

## Qualitative Methods for Studying Age and Work

Annika Wilhelmy<sup>1</sup>, Guido Hertel<sup>2</sup>, and Tine Köhler<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Zurich

<sup>2</sup> Department of Organizational and Business Psychology, University of Münster

<sup>3</sup> Department of Management and Marketing, The University of Melbourne

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### Author Note

Annika Wilhelmy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8566-3521>

Tine Köhler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0480-472X>

Guido Hertel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7754-2786>

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Annika Wilhelmy, Department of Psychology, University of Zurich, Binzmuehlestrasse 14/12, 8050 Zurich, Switzerland, E-mail: a.wilhelmy@psychologie.uzh.ch.

The second and third author contributed equally to the work.

**Abstract**

In this chapter, we describe and discuss innovative ways for employing qualitative methods in the field of age and work. Our aim is to inspire researchers to explore how qualitative methods may allow them to address research questions that they have so far been unable to examine using quantitative methods alone. We provide an introduction to qualitative research methods by outlining core characteristics of these methods, opportunities they afford, challenges researchers need to manage, and giving recommendations for their application. We also introduce a taxonomy that connects key dimensions of aging research with core aims of qualitative research, develop research questions that emerge from this taxonomy, and illustrate how qualitative methods can advance the research domain of age and work.

*Keywords:* Qualitative research, qualitative methods, age, aging, work

### **Qualitative Methods for Studying Age and Work**

Research on aging and age-related differences at work is still a new field in psychology (see Chapter 1 of this volume). Driven by increasing life expectancies and ongoing demographic changes worldwide, organizations and societies are faced with new challenges but also interesting opportunities (see Chapter 18 of this volume for examples). However, established models and frameworks in work and organizational psychology are often not sufficiently sensitive for the specifics of older workers. Moreover, the high (and so far unseen) level of demographic changes might have initiated entirely new processes and reactions at work that are not captured by existing frameworks and related measures. In this chapter, we argue that qualitative research methods offer novel avenues for understanding age at work, affiliated processes (e.g., retirement), and the mechanisms through which age influences other relevant organizational variables. Qualitative research methods allow researchers to explore aging processes, aging experiences, and interactions between individuals of different age groups, which can lead to novel theorizing on age and a more nuanced conceptualization of how age impacts work experiences and outcomes. However, age researchers have not yet taken full advantage of the various possibilities that qualitative research methods offer (Amabile, 2019).

This chapter serves as an introduction for scholars and students who have no or only a rudimentary familiarity with qualitative research. Our aim is to inspire researchers in the domain of age and work to explore how qualitative research methods may allow them to address research questions that they have so far been unable to examine using quantitative methods alone. In the first part of this chapter, we outline core characteristics of qualitative research methods, opportunities they afford, and challenges researchers need to manage, as well as recommendations for their application. In the second part of this chapter, we introduce a taxonomy connecting key dimensions of aging research with core aims of qualitative research.

We further develop specific research questions that emerge from this taxonomy, and provide concrete illustrations how research might be advanced using specific qualitative methods.

### **An Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods**

#### **Defining Features of Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research constitutes a broad umbrella of various perspectives, practices, and methods. It can be defined as a set of methods that “seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 520). Qualitative research uses interpretive, naturalistic approaches, and social actors’ meanings to study processes and phenomena in the environment in which they naturally occur (Gephart, 2004). As such, qualitative research is grounded in the idea that knowledge is subjective, and that access to knowledge must consider human examination and sense-making.

Qualitative research most commonly is inductive (i.e., making an inference based on observations) or abductive (i.e., inferring an explanation for an observation by drawing a probable conclusion from existing knowledge). It uses a bottom-up approach to theorizing by systematically analyzing observations that capture the participants’ perspective and experiences, and by developing insights from these data (i.e., inductive reasoning). It then uses subsequent abductive reasoning about the nature of the observed phenomenon and the underlying mechanisms that create the observations. Qualitative research comprises an investigative and adaptive process in which researchers gradually make sense of what is studied, for example, by immersing themselves in the natural setting chosen for the study, entering participants’ worlds, and exploring their perspectives through interaction. It also involves cataloguing and classifying information about the phenomenon of interest, and potentially collecting additional data to extend and clarify conclusions drawn from the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Along similar lines,

qualitative research is flexible to match evolving demands of the research process, adapting the research approach as researchers learn more about their phenomenon of interest, so that ensuing data collection can be targeted at theory clarification and consolidation (Lee et al., 1999).

Like quantitative methods, qualitative methods are grounded in the researcher's ontological (i.e., what a researcher perceives as knowledge) and epistemological position (i.e., what a researcher perceives as the best way to understand and learn about the nature of a phenomenon) (Rheinhardt et al., 2018). For instance, an interpretivist stance emphasizes that knowledge is a subjective and contextually mediated account of the lives of those who are studied. This is relevant for aging research because individuals' experiences differ across their lifespan, and the field would benefit from deeper insights into age-related changes and the meaning individuals attribute to age and aging (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 2002). "Retirement age", for instance, may harbor a threatening meaning for some people but invoke images of a work-life well-lived for others. In contrast, a postmodernist stance emphasizes the political dimension inherent in knowledge, which creates and maintains power relations in society. In aging research, terminology can, for example, reinforce or buffer discrimination against older workers (for a comprehensive overview of epistemological paradigms, see Locke & Golden-Biddle, 2002).

Importantly, the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research refers to more than "no numbers vs. numbers." For example, consider differences in the understanding of a specific survey item between younger and older workers that might lead to the same ratings even though the item is interpreted quite differently. From a quantitative research perspective, these differences would be considered a source of error variance. From a qualitative research perspective, however, these different interpretations are interesting and potentially meaningful observations that could contribute to insights into the phenomenon of interest and subsequently,

to theorizing. Thus, qualitative research focuses on participants' unique and idiosyncratic realities rather than on what is common across larger groups of people (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Likewise, qualitative research considers extreme cases or participants with highly unique experiences as potentially important for theoretical insight and the exploration of phenomenon boundaries (Murphy et al., 2017).

### **Goals and Typical Designs of Qualitative Research**

A central purpose of qualitative research is to understand a particular social phenomenon, situation, role, event, or interaction. With respect to age and work, we differentiate four main goals or purposes related to qualitative research in this chapter: (a) understanding meaning and sense-making, (b) capturing lived experiences and differences in life/career courses and narratives, (c) determining processes and dynamics, and (d) exploring context influences (see Table 1 for an overview). Typical research questions addressed with qualitative methods often start with “how,” “why,” “when,” and “what” (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016) and explore reasons, conditions, or mechanisms over the course of the qualitative study, rather than testing predetermined reasons, conditions, or mechanisms as would be the case in quantitative research. Therefore, qualitative approaches are often described as hypothesis *generating*, as compared to hypothesis *testing* quantitative research.

To provide answers to “how,” “why,” “when,” and “what” questions, a vast range of designs, approaches, methods, and techniques can be used in qualitative research. Lê and Schmid (2019) differentiated three families of qualitative designs: post-positivist (e.g., comparative case studies, extended case method), interpretive (e.g., grounded theory, action research), and critical designs (e.g., discourse analysis).-Within these various qualitative designs, different data collection and analysis procedures can be employed. Data collection techniques include semi-structured interviews (i.e., using a predefined set of questions but also new questions as a result

of what the interviewee says; for an overview see e.g. Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), focus groups (i.e., a group of people assembled to participate in a discussion on predefined questions), open-ended questions in questionnaires (e.g. Salmon, 2016), systematic observations, and diary events method (i.e., reporting on events during a specified time period and with a short time span between occurrence and reporting). Data analysis methods include thematic analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006), content analysis (e.g., Neuendorf, 2017), narrative analysis (e.g., Riessman, 2008), grounded theory coding (e.g., Locke, 2001), discourse analysis (e.g., Vaara et al., 2016), and template analysis (e.g., Brooks et al., 2015), among many others. Comprehensive overviews of qualitative research designs, approaches, method, and techniques are provided by Lee et al. (1999) and Locke and Golden-Biddle (2002). Different qualitative methods and techniques (and even elements of these) can and should be flexibly combined as long as they are nested within the same research paradigm (e.g., interpretivism, post-positivism, critical realism, or phenomenology). This is referred to as the bricolage approach (Pratt, Sonenshein, et al., 2020). When using bricolage, researchers mindfully pick and choose methodological elements and explain each decision made and how it fits the purpose of their study (e.g., Grodal et al., 2020).

Importantly, qualitative methods are not opponents of, but rather complementary to, quantitative methods. An example of combining qualitative and quantitative research across publications would be a qualitative study that seeks to refresh a mature and predominantly quantitatively studied field by questioning well-trodden paths of that field (Edmundson & McManus, 2007). Qualitative and quantitative research methods can also be combined in a multi-study paper (e.g., a quantitative study might reveal a group difference and a qualitative study might seek to examine what the reasons for these differences may be). In addition, mixed methods research involves collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data in a single

study, and integrating the different approaches to achieve a more comprehensive examination of a research question (Gibson, 2017).

### **Common Challenges and Recommendations for Qualitative Research**

Conducting qualitative research is challenging, and resulting publications are judged based on the fit between research methods and research questions, extent of theoretical and practical contributions, and transparency about the methods used (Harley & Cornelissen, 2020). Due to their different goals, quality criteria for qualitative research and quantitative research differ, which often poses a challenge for scholars who are new to qualitative research. Thus, our first and foremost recommendation is to seek training in the specific literature of the qualitative method to be employed (see suggestions above) and to collaborate with researchers experienced in these methods.

Our second recommendation is to not blindly follow templates, checklists, or reporting guides such as the journal article reporting standards for qualitative research of the American Psychological Association (Levitt et al., 2018), the author guidelines for qualitative research by the Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology (“Qualitative Guidelines”, n.d.), or checklists created for specific qualitative research methods (e.g., Tong et al., 2007). While these checklists and templates might provide an informative starting point, there are many disciplinary standards and traditions as well as epistemological considerations directing how qualitative methods get employed which these checklists often do not fully acknowledge. Thus, checklists may be too simple or even misleading for employing a specific qualitative method. Furthermore, they pose the risk of putting qualitative research into a “methodological straightjacket” (Corley et al., 2020, p. 161) that restricts its core potential and capacities. Qualitative research lives from flexibility and innovativeness. Authors and reviewers should critically evaluate the applicability of reporting standards and guidelines related to the specific research project, the background,



purpose, and context of the respective study. Standards may need to be modified or abandoned when not useful for examining the study in question (Köhler et al., 2019; Wilhelmy, 2016).

There are many helpful and comprehensive frameworks on how to achieve rigor when using qualitative methods (e.g., Harley & Cornelissen, 2020). Criteria for rigor in qualitative research include *methodological coherence* (i.e., the chosen methods need to match the study's purpose and the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions), *consistency* (i.e., applying the chosen method to its full intent), *logical consistency* (i.e., the links between data, steps of data analysis, and theoretical conclusions that are logical and explicitly expressed), and *inference to the best explanation* (i.e., not accepting the most likely explanation but instead questioning one's findings and considering alternative explanations).

Challenges arise when qualitative work is inappropriately judged against criteria that stem from quantitative research. For example, during a study's ethics approval process an internal/institutional review board (IRB) may request the study protocol to be fully formed and strictly carried out as approved. Because of the iterative nature of qualitative research, the sampling strategy, interview questions, and even research questions may change as a result of learning more about the phenomenon and its context. This is considered good practice as long as such key decisions are well described and justified. A solution can be to explain to the IRB that qualitative research needs to be adaptive, to submit a study protocol about the initial focus and to add updates throughout the course of the study, or to acknowledge in the protocol that specific content may be adjusted.

Similar problems arise when trying to integrate qualitative research into the Open Science framework. Whereas some Open Science movements seem compatible with qualitative research, such as Open Access (i.e., making research publications widely available to the public), or Open Peer Review (allowing for identification of authors and reviewers and/or publishing the reviewer

comments alongside a scientific article, e.g., Ross-Hellauer, 2017), other Open Science movements are not. For example, preregistration of hypotheses is impossible for studies that are not following the hypothetico-deductive method of theory testing. Furthermore, making raw data available in online repositories (i.e., Open Data) would cause severe ethical problems for most qualitative studies because the very detailed data often cannot be sufficiently anonymized. Removing names from an interview transcript does not protect confidentiality when the specific details reported, and the jargon of the interviewee enable identification by colleagues or supervisors. Informing participants that their information would become part of Open Data might affect their openness and their responses. Similarly, organizations may no longer be willing to support such research or share organizational documents with researchers. Finally, while qualitative research is committed to transparently disclosing how data were collected and analyzed, it is not assumed that another researcher would come to the same conclusions if they followed the same steps. Far from being seen as a methodological flaw, though, qualitative research acknowledges that researchers have unique backgrounds, knowledge, skills, and experiences that are an important part of the data collection and analysis process (e.g., Pratt, Kaplan, et al., 2020). While specifics of the compatibility of qualitative research and Open Science are still being debated, we sincerely hope that future institutional solutions will be more forthcoming in their acknowledgement and acceptance of different methodological approaches and view them as a strength for holistic scientific knowledge generation.

### **Potential Contributions of Qualitative Research Methods for Studying Age and Work**

Ongoing demographic changes in most industrialized countries (and beyond) affect the workforce in many ways. For instance, the life expectancy of humans has increased by at least 20 years in the last 100 years due to advances in technologies, medicine, and nutrition. At the same time, birthrates have decreased in most industrialized countries for various reasons (e.g., Chapter

1 and 2 of this volume). As a consequence, the average age of the workforce increases, requiring adaptations of human resource management strategies (see Chapter 18 of this volume). Empirical research is mandatory to enable evidence-based adaptations rather than mere intuitive behavior, the latter often being negatively biased by pre-assumptions and age stereotypes. However, although research on age differences at work has grown in the last years (e.g., Hertel & Zacher, 2018), many age-related processes are not fully explored but rather extrapolated from generalizations based on research with younger workers (see also Chapter 1 of this volume). Moreover, the level of life expectancy and the size of the human population worldwide are entirely new in human history, so that researchers lack experience with such an increasingly large population of older people (and workers). Systematic exploration is warranted to better understand the experiences and behaviors of older workers, both with respect to within-person processes and inter-individual interactions (see also Chapter 9 of this volume).

Age differences and their impact in work contexts can be explored from different perspectives (employees vs. supervisors, customer, or clients, etc.). Moreover, aging itself is a complex process, including changes of the biological system, cognitive processes, emotional reactions, and motivational needs, as well as interactions between these systems and processes (e.g., Hertel & Zacher, 2018, for a review). These changes can result in declines of certain capacities but also in increases in skills and competencies, and in changes in priorities and orientations toward work (e.g., Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). However, existing research on age and work is often based on theories, concept specifications, and measures that have been developed with rather young participants (often college students). These existing taxonomies can neglect constructs that are more relevant for older workers. Moreover, transformations that happen as part of the ageing process can be overlooked because they are not captured by existing category systems and quantitative measures.

For instance, initial studies on age differences in work values used established concepts from general motivation research, such as the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motives, between growth, social, and security needs, or the components of expectancy models (Gärtner et al., 2019; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Rudolph et al., 2013). However, values particularly relevant for older workers, such as generativity motives (e.g., Hertel et al., 2013; Kooij et al., 2011), were rarely considered in early empirical studies, and thus overlooked as potential motivators of older workers (see Krumm et al., 2013 for an extended measure of work values). As another example, research on age differences in cognitive capacities suggests a decline of fluid intelligence after the mid-20s or even earlier (e.g., Salthouse, 2012). However, empirical studies usually applied established intelligence tests, which have been originally developed to predict performance in school. Therefore, their items resemble typical school tasks, for which younger persons are better trained than older persons. When adapting test items to contexts that are equally familiar to participants, older persons show considerable competencies in their current fields, such as job-related tasks or recreational activities (e.g., Ackerman, 1996). These examples illustrate that overgeneralizing established epistemic structures and related measures might neglect factors relevant for older workers, and might fall short to capture dynamic aging processes. One fruitful way to address this problem is to adopt insights and models from lifespan research (see Chapter 7 of this volume for a recent review). However, these models are not always specific enough for work-related processes. Qualitative research methods offer important means to extend and complement existing epistemic structures to advance both practical and scientific purposes.

In the following sections, we develop specific goals and opportunities for qualitative research on age differences and aging-related phenomena at work. These are suggested with respect to three foci of aging-related research: (a) *experience* of age-related changes at work, (b)

*reactions*, such as behavior and strategies, to cope with age-related changes at work, and (c) *interaction with others* in an age-heterogeneous workforce.

### **Experience of Age-related Changes at Work**

One major aspect of age-related changes at work is the individual's subjective experience of these changes. For instance, bodily changes, such as a decrease of agility and muscle strength or changes in eye-sight, require adaptations in work routines, tasks, and goals, but also provide challenges for workers' self-esteem and well-being (e.g., Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). At the same time, gains in skills and expertise, such as work routines, job knowledge, or stress management strategies (e.g., Hertel et al., 2015), enable further career advancement and adoption of new roles and responsibilities (see Chapter 5 of this volume). Moreover, changes in job-related motives and priorities might prompt re-orientation in occupational plans and activities. Yet, how aging individuals experience these changes is not well understood, partly because existing theoretical models and empirical measures neglect the perspective of older persons.

Potential research questions in this field that would be well addressed with qualitative methods include how workers perceive and make sense of their own aging processes. For instance, what do older workers consider to be major achievements and insights (lessons learned) in their career? What are qualifying conditions that help or impede positive experiences of age-related changes? Individual and contextual demands and resources, such as personal dispositions and skills, education and training, coworkers and supervisors, organizational culture, might provide opportunities to better understand these processes, but also to plan intervention strategies. Finally, it would be fruitful to explore how older workers are perceived by others. Given that the prevalence of older workers has significantly changed in the last decades, the related perceptions of older workers might be quite different as compared to 20 or 40 years ago, and will continue to change (see also Chapter 6 of this volume).

A range of qualitative approaches would be useful to study questions as they relate to individuals' perceptions, interpretations, sense-making, or identity construction and lived experiences, amongst other topics. For example, narrative analysis or narrative inquiry are frequently used to draw out how people see themselves, process their experiences, and construct meaning from these experiences (Riessman, 2008). Sparkes and Smith (Sparkes & Smith, 2008, p. 295) state that: "Epistemologically, narratives have emerged as both a *way* of telling about our lives and a *method* or *means* of knowing" A narrative analysis conducted with older workers, for example, on how organizational communications, decision-making, or policies affect their sense-making of their role in the organization and subsequently their job identity could be an interesting endeavor to uncover whether organizations should take age differences into account in their decision-making. Similarly, interpretivist approaches that specifically focus on how individuals interpret their experiences and their environments around them (e.g., Myers, 2020) could help find mechanisms that explain how and why older workers experience and understand age-related phenomena differently from other workers. Approaches that can be used in an interpretive epistemological stance are grounded theory, thematic analysis, and open content analysis, amongst many others.

Going one step further, ethnographies and autoethnographies of older workers in organizations can reveal how older workers experience their working life and the organizational context around them (Myers, 2020; Spradley, 2016). Organizational ethnographies are commonly set in a phenomenological epistemology, in which it is most important to obtain a rich understanding of how a phenomenon and context are experienced by the informants. The researcher uses informants' and their own lived experiences in the specific context to generate deep insight about the underlying dynamics at work in the given context. An ethnographic study could, for example, be useful in uncovering issues with discrimination of older workers,

especially issues that relate to systematic forms of discrimination built into organizational structures.

Finally, qualitative process studies (Langley, 1999) can explore the change processes workers go through as they are aging and explore mechanisms underlying different trajectories of changes. Using process research, aging researchers can explore at which times or occasions bodily changes matter in a worker's career, and initiate shifts in sense-making, perceptions of adequacy, and job or role identity, among other things. Indeed, workers may 'age differently', that is, their experiences and sense-making processes might change differently and at different velocities, for instance, as a function of profession, organizational climate, personal dispositions, or ethnicity (see also Chapter 4 of this volume). Qualitative process studies can advance aging research and theorizing about the construct of aging, to assess how and why underlying experiences of aging differ.

### **Reactions to Cope with Age-related Changes at Work**

The second major focus contains the behavioral reactions of individuals to aging processes at work. For instance, how do workers cope with expected and unexpected changes of bodily, cognitive, and socio-emotional capacities? How do they navigate their work life across larger time intervals? Again, approaching these questions with category systems and measures from research with younger persons might obscure unique coping strategies of older persons. Integrating models from lifespan research is fruitful, and quantitative research using such models has revealed strengths of older workers, for instance, with respect to socio-emotional or self-regulation skills (e.g., Blanchard-Fields, 2007; Scheibe & Zacher, 2013) or active stress management strategies (e.g., Hertel et al., 2015)(see also Chapter 7 of this volume). However, lifespan models are often not very specific with respect to work-related processes and contexts. Thus, additional creative and unique behavior strategies of older workers might still be

discovered. For example, qualitative research on workers' post-retirement career planning (Wöhrmann et al., 2014) has revealed facilitating factors that might have been overlooked with a deductive approach. Finally, behavioral reactions from persons interacting with older workers are also worth considering, such as reactions from coworkers, supervisors, and customers.

Qualitative methods are particularly useful for studying actual behaviors, which is still rare in research on age and work (see Chapter 8 of this volume). Data collection methods include observations, collections of email correspondences, or considerations of organizational data. Different from interviews or surveys, these methods allow a direct assessment of behavioral reactions that older workers choose in response to their environment or to their own sense-making processes. When these methods are used in conjunction with methods that focus on introspection, sense-making, or rationalization, such as interviews or narrative approaches, researchers can then trace how behavioral expression and choices are influenced by and correspond to the informant's internal processes.

This could be interesting, for example, when comparing age-related differences in behavioral choices at work. For instance, there could be situations in which younger and older workers both feel apprehensive about certain managerial decisions (e.g., company lay-offs). Yet, their behavioral reactions might be quite different because older workers have a more varied toolbox of behavioral reactions and coping mechanisms, or different rationalizations of the underlying organizational events, which in turn make them choose more effective behavioral reactions. These sense-making processes and associated behavioral reactions can be studied through an interpretivist lens, using an approach such as grounded theory or thematic analysis.

Other useful qualitative approaches include the case-study approach. In a case-study approach, researchers can examine the interaction between the context and the individual by contrasting behaviors, experiences, and individual interpretations across different individuals,



work groups, or organizations (i.e., Myers, 2020). For example, researchers might explore in-depth how certain older workers act differently from other older workers in the same organizational context. A case-study approach could also be used to study differences between organizations or different industries. For example, it might be interesting to learn how older employees are treated differently in a variety of organizations, and how this influences older employees' commitment to the organization. Companies have different training or benefit programs for older employees, and researchers can compare these organizations to explore how older employees make use of these programs and why.

### **Interaction with Others in an Age-heterogenous Workforce**

Finally, whereas the first two foci address age-related changes at the level of the individual person, age and aging phenomena are certainly also relevant at the level of more complex social systems, such as worker-supervisor relationships, team dynamics, or the climate and culture within organizations. Indeed, age-related diversity has evolved as a popular research field in the last years, but the complexity of this phenomenon limits the insights of a pure quantitative approach (see also Chapter 9 of this volume). For instance, meta-analyses on age-diversity in teams (Joshi & Roh, 2009; Schneid et al., 2016) revealed only small or even no overall effects of age diversity on team outcomes, although considerable effects of age diversity would be predicted by theoretical approaches (e.g., van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Therefore, more in-depth analyses are desirable to better understand facilitating and impeding processes of age diversity in teams, also considering subjective perceptions of involved team members in addition to demographic data (e.g., Wegge & Meyer, 2020). Qualitative approaches can be helpful to navigate through the multiplicity of conditions. In addition, qualitative approaches can facilitate the study of phenomena at different levels of analysis (e.g., individual, team, organization, industry). Promising research questions are, for example, how relationships and

conflicts between leaders and their followers, or within teams, are experienced as a function of age diversity, and how individual roles are shaped in these contexts and across time.

Several qualitative approaches have been specifically designed to capture interactions between individuals or dynamic interactions within context. One of these approaches is discourse analysis. In discourse analysis, the researcher studies characteristics of communications and discourse around specific topics or phenomena of interest (e.g., O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). As Potter and Hepburn (Potter & Hepburn, 2008, p. 275) state: "For social scientists working with DC [discursive constructionism], the study of discourse becomes the central way of studying mind, social processes, organizations, and events as they are continually made live in human affairs." Among other things, the researcher pays specific attention, often using conversation analysis (e.g., based on email protocols), to how such discourse and communication patterns reveal underlying dynamics and structures of the relationship between different participants in the discourse (such as power differentials or differences in experiences). Discourse analysis could, for example, be used to understand how certain policies concerning older workers were created in an organization and how they affect the communication and sense-making processes of leaders and their employees. Discourse analysis could also assess underlying power differentials or stereotypes between older and younger workers that elicit conflicts in daily work-life. Along similar lines, alternative qualitative approaches can incorporate an analysis of linguistic features when analyzing communications between people to uncover how communication affects other outcome variables, such as leadership effectiveness or team functioning. These techniques include grounded theory, thematic analysis, open content coding, linguistic style analysis, and several others.

Another interesting lens through which to explore the effects of aging in the workplace could be symbolic interactionism (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). In this tradition, researchers

observe how individuals interact with objects, the context, or others in the context to interpret from these interactions the meaning and sense-making that these individuals attach to the objects, context, others, or themselves. For example, it may be interesting for organizations to analyze how older workers may use a workspace differently from younger workers, for instance, when designing assembly areas or activity-based flexible offices. By interacting with objects and others in the workspace and by charting movement through the workspace, researchers could draw conclusions about beneficial workspace design to increase wanted interaction between co-workers, decrease conflict or communication breakdowns, and increase knowledge sharing (see also Chapter 14 and 15). Similarly, research could focus on how older workers interact with their team members or supervisors differently than younger workers, for example, to obtain a richer understanding of how older workers interpret their roles and responsibilities in the organization and in their team. As previously suggested, a conjoint application of observation methods and methods to elicit perceptions, experiences, and sense-making processes would be most useful here.

All in all, with these examples, we are just scratching the surface of potential research questions for a better understanding of age and work. We encourage readers to look deeper into the types of questions they would like to ask with regard to age-related individual experiences, behavioral reactions, and interactions but have not yet been able to do so with quantitative methods, and to explore suitable qualitative methods to pursue them.

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**Table 1**

*How Can Qualitative Methods Be Used to Advance Our Understanding of Age and Work?*

Foci of aging research	Goals of qualitative research	Examples of relevant questions	Example approaches
<b>Experience of Age-related Changes at Work</b>	Understanding meaning and sense-making	How do workers perceive and make sense of their own aging processes? How do bodily changes affect the understanding and identity of one's role as an employee, manager, etc.	Narrative analysis Grounded theory (interpretivism)
	Capturing lived experiences and differences in life/career courses and narratives	When and how does one's understanding of age and aging change in the course of one's work life?	Ethnography & Autoethnography (phenomenological)
	Determining processes and dynamics	How are workers' team roles shaped by age-related physiological indicators? How do coworkers perceive and interact with older workers?	Thematic analysis Open content analysis Process analysis
	Exploring context influences	What conditions help or impede positive experiences of age-related changes?	
<b>Reactions to Cope with Age-related Changes at Work</b>	Understanding meaning and sense-making	How do older workers understand, frame, and reframe work-related challenges?	Observations Grounded theory
	Capturing lived experiences and differences in life/career courses and narratives	How do people manage age-related cognitive changes? How do people deal with transitioning from work to retirement?	Thematic analysis Narrative analysis Case study analysis
	Determining processes and dynamics	How do coworkers react to older workers, and vice versa?	Action research
	Exploring context influences	How do different organizational events influence the coping strategies of older workers?	Appreciative inquiry Ethnography & Autoethnography
<b>Interaction with Others in an Age-heterogenous Workforce</b>	Understanding meaning and sense-making	How are relationships experienced between leaders and followers as a function of age diversity?	Discourse analysis Thematic analysis
	Capturing lived experiences and differences in life/career courses and narratives	How do work-related friendships develop or change across people's career course?	Open content coding Linguistic style analysis
	Determining processes and dynamics	How are workers' team roles shaped through interactions with older and younger workers? Why and how do age-heterogeneous friendships at work develop and last?	Grounded theory (symbolic interactionism)
	Exploring context influences	When and how do different organizational contexts impede or provide opportunities for older and younger workers to interact?	Observations