

Attempted transitions from unemployment: Italy

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Introduction

Italy has been one of the European Member States worst hit by the 2008 financial crisis. The first signs of the recession appeared in the second quarter of 2008 and the huge employment effects became evident soon: since the crisis outbreak, about 1.2 million workers have lost their jobs (Istat, 2018). The crisis has especially hit young people, defined as a lost generation in the labour market (Gabriel et al, 2013), but it has also weakened the employment condition of groups of workers who, in the past, have tended to emerge immune to economic recessions. In particular, men middle-aged or older with uninterrupted careers in the same company who – thanks to the rigid employment protection legislation were traditionally protected – have been facing an increased risk of job loss (López-Andreu, 2019). In this regard, the 2008 credit crunch has also exacerbated the tendency, already apparent since the early 2000s, to dismiss managers and executives due to restructuring processes (Unioncamere n.d.).

A significant number of studies explore the experience of job loss among managerial and professional employees (Gabriel et al, 2013). However, with few remarkable exceptions (Gabriel et al, 2013; Garret-Peters, 2009; Mendenhall et al, 2008; Gray et al, 2015; Raito and Lahelma, 2015; Riach and Loretto, 2009), the literature is rather short of contributions focusing on late-career unemployment and attempted transitions out of unemployment amongst this group of workers – despite age-related issues having progressively become central in the public and political debate on employment.

A rapidly ageing population is said to make older workers crucial for maintaining the sustainability of social security systems, and guaranteeing personal and family wellbeing (Eurostat, 2019). Notwithstanding its popularity among policy makers, the prospect of working longer raises a few controversial issues that relate, among others, to the opportunities for older people to make genuine choices around work. These opportunities are affected by the number of jobs available to them, as well as the policies that regulate work and the welfare state (Lain et al, 2018).

As far as the Italian case is concerned, a persistent lack of job opportunities is still a huge problem cutting across generations. This increases the risk that policies designed to extend working life might reduce the opportunities available for younger workers, sustaining the widespread idea of an intergenerational conflict in the labour market and the society at large (Marcaletti, 2013). Overall, in a country that is home to one of the world's oldest populations, older workers' labour market inclusion appears to be a topic as much relevant as controversial, which has not been faced yet with a long-term comprehensive policy strategy (Franco and Tommasino, 2020).

Starting from these premises, drawing on data collected through 15 in-depth interviews (Legard et al, 2003), this contribution explores the experience of unemployment and attempted transition out of unemployment among upper-level managers in Italy who lost their job while in their 50s.

The chapter commences with a brief description of the institutional context in which Italian older workers experience labour market mobility and, in particular, the body of policies and processes that are likely to influence late-career employment transitions. It proceeds to describe the research design and then it draws upon the interview materials to examine how participants interpret the experience of job loss and unemployment and react to it. Findings show the huge obstacles older workers meet when trying to re-enter the labour market, especially related to suffered and self-imposed age discrimination (Duncan and Loretto, 2004; Macnicol, 2006). In the discussion, the contribution reflects on the strategies participants adopt in order to make sense around difficult and frustrating experiences and find a new place in the world of work. This shows how common discourses about ageing and work in contemporary labour markets (Thomas et al, 2014; Lane, 2011) seem to limit the options available to react to the situation.

The context of attempted late-career transitions from unemployment in Italy

Italy is home to one of the world's oldest populations (Eurostat, 2019). As of January 1, 2019, 22.9 per cent of the population is aged 65-plus and 7.2 per cent is aged 80-plus; it is the largest proportion of older people per total population in Europe. Conversely, the number of residents aged 15 or under has progressively shrunk and is currently 13 per cent of the total population (they were 17 per cent in 1990) (Eurostat, 2020).

As in most European countries, the age composition of the population is linked to the fertility fluctuation that took place in the second half of the 20th century: the so-called 'baby boomers' are now transitioning into old age, while a significant proportion of the working age population is made of the 'baby bust' cohort - the generation following the baby boomers who had very low fertility rates

(Mazzola et al, 2015). These circumstances, the progressive increase in life expectancy at birth (83.4 in 2018) and the constant decrease in fertility rates (1.28 in 2018) have been contributing to a progressive increase in the older population and it is expected to reach 250,000 individuals in 2050 (Eurostat, 2020). This is notwithstanding the mitigation effects of the positive net migration flows, which have been sustaining the working age population and the fertility levels over the last 30 years (Mazzola et al, 2015).

As in most developed countries, the rapid ageing of the population raises concerns especially regarding the economic growth and the sustainability of the social security system (Eurostat, 2019). In Italy, the weight of public expenditure on old-age benefits is particularly relevant: pension spending amounts to 16.2 per cent of the GDP; together with Greece, it is the highest in the OECD (OECD, 2015). Public pensions, combined with means-tested benefits for low earners and survivors achieve almost universal coverage of the population aged over 65 (Floridi, 2020). The increase in the number of pensioners and the shrinking number of contributors are clearly undermining the sustainability of the system.

The main answer of the Italian government to the challenges posed by the ageing of the population have been a number of reforms of the pension system (Franco and Tommasino, 2020), which culminated in the last so called Fornero Reform that was passed in December 2011 during the technocratic government of Monti. The reform accelerated the introduction of a Notional Defined Contribution system – in line with the previous Dini reform (1995). It also increased the minimum pension age (irrespective of sector or gender), which is scheduled to further increase linked to life expectancy, and narrowed the opportunities for early retirement (Giuliani, 2020). Notwithstanding some shortcomings pointed out by scholars (Giuliani, 2020), the reform has contributed to the prolongation of work careers, increasing the average effective age of labour market exit for both men (62 years) and women (61 years), although it still remains lower than the OECD average (OECD, 2017).

Nevertheless, neither the 2011 reform, nor the related or subsequent labour market policy interventions have succeeded in raising older workers' employment to intended levels (OECD, 2019). In fact, although in Italy the employment rate of older workers has constantly increased over the last 20 years, for both genders, it is still well below the corresponding EU28 level (60.0 per cent in 2019). The total employment rate of workers aged 55-64 was 27.3 per cent in 2000 and reached 54.3 per cent in 2019 – women maintain a negative gap of around 20 percentage points with respect to men (Eurostat, 2020b). Moreover, since the 2008 economic crisis older workers have faced increasing risks of job loss and unemployment (Jin et al, 2016). Traditionally, the strict Italian employment protection legislation has favoured the so-called 'insiders', workers with a stable

contract who enjoy favourable employment conditions: typically, middle-aged or older men employed full-time by big companies (Jessoula et al, 2010). The crisis and the following austerity period have caused a spread of the risks to core workers, also because of the increase in employers' ability to hire and fire guaranteed by labour market reforms that (at least partially) embraced liberalization pressures (López-Andreu, 2019).

Even though Italian older workers are still less frequently separated from a permanent job than their younger counterparts, their probability of becoming unemployed has almost doubled since the 2008 economic crisis (Jin et al, 2016). Moreover, after losing a job, older workers tend to experience longer unemployment periods and their probability of falling out of the labour market altogether is higher (Stier and Endeweld, 2015). Their professional experience does not improve the chances of re-employment. When they succeed in finding a new job, both earnings and working conditions tend to deteriorate, especially if the spell of unemployment is very long (Frosch, 2006; Jin et al, 2016). The barriers that Italian older workers face when trying to revive their career can be attributed, on the one hand, to the generalised persistent scarcity of job opportunities and, on the other, to the lack of a comprehensive strategy for active ageing promotion (Franco and Tommasino, 2020). Despite the last pension reform which has successfully intervened on the side of the so-called 'pull factors' (Walker, 2006), by reducing the possibilities of choosing to retire earlyⁱ, other relevant variables have been systematically ignored.

The most important factor that is ignored by policy is the lack of public care services. Within a familistic system, older adults – especially women – often have to manage complex care responsibilities, with critical consequences for their effective participation in the labour market (Checcucci et al, 2020). Also, the lack of policies or services specifically aimed at sustaining older workers' employability, both on the side of the government and companies – and reflected in the low levels of older workers' training participationⁱⁱ – helps to explain why displaced older workers are very likely to become inactive after experiencing unemployment (Checcucci et al, 2020). On top of this, it is important to consider the lack of labour market policies ensuring that an increasing labour supply of older workers is met by an adequate demand, especially in a context where the idea of an intergenerational conflict in the labour market is still common (Marcaletti, 2013).

Methods

This contribution is the product of qualitative research based on 15 in-depth interviews (Legard et al, 2003) with upper-level managers aged between 52 and 65 years who lost their job in their fifties. The research was carried out in 2016, in Milan. Participants were recruited through purposive

sampling (Hood, 2007). Access was gained via (1) a training course addressed to unemployed managers and professionals who wished to re-qualify as management trainers, organised by a local industrial association, and (2) an association for older workers. The association offers moral and material support to workers who lose their job late in their career. Members are unemployed workers aged over 40 who struggle to re-enter the labour market after a period of unemployment. The activity of the association includes lobbying, training and networking initiatives.

Participants in the training course and members of the association were contacted via email, in order to select upper-level managers who lost their job when they were in their fifties, and who were still unemployed or had temporary jobs at the time of the research. In short, individuals who have never found a stable job after being made redundant or dismissed in their fifties. The focus was on workers in their fifties (at the time of the job loss) because even though this does not constitute a homogeneous group, literature shows that age makes the situation of these workers unique in many ways (Kira and Klehe, 2016; Steel and Tori, 2019). Most research investigating the experience of unemployment and precarious work among older workers focuses on individuals aged over 50 (see for example Lain et al, 2018; Riach and Loretto, 2009; Steel and Tori, 2019). Moreover, the age of 50 corresponds to the age at which labour force participation begins to decline in many countries (OECD, 2006).

Among the 39 potential participants who met the selection criteria, 15 accepted to participate – 13 men and 2 women; there were only four women in the population from which the sample was derived. Even though the sample is small, it nonetheless meets the recommendations on qualitative sampling for phenomenological studies (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Morse, 1994). Further details about the sample are in Table 6.1; the numbers after quotes in the ‘Findings’ section relate to individuals listed in the table.

TABLE 6.1 about here

People who refused to participate often said that they prefer not to recall the moment in which they were dismissed because it is a cause of suffering. The self-selection of participants has skewed the sample in the sense that people who accepted to participate in the research were willing – and some of them even enthusiastic – to narrate their experiences. It is acknowledged that not all unemployed upper-level managers who lose their job in late-career may have experiences and emotions similar to the ones discussed in this contribution. Moreover, the limited number of female participants – that reflects the low number of women employed in upper-level managerial positions in Italy (Ferri et al, 2018) – delimits the possibility for discussing the gendered dimension of critical issues related to

late-career job loss and unemployment, as well as the gendered dimension of ageism (Duncan and Loretto, 2004).

The unemployment periods (absence of any kind of paid work) that followed the job loss lasted from a minimum of two to a maximum of seven years. One of the participants, after two years of unemployment decided to dedicate his time to care for his chronically ill mother.

As mentioned earlier, some of the individuals contacted refused to participate in the study for they preferred not to recall the moment of their layoff. In order to address the potential distress deriving from the narration of the dismissal, participants were first invited to briefly illustrate the story of their professional career. This allowed them to open up and gradually approach the most recent episode of involuntary job loss. They were then invited to comment on the experience of job loss and on how their view of this experience has changed from the moment of the dismissal to the present moment. The interview then focused on the recent years of unemployment/(under)employment. Participants were invited to comment on the experience of job seeking, on the work episodes over the last years and on their status at the moment the interview took place. Instead of a specific set of questions, using an interview agenda allowed them to reflect on a broad range of issues related to the domains of inquiry, commenting on previous experiences as well as present feelings and future expectations (Zikic and Richardsson, 2007).

Interviews lasted between 30 (1 case) and 90 minutes, they were audiotaped, responses were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. A bilingual colleague verified the translations.

Analytic memos on each interview were developed over the data collection period. Coding techniques (Weston et al, 2001) were then employed to analyse memos and transcripts in order to identify processes and cultural resources participants use in order to make sense around their experiences (Riach and Loretto, 2009). In a second stage of the analysis, connections and contradictions between participants' accounts were examined through comparison within and between cases.

Findings

The analysis of the interview materials led to the emergence of the processes that were key to participants' meaning making around the experience of unemployment and the attempts to revive their careers. The obstacles participants encountered in finding a new stable job mainly related to suffered and self-imposed age discrimination (Duncan and Loretto, 2004; Macnicol, 2006). These

experiences forced them to relate, for the first time, to the identity of the older worker (Riach and Loretto, 2009) and with precarious work (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2017). The strategies they adopted to deal with these experiences included constructing the stereotype of the unenthusiastic job seeker, described as the antithesis of the idealized proactive worker (Lane, 2011; Sennet, 2006), and using it to refer to older workers and contrast them to their younger colleagues. By distancing themselves from this stereotypical character, they were able to feel legitimated to re-enter the labour market. Moreover, participants tried to re-affirm their previous professional identity (Daskalaki and Simosi, 2018; Riach and Loretto, 2009; Spyridakis, 2016) through welcoming forms of precarious work that allowed them to maintain some sort of continuation. This implied embracing and adapting to a new structuring of work.

The strategies adopted by participants to give a meaning to the world of experienced uncertainty they came to know with the job loss and find a new valuable place in it are now described in detail.

Finding a new job: age discrimination and the unenthusiastic older worker

Nearly all the participants in this study viewed unemployment as a temporary episode immediately after the job loss, rather than the end of their career (Gabriel et al, 2013). Actually, they described the immediate aftermath of the layoff as a period in which they had continued to actively and intensively attempt to find a new job because they were sure that unemployment was a temporary condition. This was based on their previous employment transitions, the 'prestigious' jobs and 'ascending career' they had. In short, they were confident to be able to find a new managerial job soon, and they considered their experience and expertise as their strongest asset in the search for a new job (Gabriel et al, 2013).

Many of them had previous experiences of voluntary or involuntary job loss (before they reached the age of 45), variously described as "normal" and "very easy to cope with". They 'proactively welcomed the challenge' of finding a new job and considered these transitions as an opportunity 'for their career development'. Often, when they were younger, they re-entered the labour market right after the job loss, because they were offered a new opportunity through the intermediation of head-hunters or friends employed in similar positions in other companies.

During the first year of unemployment after losing their job in late-career, they engaged in an active and confident job search, for they were sure that their "being proactive and not expecting help from anyone" would have produced the same (positive) ending as in the past. They contacted friends and former colleagues in their professional network who could have potentially helped, and they "sifted through hundreds of job offers" [11].

However, as one of the participants described, this active job search had often led to few or zero interviews: "...I applied for more than sixty or seventy positions, I had three or four job interviews...but nothing happened" [10]. Some participants remarked that despite the intense job search, they had never – "not even once – been offered the possibility of discussing [their] applications at interview" [11].

Soon, they had come to realize that the present situation was very different from the employment transitions experienced in the past. In particular, all of them underlined the progressive prolongation of unemployment periods:

'When you are in your sixties, nobody thinks about the possibility of hiring you. Working as an executive, since when I was 45 finding new jobs has become more and more difficult and unemployment periods have progressively lasted longer...from one to six months...to one year and then nothing.' [11]

Consequently, they began thinking of their unemployment condition as a "prelude of retirement, rather than the starting point of a new career stage" [4]. Even though they never stopped searching for a new job, they maintained that after some time they "realized that the last episode [layoff] was the final act of [their] career", an "unexpected end" that had "completely changed [their lives] from one day to another" [4].

What influenced the shift from confidence to disillusionment was their first-hand experience with few opportunities and even fewer job interviews. Moreover, the experience of friends and colleagues of the same age who were facing the same situation and media reports describing the tendency of Italian companies to dismiss managers and executives during the economic crisis contributed to changing their positive attitude into a negative feeling of disillusionment and frustration (Menedhall et al, 2008).

Job search exposed all participants to episodes of age discrimination. As the following quotes help clarify, they ran into many – directly or indirectly – discriminatory job adverts: "Most job opportunities advertised are blatantly for young workers, for graduates at their first experience...are jobs that a person over 50 cannot do" [6]. In the few cases in which they succeeded in the first stage of selection and gained the opportunity to discuss their application at interview, they maintained that they were openly told that they were too old for that job.

Self-imposed age-discrimination is another relevant issue which emerged from their stories. Participants admitted that on more than one occasion they did not apply for a job for which they were qualified, because in their opinion the company “was clearly looking for a young candidate” [6]. Even when they were selected for an interview, sometimes they renounced it: “... I arrived there and there was a line of guys, aged around 25, probably at their first job interview...I looked at them and I decided to leave” [14].

Being discriminated on account of age pushed them to reflect on what it means to be labelled as “older” in the labour market. Their accounts highlighted that the barriers to reviving their career were constructed through judging them based on their age, and the fact that they were too old, and not on the assessment of their knowledge and competences. Despite expressing frustration at this, their narratives reproduced the same logic when, for example, they maintained that workers over 50 cannot apply for certain kinds of job. They tended to refer to chronological age as a factor capable of determining, in itself, the difference between those who succeed and those who do not (in recovering their career), those who can and those who cannot (discussing their application at interview).

Confronted with the identity of the older worker – that they felt was imposed upon them through being labelled as “too old” during the job search – participants engaged in an argument counterposing younger and older workers. This argument was put forth through two main strategies.

First, participants constructed the stereotype of the unenthusiastic job seeker to refer to older unemployed workers, described through a number of attributes and behavioural claims. Specifically, they referred to them as those who “do not react, continuously complain, are not proactive enough in developing their competences and often do not enough to solve their situation” [15]. The stereotype of the unenthusiastic job seeker was built as the antithesis of the idealized worker typical of the neoliberal culture: one who is entrepreneurial and self-directed, and can easily cope with frequent transitions in the labour market, embracing them as an opportunity (Lane, 2011; Sennet, 2007).

In participants’ accounts, the unenthusiastic job seeker coincided with older unemployed workers, whilst the characteristics of the idealized proactive worker were attributed to younger workers. For example, they described younger workers as “a natural power...younger workers have much more energy and many ideas, their minds work better. They have ideas and are eager to get involved, even for free. They have determination and enthusiasm...they never give up” [10].

It is interesting to note that they considered working for free as a commendable effort. In line with this, participants stressed, with a negative tone, that older workers “cost more [than their younger colleagues] and they have been guaranteed certain rights that may cause inefficiencies for the company” [13]. The practice of self-exploitation (working passionately for free) – typical of neoliberal labour markets (Brienza, 2016; Schmiz, 2013) – which participants’ attributed to younger workers, is described as an opportunity to improve workers’ marketability, and is contrasted with the outdated and inefficient work standards of ‘payments and dependence’ (Finn, 2000: 393), embodied by the older workers.

Participants used the stereotypes of the unenthusiastic job seeker and the idealized younger worker in two ways. On the one hand, by highlighting that they “have never quit searching for a job”, or again “have immediately rolled up their sleeves to face the situation” [4], they were able to juxtapose their actions with others who are in the same situation but are not entrepreneurial enough or proactive, thus distancing themselves from the stereotypical older worker. On the other hand, they stressed their admiration for younger workers and their feeling much more comfortable “with them, than with those of [their] age” [1] as a means to affirm their affinity to the character of the idealized proactive worker.

Second, participants positioned themselves within the debate on intergenerational conflict (Hess et al, 2017). They stressed the fact that “younger workers are those who deserve to work” [5]. By having a conscience that youth employment “must be prioritised” and highlighting that with their participation in the labour market they do not “intend to deprive young people of work opportunities” [15], participants were able to legitimize their desire for re-entering the labour market. Moreover, by stressing the fact that they ‘take young peoples’ side’ in this imagined battle between younger and older workers, they were able to reject, once again, the identity of the older worker. Their accounts reflected the common (wrong) belief that older workers’ employment and the prolongation of work careers should be blamed for younger workers’ unemployment (Marcaletti, 2013). An idea that in Italy has been reinforced by recent pension system reforms that have reintroduced early retirement options, justifying them based on the young in-old out logic (see note 1).

New employment conditions: chasing activity, embracing precarity

Participants did not succeed in finding a new stable job. Nevertheless, nearly none of them had ever considered giving up paid work and, once they abandoned the idea of recovering their careers as upper-level employees, they started searching for whatever job “just to work”. This multiplied the possibilities of facing discrimination on account of their age, because their long career and their previous qualified experience made their profile unfitting for jobs with no qualification or no

experience needed. The main reason behind their desire to find a stable job, even with a lower position, was not financial. Many participants did not express concern over possible financial distress. On the contrary, they maintained that their past earnings and the 'golden parachute' that accompanied the layoff could have allowed them "to sit and wait for retirement" [2].

However, they could hardly imagine the option of giving up paid work because it "is fundamental to feel active and [...] one must continue doing something in order to keep a useful role in the couple and in the family" [6]. Again, as the following quote explains, they considered it the key to personal wellbeing: "When you stop working you can easily go insane. If you stay still and you don't try to do something, you are going to go insane very soon" [3].

When talking about "being active" and "doing something" they referred to productive activity. From their accounts emerged that the possibility of feeling well and useful to their family and to society resided in having a paid job. Activity was thus interpreted only with reference to the traditional notion of labour. They did not engage in a personal renegotiation of the meaning of work (Riach and Loretto, 2009). As one of them affirmed:

'Nothing has changed in the way in which I look at the meaning and value of work in my life and in the way in which I define myself as a worker....I am an upper-manager...simply as it is...I am just doing my job in a different way...' [4].

Only in one case, a participant, after two years of unsuccessful attempts of finding a job, decided to give up and spend his time and energy in caring for his chronically ill mother. The other interviewees, including the two women in the group, never mentioned caring or volunteering as possible alternative ways of utilizing their time in their years of unemployment.

As the above-mentioned quote shows, participating in paid employment, even if it implied a downgrade in terms of position and salary, allowed them to continue defining themselves as upper-level professionals.

As a result of an active and intense job search and a desire of 'doing whatever job' was available, all interviewees had some sort of work experience after the layoff. They had never been able to re-enter the labour market on a stable and qualified contract, even if they declared they would have preferred it. Nevertheless, nearly all of them had temporary, underpaid and underqualified jobs that "not even remotely could compare with [their] previous job" [15], as one of the participants stated. Specifically, they reported working self-employed and part-time jobs that included: short-term

consulting contracts, tutoring and teaching and commission-based sales jobs. All jobs were found through personal contacts.

In financial terms, these jobs were described as “very similar to unemployment” [15]. Moreover, participants stressed the fact that these new jobs were always temporary and very discontinuous: “I am happy to change job every six months...however, the problem is that between one job and the other I often wait up to one year” [14].

Despite the bad working conditions they had been experiencing, their accounts around these forms of employment never involved terms such as ‘instability’ or ‘insecurity’. Even if, as mentioned previously, nearly all of them were currently working – or had experienced working – with short-term, unstable and underpaid contracts, none maintained that they were experiencing bad jobs. Instead, they variously referred to these jobs as “flexible”, “interesting” and “satisfactory”. Overall, they described the new (and worst) (under)employment conditions with a positive accent (Gandini, 2016). In other words, despite these working conditions which did not emerge as the result of a genuine choice but as the only available option, they never described this option as a bad one. The interpretation around the experiences they were living excluded any form of contestation of precarious low paid work, as well any tentative of constructing alternative selves outside the structural spaces of paid work and traditional work organisations (Daskalaki and Simosi, 2018).

Only a few interviewees developed a narrative of liberation and said that this new life was allowing them “to find a new balance between work, family and personal interests” [2]; thus, an opportunity to escape an undesirable work. For the majority of the participants the new conditions that characterized their work experience did not correspond to what they actually wished for but, at the same time, were not something they felt allowed to complain about.

Specifically, they used terms such as “normal” and “nothing to complain about” when describing employment conditions that are typical of the risk economy (Mendenhall et al, 2008), with its emphasis on flexibility and contingent workforce. Moreover, they declared to “understand” and “justify” companies that had dismissed many managers and executives, due to economic and financial reasons.

Participants’ accounts seemed to reflect an interpretation of their personal experience around job termination as the natural consequence of changes that have affected work, labour markets and, more in general, the economy. They interpreted their condition as the average condition of contemporary workers. They did not consider themselves particularly unlucky or unsuccessful: on the contrary, they maintained that their situation “mirrors the condition that most workers are currently

forced to cope with” [13]. In addition, this condition was not something one could complain about, because it “is one’s own responsibility to be able to cope with a flexible and competitive market...it is not companies’ fault ...” [13].

‘If you are not able to find a new job, to recover your career, it means that you have not been able to adequate your skills and competences to the new needs of the market [...] that you have not invested enough in your development and in creating a network of helpful people.’ [8]

As shown, participants blamed workers who are not able to “adapt to these new [employment] conditions” and maintained that, regardless of their age, these people are not enough “self-entrepreneur” [15]. Immersed in the neoliberal culture of meritocratic individualism, which permeates the managerial world (Lane, 2011) they inhabited for a long time, participants tended to interpret the failure in finding a new job as the consequence of personal flaws and, in particular, the absence of an enterprising attitude.

It is worth mentioning that being one ‘among many others workers’ did not imply the development of a sense of solidarity, nor the idea that a collective action could sustain the improvement of the situation for all. Since what participants are facing is interpreted as natural in contemporary economic system, and companies are justified in their choices and their personnel policies and practices, the responsibility for succeeding in finding a new job is on each of the worker’s shoulders.

Discussion

Participants’ stories clearly show the huge obstacles that older workers – even those who previously had prestigious and highly-paid jobs – meet when trying to recover their career after job loss, in the Italian context. As data on late-career unemployment show, finding a new job is difficult and finding a job similar to that lost seems to be almost impossible. Participants’ experiences reflect a context characterized by few concrete opportunities to getting back into paid employment and in which age discrimination – either suffered or self-imposed – is evident.

The experience of late-career job loss and unemployment leads older workers to engage in a process of meaning making and (re)construction of a coherent sense of self (Gabriel et al, 2013; Riach and Loretto, 2009). Findings suggest that this process seems to imply an individual transformation oriented towards the production of a self that is fit for work in contemporary labour markets (Bandinelli, 2019): a self-directed entrepreneurial individual that carries all the responsibility to manage work transitions (Lane, 2011) and survive job instability. The logics of efficiency and

productivity (Bröckling, 2016; Daskalaki and Simosi, 2018) dominate the time of unemployment and do not leave room for imagining alternative selves outside the domain of paid labour. In fact, in contrast with what emerges from other studies (Riach and Loretto, 2009), respondents do not negotiate the meaning of work and seek to affirm a continuation of prior professional identity in order to demonstrate their capacity of successfully adapting to a condition of uncertainty. No room is left for contesting precarious low paid work and the structural causes of a growing insecurity that dominates the world of work.

Being discriminated against on account of age is lived by participants as a frustrating experience that leads them to construct a negative stereotyped character they use to describe older workers and to distance themselves from this identity. This negative stereotype is described as the antithesis of the idealized proactive worker: the older worker is one who does not successfully manage work transitions, due to her scarce flexibility and entrepreneurial attitude. The contrast between the older worker and the proactive worker is reinforced through stereotyping younger workers as adaptable to company needs and deserving of work. Thus, the common discourse of autonomy and self-responsibility (Lane, 2011), espoused by participants, nurtures an ageist attitude that manifests through stereotyping younger and older workers as respectively deserving or not of work. At the same time, respondents try to make their age invisible by juxtaposing their attitudes and actions with the ones of the older workers, stressing their admiration for younger workers and expressing their solidarity to them. The lack of reaction against the bad working conditions brought about by the progressive process of employment de-regulation drive respondents to the point where older workers are also the ones to blame for the difficulties that younger Italian workers face in finding a job.

Overall, work-related problems that may occur when one experiences late-career job loss are attributed to a supposed decreasing usefulness of workers as they age, and the responsibility for finding a solution to these problems is entirely put on individuals' shoulders. This idea delimitates the spectrum of possible and acceptable work-related attitudes and behaviours in late-career, because it is based on an interpretation of vulnerability as a personal responsibility, rather than as the consequence of structural conditions. If people find themselves out of the labour market and experiencing precarious work, the only acceptable way out of this condition is the adoption of an entrepreneurial attitude and of a free-agent mentality in the search for a new job. According to this logic, unsuccessful experiences are the result of 'not being as active and proactive as needed'.

This interpretation of unsuccessful late-career transitions out of unemployment undercuts importantly any possibility for individual and collective resistance to age discrimination, because it is sustained by ageist attitudes which seems to be internalised (and thus invisible) by those who suffer

from discriminatory practices, as well as because it diverts the attention from any possible political solution.

Conclusion

The research discussed in this contribution has explored the lived experience of attempted transitions out of unemployment among older workers who had high-level managerial jobs, in Italy. Findings show how participants' interpretation of the experiences that follow the loss are shaped by concrete obstacles – in particular, related to episodes of age discrimination – that limit the possibilities of successfully reviving the career, as well as common discourses about ageing and work in contemporary labour markets (Thomas et al, 2014).

Inevitably, any conclusion based on this study must be explorative. No generalizations can be drawn from these data, but this was not the aim of a research based on qualitative interviews. Yet, they allow for a reading of individual accounts of personal events in the light of specific contextual conditions and socio-cultural processes (Murgia, 2011). Further research is needed in order to explore the gendered dimension of late-career employment transitions, especially in a context where women still face huge disadvantages in their working lives.

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Table 6.1: Participants summary of unemployed individuals

Identification number	Name (pseudonym)	Age at time of interview	Age at time of job loss	Gender	Last stable job	Current position
1	Marco	55	50	Male	ICT Manager	Business consultant for one company; he works two days a week
2	Andrea	57	49	Male	Marketing Executive	Teacher
3	Stefano	58	50	Male	Finance Executive	Management consultant; very casual work
4	Alessandro	58	48	Male	Supply chain operations manager	Temporary manager; very casual work
5	Roberto	56	50	Male	General manager	Secretary at a sailing centre
6	Giuseppe	64	57	Male	Sales executive	Retired (just retired)
7	Flavio	56	49	Male	Pharmaceutical sales manager	Marketing trainer; self-employed
8	Luca	59	50	Male	Production executive	Business consultant (self-employed)
9	Maria	57	51	Female	Administration manager	Careworker
10	Angelo	63	55	Male	Head of internationalization	Part-time business consultant
11	Gianni	65	59	Male	Finance manager	Unemployed
12	Luigi	60	50	Male	Product manager	Unemployed (Caring for his mother)
13	Davide	59	52	Male	Sales manager	Unemployed
14	Paolo	52	48	Male	Product development manager	Trainer (self-employed)
15	Rosa	56	50	Female	General manager	Management consultant (self-employed)

ⁱ It is worth mentioning that at the beginning of 2019 the Lega-Five Stars Movement government approved a new early-retirement scheme: Quota 100. Quota 100 introduced the possibility for workers aged 62 years and having made 38 years of contributions to retire, thus allowing them to retire five years earlier with a limited reduction of the pension amount. The new scheme was approved as an experiment running for three years, and it would have been replaced by a new early retirement scheme (the Lega-Five Stars Movement's government fell in August 2019). The first data about beneficiaries show that Quota 100 ended up addressing workers with a long contributory history, from the private sector (50%) or self-employed (20%), thus mostly men living in the North (Perri, 2019).

ⁱⁱ According to the OECD (2019), less than 10% of older workers in Italy have access to training.