", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 35 No. 11, pp. 1719-1723.
- Finnish government report (2017), available at: https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/79799/38_TYPYKE_27042017.pdf.
- Gagliardi, P. (1996), "Exploring the aesthetic side of organizational life", in Clegg, S.R., Hardy, C. and Nord, W.R. (Eds), *Handbook of Organization Studies*, Sage, London, pp. 701-724.
- Gherardi, S. and Rodeschini, G. (2016), "Caring as a collective knowledgeable doing: about concern and being concerned", *Management Learning*, Vol. 47 No. 3, pp. 266-284.
- Hancock, P. (2005), "Uncovering the semiotic in organizational aesthetics", *Organization*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 12-29.
- Hancock, P. and Tyler, M. (2000), "The look of love: gender and the organization of aesthetics", in Hassard, J., Holliday, R. and Willmott, H. (Eds), *Body and Organization*, Sage, London, pp. 108-129.
- Hansen, H., Ropo, A. and Sauer, E. (2007), "Aesthetic leadership", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 18 No. 6, pp. 544-560.
- Harding, N. (2002), "On the manager's body as an aesthetics of control", *Tamara: Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science*, Vol. 2 No. 1, pp. 63-76.
- Hatch, M.J., Koster, M. and Kozminski, A.K. (2005), *The Three Faces of Leadership: Manager, Artist, Priest*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.
- Hertel, G., Thielgen, M., Rauschenbach, C., Grube, A., Roßnagel, C.S. and Krumm, S. (2013), "Age differences in motivation and stress", in Schlick, C., M., Frieling, E. and Wegge, J. (Eds), *Age-Differentiated Work Systems*, Springer, Berlin.
- Ho, H.C.Y. and Yeung, D.Y. (2020), "Conflict between younger and older workers: an identity-based approach", *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 102-125.
- Kanfer, R. and Ackerman, P.L. (2004), "Aging, adult development, and work motivation", *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 440-458.
- Koivunen, N. (2009), "Collective expertise: ways of organizing expert work in collective settings", *Journal of Management and Organization*, Vol. 15 No. 02, pp. 258-276.
- Koster, M. (2003), "Space and silence", in Höpfl, H. and Koster, M. (Eds), *Interpreting the Maternal Organisation*, pp. 224-235.
- Kuepers, W. (2011), "Trans+form: leader and followership as an embodied, emotional and aesthetic practice for creative transformation in organisations", *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 20-40.
- Ladkin, D. (2013), "From perception to flesh: a phenomenological account of the felt experience of leadership", *Leadership*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 320-334.
- Lammintakanen, J. and Kivinen, T. (2012), "Continuing professional development in nursing: does age matter?", *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 34-47.
- Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (2013), *The Constructivist Credo*, Routledge, New York.
- Lopes, D.M. (2015), "Aesthetic experts, guides to value", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 73 No. 3, pp. 235-246.
- Maréchal, G. (2009), "'Flat-pack' philosophy: relativism, realism and the persistence of rhetoric in organization studies", *Ephmera*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 201-218.
- Mitias, M.H. (1988), *What Makes an Experience Aesthetic?*, Königshausen & Neumann, Amsterdam.

- Nickson, D. and Baum, T. (2016), "Young at heart, but what about my body? Age and aesthetic labour in the hospitality and retail industries", in Parry, E. and McCarthy, J. (Eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Age Diversity and Work*, London, pp. 539-559.
- Parry, E. and McCarthy, J. (2017) (Eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Age Diversity and Work*, London, pp. 1-14.
- Peterson, S.J. and Spiker, B. (2005), "Establishing the positive contributory value of older workers: a positive psychology perspective", *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 153-167.
- Pool, I. and Poell, R. (2012), "Nurses' and managers' perceptions of continuing professional development for older and younger nurses: a focus group study", *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, Vol. 50, pp. 34-43.
- Posthuma, R.A. and Campion, M.A. (2009), "Age stereotypes in the workplace: common stereotypes, moderators, and future research directions", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 158-188.
- Railton, P. (2000), "Normative force and normative freedom: Hume and Kant", in Dancy, J. (Eds), *Normativity*, Blackwell Publisher, Oxford, pp. 1-33.
- Rochberg-Halton, E. (1986), *Meaning and Modernity*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Ropo, A., Parviainen, J. and Koivunen, N. (2002), "Aesthetics in leadership from absent bodies to social bodily presence", in Parry, K.W. and Meindl, J.R. (Eds), *Grounding Leadership Theory and Research: Issues, Perspectives, and Methods*, Information Age Pub.
- Sandelands, L.E. and Boudens, C.J. (2000), "Feeling at work", in Fineman S. (Ed.), *Emotions in Organization*, Sage, London.
- Scheuer, C.L. and Mills, A.J. (2017), "Reifying age-related employment problems through the constructions of the 'problematic' older and younger worker", in Aaltio, I., Mills, A.J. and Mills, J.H. (Eds), *Ageing, Organisations and Management, Constructive Discourse and Critical Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 41-63.
- Springborg, C. (2010), "Leadership as art – leaders coming to their senses", *Leadership*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 116-137.
- Strati, A. (1999), *Organization and Aesthetic*, Sage, London.
- Strati, A. (2003), "Knowing in practice: aesthetic understanding and tacit knowledge", in Nicolini, D., Gherardi, S. and Yanow, D. (Eds), *Knowing in Organizations, A Practice-Based Approach*, Routledge, New York, pp. 53-75.
- Taylor, C.C. (1999), *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary*, University of Toronto press, Scholarly Publishing Division, Toronto.
- Taylor, S.S. (2020), "Aesthetics and connection", *Organizational Aesthetics*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 21-27.
- Thomas, R., Hardy, C., Cutcher, L. and Ainsworth, S. (2014), "What's age got to do with it? On the critical analysis of age and organizations", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 35 No. 11, pp. 1569-1584.
- Truxillo, D.M., Cadiz, D.M. and Rineer, J.R. (2014), *The Aging Workforce: Implications for Human Resource Management Research and Practice*, Oxford Handbooks Online, Oxford, New York.
- Williams, C.L. and Connell, C. (2010), "Looking good and sounding right: aesthetic labor and social inequality in the retail industry", *Work and Occupations*, Vol. 3, pp. 349-377.
- Zanoni, P. (2011), "Diversity in the lean automobile factory: doing class through gender, disability and age", *Organization*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 105-127.

Corresponding author

Kristiina Niemi-Kaija can be contacted at: kristiina.niemi-kaija@jyu.fi

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com