

Older Workers' Evaluations of the Political Goal to Extend Working Life: Discursive Approach to the “Attitude Problem”

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Abstract

Population ageing presents major challenges to the welfare system across the European Union. Consequently, emphasizing delayed retirement age and extended working lives abound in political discussions. Researchers have recognized numerous problems, which make the extended working life a challenging political task. One of these problems are citizens' negative attitudes toward delayed retirement and extended working life. In this paper, we approach this “attitude problem” from the perspective of discursive social psychology and analyze the variation in the way aspirations to extend working lives are evaluated by older workers. The data analyzed in the study consists of interviews where participants between 50 and 65 years of age comment on the political goal to extend working lives. The article sheds light on the “attitude problem” by turning the attention from underlying individual preferences to discursive resources used to undermine the political goal and the situational functions these evaluative practices have.

Keywords

attitude, extended working life, delayed retirement, discursive social psychology, qualitative attitude approach

Non-Technical Summary

Background

All European countries have an increasing number of older citizens, and difficulties to fund both their pensions and health and social care in the foreseeable future. This challenge has led to changes in policy goals, and in setting new goals to increase the retirement age and to convince people to work longer and extend their working life. Statistics show, however, that citizens in many European countries overall have negative attitudes towards these new policy goals. This makes extending the working life a challenging political task to reach.

Why was this study done?

Attitude measurement does not capture people's ways of deliberating, nor the complexities of how attitudes are formed, and how work life decisions are argued and used in everyday encounters. In this study, we analyzed the qualitative variation in the way aspirations to extend working life are evaluated by older workers. We wanted to find out, what do older workers actually object when challenging the political goal to extend working life.



What did the researchers do and find?

The study used interview data generated among former postal service workers in their 50s and 60s in Finland. The interviewees had left the workplace due to employee downsizing. Detailed analyses shows that the interviewees constructed and performed numerous qualitatively distinct attitudes. While evaluating the political aspiration to extend working life, interviewees talked about welfare expenses, age discrimination, health and work ability issues, youth unemployment and moral entitlement to retirement. Thus, deliberation on the political aspiration was complex, and not reducible to a simple positive-negative attitude.

What do these findings mean?

The study shows some of the root reasons why the interests and expectations of policy makers and citizens currently contradict in many European ageing societies. Citizens do not have just one, clear attitude towards extended working life, or other policy questions concerning age and working life. Rather, they consider what is doable, feasible, economically sound, morally acceptable, and rightly timed. There is also a generational gap in how people view their possibilities and rights to stop working and retire. Whereas younger generations are more accustomed to perceive their working life as insecure, fragmented and consisting of multiple careers, older generation perceives that they have earned the right to retire after working for 40 years non-stop. At the same time, older workers constitute a hugely heterogeneous group, and not every single older worker has the same potential or possibilities to continue in the workforce. Achieving the policy goal of extended working life and postponed retirement therefore clearly needs a broad understanding on the issues citizens' negative attitudes or evaluations are based on and the functions these evaluations may serve.

The ageing population and its implications for the welfare system are among the key concerns across Europe but especially in the Nordic countries where the population has aged rapidly (Grunfelder, Norlén, Randall, & Sánchez Gassen, 2020). With the constantly decreasing old age support ratio, the political discourse concerning retirement and older workers has shifted. Until the 1990s, the discourse promoted early retirement and institutional arrangements, which enable “early exit” from the labor force. Since the 1990s, the discourse has promoted “productive, active ageing” and institutional arrangements, which prevent “early exit” from the labor force (Laliberte-Rudman, 2006; Phillipson, 2019; Taylor & Earl, 2016). European countries including the Nordic countries are nowadays eager to delay retirement age and extend working lives (European Commission, 2010; Grunfelder et al., 2020; Nilsson, 2012; OECD, 2017).

Researchers have recognized numerous problems, which make the extended working life a challenging political task. One of these problems are citizens' negative attitudes toward delayed retirement and extended working life (Eurobarometer, 2012; Eurofound, 2017; Forma, Tuominen, & Väänänen-Tomppo, 2005; Hofäcker, 2015). Phillipson (2019) calls this the “attitude problem.” According to the Eurobarometer (2012), six out of 10 respondents above 15 years of age think that the retirement age does not need to increase by 2030 (Eurobarometer, 2012). Although six out of 10 respondents believed that people should have the right to carry on working past the retirement age, more than five out of 10 respondents stated that personally they did not want to continue working once they reach official pension age (Eurobarometer, 2012). The Eurofound report (2017) demonstrates that even when respondents evaluate that they would be able to work past the retirement age, they state that they do not want to do so (also Nilsson, Hydbom, & Rylander, 2011). According to the study by Hofäcker (2015), respondents approaching retirement age intend to retire before the age of 65 and, in many cases, even before national official retirement age (also Forma et al., 2005).

Although citizens in the Nordic countries are aware of the rapidly ageing population, they do not seem concerned about the situation (Eurobarometer, 2012). According to the Eurobarometer (2012), six to seven out of 10 respondents in Finland and Sweden state that the retirement age does not need to increase by 2030, and five to six out of 10 state that they want to stop working on reaching official retirement age. The official retirement age in the Nordic countries varies between 65 and 67 but it is often possible to draw some type of pension already from the age of 61–62¹ (Nordic Council

1) The statutory pension systems in the Nordic countries include an earnings-based pension and a basic security pension for those pensioners who either have no earnings-based pension or have a very small earnings-based pension (Nordic Council of Ministries, 2008).

of Ministries, 2008). According to the Nordic Council of Ministries (2008), three to four out of 10 respondents in Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden wish to retire before the official retirement age 65–67 (also Forma et al., 2005).

The above-mentioned studies which demonstrate the “attitude problem,” or negative attitudes toward delayed retirement and extended working lives, have followed the conceptualization of cognitive social psychology. Cognitive social psychology conceptualizes attitudes as pre-existing, cognitive structures, which influence peoples’ behavioral intentions, such as their intention to retire or continue working (Ajzen, 1985; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). From this perspective, attitude is a rather unambiguous phenomenon; people have a psychological tendency to evaluate retirement delay either positively or negatively. Because the object of evaluation is considered to be univocal, researchers have focused on factors, such as work satisfaction, good health and social relations, that predict positive (and negative) attitudes towards work life extension (Berglund, Seldén, & Halleröd, 2017; Forma et al., 2005; Kadefors, Schaller, Thång, & Pestat, 2016; Nilsson, 2017; Nilsson et al., 2011).

In this paper, we do not adopt the perspective of cognitive social psychology. We take no interest in analyzing factors that predict negative attitudes, nor take part in the long-lasting debate over the ways attitudes relate to peoples’ behavioral intentions like intention to retire or continue working. Rather, we adopt the perspective of discursive social psychology, and focus our attention on negative attitudes toward delayed retirement and extended working lives per se.

Discursive social psychologists have widely criticized the cognitive conceptualization of attitudes. The starting point for the criticism is the way cognitive conceptualization ignores the variability in attitude expressions (Billig, 1988; Potter, 1998, 2012; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1988). Some discursive social psychologists have abandoned the concept of attitude altogether (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), while others have highlighted the social and relational nature of attitudes (Billig, 1988, 1996; Burr, 2015; Vesala & Rantanen, 2007). Instead of underlying mental constructs, attitudes can be viewed as argumentative positions or evaluative practices constructed and performed in particular interactional settings, and in relation to controversial issues of the social world (Billig, 1988, 1996; Potter, 1998; Wiggins & Potter, 2003).

According to discursive social psychology, researchers should abandon measuring these mental constructs called attitudes, and rather examine 1) how people construct evaluations or 2) what participants do with these evaluations (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; Potter, 1998; Speer & Potter, 2000; Vesala & Rantanen, 2007). In this paper, we study negative attitudes toward delayed retirement and extended working lives by highlighting the social and relational nature of attitudes and focusing on the question, how people construct evaluations of extended working life. If the object of evaluation is potentially equivocal, it is reasonable to ask, what do people actually object when they challenge the political goal to extend working life. The article sheds light on the “attitude problem” by turning the attention from underlying individual preferences to discursive resources used to undermine political goals and situational functions these evaluative practices serve.

Discursive Social Psychology and Attitudes

Although research on attitudes is highly dominated by cognitive social psychology and quantitative methods, researchers have approached attitudes as social and relational phenomena for the last 100 years (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918/1974). Within the field of discourse analysis, the social and relational nature of attitudes has been discussed within discursive psychology (Potter, 1998; Wiggins & Potter, 2003), rhetorical social psychology (Billig, 1988, 1996) and conversation analysis (Du Bois, 2007). These studies have viewed evaluative talk as speech acts (Puchta & Potter, 2002; Wiggins & Potter, 2003), analyzed the construction of the object of evaluation (Nortio, Renvik, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2020; Nousiainen, Pyökkänen, Saunders, Seppänen, & Vesala, 2009; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and studied the communicative practices through which evaluations are made (Pomerantz, 1984; Pyysiäinen, 2010; Wang, 2020).

In this paper, we approach the “attitude problem” from the perspective of the qualitative attitude approach (Vesala & Rantanen, 2007; also Kauppinen, Vainio, Valros, Rita, & Vesala, 2010; Niska, Olakivi, & Vesala, 2018; Nortio et al., 2020; Pesonen, Niska, & Vesala, 2013; Pyysiäinen, 2010; Renko, 2018). This methodological approach draws on the basic assumptions of discursive social psychology, especially discourse analysis of Potter and Wetherell (1987), and rhetorical social psychology of Billig (1996). However, unlike the discourse analysis of Potter and Wetherell and the rhetorical social psychology of Billig, the qualitative attitude approach provides clear procedures for data analysis, which we introduce in the next section.

In discursive social psychology, attitudes refer to action of making evaluations or taking stands over controversial issues (Billig, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Vesala & Rantanen, 2007). The goal to extend working life is a controversial issue people argue over in their everyday life, for example, round dinner tables, media and interviews. Expression of a stand toward a controversial issue, like the goal to extend working life, can be an evaluation with a subjective character or an evaluation with an objective character. Subjective evaluations of the goal refer to speakers' personal preferences ("I dislike that goal"), whereas objective evaluations refer to aspects of the world independently from speakers' preferences ("that goal is as bad as can be") (Potter, Hepburn, & Edwards, 2020; Wiggins & Potter, 2003).

In everyday argumentation, people do not just take stands over controversial issues ("I dislike that goal") but they also make justifications for their stands. Justifications are episodes of talk where the speaker reflexively comments on the stand he/she has expressed ("I dislike the goal because older workers are entitled to freedom after long work careers"). Mere focus on stands overlooks the fact that in argumentation the pre-given objects of evaluation (here the goal to extend working life) do not remain fixed and unambiguous (Willig, 2003; also Potter & Wetherell, 1988). Focus on stands alongside justifications enables the identification of attitudes where someone evaluates an object in a particular way (Vesala & Rantanen, 2007).

The discursive perspective, takes it as natural that individuals may express numerous attitudes per controversial issue (Potter, 2012). The object of evaluation may change, the dimension of evaluation may change and the position from which the evaluation is constructed or performed may change. From the cognitive perspective, there is one evaluation per object and quantitative measurement reveals its direction (positive–negative) and strength (strong–weak). From the discursive perspective, individuals do not merely use the general positive–negative dimension; they can also evaluate objects, for example, as practical–impractical, possible–impossible, desirable–undesirable or moral–immoral (Potter, 1998; Vesala & Rantanen, 2007; Wiggins & Potter, 2003).

From the cognitive perspective, there is an unambiguous evaluator: the person who answers the attitude measurement. The discursive perspective acknowledges that evaluations are always constructed and performed by someone but it is less univocal who that someone is. The variation in the evaluator position can be illustrated, for example, referring to Goffman's (1979) concept of footing. The animator is the person who performs the evaluation. Yet the responsibility of the content of the evaluative speech act can be designated to a principal that can be, for example, another person ("that goal is bad according to my spouse") or a specific position the animator is adopting ("as the person who used to be in charge of recruitment, I must be against this goal").

In this paper, we are interested in the qualitative variation in attitudes constructed in argumentation over the controversial goal to extend working life. As we want to focus on the "attitude problem," we focus on the evaluative practices, which are unfavorable toward the goal. We are especially interested in the discursive resources used to undermine the political goal of extended working life and the situational functions these evaluative practices serve. All discourse, including evaluative practices, are constructed from a range of resources, like words, interpretative repertoires and commonplaces (Potter, 2013). In this paper, we center-stage the resources of personal experience and culturally shared beliefs, which are sometimes summarized in culturally shared commonplaces (Billig, 1988, 1996; also Wetherell & Potter, 1992). All discourse—including evaluative practices—fulfill many types of functions (Potter et al., 2020; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In this paper, we focus our attention on impression management and self-presentation (Billig, 1996; Niska et al., 2018; Vesala & Rantanen, 2007).

Data and Methods

The data we analyze in this paper was generated in the research project *Towards a Two-speed Finland? Longer Working Life, Retirement Pathways and Inequality*. This project explored work transitions of people in their 50s and 60s with the help of qualitative longitudinal research (Neale, 2019). In the project, 40 people who voluntarily or involuntarily left their long-term workplace at the Finnish postal service were followed up to 2 years with the help of face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, video diaries and e-mails.

Finland has the highest proportion of older people in the Nordic countries (Grunfelder et al., 2020) and Finnish policy actors have been eager to extend working life, especially by promoting employment of people above 50 (Finnish

Government, 2017). While policy actors have been eager to extend working lives, older workers' career patterns have become less secure and less stable. Besides globalization, automation and digitalization, problems have been caused by the economic recession of 2008 and lately the Covid-19-pandemic (Finnish Government, 2017, 2020). Despite the political goal to extend working lives, older people, who become unemployed, face severe problems in finding stable re-employment (Finnish Government, 2017).

In this paper, we analyze the first-round interviews with men and women between 50 and 65 years of age who had left their long-term workplace at the Finnish postal service due to employee downsizing. Postal services all over the world have faced massive transformations due to progressive digitalization and diminishing amount of traditional paper mail (Dieke et al., 2013). The interviewees were both blue-collar workers (e.g., mail carriers) and white-collar employees (e.g., HR-officers) and lived across Finland.

In the first-round face-to-face interviews, the interviewers focused on questions like how the interviewees' job at the postal service ended and what the interviewees' situation and plans for the future were. At the end of the interview, the interviewers requested the interviewees to comment on the political goal to extend working life. In this paper, we view this request as a prompt (Speer, 2002) that produced argumentation over the controversial political goal. From the 40 interviews conducted, only 38 interviews included this section. In two interviews, the interviewer, failed to present the request for some reason. In addition, five interviews had to be removed from the final data. In these interviews, the interviewer presented the request, but the interviewees failed to comment on the goal to extend working life. Instead, they commented on other controversial political issues in Finland, such as the Competitiveness Pact and the Activation Model². The final data, thus, consist of commentary from 33 interviewees.

According to Potter and Wetherell (1987), discursive analysis can be divided into two stages: coding and analysis (also Potter, 1988). The coding stage squeezes text into manageable chunks. Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue that the categories of coding depend on the research interests. However, in the qualitative attitude approach, the coding categories are predetermined: at the first stage of the analysis, researcher codes stands and justifications from the data (Vesala & Rantanen, 2007). What kind of stands do the interviewees take on the political goal to extend working life and how do they justify their stands?

The coding stage forms the basis for more detailed analysis, which focuses on the constructed and constructive nature of discourse (Potter, 1998; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wiggins & Potter, 2007). In the analysis stage, researcher focuses on variability and consistency in discourse and searches for patterns (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In the qualitative attitude approach, researcher identifies variability and consistency in coded stands and justifications (Vesala & Rantanen, 2007). What are the specific objects of evaluation? What kind of discursive resources are being used in the construction and performance of these evaluations? What kind of functions do these evaluative practices serve in the interaction situation?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Finnish. The excerpts presented in the next section are translated by the authors. Transcribing commonly requires practical compromises between faithfulness to the data and the readability of the transcript. However, an additional complication is the translation of the transcript into English. For the benefits of transparency and validity, we present the original data excerpt transcriptions in Finnish alongside their translations into English (Nikander, 2008), and use cultural footnotes when needed to further clarify the translation process.

Results

In the next sub-sections, we introduce the results of the analytic process. The first three sub-sections introduce the results of the coding stage. The coding stage demonstrates that the interviewees expressed favorable, rejecting, reserved and conditional stands toward the goal to extend working life. The coding stage also demonstrates that the interviewees

2) The Competitiveness Pact refers to an agreement made by Finnish labor market organizations to increase annual working time without wage increases.

The Activation Model placed activation requirements (e.g., self-employment or study activities) for Finnish unemployed jobseekers. If the requirements are not met, unemployment benefit can be reduced.

justified these stands in numerous ways. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates how the object of evaluation varies when interviewees construct favorable and unfavorable attitudes. The last sub-section continues with the analysis stage and demonstrates 1) how culturally shared beliefs are used in attitude construction, and 2) how attitude construction can serve the need for situational impression management.

Positive Stands and Justifications

From the 33 interviewees, only two expressed a favorable stand toward the goal to extend working life. Interviewee number 26 stated that he approved the political goal (Excerpt 1: Line 1, “Well I do agree with that”) and interviewee number 33 stated that he does not object the political goal (Excerpt 2: Lines 1–2, “I do not like in that way resist”). These types of stands are what Wiggins and Potter (2003; also Potter et al., 2020) call subjective evaluations (I [x] work life extension).

Excerpt 1

1	No kyl mä sen allekirjoitan tuon	Well I do agree ^a with that
2	mitä että, toi, 65:een, ja ihmisten kunto	that up to 65 as the condition of people
3	on parantunu siitä mitä se oli, munkin	has improved from what it was like my
4	vanhempien, tai heidän, mun	parents' or their my
5	isovanhempien aikana varsinkin.	grandparents' time in particular.
6	Et fyysinen siis kunto ja, että ihmiset	That the physical condition and that people
7	jaksaa, pitempään.	cope for longer.

(Interviewee no. 26, 57-years old male)

Note. See Appendix for transcription conventions.

^aThe literal translation of the speaker's turn is “I do sign under the fact that.” Besides making a signature, the Finnish expression equals acceptance.

Excerpt 2

1	Eläkeikä nousee ja, en mä sil	Retirement age raises and I do not like
2	tavalla (vastusta). Toisaalta ite on	in that way (resist). On the other hand I
3	tuntuu et on ihan, hyvässä	feel that I'm in an OK
4	työkondiksessa. Ja himassa tulee ja	working condition. And at home I do and
5	ja mökillä kaikkee fyysistä, töitä	at the cottage I do all kinds of physical work
6	tehtyy ja joka vuosi hakkaa tossa	and like every year chop many
7	monta kuutio koivuklapeja puusaunaan.	cubic meters of birchwood for the sauna.

(Interviewee no. 33, 53-years old male)

Both interviewees justified the positive stand with work ability. Whereas interviewee number 26 referred to common knowledge that work ability has generally improved (Excerpt 1: Lines 2–3, Lines 6–7), interviewee number 33 referred to his personal experience of his good work ability (Excerpt 2: Lines 2–4). Thus, besides constructing a subjective evaluation (I support the political goal) the two interviewees also constructed an objective evaluation (work ability is good). In this objective evaluation, the pre-given object of evaluation—the goal to extend working life—is reformulated into a work ability issue. Interestingly, work ability is related to previous generations' work ability: compared to them, older people's work ability is good.

Negative Stands and Justifications

Altogether 19 out of 33 interviewees expressed a negative stand toward the goal to extend working life. These stands were directly expressed subjective evaluations (Excerpt 3: Line 5–6, “Well I for one take it as a very negative thing”),

indirectly expressed subjective evaluations (*Excerpt 4*: Lines 6–9, “I think that them politicians know nothing about the normal and the reality about life”) and objective evaluations (*Excerpt 5*: Line 6, “It’s as wrong as can be”).

Excerpt 3

1	Mitä sä aattelet työurien pidentämisestä,	How do you feel about extended worklife
2	kun siitä aika paljon keskustellaan?	it’s discussed quite a bit? (Interviewer)
3	(Haastattelija)	
4		
5	Mä ainakin koen sen hyvin	Well I for one take it as a very
6	negatiivisena, koska se on ihan	negative thing because it’s like totally
7	naurettavaa. Siis että, ihmiset jos joutuu	ridiculous. Like that if people are made
8	työttömäksi viiskymppisenä ja vähän yli,	redundant at their fifty or fifty plus
9	niin ei niitä tahdota ottaa töihin.	then no one wants to hire them.
10	Se on ikäsyryntää jo siellä työpaikoilla	It’s ageism already now at the workplace
11	monissa.	in many of them.

(Interviewee no. 34, 62-years old female)

Excerpt 4

1	Mitä ajattelet ku tässä julkisessa	What do you think when the public
2	keskustelussa on nyt koko ajan	debate today goes on
3	sitä että työuria pitäs pidentää ja ...	about extending the work career and ...
4	(haastattelija)	(interviewer)
5		
6	Niin justiin, joo. Siis huvittaa. Että mä	Yeah right yeah. I’m amused. Like I
7	oon sitä mieltä et noi poliitikot ei tiedä	think that them politicians know
8	tästä ollenkaan tästä normaali ja	nothing about the normal and
9	todellisuudest, elämäst yhtään mitään.	the reality about life.
10	Eihän siis, harva työpaikka pitää ihmisiä	I mean like only a few workplaces keep
11	ihmisiä ylitte sen. Että kun sä rupeat	people people over ((the age limit)). Like
12	läheneen 60:tä johan kiireen kaupalla	when you start to approach 60 then there’s
13	pannaan pois että eläkkeelle eläkkeelle	a rush to push you away to retirement
14	ja eläkkeelle.	and retirement and retirement.

(Interviewee no. 12, 51-years old female)

The interviewer’s generic framing of the question in terms of a wider public discussion on raising the retirement age clearly affords a negative stand to be expressed. The most commonly used justification for such a negative stand was age discrimination at the labor market. According to eight interviewees, it is virtually impossible for older people to stay active in the labor market. Some of these interviewees, among them interviewee number 12, argued that this is because employers lay off people close to 60 years of age (*Excerpt 4*: Lines 10–14). Others, among them interviewee number 34, argued that this is because unemployed people over 50 years of age face difficulties in finding re-employment (*Excerpt 3*: Lines 7–11).

Another commonly expressed justification was the general lack of vacancies. According to four interviewees, among them interviewee number 10 (*Excerpt 5*), working life extension is virtually impossible because there are not enough jobs for everyone. Interviewee number 10 affirmed his argument with a commonplace “It is unfair to keep people hanging in a loose noose” (*Excerpt 5*: Lines 8–9). According to the commonplace, it is unethical to keep people in a state of uncertainty when they might be in a serious trouble, for example, in relation to their livelihood. With these justifications, the interviewees constructed an objective evaluation, in which the pre-given object of evaluation—the

goal to extend working life—is reformulated into an age discrimination and job deficiency issue: being over 50 and active in the labor market is difficult or even impossible.

Excerpt 5

1	Mitäs hei, jos ajattelet tänä päivänä	What about, hey, if you think about the talk
2	puhutaan - - että työuria täytyis pidentää	today - - that we should extend
3	ja eläkeikää on pakko nostaa. Miltä tää	and raise the retirement age. What does
4	kuulostaa? (Haastattelija)	this sound like? (Interviewer)
5		
6	Se on niin väärin kuin olla ja voi. Jos ei	It's as wrong as can be. If you don't
7	oo kerran töitä, niin miks ihmisiä	have work then why tease people
8	kiusataan, että ne on tuolla, roikkuu	and why keep them hanging
9	löysässä hirressä. Saadako töitä,	in a loose noose. Do I get work,
10	päästäkö eläkkeelle.	do I get to go on retirement.

(Interviewee no. 10, 58-years old male)

Besides the four interviewees who talked about general lack of vacancies, six interviewees further specified their justification by youth unemployment in Finland. These interviewees argued that since there are not enough jobs for everyone, young people should be given priority to vacancies. Both interviewee number 5 and 21 (Excerpts 6 and 7) referred to this justification. Interviewee number 5 reformulated the goal to extend working life into a goal to delay retirement age and evaluated this reformulated goal negatively (Excerpt 6: Lines 1–2, “I feel that the retirement age should absolutely not be raised”). Interviewee number 21 expressed an indirect negative stand (Excerpt 7: Lines 7–8, “Well I do wonder about that business of extended work careers”).

Excerpt 6

1	- - Minusta eläkeikä ei pitäis missään	- - I feel that the retirement age should
2	tapauksessa nostaa, koska eihän silloin	absolutely not be raised cause that means
3	nuoret pääse ollenkaan töihin.	that the young won't get jobs.

(Interviewee no. 5, 63-years old male)

Excerpt 7

1	Nii, sit mä voisin viel lopuks kysyy - -	So then to conclude, I could ask - -
2	yleisimmin just tost työelämän	more generally about the change
3	muutoksesta ja työurien pidentämisestä	in work life and extending the work career
4	niin mitä sä aattelet siitä keskustelusta?	so what do you think about these
5	(Haastattelija)	discussions? (Interviewer)
6		
7	No sitä minä kyllä ihmettelen niitä tuota	Well I do wonder about that business
8	työurien pidennysasiaa, et minä en	of extended work careers, like I don't
9	käsitä et jos meil on niin paljon	understand like if we have a lot of
10	nuorisotyöttömyys on niin valtasaa, et	youth unemployment is so huge that
11	miksi piätetään semmosia kehäraakkeja	why then hold on to such journeymen.
12	ihmisiä.	

(Interviewee no. 21, 61-years old female)

Interviewee number 5 and 21 argued that older people who delay retirement complicate young peoples' opportunities in employment (Excerpt 6: Lines 1–3, Excerpt 7: Lines 9–12). With this justification, the interviewees constructed a generational or cohort-based, objective evaluation, in which the pre-given object of evaluation—the goal to extend working life—is contrasted with youth unemployment: taking over jobs, which young people could have, is wrong or immoral.

Interviewee number 21 referred to older workers as “journeymen” (Excerpt 7: Line 11). In English, the term refers to boxers who have no expectation of winning fights. In Finnish, the term refers specifically to older boxers who are no more in their best shape. A third commonly expressed justification for rejecting the goal to extend working life was older peoples' decreased work ability combined with increasing requirements for effectiveness. Six interviewees, among them interviewees number 10 (Excerpt 9) and 12 (Excerpt 8), argued that older people have all sorts of ailments, which make many jobs physically challenging.

Excerpt 8

1	Plus et sitte ihminen ku se vanhenee	Plus then as people get older
2	sille tulee kremppoja, kuka jaksaa	they get all sorts of ailments and who in
3	oikeesti jonain 68:na enää välttämättä	68 really necessarily copes
4	tehdä täyttä päivää sillä vauhdilla, ja	and puts in the hours at the speed and
5	teholla mikä nyt on oletuksena et	effect that is required today like
6	ihmisen [Haastattelija: Totta] täytyis	from [Interviewer: True] people.
7	pystyä.	

(Interviewee no. 12, 51-years old female)

Excerpt 9

1	Mä sanon et mun ikäisistä ja	I'd say that out of people of my age and
2	kuuskymppisistä, jos on pitkään ollut	out of people in their 60s, if you've been
3	työttömänä, niin ihan armotta vois	unemployed then you could straight on
4	laittaa eläkepaperit ihan. Kun on	put in your retirement papers like. When
5	muutenkin semmoisia kremppoja,	you have them aches and pains
6	mullakin toi käsi alkaa olla vähän	like I my arm is starting to be a bit
7	semmoinen kenkutin.	wonky.

(Interviewee no. 10, 58-years old male)

While interviewee number 12 referred to age-related ailments and increasing requirements for effectiveness as general knowledge (Excerpt 8: Lines 1–2), interviewee 10 also referred to his personal experience of an ailment (Excerpt 9: Lines 6–7). With these justifications, the interviewees constructed an objective evaluation, in which the pre-given object of evaluation—the goal to extend working life—is reformulated into a work ability issue. Interestingly, work ability is related to younger people's work ability: compared to them, older people's work ability is impaired. Three interviewees, who justified their negative stands with impaired work ability, also made particularizations (Billig, 1996) and noted that people with easy and light work (librarians and office workers were mentioned) might be able to delay their retirement.

A fourth and final justification given for a negative stand toward the goal to extend working life was entitlement. Five interviewees argued that people have the moral right to retire. Both interviewee number 9 and interviewee number 13 expressed direct negative stands towards the political goal (Excerpt 10: Line 1–3, “Yeah so I don't take it to be reasonable that work, and I don't think it's right either that a person is worn down,” Excerpt 11: Lines 3–4, “I mean I think it's a bad idea”).

Excerpt 10

1	Joo, että mä en nää sitä mielekkäänä et	Yeah so I don't take it to be reasonable
2	työ, eikä se mun mielestä oo oikeinkaan	that work, and I don't think it's right either
3	että ihminen kulutetaan loppuun ja sitten	that a person is worn down and then
4	kun pitäis päästä sinne eläkkeelle ja	when you should go on retirement and
5	vähän niin ku omaa aikaa saada niin, sä	get like a bit of time for yourself then
6	oot niin puhki.	you're like totally knackered.

(Interviewee no. 9, 62-years old male)

Excerpt 11

1	Miks sun pitäis antaa ittes ihan sinne	Why should you give every last bit of
2	tappiin kun sä voisit nauttia siitä sun	yourself when you could enjoy your
3	vanhuudestas arvokkaasti? Elikkä mun	old age with some dignity? I mean I
4	mielestä huono idea.	think it's a bad idea.

(Interviewee no. 13, 54-years old male)

Both interviewees argued that older people have the right to enjoy their life free from work while they are still in decent physical condition ([Excerpt 10](#): Lines 2–6, [Excerpt 11](#): Lines 1–3). Whereas interviewees, who referred to impaired work ability, portrayed older people as suffering from all sorts of ailments ([Excerpts 8 and 9](#)), interviewees, who referred to entitlement, argued that older people have a right to retire even if their work ability was as good as always ([Excerpts 10 and 11](#)). With this justification, the interviewees constructed an objective evaluation, in which the pre-given object of evaluation—the goal to extend working life—is contrasted with the moral right to retire and enjoy retirement days: obligatory retirement delay is wrong or immoral.

Reserved and Conditional Stands and Justifications

From the 33 interviewees, 12 expressed reserved or conditional stands toward the political goal to extend working lives. Two interviewees expressed reserved stands and made justifications for both positive and negative stands. In these comments, the positive stand was justified with improved work ability and high welfare expenses, negative stand with lack of vacancies, youth unemployment and age discrimination at the labor market. While improved work ability was also used as a justification for a positive stand ([Excerpts 1 and 2](#)), high welfare expenses were not mentioned before. Interviewee number 1 began her reserved comment by expressing an indirect negative stand ([Excerpt 12](#): Lines 6–8, “What does it feel like, well like sometimes it feels like do we live in the same reality, I mean really”). However, she continued with a justification for an opposite, positive stand: she acknowledged how expensive pensions and old age care are for society now that people live longer ([Excerpt 12](#): Lines 9–17).

With this justification, the interviewee constructed an objective evaluation, in which the pre-given object of evaluation—the goal to extend working life—is reformulated into an economic resource issue: welfare expenses are high in Finland.

In the reserved comments, the negative stand was justified with lack of vacancies, youth unemployment and age discrimination in the labor market. All these justifications were also used when interviewees rejected the political goal ([Excerpts 3, 5 and 7](#)). After acknowledging the expensiveness of pensions and old age care ([Excerpt 12](#)), interviewee number 1 referred to the general lack of vacancies and argued, that it is not possible to extend working lives simply because there are not enough jobs ([Excerpt 13](#): Lines 6–8).

Excerpt 12

1	No entäs sitte ku - - puhutaan koko aja	Well what about - - the constant talk on
2	vielä vaan tästä työurien pidentämisestä?	all a long about extending work careers?
3	Me vähä sivuttiinki sitä mutta että miltä	We sort of touched this already but
4	tää nyt tuntuu? (Haastattelija)	what does it feel like? (Interviewer)
5		
6	Miltä tää tuntuu no joo, siis joskus	What does it feel like, well like sometimes
7	tuntuu kyllä että, elämmekö me samassa	it feels like do we live in the same
8	todellisuudessa, siis oikeesti. Niin ku mä	reality, I mean really. Like I
9	sanoin että mä ymmärrän tän	said that I do understand about the
10	taloudellisen puolen, ymmärrän kuinka	economic side of things, understand how
11	paljo tulee yhteiskunnalle maksamaan	much it will cost the society
12	kun ihmisille maksetaan 30–40 vuotta	paying people's pension for 30–40 years,
13	eläkettä, kun osahan aina elääkin vaikka	I mean some will live although
14	toiset kuolla kupsahellee, niin osa	others bite the dust, but others
15	kumminkin elääkin ja sitten se	do live on and then the
16	vanhustehoito voi olla muutenkin	elderly care can in any case be
17	helvetin kallista.	bloody expensive.

(Interviewee no. 1, 57-years old female)

Excerpt 13

1	Mutta, kyllä tää tuntuu iha hullulta niin	But this does seem totally mad like
2	ku mä sanoin että mä ymmärtäisin sen,	I said that I'd understand if
3	että vielä siis että otettais kaikki	if we'd take all the
4	vajaakuntoiset ja sairaut ja ihan kaikki, ja	frail and sick and all of them, and
5	jopa todella vanhatkin ihmiset ketä	even really old people who'd
6	haluais ja pystyis niin otettais kaikki	want and might be able to, we could take
7	työelämään, jos sitä työtä ois, mutta	all of them into the workforce if the jobs
8	Jumalan pyssyt kun ei sit ei oo nytkään	were there. I mean for the love of God
9	nii mistä sitä tehdää.	there's none now so where to get them.

(Interviewee no. 1, 57-years old female)

With this justification, the interviewee constructed an objective evaluation, which was also performed by interviewee number 10 (Excerpt 5): being over 50 and active in the labor market is difficult or even impossible. In the evaluation, the goal to extend working life is reformulated into a job deficiency issue.

Ten interviewees expressed conditional stands toward the political goal to extend working lives and argued that they favor the goal with some specific precondition. The most commonly stated precondition was individual willingness and ability to continue working. Five interviewees stated that individuals should have the right to continue working if they can and choose to do so. Among them was interviewee number 38 who expressed a conditional stand that highlighted individual health and positive feelings toward one's job (Excerpt 14: Lines 4–6, "If one is well and let's say that if one likes the job and overall then why not").

These conditional comments can be interpreted as implicit rejections of postponed retirement age. The argument that people should have the right to continue working is an implicit criticism to the counter positions that people should be obliged to continue working (Billig, 1996). With these justifications, the interviewees constructed an objective evaluation, in which the pre-given object of evaluation—the goal to extend working life—is reformulated into an issue of personal choice: voluntary work life extension is acceptable.

Excerpt 14

1	Mitäs mieltä sä oot ylipäänsä työurien	What do you in general think about
2	pidentämisestä? (Haastattelija)	extending work careers? (Interviewer)
3		
4	Jos ihminen on terve, ja sanotaan et	If one is well and let's say that
5	tykkää työstään ja ylipäänsä niin mikä	if one likes the job and overall then
6	ettei, et se on hyvin yksilökohtainen	why not, like it's a very personal
7	asia.	matter.

(Interviewee no. 38, 60-years old female)

Another stated precondition were working conditions. Four interviewees argued that extended working life is an acceptable goal if older workers are given suitable tasks. Interviewee number 23 expressed a conditional stand that highlighted individual health (*Excerpt 15*: Lines 1–3, “If one can cope physically and there’s no like health issues then one should go ahead”) but further specified that age based physical deterioration must be acknowledged (*Excerpt 15*: Lines 4–8).

Excerpt 15

1	Jos sitä fyysisesti pystyy tekemään eikä	If one can cope physically and there's
2	oo mitään täämösii terveydellisiä esteitä	no like health issues
3	niin pitäähän se tehdä. Mutta se että se	then one should go ahead. But it's like
4	nyt on ihan selvää että se ei voi olla	totally clear that it can't be like
5	jotain tommosta näpertämistä tai jotain	some tinkering or some other
6	semmost et pitää könytä jossain pöydän	like having to crawl somewhere
7	alla jotain piuhaa laittamassa kun ei	under tables to fix a cable like
8	kyllähän se fysiikka rapistuu. Eihän sille	the physique does go. You can't
9	mitään voi ((nauraa)). Ei oo enää ihan sitä	help it ((laughs)). You're not the same
10	mitä on ollu joskus kaksikymppisenä.	as you were at twenty.

(Interviewee no. 23, 58-years old female)

Interviewee numbers 23 argued that tasks need to be suitable for older people and suitable tasks do not include tinkering or crawling (*Excerpt 15*: Lines 5–7). With this justification, the interviewee constructed an objective evaluation, which was also performed by interviewee number 12 (*Excerpt 8*): compared to youngsters, older people's work ability is impaired.

Finally, one interviewee stated a precondition that extended working life is an acceptable political goal if people exit workforce before they have been working for 40 years. With this justification, the interviewee constructed an objective evaluation, in which the goal to extend working life is reformulated into an issue of suitable working life duration: working for 40 years is morally good but also enough.

Attitudes, Resources and Functions

In sum, our interviewees made subjective evaluations (I agree with the goal) and objective evaluations (the goal is bad) of the political goal to extend working life. The interviewees constructed eight qualitatively distinct objective evaluations, or attitudes, where the goal to extend working life was somehow specified or reformulated (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1*Attitudes Constructed in the Data*

No	Object		Dimension
1	Welfare expenses	are	high
2	Being 50+ and active in the labour market	is	impossible
3	Competition over jobs with young people	is	immoral
4	Long work career	is	moral
5	Voluntary retirement delay	is	moral
6	Obligatory retirement delay	is	immoral
7	Compared to former generations, older peoples' work ability	is	good
8	Compared to younger people, older peoples' work ability	is	bad

The goal to extend working life is not a univocal object of evaluation. When interviewees commented on the goal, they evaluated welfare expenses, possibilities to remain employed and find new employment, competition over jobs with young people, length of career, voluntary and involuntary retirement delay, and older peoples' work ability. While evaluating these objects, the interviewees used four dimensions of evaluation: high–low, possible–impossible, moral–immoral and good–bad.

While the interviewees commented favorably on the goal to extend working lives, they constructed the following attitudes: “welfare expenses are high” (Attitude 1), “long work career is moral” (Attitude 4), “voluntary retirement delay is acceptable” (Attitude 5) and “compared to former generations, older peoples' work ability is good” (Attitude 7). Since we are interested in the “attitude problem,” we focus our attention on the attitudes interviewees constructed when they commented the goal to extend working life unfavorably. According to the interviewees, “being 50+ and active in the labor market is difficult or impossible” (Attitude 2), “competition over jobs with young people is immoral” (Attitude 3), “obligatory retirement delay is culpable” (Attitude 6) and “compared to younger people, older peoples' work ability is bad” (Attitude 8).

While few interviewees referred to their personal experiences, a far more crucial discursive resource for the construction of negative attitudes was a reference to culturally shared beliefs. The negative attitudes expressed in the interviews make sense for the interviewee and the interviewer because they base on beliefs that are part of our shared common sense and thus beyond question (Wetherell & Potter, 1992; also, Billig, 1996). The attitudes formulated in the unfavorable comments toward the political goal to extend working life base on three shared beliefs: belief in traditional nature of work, belief in age-based decline and belief in age-appropriate work life transitions. We turn to these three next.

First, according to the shared belief in traditional nature of work, work equals permanent, fulltime, paid work. The interviewees pondered the physicality of different work tasks but did not ponder duration of working days or working weeks. Atypical work relations (i.e., fixed-term and part-time work) were not portrayed as opportunities to extend working lives. In addition, possibilities of entrepreneurship and self-employment were generally not discussed. The data included but a singular comment, made by interviewee number 15, in which entrepreneurship was acknowledged as a viable option to extend working lives.

Excerpt 16

1	-- Voihan niitä ((töitä)) joku jatkaa	-- Some can continue ((on the job))
2	mutta yleensä se on sit joku ihminen	but usually that is someone with
3	jolla on oma firma ja ehkä yks taikka	their own business and perhaps one or
4	kaks työntekijää ni sehän voi olla siel	two employees which means that they can
5	vaikka hautaan saakka töissä.	continue working to the grave.

(Interviewee no. 15, 58-years old female)

Second, according to the shared belief in age-based decline, people automatically deteriorate with age. The interviewees argued that with age, people become, for example, slow, tired, and stiff, and start to suffer from all sorts of ailments. At the same time, employees face increasing requirements for effectiveness. Referring to the shared belief in automatic age-based decline, the interviewees portrayed the labor market as an arena that somewhat naturally prefers younger and discriminates older people.

Finally, according to the shared belief in age-appropriate work life transitions, there is a “right time” and a “wrong time” for every transition, like going to school and retiring. According to the interviewees, the right time to retire is when a person turns 60 years of age or has been working for 40 years. Thus, according to the interviewees, the right time to study is before 20 years of age and the right time to work is between 20 and 60 years of age.

While the interviewees constructed and performed attitudes in the research interview situation, their discourse had several different functions. Although the object and the dimension of evaluation varied, the evaluator position remained constant; interviewees evaluated the political goal from the position of an older person who had recently lost his/her long-term job. This was the position from which the interviewees were invited to talk. For example attitude number two (“being 50+ and active in the labor market is impossible”) is understandable in relation to the position from which it is performed; a laid off evaluator has personal experience about discriminative labor market structures and practices. However, while their position makes their attitudes understandable, their attitudes also make their position understandable.

Some of the interviewees were in an awkward position in relation to the political goal to extend working lives. While some stated having difficulties finding re-employment, others reported that they intentionally retired prematurely. Both positions are potentially problematic in an interaction situation in which the interviewer suddenly brings up the goal to extend working lives. Attitude construction and performance are an important part of impression management and self-presentation. Thereby, construction and performance of negative attitudes toward the political goal can simultaneously make evaluators’ positions as unemployed jobseekers or young pensioners both understandable and morally acceptable.

For example, interviewee number 10 was a 58-years old man, who earlier in the interview stated that he was having problems finding re-employment. Construction and performance of attitude number two (“being 50+ and active in the labor market is impossible”) in *Excerpt 5*, makes his status as an unemployed jobseeker highly understandable. Interview number 9 was a 62-years old man, who earlier in the interview stated that he was not looking for re-employment but planned to remain unemployed until he can retire. Construction and performance of attitude number six (“obligatory retirement delay is immoral”) in *Excerpt 10*, makes his unemployment pathway to retirement entitled and a morally acceptable choice.

Discussion and Conclusions

Previous studies have demonstrated that in contrast to the political goal to extend working life, most Europeans state that they want to retire before the age of 65 and disagree with the goal of pushing the retirement age up (Eurobarometer, 2012; Eurofound, 2017; Hofäcker, 2015). In this article, we center-staged this so called “attitude problem.” Instead of following mainstream cognitive attitude research and trying to measure individuals’ mental constructs, we followed discursive social psychology and the qualitative attitude approach to examine how people construct and perform evaluations of the political goal to extend working life.

In the article, we analyzed interviews with 50–65 years old people, who had recently lost their long-term employment. From this position, the interviewees were asked to comment on the much-debated goal to extend working life. While commenting on the issue, the interviewees constructed and performed numerous qualitatively distinct attitudes. Since our key interest lied with the “attitude problem,” we focused on the negative attitudes, in which the pre-given object of evaluation (the goal to extend working life) was somehow specified or re-formulated. The interviewees constructed and performed four negative attitudes, or objective evaluations: 1) being 50+ and active in the labor market is impossible, 2) competition over jobs with young people is immoral, 3) obligatory retirement delay is immoral, and 4) compared to younger people, older peoples’ work ability is bad. While few evaluations were constructed referring to

personal experiences, most evaluations based on culturally shared beliefs (Wetherell & Potter, 1992; also, Billig, 1996) in the traditional nature of work, age-based decline and age-appropriate work life transitions.

European governments and think tanks have tried to alter these beliefs for decades. First, they have been eager to transform the way citizens make sense of work and working life. In Finland, for example, the government funded Finnish Innovation Fund (Sitra, 2020) argues that the traditional notion of work originates from the industrial era and needs to change. Work should not be understood as permanent, fulltime, paid work; work should be understood as meaningful, flexible, diverse, and entrepreneurial action, which may include, for example, part-time work or self-employment (Sitra, 2020).

Although previous studies suggest that older workers are increasingly engaged in atypical work relations, like part-time jobs and self-employment (Laliberte-Rudman, 2006), the “new work discourse” which the Finnish Innovation Fund promotes was not (yet) widely deployed in our data. As younger generations in Finland have deployed the “new work discourse” (e.g., Niska, *in press*), there seems to be a cohort-specific difference in work discourses. This difference can be taken as proof of the structural and cultural lag between generations (Riley, 1987), which consequently, manifests itself also as a discursive lag. The term structural lag, coined by Riley, characterizes on-going dynamics in ageing societies, and the mismatch between the changes concerning the ageing process on the one hand, and the numerous social structures, norms and cultural images that still lag behind this transformation. This study clearly shows what happens, in Finland and beyond, when policy goals change, and former, expected routes to work exit no longer stand. Furthermore, this study undeniably shows the benefits of detailed analyses on the argumentative and discursive means of opposition by citizens in such changing policy circumstances in all ageing societies.

Second, international organizations, like The World Health Organization (WHO), have for decades declared that the belief that people automatically become frail with age is a detrimental myth that needs to be challenged (WHO, 1999, 2008). According to the discourse of active ageing or the narrative of late career productivity, older age signals activity, self-fulfillment and continuing productive contribution—preferably through paid employment (Gettings, 2018; Laliberte-Rudman, 2006; Taylor & Earl, 2016). According to Gettings (2018), an important question is to which extent individuals nearing retirement age adopt these discourses. Our data suggests that the belief that people deteriorate with age is still widely used in grass roots level argumentation. The interviewees in our study contested the discourse of active ageing with narratives of old age ailments (Excerpts 8, 9 and 15). Older workers constitute a hugely heterogeneous group and not every single older worker has the same potential for continuing productive contribution (also Gettings, 2018; Taylor & Earl, 2016; van Dyk et al., 2013).

Finally, according to Freeman (2010), the cultural idea that there is an appropriate time for every work transition is the embodiment of chrononormativity (also Leonard, Fuller, & Unwin, 2018; Riach, Rumens, & Tyler, 2014; Yläne & Nikander, 2019). Although WHO (1999, 2008) highlights that there is no biological basis for retirement at 60–65 years of age, this temporal transitional norm is widely present in our data. In line with chrononormative expectations, our interviewees argued that older people must retire and make space for the younger generations. This idea was also a crucial part of the old political discourse, which promoted early retirement (Hess et al., 2016). Although international organizations, like WHO (1999), highlight that early retirement does not automatically translate into available vacancies for younger people, the interviewees in our data used this idea to legitimize liberation from work around the age of 60.

Our intention is not to prove the three common sense beliefs factual or false. Rather, our intention is to participate in the discussion of negative attitudes toward the political goal to extend working life by turning attention away from underlying individual preferences (e.g., Forma et al., 2005) to argumentative resources, like shared beliefs, which are available and situationally used to undermine political goals (Wetherell & Potter, 1992), in this case the work life extension. Based on our study, these argumentative resources are highly functional for older people who find themselves caught between the political pressure to extend working life and the increasingly insecure and unstable nature of working life. Instead of a problem located in individual minds, the “attitude problem” can be viewed as a problem located in the social and discursive realm.

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Appendix: Transcription Conventions

- (word) A word that the transcriber is unsure of
- (()) Double parenthesis: additions or comments made by the transcriber or the authors
- [] Square brackets: another person says something while the other is talking
- . . . Three dots: Pause
- word- Clause discontinues
- - Omitted sequence