



# Older Jobseekers' Temporal Identity Work: Relating to Past, Present, and Future<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines how older unemployed people cope with unemployment through temporal identity work. By temporal identity work, we refer to identity work that takes place at junctions between past, present, and future working lives and which relates to these tenses as a part of identity construction. The paper is based on 30 semi-structured interviews with jobseekers aged 50+ living in a region that has undergone deindustrialization and suffers from high unemployment rates. In the interview material, we identified three main types of identity work: Relying on the past, renewing oneself, and tweaking one's working identity. This article identifies 'respectably unemployed' as the cultural construction in relation to which identity work is done in a society that values paid work highly. The paper contributes to the literature on age and unemployment by enhancing the understanding of older jobseekers' identity work as a contextually embedded temporal process.*

## KEYWORDS

*Age, contextuality / older jobseekers / regionality / temporal identity work / unemployment / working identities*

## Introduction

Being unemployed often has immense consequences for people's everyday lives in terms of economic situation, social relationships, and everyday life practices (e.g., Chan & Stevens 1999; Clasen et al. 1997; Kortteinen & Tuomikoski 1998; Taira 2006). Moreover, the consequences of unemployment and the ways in which unemployment is experienced and dealt with relate to age through, for example, opportunities for finding employment (e.g., Leana & Feldman 1992). In this article, we examine how older jobseekers experience and cope with their unemployment through the framework of identity work, that is, the different types of activities in which people engage to create, present, and sustain a relatively coherent and positive sense of self (Snow & Anderson 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). The article is based on a set of 30 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2016–2017.

We examine identity work as a process that has a temporal meaning (e.g., Ehn 1996, p. 159–163; Ericson & Kjellander 2018): It is simultaneously carried out in relation to

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the past, present, and future (e.g., Roberts 2004). Cutcher et al. (2015) argue that 'temporal work' in the sense of agency toward past, present, and future is strongly linked to identity work. By combining identity work with temporality, we focus on 'temporal identity work' as a way in which people relate to and work with different tenses as a part of their identity construction. Previous literature has identified important continuities in terms of people's identities after facing unemployment. For example, Willot and Griffin (2004) showed how working-class men maintained a breadwinner identity despite long-term unemployment. However, transitions between working and nonworking identities are seldom linear and are characterized by ambiguities, discontinuities, and complexities (Daskalaki & Simosi 2017; Kanji & Cahusac 2015). Prolonged unemployment may result in having to deal with confusion and blurriness (e.g., Beech 2011; Daskalaki & Simosi 2017, p. 4). In such situations, it might be difficult to achieve a sense of stability or coherence across one's working history (Daskalaki & Simosi 2017).

The temporality of identity work is closely connected to age. Previous literature has identified temporal work as a key feature when working with aging (working) identities (Cutcher et al. 2015; Tomlinson & Colgan 2014). It is also closely connected to the temporality of a broader societal context (e.g., Roberts 2004; Nikander 2009). Accordingly, we treat temporality as being related to two intertwined processes: (1) The temporality of aging working identities, and (2) temporality in terms of the structural and cultural changes that take place in the broader societal and regional context. Here, we examine the contextuality of temporal identity work at the interface of structural changes in the labor market, and the relatively persistent meanings related to work and unemployment that are used as resources in identity work.

We ask the following research questions:

1. How do older jobseekers relate to and combine their past, present, and future working situations as a part of their identity work?
2. What kind of meanings related to (un)employment do older jobseekers draw on in their identity work?

Being connected to both age and unemployment, temporality sheds light on some of the central identity dynamics around older people's unemployment that may otherwise remain unobserved. In particular, combining unemployment, age, and temporal identity work helps us understand older people's contextually and temporally embedded experiences around unemployment and how these may be dealt with in and through identity work. Moreover, this paper identifies the 'respectably unemployed' as a cultural construction in relation to which identity work is done in a society that values paid work highly.

## Background and rationale of the paper

This article examines temporal identity work among jobseekers aged 50+. Even though this is by no means a homogeneous group, the age of the participants makes their situation unique in many ways (e.g., Kira & Klehe 2016). We chose to focus on older jobseekers for a number of reasons. According to some research, the negative impacts of unemployment are more drastic for older workers (Kira & Klehe 2016; Lassus et al. 2015). As previous studies have shown, jobseekers aged 50+ encounter a great deal of ageism (Lassus et al. 2015; Macnicol 2006; Pärnänen 2011) that may render the situation even

more challenging. Employment has been estimated as one of the most significant visible areas in which age discrimination occurs (Burchett 2005). In addition to ageism, older jobseekers also often face other specific challenges, such as the impact of unemployment on income, retirement, and access to professional networks that have developed over a long period of time, as well as being unable to find employment on terms that are as satisfying as previously (e.g., Chan & Stevens 1999; Kira & Klehe 2016; Klehe et al. 2012). As such, the experiences of older jobseekers may be qualitatively different from those of younger jobseekers. In fact, previous research has emphasized the importance of examining aging jobseekers' perceptions and experiences during unemployment in addition to their efforts to become re-employed (Lassus et al. 2015).

Identity work is influenced by larger societal and regional economic changes, as well as by the cultural meanings given to work and unemployment (Moser 1998; Taira 2006). We studied the identity work of people who live in Finland in a region that has undergone large structural and economic changes and suffers from high unemployment rates. Digitalization, automatization, and robotization are global phenomena that have implications for industries, organizations, and work practices. One of their trends is a reduced number of jobs, partly because production has moved to countries with lower costs and partly because less human workforce is needed due to automated processes in many areas of industry, also in administration. High-cost countries such as Finland have outsourced production more than countries with lower costs (Eurostat 2017b, International sourcing). In terms of employment rates, Finland resembles other northern and central EU countries, with a rate above 70% (Eurostat 2017a, Employment statistics).

Despite significant structural changes, the cultural meanings of work and unemployment change slowly (e.g., Andersson 2003; Moser 1998). Previous research has seen the cultural meaning of paid work, employment, and livelihood as central to Finnish society (e.g., Alasuutari 1996), but it is also a widely prevailing transnational phenomenon (e.g., Gini 2001). In Taira's study based on autobiographies of unemployed Finns during the 1990s recession, the unemployment narratives reflect the new values that the unemployed turned to outside paid labor (see also Ylistö 2018). Describing alternative ways of living is a strong criticism of the paid labor ethos and challenges the stereotype of a passive, unemployed individual. Yet, at the same time, it might be difficult to completely escape this ethos.

### **Approaching experiences of unemployment through temporal identity work**

Whereas identities are often referred to as dealing with the question of 'who am I', identity work focuses on the different activities that people undertake when forming a conception of themselves (Brown 2015; Snow & Anderson 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). In this article, we propose 'temporal identity work' as one useful way of approaching older people's experiences in and around unemployment.

Identity work takes place at the interface between a personal identity referring to oneself as a unique human being and a number of relevant social identities, meaning the identity of a group or category of people that the person belongs to (Snow & Anderson 1987). These different categories are not separate but intersect with each other, together influencing people's positions, experiences, and identities (e.g., Essers & Benschop



2007). In this article, we are primarily interested in how people deal with a specific social identity, that of being unemployed, in their identity work, and further, how this is intertwined with another identity, that is, age (being over 50). Although older jobseekers' identity work includes many different aspects, we have chosen to focus on age and unemployment. Nevertheless, factors such as gender, class (Willott & Griffin 2004), or (dis)ability (e.g., Riach & Lorretto 2009) are also central, as documented by previous research.

Social identities carry specific, contextually defined meanings that people relate to in their identity work. Being unemployed can be a challenging social identity that could mean, for example, having to deal with identity-related insecurities (Collinson 2003; Moser 1998) or a sense of failure (Luckmann & Berger 1964). Especially in societies that highlight individuals' achievements, unemployment may pose a substantial threat to a person's sense of self (Collinson 2003; Luckmann & Berger 1964). Moreover, the combination of unemployment and older age may pose specific challenges in terms of, for example, ageism. Jobseekers aged 50+ may often have to deal with ageism regardless of their own conceptions of themselves (Lassus et al. 2015; Macnicol 2006; Pärnänen 2011).

Time and temporality are closely related to both unemployment and age. Time is central to unemployment-related identity work in at least two ways. First, losing work challenges the notion of coherence or sameness over time, which is central to identity work (Ericson & Kjellander 2018). Second, it has been suggested that unemployment creates a state of 'in-betweenness', in which past, present, and future working identities are (re)constructed and possible future working identities are explored (Daskalaki & Simosi 2017; see also Taira 2006). Accordingly, people may do identity work in order to entwine their past(s), present(s), and potential future(s) into a relatively coherent self-identity. In other words, people talk about their lives in relation to different and interrelated tenses of time (past, present, and future) combining these in differing ways (e.g., Roberts 2004). For example, what is present can be talked about in relation to the past and/or the future.

Moreover, temporal identity work enables us to inquire how people's personal experiences of the past and present, as well as their future aspirations, are intertwined with broader societal and regional developments. This is especially important in the case of older people who have lived through substantial societal changes during their active working years. Indeed, according to Ezzy (2001), how people make sense of their unemployment is a dynamic between the 'objective' events they have lived, and the way in which these events are interpreted as part of their 'subjective' identities.

## Methodology

### Research Setting: Unemployment in South-East Finland

The local context of this study is the medium-sized (54,000 inhabitants) town of Kotka, on the southern coast of Finland, about 140 km east of Helsinki and about 280 km west of St. Petersburg (Russia). The town was established in 1879 at the mouth of the river Kymi and since then has been a hub for forest industry and engineering. In recent decades, automatization, digitalization, and globalization have not only reduced the number of jobs in industry and logistics, but also in, for instance, banking and insurance

(Saarinen 2002). Kotka hosts several intermediate grade schools, but the Kotka branch of the University of Helsinki was discontinued in 2014 (Town of Kotka website). In November 2016, when our research project began in Kotka, the unemployment rate was 19.3%. Unemployment is higher among the older generations and starts rising at the age of 45. In November 2016, there were approximately twice as many 60 to 64-year-old jobseekers as 40 to 44-year-old jobseekers. (Kaakkois-Suomen ELY-keskus 2016.) In addition, the duration of unemployment is longer in the older age groups (Suomen virallinen tilasto 2018).

## Procedure and participants

We found the study participants through a participatory project aimed at jobseekers aged 50+ in the Kotka area. The interviewees were participants in activities arranged by our research project in collaboration with several organizations and individuals. The activities aimed to enhance the participants' opportunities to find employment (Steel & Koskinen-Koivisto 2019). The participatory project was conducted in the local museum center, which offered discussions with its staff, a stimulating environment, and a suitable-sized conference room.

The participatory project was open to all jobseekers aged 50+ and the local TE office (employment services) sent the email invitation to all 50+ aged jobseekers in the area. The participatory part consisted mostly of group discussions, some of them with officials and employers. All participants were invited, both face-to-face and via email, to be interviewed, and all the participants who volunteered were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in the museum center.

One of two female researchers in their thirties and forties (one of them an author of this article) interviewed each participant. One of the researchers was originally from Kotka and both researchers were actively involved in organizing the participatory meetings and were present at them. These meetings most likely shaped the interviews' discussions to some extent. For example, challenges related to finding employment and what help the interviewee could obtain from the meetings was a central topic. The open-ended questions of the interview guide covered the interviewees' work experience and future plans, the obstacles to re-employment that they experienced, how jobseekers aged 50+ could be helped, and what kind of services they were offered. In the interviews, the detailed discussions on the meetings and practices generated more general discussions on finding employment. The length of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to 2 hours, with the majority lasting about 70 minutes. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber. The material was to be deposited at the Finnish Social Science Data Archive where it would be at the disposal of other researchers. In the text, we refer to the interviewees by pseudonym initials (first name and family name), which we chose from common Finnish names.

In the analysis, we have not divided the interviews into samples according to age, length of unemployment, or any other factor. Nevertheless, here we briefly describe the backgrounds of the interviewees. Their ages varied widely. Of the 30 interviewees, eight were between 50 and 54 years old. The largest group was the 55 to 59-year-olds (15 interviewees). The oldest interviewee was 62 and the 60+ group had seven interviewees. About two-thirds of the interviewees were women (19) and one-third were men (11).



Many interviewees had long working careers and had worked for the same employer for a long time. For them, a good standard of living, clear divisions between different tasks at work, clear hierarchies, and a clear distinction between work and nonwork were a reality (on the boundaries of work and nonwork see, e.g., Götz 2013). The period of unemployment ranged between a few months and several years. Our study was based on interviews with jobseekers with no special needs. Some of them had had physical restrictions in their previous occupations, but all were ready and willing to work.

The interviewees represented different kinds of educational backgrounds. Eight interviewees had a vocational degree, nine had college-level training, three had a degree from a university of applied sciences, and 10 interviewees had a higher academic degree. Many interviewees had versatile work experience and several qualifications. Many had been made redundant for 'production and economic' reasons, for instance, when their employer had merged with another company and many people had been given notice. Moving production to cheaper countries and digitalization were also reasons for the redundancies. In a few cases, the interviewee had resigned because their workload had become impossible to cope with due to the downsizing of staff. The interviewees had worked in administration, commerce, construction, education, engineering, industry, and logistics.

## Analytical approach

Coupland (2007) distinguished between different approaches to identities in interview talk. Whereas the neopositivist approach sees interview talk as objective accounts of reality, the constructionist and poststructuralist approaches acknowledge identities as being fabricated as part of socially produced (power) relations. We draw on the constructionist idea of identity work as concretely taking place in the interview situation in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, yet simultaneously being embedded in and drawing on a variety of relevant contexts beyond the immediate interview situation.

The approach to the interview material could be best described as abductive in the sense that the first reading of the interview material was inductive and the second deductive (e.g., Azungah 2018). The first stage of analysis was exploratory and consisted of Author A carefully reading through the interview material and making notes on its central themes. The focus was, at this stage, particularly on age and the different ways in which it was talked about in relation to unemployment. The preliminary impressions on the material summarizing the central themes were communicated to Author B and a decision was made to analyze the material through the notion of identity work in general and its temporality in particular. The second stage of analysis thus consisted of applying temporal identity work as a framework to the interviews. In practice, this meant that we focused on the instances of the interview transcripts in which the interviewees talked about their working life in relation to the three tenses: The past, present, and future, as well as different combinations of these. The analysis included

1. Identifying the different ways in which the interviewees talk about their past working lives.
2. Identifying the different ways in which the interviewees talked about their present situations and potential future working lives.

3. Identifying the different forms of identity work people engaged in at the junctions between their past, present, and future working lives.
4. Identifying the shared cultural meaning of ‘respectably unemployed’ as an overarching feature of the three types of identity work.

We examined in particular the instances in which the interviewees talked about age, either directly or indirectly. Even though they did not always directly name age, it was often very central in the interview talk, through talk about past decades or different generations. In these cases, we interpreted that the interviewees were talking about age. As identity work is an active process, we focused on what people did when they talked about themselves in relation to their working life. In particular, we focused on identity talk as a process of deploying meaning for the construction of the self (Snow & Anderson 1987). Based on this, we present the three main types of temporal identity work we identified in the data: Relying on the past, renewing oneself, and tweaking one’s working identity. All three forms of identity work are ways of adapting to unemployment, that is, the lack of paid work. We want to emphasize that these are different forms of identity work, and not different types of unemployed people. Several forms of identity work often emerged in the same interview.

## Results

### Relying on the past

We call the first type of identity work central to the interview material ‘relying on the past’. In this type of identity work, the interviewees talked about their present state of unemployment by strongly drawing on their past working lives, occupation, industry, and commerce. Berger (2006) describes a similar process in which previous work roles are maintained even through periods of unemployment. In the occurrence of job loss, the desire to maintain one’s working identity requires identity work (see also Lassus et al. 2015).

Identity work that focuses on the past is closely related to age in the sense that due to their chronological age, jobseekers aged 50+ have long working careers, and have sometimes worked for the same employer for a long time. During their life courses, these jobseekers have also witnessed large societal changes, such as digitalization. The interviewees were positioned, and at times also positioned themselves, as older, for example, through stereotyping. Based on the stereotype of older people clinging to the past (Posthuma & Champion 2009), it is easy to detect relying on one’s past working life in the identity work done in the interviews. However, the interviewees typically talked about this stereotypical clinging to the past on a more general level in the interviews, or applied it to others of the same age rather than to themselves. In his interview, T. L., an engineer who had occupied a top management position in his last job, described relying on the past as follows:

It is, in a way it’s true, that some people our age can understand how much the world has developed in the last 50 years. And why development continues and where it’s going. But some don’t understand that development goes upwards. They think some things from the 70s or 80s are better and that these things need to be repeated or reproduced.

The interviewee described the societal changes and how people might relate to them without explaining in more detail what things people thought were better before. He used a stereotypical notion that his own generation could not cope with new developments, separating himself from the people he talked about and in this way managing to construct a positive identity for himself.

For E. Y., the past was very central in her identity work. She used strong emotional images when she spoke about working life. She said that all her life she had lived next to a paper mill and her father had had a long career in the factory. Long-term employment with the same employer was very central to her idea of a good working life. For instance, she said she was horrified by some colleagues 'who changed jobs as soon as something went wrong at their workplace'. She had served her career in logistics and said her mind still longed to be on the road, but for physical reasons, she was not allowed to drive a car as a full-time occupation. It seemed difficult for her to let go of her previous working identity and to think of new possibilities that could broaden her opportunities to find employment. Age is relevant here in the sense that for E. Y., the example set by her father is likely to be common among 50+ jobseekers. Younger generations are more liable to see the uncertainties of current working life as something prevailing (e.g. Väänänen & Turtiainen 2014).

The interviewees' long working careers sometimes consolidated their commitment to their existing working identities (cf. e.g. Kira & Klehe 2016). In his interview, S. K., a male in his early fifties, illustrated how comprehensive one's working identity can be:

If you are born a bagman [a travelling salesman] – well, maybe it's wrong to say that you are born a bagman – but if you've always done that job, it's really difficult to settle down. At least for me it is.

For most of his career, the interviewee had worked in multi-locational commercial work, and in recent years in leading positions. Whereas many people who need to travel extensively for their work may think traveling is boring and frustrating (Helander 2017), for S. K. traveling was essential to his identity work. He explained the centrality of traveling through his experience of having traveled a great deal for work and as something he had grown accustomed to. His long experience (enabled by age) might have strengthened this conception. According to Helander (2017), movement and traveling is connected to learning processes linked to new environments. For S. K., the enjoyment was in meeting new people and in these interactions. He used colorful language (the term bagman) and humor to emphasize the meaningfulness and temporal continuity of his working identity.

Clinging to past working identities was not the only aspect the interviewees emphasized. Another was highlighting the identity of a 'good worker', based on one's previous working life. This was manifested in the way they talked about their willingness to get up early in the morning and committing themselves to their work, making this an issue of different generations, with the jobseekers aged 50+ being the 'old school', the devoted. I. R., a man with background in manual labor and working as a sales clerk, explained:

It's normal for me to know that work is important. In the morning you get up and go to work and you aspire to do your work as well as possible. And when you always do your best you can't go wrong. One would think that society can't afford to waste my resources.



Some of the interviewees constructed themselves as part of a generation that was willing and able to concentrate on work without the distractions of family life (responsibilities of looking after small children) or indulging oneself in social media like younger people. Ironically, by constructing a positive working identity through generational differences, the interviewees engaged in stereotyping and discriminating against younger generations. In addition to generational differences, some of the interviewees highlighted their own positive attitudes and willingness to work by talking about ‘some other’ unemployed person as lazy and irresponsible.

In sum, in ‘relying on the past’, the interviewees constructed continuities in terms of their (working) identities, while describing disruptions in terms of their past and present lived situations and surrounding circumstances. They discussed the challenging regional economic situation and negative stereotypes related to their age, but often managed to construct a relatively positive identity for themselves by, for example, drawing on a good work ethic. The focus in this type of talk was on seeing their changed economic circumstances as being the cause of their changed situation instead of pondering on different ways of dealing with it.

### **Renewing oneself**

In contrast to relying on the past, people also talked about an uncertain future as an opportunity to develop new skills and renew themselves. Therefore, the second type of identity work that we identified was ‘renewing oneself’. Like relying on the past, this was characterized by substantial disruptions between past working life, present unemployment, and potential future working life. On one level, this can be linked to what Lassus et al. (2015) describe as a discordance between the worker’s personal and working identity. In such cases, unemployment presented an opportunity for change, bringing working identity closer to personal identity.

According to a stereotypical notion, older people are often reluctant and unable to majorly develop working life skills (Posthuma & Campion 2009). However, most of the interviewees were very eager to learn new skills, and at times to also make substantial life changes in order to gain employment. Lifelong learning was discussed both explicitly and implicitly. Acquiring new skills through education or work practices was the basis of the transformation. For instance, one of the interviewees had worked as a laboratory technician for more than 20 years, started studying part time, and passed her matriculation examination. After further obtaining a degree from a university of applied sciences, she had not been able to find work, even though employment prospects had been good when she began her studies. A. N., a metal industry worker for more than 30 years, studied to be a special needs assistant but never worked in this occupation because he found work in the metal industry again. Another example was M. Ö. who, after a long career as a clerk, studied to be a special needs assistant, then worked as a switchboard operator, and was now studying at a university of applied sciences to be a social worker. In addition to this, she had recently acquired the qualifications of a residential adviser. Due to their chronological age, many of the interviewees had been able to complete several fields of education and therefore knew they were able to renew themselves.

For instance, A. N. had several strategies for adapting. Like many others, he had applied for jobs in a large area, and previous migrations inside Finland had helped him

in this. He had applied for work through a temping service, something that was strictly out of the question for some of the interviewees. A. N. highlighted the responsibility for finding a job as being that of the jobseeker him/herself: He had made detailed searches using contacts from his union years, contacting possible workplaces through chief shop stewards. On the other hand, for the temping service, he had deliberately removed his experience as a chief shop steward from his CV. He did not reveal the reason for this, but it is very likely that he did not want to present himself as a worker who was fully aware of his rights and who may be ready to challenge his superiors. On the level of identity, he was very committed to the idea of being one's own man and being personally responsible for finding new work (see also Götz 2013). Luckily for him, his skills were the kind that were currently in demand, and he was one of the few participants who found work during the fieldwork period.

Sometimes renewing oneself is a question of extending one's working identity by reactivating previous skills or education. Some of the interviewees constructed renewing oneself and transforming working life practices as an easy, 'natural' way of coping with life. N. P., a woman with several occupations (one of them that of a teacher), described herself as a 'multipotentialite' and presumed that this was not always appreciated on the job market.

The interviewer responded by saying that this lack of appreciation was in conflict with many job advertisements, which often highlighted the widespread skills required of an applicant. The interviewee continued on the positive effects of renewing oneself:

Yes, I agree [it is conflicting], and yet our type of people have the advantage that we have started, in a way we have always started, the process of learning from the beginning, so we can do it quickly. We can learn things quickly and perceive new situations quickly.

The interviewee linked older age and the repeated experience of starting in a new job to strength.

Another 'reformer by nature' was K. E., who had recently moved back to her old hometown of Kotka, and during the time of the interview was in the process of starting her own care business. She said that she felt like she was in freefall, having just quit short temporary jobs, and that her new company was barely providing a living. She analyzed the values conveyed by school and home. At school, the main thing was to be obedient, and at home a long and stable career in one job was valued over everything else.

My environment was a traditional Kotka home. When you qualified as a nursery school teacher you were supposed to stay in that occupation until you retired. It was like people had this assumption that the post was permanent. But that's history, that kind of narrow thinking.

Her ex-colleagues had questioned her decision to start her own business, but she said she only had one life and needed to see if it was possible to make a living and gain a better quality of life through working independently. K. E. presented entrepreneurship as a voluntary choice, but it should be set against the background of changed working conditions and work environment, which according to her had deteriorated in the last few years.

R. S. was frustrated because he had realized that his skills were outdated: He said that in his previous work his tasks had not been very demanding considering his

education and previous work experience. His own outlook on his situation was that his only chance of finding employment was to first attend some kind of course to acquire new skills but so far, he had been unable to access such a course. In connection to this, his identity work included a time-consuming effort of examining his experiences with TE office services (governmental employment services). For example, he was personally invited to an introductory event for an upcoming course but discovered at the end of the course presentation that he was too old to attend it. In another case, he applied for a course with 30 other jobseekers, and felt he had the basic qualifications for it, but in the end, the course was cancelled due to a lack of suitable applicants. The interviewee interpreted these setbacks as consequences of ageism, and they seemed to have a strong influence on his identity work, draining energy from the process of renewal. His situation can even be seen as tragic: He was determined to reform himself for the benefit of his working identity and economic situation, and to become a tax-payer instead of a benefit receiver, even though on the basis of his age, he could 'legitimately' have just waited for a pension. He felt that he received very little support for his aspirations to find additional education, and that he was a burden to the welfare society.

In this form of identity work, the interviewees related strongly to the future, also building on and expanding their past experiences and existing qualifications and/or skills. This is in line with a 'moral obligation' of being entrepreneurial and moving forward, even if unemployed. 'Good citizens' are constantly able to renew themselves for the use of the labor market (Väänänen & Turtiainen 2014). This also influences what is expected of unemployed people. However, regardless of their endeavors, some of the interviewees described difficulties they faced when trying to be productive citizens within the narrow meaning of a tax-payer.

### **Tweaking one's working identity**

In contrast to the two other types of identity work, 'tweaking one's identity' focuses primarily on the present instead of the past or future. The interviewees did their identity work in order to adapt to their new jobseeker status, but were not willing or did not consider it possible to undergo substantial life changes, which meant no abrupt changes in terms of working identity. Instead, the interviewees took smaller steps in adapting to their new circumstances by, for example, downshifting, doing unpaid work, or focusing on life outside work. For instance, some attained a positive outlook by identifying themselves as 'semi-retired' (see also Berger 2006).

One way of tweaking one's identity was through downshifting. Sometimes the interviewees described downshifting as a necessity caused by age-related issues. For instance, one male interviewee who, for most of his career, had worked in logistics, said he was willing to find a job with less pressure to work long hours in such a physically hard occupation. Before his recent unemployment, he had worked for two and a half years with no proper holidays and under great pressure. Presumably, work with less pressure also meant lower income, which might be more tolerable in older age if one has already secured, for example, an owner-occupied flat or house.

The interviewees who had worked as directors or managers discussed another type of downshifting. They worried about their experiences of employers not trusting their motivation in a less demanding position, even though they were very willing to start



working. In other words, the interviewees described how tweaking their working identity was not always credible to employers, regardless of their own conception of themselves. S. K., a man with a long and successful career in commerce (from a bank clerk to a CEO and Chairman of the Board of a listed company), felt frustrated because he was ready to adapt by downshifting to a sales manager-type position and felt that he would enjoy that kind of work. However, he felt that recruiters did not seem to believe he would stay in a job at that level. At the same time, the only job offer he had received from the TE office was that of a part time telemarketer, which felt like an insult. Another male interviewee with a career in marketing but not at top management level had recently started working as a telemarketer, even though his income was quite low. He had tweaked his working identity by diminishing the meaning of a managerial position and duties, and remaining in marketing.

Several interviewees were interested, and some were also already active in local employment cooperatives. The idea of a cooperative is to offer short-term jobs to job-seekers and make it easier for employers to get short-term temporary work done. The pay for these kinds of short-term jobs is often low, so it could actually be compared to unpaid voluntary work. This highlights the meaning of work for the identity of these job-seekers, who wanted to be more active than simply doing what the TE services expected of them. Doing short-term odd jobs may help someone (a person or a local business) get something small but important done. On the level of identity work, this helped the jobseekers feel useful and respectable. Doing unpaid work is one way of coping with unemployment and maintaining work ability (e.g., Taira 2006, p. 60), and the person doing this work sees themselves as 'unpaid' rather than unemployed (Riach & Loretto 2009). Unpaid work can be unstructured: For example, helping out when relatives or friends need assistance in their everyday lives. Some of the interviewees also took part in organized voluntary work at a church or nongovernmental organization. The interviewees were generally very critical toward work trials and rehabilitative work, because they had seen that it was a way for some employers to acquire free labor. Being forced to work for free or for a minimal allowance (9 euros per day) is not only a financial difficulty but also a serious threat to self-worth, since they felt they had a lot to offer the job market due to their long work experience.

A meaningful pastime in terms of family life, doing sports or having other hobbies, can be an important way of maintaining mental well-being, meaningful everyday life, and the identity of a 'good citizen', despite unemployment. T. L. explained that the need for money was the principal reason he was trying to get a job. He also pointed out that a work community and positive feedback from successful achievements were important to him. He said that if he did not get a job, he would have to think of something else and mentioned organizational activities in order to accomplish 'something bigger'. In line with Jahoda (1982), this can be interpreted as a way of tweaking: Even though income would remain low (compared to a job for his level of education and work experience), being part of a work community and achieving things in the public sphere would support his identity work. O. T. described the meaning of unpaid work as follows:

It was always important to me even when I was working: Money wasn't the only thing I got from working. You have to get something else as well. Friendships, a good work environment, social interaction and other such things, things you can't buy with money.

It was very rare for the interviewees to question the meaning of work. J. V. was an exception. She explained that she had experienced great losses in her early adulthood and consequently had to check her attitude toward work.

For some people, work is the most important thing in their lives. But for me it's never been like that. I have five or six things in my life that are more important than work. - - And I've still been content with my life. Sometimes I read about someone who works 16 hours per day or something like that and I must say I don't get it. I don't understand why they waste their lives like that.

In J. V.'s identity work, studying and learning were central, and in some phases of her life, studying had replaced paid work. In the interview, she contemplated the meaning of studying languages: It had been significant to her personally. Yet, she worried about not having been 'productive' enough and having long periods of study in her CV. J. V. was married and her husband's income was enough for the couple to manage moderately. As such, her material position enabled the reduced importance of work. However, J. V. had come to terms with the fluctuating periods of wage work, unemployment, and using employment subsidies as a way in which to manage her precarious situation.

When tweaking their working identities, the interviewees focused on the present. Central to this type of identity work was the diminishing importance of working identity and the increasing importance of other areas of life. However, the interviewees highlighted ways of keeping themselves busy despite their unemployment. These activities were constructed as useful for the common good, even though not directly economically productive.

## Discussion and conclusion

In the paper, we have looked at how jobseekers aged 50+ do their identity work at the junctions between their past working lives, present unemployment, and potential future working lives. We have examined temporal identity work as a medium in and through which people negotiate a relationship between these three tenses. Our first research question concerned how older jobseekers relate to and combine their past, present, and future working situations as a part of their identity work. We identified three main types of identity work: Relying on the past, renewing oneself, and tweaking one's working identity. The interviewees engaged in two distinct, but intertwined and simultaneous processes related to identity work: Dealing with different time tenses; past, present, future; and relating to the cultural meanings of work and unemployment.

As an answer to our second research question about cultural meanings, the article identifies 'respectable unemployed' as a contextual and historical construction. Our interpretation and one conclusion of this paper is that 'respectability' functions as a solution for the contradictory and often impossible situation between high unemployment caused by drastic regional structural changes and persistent cultural understandings highlighting the centrality of paid work. Our interpretation, inspired by Beverly Skeggs (1997), is that all three forms of identity work are ways of constructing a positive understanding of oneself as a respectable citizen, aiming and willing to contribute to the benefit of the community or society. Work is closely connected to what kind of people



are seen as 'respectable'. In her study of working-class women, Beverly Skeggs (1997) discussed their situation through the notion of 'respectability' or the lack of it. 'Not to be respectable is to have little social value or legitimacy', says Skeggs (1997, p. 3). Similarly, in societies such as that in Finland, which highlight the importance of (paid) work, unemployment may pose a substantial threat to the experienced respectability of people.

### Three types of identity work

The interviewees tackled identity challenges by relating in different ways to what could be seen as being a respectable unemployed person, and this manifested itself somewhat differently in each type of identity work. The notion of the 'respectable unemployed' and the different tenses were intertwined in the interviews. All three tenses were used in each type of identity work, but the forms of identity work differed in their emphasis on specific tenses. In relying on the past, the emphasis was on the past; in renewing oneself, on the future; and in tweaking one's working identity, on the present. Central to relying on the past was the experience of having grown up in times that had a different kind of work ethos. The interviewees highlighted that they had been and still were good workers, conveying more 'traditional' working life values such as diligence, to their future working lives. They talked about themselves as having been good workers in the past, which they would also be in the future if they were only given the chance.

As regards renewing oneself, the interviewees embraced the idea of lifelong learning and development. This type of identity work can be also seen as counter talk to the stereotypical notion of older people being incapable of change, and in this way as also opposing the dismissive attitudes encountered by jobseekers aged 50+. In renewing oneself, the interviewees talked about themselves as someone who was ready to reinvent themselves repeatedly in accordance with the changing requirements of the labor market. They did this through, for example, embracing a societal discourse on lifelong learning (see, e.g., Field & Leicester 2000). There was a strong orientation to the future and willingness to go along with the demands of substantial changes and to adapt to the new requirements of working life. Here, a respectable unemployed person is future oriented, able to leave the past behind, and flexible, ready to constantly develop in accordance with larger societal changes. However, this type of identity work was a mixture of both hopefulness and frustration in the face of the present and the future. Despite their active approach, some of the interviewees described how they were not necessarily given the chance to change their situation.

Tweaking one's identity lay between the two previous types of identity work. Instead of emphasizing the past or orienting toward the future, this type of identity work was grounded in the present. More than the two other forms of identity work, this involves accepting one's current situation and finding viable immediate solutions to it. It is also a way of being a respectable unemployed person, not depending on unemployment benefits but accepting a job with a considerably lower salary or combining precarious contracts with unemployment benefits, although this went against the older ideal of a full-time job and working for a long period of time for one employer. As regards tweaking one's working identity, the interviewees described how they adapted to unemployment through finding meaning and respect outside of or within the margins of paid work.

## Age and regional aspects in identity work

Age and the experiences of age discrimination set the backdrop to the identity work of the research participants, as it was a central aspect to participating in the research in the first place (Author 1 2019). As in the study of McVittie et al. (2008), the interviewees experienced 'age' as a 'natural' explanation for their challenges in finding employment. They shared the view of being left out of recruiting processes in the first stage of applying for a job because of their age, which is visible even in anonymized applications: It is easy to estimate the chronological age of an applicant on the basis of when their education was acquired and the long work experience in their CV. Men and women alike thought that age, combined with locally high unemployment, was the most significant obstacle for both men and women. In the Finnish and Nordic context, the idea of a 'good citizen' includes, and has included, men and women, and women having paid work also have strong historical traditions. This is different from, for example, the UK, where the masculine breadwinner identity has been very central (Willott & Griffin 2004). As mentioned in the Introduction, this paper leaves room for a more focused analysis of gender.

The different types of identity work also have different relations to region and local identity work. In an area of strong structural changes in industry, relying on the past can be expected to be central. In Kotka, the relatively stable, successful industrial decades were behind the uncertainties of the globalized postindustrial times. Although the past can be used as a safe haven, a source of stability and strength, it can also become a constraint in the form of a comprehensive dispute in the need to adjust to new circumstances, to some extent at least. By renewing oneself, the meaning of the local or regional connection diminishes, and one concentrates on the development of the individual on the one hand, and on the numerous possibilities offered when one is not tied to a certain place on the other hand. In tweaking identity work, regional aspects become important, since the future is constructed on local networks (for instance the work cooperative) and strength and meaningfulness are drawn from intimate relationships and self-care (for instance sports), which is at least to some extent dependent on local possibilities.

The identity work of people outside paid work can go in multiple, and between themselves, contradictory directions; on the one hand resisting the hegemonic idea of good citizenship as being entangled with pay, but on the other hand having to relate to it in some way. In these negotiations for self-worth, the cultural understandings around work and unemployment meet people's complex life histories, which are influenced by economic, structural, and regional changes. In other words, identity work was closely entangled with the idea of a positive sense of self. However, our focus was on the process of constructing a positive self-identity rather than examining the 'success' of identity work in terms of the interviewees having managed or not managed to adapt to their situation.

## Limitations and contributions of the study

The paper is based on a qualitative interview study. The chosen approach has some obvious limitations, not least due to the number of the interviews (N = 30). This number of interviews prevented us from making any direct generalizations beyond our sample, and did not allow for distinctions within the sample in terms, for example, differences



between the different age groups. However, the research design did enable us to examine older jobseekers' experiences and identity work in a rather nuanced way.

The recruitment of the interviewees was a process consisting of several steps, and from the beginning it excluded individuals not able or willing to join the meetings of the participatory part which preceded the interviews. When assessing the results of this study, it should be noted that the invitation, which was sent via the TE office, encouraged and activated participants who were willing to adjust to the requirements of re-employment. This is a different stance from that of the participants in the research of Maria Andersson (2003) and Teemu Taira (2006), which was based on written reminiscence. In their research, the participants' willingness to question the emphasized position of paid labor as the basis of being socially acceptable was more pronounced. In our study, seeing unemployment as a positive thing, for instance, liberation from oppressive conditions (Andersen 2009; Ezzy 2001), was very rare. Nevertheless, an overarching aspect in both our material and that of Andersson (2003) and Taira (2006) was the participants' strong aspiration to challenge the stereotypical, stigmatized images of the unemployed. We wish to highlight that one interviewee could engage in one or more types of identity work. The results of this research should not be interpreted as the possibility to divide older jobseekers into groups of people identified with only one type of identity work and to treat them accordingly in employment services. We will elaborate on the practical implications of this study in a separate Policy Brief.

The contribution of the paper is twofold: First, the paper contributes to the understanding of older jobseekers' identity work as a temporal and contextual process embedded both in the life history of the person and in societal and regional developments. As such, temporal identity work can be seen as a potential vehicle for understanding the complex dynamics around time and contextuality in identity work. Second, the paper identifies 'respectably unemployed' as a shared cultural construction in relation to which identity work is done. In a societal context that emphasizes the value of paid work, constructing oneself as a respectably unemployed person could be seen as a way of seeking to maintain a positive identity in a situation in which it is severely questioned.

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A total of 30 interviews of unemployed jobseekers who took part in a participatory research project organized by a [anonymized] project in the town of Kotka, Finland. The interviews are currently owned by the project researchers at the University of Helsinki, and will later be added to the collections of the Finnish Social Science Data Archive.



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