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Organization 2008; 15; 389
DOI: 10.1177/1350508408088536

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Volume 15(3): 389–405
ISSN 1350–5084
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articles

The Enterprising Self: An Unsuitable Job for an Older Worker

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Abstract. *The discourse of enterprise has permeated contemporary society with significant implications for government, organizations and individuals alike. In particular, enterprise prescribes an ideal identity, that of the 'enterprising self'. This study examines the ability of the older worker to become part of this enterprise culture through the analysis of an Australian government inquiry. Our findings show that certain categories of identity—such as older workers—are unable to don the mantle of enterprise, although they are nonetheless subjected to it, helping to explain why the discourse of enterprise is so persistent and durable.* ***Keywords.*** *discourse; enterprise; identity; older workers; risk*

The discourse of enterprise has permeated contemporary society, with significant implications for business and government alike. It promotes competition, empowers citizens, prioritizes customers, decentralizes authority, and privileges the market (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), thereby supposedly enhancing productivity, quality and innovation. Enterprise also has significant consequences for individuals through 'the construction of new work identities' (du Gay, 1996: 3); that promote 'a particular

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view of what persons are and what they should be allowed to become'. As individuals become more entrepreneurial, not just as small business owners, but also as members of larger organizations, organizational performance will soar—or so it is hoped. While some writers are optimistic about the advantages of enterprise (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Teague, 2005); others have adopted a more critical approach and focused on the negative effects for individual employees and their identities (e.g. du Gay 1996, 1997, 2000, 2004).

Studies have found that enterprise produces its effects through the way it intersects with other identity markers, such as ethnicity and gender (Cohen and Musson, 2000; Essers and Benschop, 2007). So far, however, there has been little study of how enterprise intersects with age-based identity markers and, particularly, old age. We believe the relationship between old age and enterprise to be important for a number of reasons. First, older employees bear the brunt of enterprise-led reforms in that they are often targeted for redundancy (De Bruin and Firkin, 2001). Second, success at aging is judged in relation to the extent to which the processes of aging can be *minimized* (e.g. Trethewey, 2001). Aging is about denial and, as such, age discourse operates differently to ethnicity and gender: 'We do not fight sexism or racism solely by challenging the existence of the categories of sex and race' (Andrews 1999: 302). Third, old age is different to youth insofar as 'there is not much serious discussion about eliminating infancy, adolescence or adulthood from the developmental landscape. It is only old age which comes under the scalpel' (Andrews, 1999: 302). Our study therefore examines the ways in which age and enterprise intersect to construct particular versions or categories of older worker identity; and their implications.

The study contributes to the debate about enterprise in the following ways. First, our findings show that the identity of older workers is formed at the intersection of the discourses of enterprise and age. In this way, the enterprising self is not uniformly accessible but, rather, an inherently aged construction. We thus extend existing work on intersectionality in relation to enterprise to include age. Second, the findings show the complex nature of this intersection: enterprise is not a single monolithic discourse, but is contradictory (Wasson, 2004) and bound up with other discourses such as commodification, consumption and risk (Fairclough, 1991); age, too, is linked to other discourses such as risk and the body. Our study shows that it is the *particular* way in which these discursive strands are interwoven that makes it difficult for older workers to access the enterprising self, providing additional insight into how discourse regulates the way in which individual actors conduct their identity work. Third, the findings show how, even though older workers are unable to access enterprise, they are nonetheless subjected to it. In this way, we help to explain why this discourse is so durable.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. We first provide an overview of the discourse of enterprise. Second, we discuss our study

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and methods. Third, we present our findings. Finally, we discuss the implications and contributions of our study.

The Discourse of Enterprise

The discourse of enterprise is associated with a range of organizational reforms (Fournier and Grey, 1999) designed to rectify problems caused by slow moving bureaucracies and to produce more motivated, self-reliant employees who are willing to accept responsibility and exercise initiative (du Gay, 1996). As a discourse, enterprise denotes entrepreneurial ideals that are not simply related to the small business sector, but also to the widespread changes associated with 'new public management' that extend to local government, universities, hospitals and beyond (Chandler et al., 2002; Doolin, 2002; Thomas and Davies, 2005).

> No longer does 'enterprise' refer simply to the creation of an independent business venture … it refers to the ways in which economic, political, social and personal vitality is considered best achieved by the generalization of a particular conception of the enterprise form to … the conduct of organizations previously seen as non-commercial, to the conduct of government and its agencies and to the conduct of individuals. (du Gay, 2004: 38–39)

Accordingly, while traditionally associated with business, the discourse of enterprise now saturates diverse areas of social life, as public and political institutions are remodelled along commercial, private sector lines (Fairclough, 1995).

Enterprise advocates minimizing state intervention and maximizing individual freedom and choice; but individuals must exercise these privileges in appropriate ways (Rose, 1989). If they do not, the enterprise project becomes unworkable (du Gay, 1997). Enterprise discourse thus prescribes an ideal identity for the governed, that of the 'enterprise self', where individuals become 'entrepreneurs of themselves, shaping their own lives through the choices they make' (Rose, 1989: 226); engaging in self-monitoring and self-reliance (du Gay, 1996) and working on themselves in order to better themselves (Rose, 1989).

This enterprising self is presented as accessible to all. Those stricken with homelessness, joblessness or other disadvantages can—so proponents argue—rise out of their predicament if they are willing to remake themselves as enterprising subjects (Rose, 1989: 116). Those who 'cannot or will not conduct themselves in an appropriately "entrepreneurial" and hence "responsible" manner are excluded or marginalized' (du Gay, 1997: 302). In this way, enterprise regulates individuals either by constructing compliant subjects who take responsibility for their own misfortunes; or by justifying the monitoring, intervention and regulation of those who fail to comply (Rose, 1989).

Despite its supposed accessibility, researchers have argued that the entrepreneurial self is not an identity that everyone can assume. For

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example, small business entrepreneurship has been shown to promote an identity of the entrepreneur as white and male (Ogbor, 2000): women and certain ethnic groups are marginalized by biased practices such as lending by financial institutions (Riding and Swift, 1990). Cohen and Musson's (2000) study shows that the label of entrepreneur had negative, masculine connotations for women, who were only able to identify with it by selectively reinterpreting these aspects in ways that suited their particular contexts. Fenwick (2002) shows how female entrepreneurs recast this identity to downplay its male traits—competitive individualism and aggressive growth—and, instead, associated it with the broader quality of life. Construction of an entrepreneurial identity was even more complex in Essers and Benschops' (2007: 64) study of female entrepreneurs of Moroccan or Turkish origin in The Netherlands. The intersection of gender and culture with enterprise appeared to preclude these women from entrepreneurial activities; yet these women were able to claim an entrepreneurial identity by redefining it, 'disconnecting it from whiteness and maleness'. Research has thus shown that, when the discourse of enterprise intersects with gender and race, it becomes harder for these individuals to access it; but, at the same time, it appears that these barriers can be overcome.

Few studies have explored the intersection of enterprise and age even though age is particularly salient to a discussion of enterprise. First, it is often older workers who lose their jobs as a result of enterprise-led reforms (De Bruin and Firkin, 2001; Strangleman, 2004). Second, older people are encouraged to take up self-employment to compensate for job loss, although evidence suggests that many older workers would prefer to regain full-time employment (Curran and Blackburn, 2001). Third, the entrepreneur is associated with youth. Down and Reveley's (2004) study shows how generational differences were used by individuals to construct entrepreneurial identities: individuals identified with the younger generation of entrepreneurs, while older owner-managers were constructed in a predominantly negative way. Finally, the discourse of age is associated with a 'master cultural narrative' of aging as inevitable decline (Gullette, 1997). It is likely therefore to be interwoven with enterprise in ways that produce highly constraining identity categories for older workers.

For these reasons, it is important to understand how age and enterprise intersect. Therefore, our research questions are: how do age and enterprise intersect to construct particular versions of older worker identity; and what are the implications of these versions of identity?

Case Study and Methods

To answer these questions, we examine an Australian Parliamentary inquiry on 'the social, economic and industrial issues specific to workers over

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45 years of age seeking employment, or establishing a business, following unemployment' (Advertisement for the inquiry, March 1999). The inquiry commenced in March 1999 with a call for written submissions from all interested organizations and individuals, following which a series of public hearings were held throughout Australia, involving a wide range of participants including employer groups, government officials and private individuals. The Committee released its final report in August 2000 with recommendations to address the problems facing older unemployed workers.

The inquiry was selected, first, because it explicitly focused on both age—the older worker—and enterprise—since small business was explicitly considered as a solution to unemployment. Second, enterprise was a feature in that the inquiry was held in the context of wider enterprise reforms. Under a privatized, market-based model of service provision, a government agency—Centrelink—was responsible for registering the unemployed, administering unemployment benefits and referring the eligible unemployed to a range of employment service providers, known collectively as the Job Network. This network consisted of mostly non-government organizations that were publicly funded through government contracts to provide services such as vocational training, case management and assistance with job search.

Data Collection

We downloaded all the texts lodged on the official Parliamentary website (http://www.aph.gov.au/house/Committee/ewr/Owk/index.HTM) between August 1999 and September 2000. They included over 1,000 verbatim and unedited pages of Hansard transcripts of the 20 public hearings held in different parts of the country. Each transcript lists the Committee members (12 Members of Parliament) in attendance, as well as the names of witnesses and the capacity in which they appeared (as a private citizen or a representative of a particular organization). We also analysed the final report—*Age Counts: An Inquiry into Issues Specific to Mature-Age Workers* 2000—containing the Committee's analysis of the evidence and recommendations.

Witnesses were categorized according to their roles within the labour market system as follows: private individuals; Job Network providers (organizations actively involved in assisting the unemployed through vocational employment and training programs, that were receiving Federal Government funding); lobby, community, support and welfare groups (groups that also provided assistance to the unemployed, but which were funded from other sources); government; industry associations and employers; trade unions; professionals and professional bodies; academics and researchers and consultants. Private individuals and Job Network providers accounted for over half the actors participating in the inquiry.

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Data Analysis

Our data analysis focused on tracing how enterprise discourse was used to construct identity categories of older people trying to re-enter work or start small businesses after unemployment. Enterprise discourse is itself interdiscursive, i.e. made up of a variety of interrelated sub-discourses (Fairclough, 1995). Therefore our first stage of analysis was, by moving between the theory and data, to identify four particularly prominent 'sub-discourses': commodification, marketing, consumption and risk.

Commodification refers to the way in which 'social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organized and conceptualized in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption' (Fairclough, 1992: 207). Commodification focuses attention on self-presentation, self-commodification and the mobilization of the body and we therefore coded for references to appearance, products and self-presentation (such as dress, fashion) in order to identify instances of this discourse. *Marketing* represents relationships in terms of selling or marketing products and services, as well as other 'non-commodities' such as ideas, people and organizations (Fairclough, 1995). We therefore coded for references to marketing, advertising, promotion (including self-promotion) and selling.

The discourse of *consumption* privileges the identity of the consumer, which depends on individuals exercising freedom of 'personal choice among a variety of marketed options' (Rose, 1989: 226). Above all, the citizen is represented as a choosing consumer and we coded for this discourse by identifying references to consumers, choice, purchasing and decisions relating to consumption. Finally, the discourse of *risk* is integral to the construction of the enterprising self (Beck, 1992): the responsible exercise of autonomy that comes with enterprise (du Gay, 1997; Rose, 1989) requires the avoidance of risk by behaving rationally, taking appropriate care of the self and exhibiting self-knowledge and self-control (Lupton, 1999). Enterprising subjects are expected to calculate the potential outcomes of the choices they make; project the future consequences of current actions; modify their choices accordingly; and make personal provision for the future to reduce their dependence on broader society. Risk thus involves calculating possible future outcomes in a bid to stabilize them and 'bring the future under control' (Giddens, 1991: 133). In this way, this discourse is an aged construction (Lupton, 1999)—its strong future orientation means that it affects different age groups in different ways (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1998). In relation to risk discourse we coded for references such as safety, security, time periods (e.g. the future, present and past), decision-making and its consequences, calculation of potential outcomes and responsibility.

Having identified instances of these four discourses related to enterprise, our next stage of analysis involved examining how they intersected with age. We therefore coded for all references to age discourse including

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Table 1. Summary of data analysis

Enterprise discourse	How coded	Implications for older worker identity when enterprise intersects with age	Other implications when enterprise intersects with age
Commodification	References to appearance, products, self-presentation	Older workers are 'unattractive products'	Older workers are held accountable for not adequately self-commodifying, despite recognition of the limits to hiding age-related markers
Marketing	References to marketing, advertising, promotion (including self-promotion), selling	Older workers do not know how to sell themselves in the job market	Because they are unattractive products, older workers need extra marketing and promotional efforts by Job Network providers
Consumption	References to consumers, individual choice between products and services, purchasing decisions	Older workers make bad consumer decisions, e.g. they buy small businesses on impulse	Employers are consumers in the job market; they have the right to choose between products; it is reasonable for them to discriminate on the basis of age.
Risk	References to time periods (e.g. future), calculating possible consequences of decisions, safety and security, responsible decision-making	Older workers as entrepreneurs are 'a risky project': they want too much safety and security; they take irresponsible risks	Small business was not a suitable job for older workers

terms such as youth, young, middle-aged, mature, grey, older, aged, as well as numeric indicators of chronological age such as 20-something, 45 and older, etc. We examined in detail instances where the two sets of discourse intersected, with a view to identifying the particular versions of older worker identity that emerged at these intersections. See Table 1 for a summary.

Findings

In this section, we explore two key findings that show that the intersection of enterprise- and age-related discourses constructed older workers as: (a) unattractive products and (b) risky projects, both of which served to restrict the access of the older worker to the enterprising self, while at the same time helping to reproduce enterprise discourse.

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The Older Worker as Product: Old and Unattractive

The intersection of enterprise and age served to construct the older worker as a particular type of product through the way in which the commodification aspect of enterprise was juxtaposed against the physical aspects of age. The implication was that the older worker was an unsuitable employee for prospective employers; and would therefore find it difficult to escape unemployment without the assistance of agencies that made up the privatized enterprise model of contractually-based, government-funded labour market services.

The unemployed were depicted as commodities that needed to be sold to employers and, compared to the younger unemployed, were much harder to place.

> **Mr Cafferty [Witness, JobPower, Job Network Provider]**—It is a lot easier to work with and place younger people than it is the long-term, older unemployed. (Public Hearing, Tuesday 16 November 1999, Melbourne: 725)

Older workers were the opposite of what employers wanted, i.e. younger faces that would associate their organizations with dynamism and change.

> **Mr Duncan [Witness, Association of Independent Retirees, Lobby group]**—[T]here is an image bias … and an incorrect perception of the older worker by society generally and by employers specifically. The image bias is of the supposed need for young looking, vibrant, trendy, upwardly mobile workers … business has to look as though it is young and going somewhere, otherwise the employers feel that the business is not being presented in the right way to the public. There is also a perception by them that the end user of the product or service expects this image … . (Public Hearing, Thursday, 28 October 1999, Melbourne: 637–638)

In the absence of any more substantial indicators of change, youthful employees signified organizational change.

> **Mr Meddows-Taylor [Witness, Drake Management Consulting, Private consulting firm]**—[There is a] very real problem of having CEOS under pressure for visible signs of a turnaround. Often a turnaround is about more nebulous things like culture and business performance, which take a while to come in. So if on day 2 a new CEO can say, 'Look at my fresh new young team here, capturing windows of opportunity', it is a very tempting strategy. (Public Hearing, Tuesday, 16 November 1999, Melbourne: 687)

Older workers, in contrast, were a reminder of the past and, had to take responsibility for ridding themselves of this association. Service providers could help, but considerable work was required, particularly in relation to appearance: the display of visible, physical markers of aging—having an old face or grey hair, as well as the way in which older workers dressed and presented themselves—decreased their prospective value in the labour market. Older workers were criticized for failing to attend to their appearance and self-presentation and thus inhibiting their ability to promote themselves in the labour market.

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> **Mrs McCabe [Witness, Jobseeking Over Forty Association, Lobby and support group]**—If you have been a public servant for 30 years and you still wear a cardigan or safari suit and sandals you have to change. If you have got an out-of-date hairstyle you have to change and get a No. 2 haircut. Honestly, I have got really good at dealing with men who have got out-of-date hairstyles … You want to be part of the mainstream and you must look it. The ladies wearing the wrong colours, wearing navy stockings with suits or whatever is not currently fashionable or wearing the wrong colour lipstick have to adjust. (Public Hearing, Wednesday 8 September 1999, Melbourne: 163)

In sum, bodily appearance was cast as a *tabula* on which inscriptions of age were written and read. It included not only physical signs of aging but also self-presentation and demeanour. Older workers were at once made responsible for their reinvention as younger selves; and criticized for their lack of competence at helping themselves in these activities of self-commodification and self-promotion.

This version of older worker identity—as unattractive products—had two further implications for related identities: employers and labour market service providers. In employing older workers, employers were constructed as potential consumers—with the right to free choice in the labour market, including their preference for younger employees:

> **Mr Maher [Witness, Australian Education Union, Trade Union]**—Many employers simply prefer younger employees. (Public Hearing, Wednesday 9 February 2000, Newcastle: 956)

Consumer choice was used to explain the failure to place older workers and to justify employer prejudice against older workers. Accordingly, age prejudice was reconstructed as 'differentiation'—a reasonable consumer preference on the part of employers:

> **Mr Howard [Witness, Private individual]—**I think we take the word 'discriminate' too literally, or we take the wrong definition of it at times. The definition that I have is that to discriminate is to make a clear distinction or to differentiate rather than the secondary definition of discriminate which is to act on the basis of prejudice … The irony is that central to the capitalist, free enterprise, deregulated system and approach which otherwise impacts so heavily on our lives is that practice of marketing, and marketing is everything about responding to needs. This is only achieved through differentiation. The reality, of course, is that governments and others do differentiate. (Public Hearing, Tuesday 16 November 1999, Melbourne: 716)

In this excerpt, the speaker establishes alternative definitions of discrimination and a hierarchy of meanings: discrimination as differentiation is asserted as the primary meaning. An association is then constructed between differentiation and marketing, with the speaker arguing that marketing rests on differentiation and, further, marketing is central to society.

Thus differentiation (discrimination) is associated with individuals (employers) exercising consumer choice; while marketing becomes necessary to ensure that they have free choice. Such a construction

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depicts discrimination as a natural by-product of enterprise: employers discriminating against older employees were represented as exercising natural and necessary choices between alternatives. Age discrimination in employment was thus depoliticized as freedom and choice assume foundational status as both a primary social right and a remedy for social problems.

The construction of older workers as unattractive products also had implications for the organizations contracted by government to provide labour market services to the unemployed. They were the marketers of products, who had to influence employers' choices as consumers by making them more aware of the hidden benefits of older workers.

> **Mr Richardson [Witness, Mission Australia, Job Network Provider]**—I do not think to this point we have educated employers about the over-45s as a particular group … Generally, once employers have tried the product, if you like, they will come back. (Public Hearing, Thursday 15 July 1999 Sydney: 87)

To be marketed to the consumer effectively, older workers—as unattractive products—needed the help of the service provider.

Better marketing and promotion were the solution to older workers' unemployment: one of the most repeated remedies was the introduction of a major government-funded advertising and educational campaign to promote the benefits of older workers to employers. The Committee's first recommendation was for 'a sustained national strategy and campaign targeting employers, to promote the benefits of maturity and age-balance in the workforce' *(Recommendation 1, Age Counts,* 2000: xvi*)*. In this way, the construction of older workers as unattractive products coupled with the dominance of consumer choice depoliticized age discrimination and reinforced the enterprise system, particularly the role of service providers. Unattractive products do not sell themselves, thus the Job Networ*k* was needed to market and promote such products to reluctant employers.

The Older Worker as Entrepreneur: A Risky Project

The intersection of enterprise and age served to construct the older worker as a particular type of entrepreneur through the way in which enterprise—as related to small business—age, and risk were juxtaposed against each other. The implication of this particular version of identity was that older workers were unlikely to be successful entrepreneurs; and therefore should be discouraged from attempting it. Small business was too high risk for older workers to undertake, as indicated by the title of the final chapter of the Committee's report: *Establishing a Small Business—A High Risk Option*.

The inquiry promoted small business ownership as a way out of unemployment. This identity resonates with the enterprising self and its emphasis on self-reliance, encouraging unemployed workers to adopt an entrepreneurial approach to their own careers, as well as promoting

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self-employment and the growth of enterprise more generally through small business ownership. However, this positive representation of the unemployed as potential entrepreneur underwent substantial change when it was combined with discourses related to risk and age: while the younger employed were constructed as entrepreneurial material, their older counterparts were constructed as unsuccessful and unsuitable entrepreneurs.

This contradiction between promoting small business ownership to unemployed workers, at the same time as discouraging older workers from undertaking it, was discursively accomplished in a series of inter-related moves: first, splitting entrepreneurial identities into two sub-identities—those who started small business and those who bought established businesses; second, providing accounts of small business success and failure in psychological terms that privileged youth and excluded older workers; third, privileging small business start-ups over small business purchases; and, finally, associating older workers with the less attractive version of small business ownership—purchasing existing businesses.

First, consistent with the enterprise culture, small business ownership was represented in a positive way, and lauded as a potential means of both economic regeneration and upward mobility for disadvantaged groups excluded from mainstream employment.

> **Dr Leech [Witness, Mission Australia, Job Network Provider]**—Small business … [is] essential to the generation of new jobs in Australia. They have been described as the backbone of the nation's economy. They provide a platform for distribution of wealth and opportunity. Micro businesses act as a source of employment for groups within the community who traditionally encounter inequity. (Public Hearing, Thursday 15 July 1999, Sydney: 77)

Small business success stories were regularly used to lighten discussion of chronic mass unemployment or other negative topics such as downsizing and cutbacks in public spending.

> **Ms Gambaro [Committee]**—I might end on this light note. One of the businesses that is a raging success is that of a woman who founded a business called 'Zero Gravity Bras' for more well-endowed women who needed more support. The business is a roaring success. Here is an example of someone who is doing very well. These schemes—you talked about birthday parties—are just fantastic. (Public Hearing, Wednesday 14 July 1999, Sydney: 19–20)

This example portrays an enterprise ideal that could be pursued by disadvantaged groups.

Second, the ideal of small business was accompanied by an acknowledgement that it had a high chance of failure. Reasons that differentiated success from failure were regularly attributed to aspects of individuals' personalities, rather than the vulnerability and dependence of small business within wider economic structures. Successful small business ownership was associated with willingness to innovate, energy and, particularly,

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optimism—personal attributes associated with youth. Even behavioural skills, such as marketing and finance skills, were converted into personality traits like introversion and extroversion:

> **Mr Sawford [Committee]**—It seems to me that a lot of people who get into small business do not have the next two skills which are marketing—where you have to be an extrovert—and then the introverted skill of being able to finance the thing properly. (Public Hearing, Thursday 15 July 1999, Sydney: 84)

These personality traits were associated with the youthful unemployed, not their older counterparts:

> **Mr Sawford [Committee]**—The young are always optimistic because the majority of your life is in front of you.
>
> **Ms Williams [Witness, Private individual]**—Yes.
>
> **Mr Sawford**—When you are 45-plus, you are past the halfway mark. (Public Hearing, Thursday 16 Sept 1999, Adelaide: 432–33)

Older workers were thus constructed as unlikely small business owners because of age-related characteristics such as pessimism, and multiple commitments requiring time and energy.

> **Mr Sawford [Committee]**—Small business is very difficult. How many people in that mature age cohort, as a percentage, are suitable for having an idea, a service, a product or a beginning point? (Public Hearing, Thursday 15 July 1999, Sydney: 84)

Third, entrepreneurial identities concerning who might engage in small business ownership were divided into two sub-identities: those who initiated a small business—who were 'proper' entrepreneurs—and those who bought an established business, who were in some way inferior. The majority of the success stories of small business belonged to the first identity—small business start-ups.

Fourth, older workers were more likely to be assigned to the sub-identity of small business purchasers—those who bought an established business. An example of an older worker using their redundancy package to purchase a franchise was regularly used by participants and Committee members. It contributed to the construction of an identity for older workers who, rather than being real entrepreneurs, were simply 'buying themselves a job', and in doing so, making an inappropriate purchasing or consumption decision:

> **Mr Powers [Witness, GROW Employment Council, Job Network Provider]**—Anecdotal information suggests that many older unemployed people attempt to buy themselves a job by investing their savings and/or superannuation payouts in purchasing a business franchise. While such entrepreneurial ventures can be a success, there are many stories of people who enter into these things with naïve attitudes and a lack of skill. (Public Hearing, Thursday 15 July 1999, Sydney: 104)

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This negative construction of older workers involved the complex juxtaposition of risk and security. In buying established businesses, older workers were simultaneously criticized for their attachment to security (associated with the past) and their engagement in high risk behaviour. Established businesses like franchises were represented as more tangible and certain and, as a result, more attractive to older workers with their greater need for security.

Yet, at the same time, older workers who did buy businesses were criticized for their high risk behaviour in purchasing them, and were depicted as gambling with large amounts of money.

> **Mr Salkeld [Witness, South East Regional Training and Enterprise Centre, Job Network Provider]**—There is often a desire to use retrenchment packages to buy a job. This usually takes the form of purchasing a small business. It never ceases to amaze me that, were I to suggest to a person that they place a $20,000 bet on an even-money favourite in the fourth race at Randwick, they would dismiss me with disdain. However, I regularly see the result of people who have invested their superannuation or redundancy packages, often totalling more than $20,000, on so-called business opportunities without having conducted adequate research or obtained appropriate business advice. (Public Hearing, Thursday 25 November 1999, Canberra: 870)

Older workers were constructed as buying small businesses on impulse as a result of their desperation to find work. They made flawed decisions because they lacked the necessary skills, failed to access the necessary information and assistance, did not have an adequate understanding of their own capacities, and neglected to calculate the risks and consequences of small business failure.

> **Ms Gambaro [Committee]**—I want to ask about the franchising industry. I have seen a number of people who have become redundant rush out to the nearest franchise … with $400,000 or $200,000. They had been retrenched and they wanted to buy a business. They rush out there and invest in an ice cream shop, for example, or something, with no experience. (Public Hearing, Wednesday 8 September 1999, Melbourne: 162)

In sum, the contradiction of promoting small business while discouraging older workers from participating in it was accomplished through a series of discursive manoeuvres. Factors contributing to small business success and failure were reduced to aspects of personality which converged with the construction of age identities. In this way, older workers were constructed as unsuitable for small business ownership. In addition, small business identities were split into two sub-identities that were hierarchically organized: small business starters were considered superior to small business purchasers. Older workers were constructed most often as the latter; as trying to buy themselves a job. Moreover their purchase of small business was criticized as being *both* too low risk (attachment to security) and too high risk (gambling away their redundancy packages). Thus the appeal of security coexisted with reckless behaviour as older workers risked their

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financial future to buy themselves a job. Risk discourse is oriented towards the future, specifically, the potential consequences of current actions and choices; but older workers' associations with the past were considered to impair their ability to adequately calculate risk decisions. They were constructed as yearning for security when it was no longer available in ways that prevented their re-invention as entrepreneurs.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our findings show that the enterprising self is an inherently aged construction and, therefore, not equally accessible to all age groups of workers because of the way in which enterprise and age intersect to produce two versions of identity for the older worker. The first version of identity constructed for older workers was that of an unattractive product. Our study shows how the age-related appearance of older workers was depicted as a key reason why they remained unemployed. Western societies have a long history of cultural ambivalence towards the aged, often viewing aging as a form of bodily betrayal (Warren, 1998) where the aging body is seen a 'cultural icon of decline and helplessness' (Tulle-Winton, 1999: 297). Industries have emerged to target this 'cultural dread of aging' (Minkler, 1991: 88), as the management of the body through technologies of self-presentation has become a 'normal part of post-traditional social environments' (Giddens, 1991: 178).

Older workers were, accordingly, urged to act upon their appearance, as a result of which age became a pathology—it had to be disguised and combated through various technologies of the self. But there are physical limits to which age-related markers can be erased. Since older workers are constrained in the extent to which their 'body planning' (Giddens, 1991) is likely to succeed, their access to the enterprising self is similarly restricted. Despite the futility of such an undertaking, older workers were still held responsible for achieving their own reinvention through self-presentation and self-commodification. Their failure to do so legitimated the need for the service providers within the larger enterprise system: by constructing older workers as unattractive products—and by emphasizing the right of employers as consumers to choose who they wanted to employ—service providers were essential if older workers were to have any hope of finding jobs. Hence, the broader discourse of enterprise was reproduced at the same time as older workers were denied access to it.

The second version of identity was that of a risky project: when it came to small business ownership, the older worker could not get it right—they were either too low risk or too high risk. The intersection of discourses of age and risk constructed older workers as reckless small business owners, attempting to 'buy themselves a job' through the purchase of existing small business. The construction of this identity involved multiple contradictions: promoting the small business ideal, while discouraging older workers from engaging in it; and blaming the older worker for being too

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secure (in wanting an existing business) *and* too risky (in using savings or redundancy compensation to buy it). Thus while small business ownership was still considered an avenue out of unemployment for younger people; it was deemed unsuitable for older workers, despite empirical evidence that suggests that small business run by older people have better survival rates (e.g. Curran and Blackburn, 2001). By constructing older workers as buying businesses on impulse and not adequately calculating the risks arising from that choice, their failure could be attributed to their own flawed decision-making processes, rather than anything inherently wrong with the concept of small business ownership. So, once again, the broader discourse of enterprise survived unscathed: it remained an effective solution to the problem of unemployment; just not for older workers.

Our study clearly shows how the intersection of these discourses constructed particular versions of identity for the older worker that constrained their access to the enterprising self: not only were they not enterprising enough to secure new employment; they were not enterprising enough to start up a new business either. Enterprise, on the other hand, was not challenged; nor did the Committee's report invoke other discourses that might have been less disadvantageous to the older worker. Our study thus paints a negative picture for those subjected to the intersection of age and enterprise—both in the way in which categories of identity are constructed that appear to offer little scope for agency (c.f. Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004); as well as the policy recommendations that are likely to follow (c.f. Ainsworth and Hardy, 2007). Our study focuses on how *categories* of identity (or subject positions) are constructed by these discourses: more research is needed to see how individual older workers engage with these categories and whether they are able to resist them in ways that allow them to access the enterprising self. Other studies have found individuals not normally associated with enterprise are able to exploit the space and contradictions in the intersections between enterprise and gender/ethnicity and, as a result, still access the enterprising self (e.g. Bruni et al., 2004). However, it appears that the discourse of old age involves different dynamics than gender or ethnicity and, given that age is one version of identity with which most of us will be forced to engage at some point, there is much more to learn about the implications for those subjected to it.

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