

Master discourses on age and our acts of organizing around age and ageing overshadow more complex, non-essentialist enquiries in management and organizational studies. [Hearn and Parkin \(2021\)](#), in their book *Age at work: Ambiguous boundaries of organizations, organizing and ageing*, focus their efforts on deconstructing these master discourses thereby opening the door wider to considering non-essentialist enquiries around age(ing) intersecting with organizations. In the process, they answer [Aaltio et al.'s \(2017\)](#) call for a closer look at the discursive nature of age(ing). Notably, Hearn and Parkin consider the boundary states of age(ing) in society and in organizations, and how such master discourses impact the production and sharing of academic knowledge. They also reflect on an important rigid practice that continues to be reproduced; that is, (gendered/racist/classist/etc.) ageism in organizations and in broader society persists as one of those discriminatory practices that we seem not prepared to undo “just yet”.

Their book is divided into four parts, where they along with Richard Howson and Charlotta Niemistö address many if not most key concepts and, with the material-discursive theoretical framework, investigate age(ing) in society and age(ing) in organizations. They also look at notions surrounding what they call “a living afterlife”, where “the power of the individual is diminished [. . .] major decisions are removed to others [. . .][and] people can feel powerless and superfluous” (p. 128), along with deconstructing death and post-death concepts and experiences. They set the stage for the post-graduate reader in each of the introductory chapters (One, Two, Four and Six) to each of the book’s four parts, talking explicitly to the construction of such concepts as age and ageing, generations and life course, and ageism in its many different facets (Chapter One), along with age systems, societal age regimes, social structure organizing and age hegemony (Chapters Two). The authors also guide the reader from social relations’ contingency to intersectionality scholarship and onto the theme of intersectional age and the accompanying silences about these complex intersections that lead to the exclusion of old(er) individuals in their third age (i.e. those who have active engagement in formal organizations, whether paid or unpaid) or fourth age (i.e. those who are dependent, marginalized and potentially isolated) (Chapters Two, Four and Six). They also consider historicity, power relations, age hegemony and relations to social structures, pulling on various kinds of literature studies on age(ing), where they call out that

to understand age more fully there is a need to push beyond history to historicity, where the latter is not the same as either history or histories [. . .] [historicity is] to move beyond the appearances of truth organized into essentialist categories, the focus is less on identifying “what is” and more on the “why it is” (p. 43).

Their driving question for this book – why is age relevant for organizing and organizations? – goes beyond the basic question of social divisions based on age. The informed reader is invited to look more closely at the making and doing of organizations, in relation to age(ing). The material-discursive framework of how age and ageing operate in and around organizations, and vice versa, is framed within an understanding of how organizations and ways of organizing are co-constructed with age(ing). The historical contexts of organizations and the formation and membership of organizations, such as questions of succession and structuring around age limits and being age-banded, are addressed and examined (Chapter Four). They also look to internal organizational dynamics and examples of organizational talk and silence on questions of age and ageing (Chapter Five). Furthermore, they consider gendered ageism where women, in particular, are singled out in this treatment,



while hinting at genders other than femininity or masculinity/masculinities (Chapters Three and Five).

The heart of the book is in Part Four, where age–organization boundaries are considered extensively. Hearn and Parkin together and individually consider the importance of such boundaries starting with a particular type of autoethnography, the personal narrative (Ellis, 2004). Hearn and Parkin view themselves as the phenomena, writing and sharing stories that focus on their personal lives and academic lives. Each one moves between the analytical and the very personal, sharing their journeys of age and ageing and navigating their respective experiences with/without organizational boundaries. They tell us of the significant challenges and marginalizations that they each face as organizational objects of repression and suppression. A good autoethnography pulls the reader into the big and the small picture, blurring the lines between these pictures, in such a way to ultimately empower and teach the reader (Ellis, 2004). Assuming this role as the reader for this viewpoint article, I was left wondering not about resilience but adaptability and drive to pursue what Hearn and Parkin call unpaid or volunteer work or physical and mental exertion towards achieving existential fulfilment. There was no ready answer as to the question of why age(ing) requires such mistreatments of our (older) colleagues in their various attempts to offer service to the wider community. I also contemplated knowledge acquisition and the acts of sharing said knowledge, and how boundaries are erected to stop individuals in their latter life phases from such knowledge acts, with no one crying out that this is ethically and morally wrong to segregate the (older) academic into such oblivion. These immense structures that divide us and segregate knowledge, to the purview of those of a certain “younger” age, lead me to ask the following question: who decided, in this notion of knowledge creation and dissemination, to exercise such power-relations or to erect such structures that result in only those of a certain age individually and collectively contributing to knowledge?!

Building from these autoethnographies presented in Chapter Seven and “a living afterlife” in Chapter Eight, the next three chapters on death, post-death (or the power of absence) and organizations move the reader away from much of the academic literature’s focus on bio-medicalized ageing and medicalizing death, healthcare and the terror and fear of death. This growing literature, as evidenced via a keyword search on “death” in this journal, which resulted in 59 hits for research paper publications in the past 10 years – more so than age and ageing, the older worker and successful ageing combined – would also benefit from a move away from some of those master discourses. Notably, Hearn and Parkin take the time to deconstruct the fear and terror surrounding death and ultimately the avoidance of death; they ask us to consider that “the language of death is part of organizational life” (p. 151), and they deconstruct notions that some may have about “only” the older old die. The intersections of age and ageing with organizing in these death and post-death power relations result in individuals being marginalized and discriminated against, and in Hearn and Parkin’s words, “conveniently forgotten” (p. 4) and subject to “invisibilizing processes” (p. 22). They also briefly consider organizational “death” pushing aside such euphemisms as reorganization, restructuring or downsizing. Hearn and Parkin also tell us that “post-death is the paradigmatic state of absence and not knowing” (p. 163). It is a state in which both life and post-death come together, where post-death is an actant. While individual post-death is organized and organizing around such structures as medical, legal, funeral industries and the like, we can and should talk more of ageing and ageism at the boundaries of organizing and organizations towards that endpoint that we will all face, a “good death” and thereafter during the power of absence.

My personal experience with this book tells me that, yes, you can read it linearly from beginning to end; however, you can also jump around and choose to live in an asynchronous re-discovery of the theoretical frameworks and the extensive notions that are at play with age(ing) in organizing and organizations. I am making such statements around linearity and

asynchronicity because my relationship with this book is temporal and influenced by life, death and post-death, as I too navigated my flow of gendered age(ing) intersecting with organizations. I suspect many of us who have gone through the COVID-19 pandemic, for the past two years, have also experienced such forces that transcend a specific age and those more nuanced discourses of ageing as we navigate many life challenges, including mental health issues.

Looking more closely at this idea of transcending a specific age, much of the academic literature adheres to the rigid idea that age and ageing are about one growing one year older, for every year one lives. This essentialist stance ignores one keyword – growing – and that life experiences are not necessarily acquired yearly. Time, as [Price et al. \(2017\)](#) state, is indeed connected to age and ageing; however, Indigenous Elders recognize that their “knowledges are not acquired exclusively in a linear way” ([Price et al., 2017](#), p. 23). I suspect that Hearn and Parkin, as academic elders who are “situated in a continuum and process, which is related to age but not exclusively bound by it” ([Price et al., 2017](#), p. 20), would agree with these Indigenous Elders. A lack of fluidity in an understanding of age(ing) translates itself into the academic literature and into the formative contexts that drive cultural and stereotypical understandings of what age(ing) is and is not at the intersection of society and organizations. For example, many of the studies on age(ing) and organizations are focused on areas of linearly managing an ageing workforce, succession and knowledge transfer, motivational issues (e.g. [Cook and Rougette, 2017](#); [Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004](#)), generational career mobility concerns (e.g. [Lyons et al., 2015](#)), bridge employment, early retirement and retirement (e.g. [Kim and Feldman, 2000](#); [van Solinge and Henkens, 2007](#); [Wang and Shultz, 2010](#)). There is also a growing field of organizational academic literature that is focused on “managing” death of (older) individuals (e.g. [Mukherjee and Thomas, 2022](#)). Attempts to address Western stereotypes of “older” employees being less productive or less healthy or “less preferred” (e.g. [Brought et al., 2011](#); [Hedge et al., 2006](#); [Henkens et al., 2008](#)) are much needed but also seem to struggle with fluid understandings of age(ing). Hearn and Parkin’s work tries to untangle some if not most of these essentialist stances by recognizing that age(ing) can be, and is, mediated by not only individuals involved in social relations in organizations but also by the organizations themselves.

Turning explicitly now to death and post-death as a state of being, much of my work follows Foucault’s philosophies but somehow, I missed his constructions around these particular ontologies. He, unfortunately, let me down with respect to death: “there is no longer visible manifestation of power” (p. 164) said he and so the dead escape power. Thankfully, Hearn and Parkin talked about post-death as being rather ambiguous, as it is a state of being that is political and politicized and that it is both “alive” and productive. A realization started to form for me with one of their more straightforward sentences: “our reluctance to honestly examine the experience of aging and dying has increased the harm we inflict on people and denied them the basic comforts they most need” (p. 149). Such a death and post-death existence, where that existential state of being in the land of the dead, even though I am not yet dead or dying and that power of absence brought forth an awakening for me personally and as an academic researcher. That is, death and post-death in and with organizations can be socially and culturally productive. The dead person/the “dead” career/the “dead” organization continues to exercise power over the living, while productive and oppressive power can either propel the living forward into the future or hold that living in limbo, neither moving forward nor backward. We can, in other words, be in a state of being that exists with the living and with the dead, and we can experience post-death in and amongst organizations and in acts of organizing.

Sadly, my growing awareness of new and more fluid meanings to age(ing) intersecting with organizations and organizing, framed with Hearn and Parkin’s help, only came to me much later. In the interim, Wendy Parkin transitioned into the post-death life stage on

September 10th, 2021. While her family, friends and colleagues, notably Jeff Hearn, struggle through this power of absence, I take some personal solace in knowing that Wendy is reachable productively and constructively through her writings, sharing her knowledge and experiences in this what is most likely her last work, helping me and others navigate the complex relations and meanings of age and ageing at work.

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