Foreword

It is an honour and a pleasure to accept Ellie Berger's invitation to provide a foreword for *Ageism at Work: Deconstructing Age and Gender in the Discriminating Labour Market*. Based on Ellie's extensive career (far from ended), this book draws on and synthesizes her findings and theorizing in the broad and complex areas noted in the title. Unlike so many scholars, including myself, Ellie has pursued research in the same, albeit broad area over her career. The book shows the progression of her thinking, as one project after another (beginning with her master's thesis) has raised new questions, while trying to answer earlier questions. The chapters take us from project to project, but they do more than that. She masterfully brings everything together in a unified and highly nuanced work of scholarship. The result is a comprehensive sociological investigation of ageism in the Canadian marketplace and workplace.

The first of seven chapters sets the stage with a brief history of changes in the formal definition of "older worker" and the developments of laws forbidding age discrimination in employment in Canadian legislation as well as legislation at the provincial level. These changes began in the 1980s and continued until 2012, when amendments to the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Canada Labour Code eliminated mandatory retirement in federally regulated workplaces. Yet, Berger notes, some provincial jurisdictions continue to allow employers to use mandatory retirement if it is related to the company retirement or pension plans. This chapter also presents evidence of changing attitudes and practices of firm owners and older workers concerning age of retirement. Also important in setting the stage for the accounts of her own research is her overview of changing values and attitudes of workers and employers, as captured in various surveys.

The introductory chapter then turns to ageism in general and in the labour market. She grounds this discussion in international writings

about ageism but then turns to the very few Canadian research reports (including my own) on this topic. Berger is careful to distinguish between employers' attitudes and their practices, to show how the existing international literature links these, and how employers' attitudes are consequential for such things as variability by age in job training opportunities. Older workers in Canada receive fewer training opportunities than younger workers, but nevertheless have a lower rate of job turnover. Ageism in employment, Berger argues, is highly gendered to the disadvantage of women; and workplace ageism, she notes, has more than economic consequences as it can also lead to adverse health effects.

Berger next introduces the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective that has guided her research career and her interpretations of data. Drawing on the major theorists in this tradition, she provides a concise overview of symbolic interactionism, with particular attention to the importance of stigma, identity, and impression management in interactionist thought. Moreover, Berger does not fall into the trap of considering symbolic interactionism to be suitable only for guidance in qualitative fieldwork, the interpretation of qualitative data, and applications at the micro level of analysis. Commendably, in the chapters that follow, she ventures well beyond the micro or social-psychological level as this book is very much about ageism in the workplace and the job market, as seen from the employee and employer perspective. Such symbolic interactionist concepts as identity and career (in both cases, both "objective" and "subjective") provide a useful foundation for the subsequent empirical analyses. Berger executes these analyses with great clarity, making the book a joy to read.

The remainder of [chapter 1](#) provides a brief overview of the four studies, which are pursued in the following five chapters. [Chapter 2](#) explores employer attitudes towards older workers using data from a national survey of 559 Canadian private-sector companies. The survey was conducted by the Institute for Human Development, Life Course and Aging at the University of Toronto in partnership with One Voice, the Canadian Seniors Network and funded by Human Resources Development Canada.

The remaining chapters draw on three of Berger's qualitative research studies. [Chapters 3–5](#) draw on her own interviews with unemployed older workers and a later follow-up survey with many of these respondents. Study #2 used semi-structured interviews with thirty unemployed males and females aged forty-five to sixty-five, as well as participant observation in three older worker programs (funded by Human Resources Development Canada) in the Toronto area. From this study, Berger raises four research questions that are addressed in the book: What are older

displaced workers' perceptions of the nature and existence of ageism in the job search process? How do gender and age relations structure the experience of searching for employment? What are the psychosocial consequences for older individuals who perceive they have experienced ageism in their job-seeking? And, do they develop specific age management techniques that they feel help them in the job search process? The third study is longitudinal, in that Berger goes back to some of the respondents in the second study to assess their experiences and degree of success in the job search. This study occurred three to six years after her initial interviews.

The fourth and last study is based on semi-structured interviews with twenty-six owners, human resources professionals, directors or managers of companies in North Bay and Toronto, Ontario. [Chapter 6](#) focuses on employers' attitudes towards older workers and the extent to which age of applicant guides their hiring decisions, how the elimination of mandatory retirement in Ontario has influenced their attitudes towards older workers, and how employers' attitudes are related to older workers' perceptions. The companies varied by size, and she investigates the extent to which size matters. Gender of the respondents is also considered in the analyses. The book concludes with an integrative chapter, *Reflections on Ageism at Work: Conclusions and Implications*.

I will resist spoiling the reader's enjoyment by not summarizing Berger's results. Suffice it to say, the strength of the book comes from several features. The theoretical grounding in the very clearly explained perspective of symbolic interactionism is one. The respondent follow-up is another, providing a longitudinal perspective. Attention to gender differences in the experiences and identities of unemployed workers and of managers, who often do have negative attitudes towards older job applicants, runs through the book. Berger's conceptual model is clear and an asset to the reader's understanding of causal pathways. And a concluding chapter brings her findings and interpretations all together and suggests directions for future research.

As a result, this book will be not only useful, but a pleasure to read for several audiences, including bureaucrats who design or run older worker and unemployed worker programs, managers, older workers and job seekers, and younger workers for whom a realistic view of ageism in the occupational realm will be useful. In the academic realm, the book *Ageism at Work* should be read by professors in sociology and management who deal with workers in their research and in their teaching. Although the book is complex, it is highly readable and is thus suited not only for graduate students in these areas but as a monograph for upper-level undergraduates. In addition, this book presents a valuable introduction of

the symbolic interactionist perspective and would be very useful in social psychology or social theory courses.

In summary, Professor Berger's well-crafted monograph provides an integrated review of Canadian research on age and work, as well as a beautiful application and demonstration of the usefulness of the symbolic interactionist perspective. Although the book is aimed at Canadian audiences, it is a valuable resource for aging and work scholars and those interested in an example of how the symbolic interactionist perspective works, wherever they may be.

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