

Getting on or getting out? The impact of gender on promotion decision-making among older workers in Ireland

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This paper is based on an empirical study of older workers (men and women aged 50-64) in the Irish civil service. The study forms part of a PhD thesis in progress. It explores the work-related decision-making of 105 civil servants working at various positions in the civil service hierarchy. A qualitative methodology is employed, using semi-structured interviews with participants telling the story of their working lives to date. This offers an opportunity to uncover workers' own perceptions of how they negotiate their working lives. The study investigates recruitment, promotion and future career and/or retirement intentions.

This paper focuses on the choices workers make around promotion - one of the central work-related decisions with which they are faced. In so doing, it considers the role that work plays in relation to identity-formation for older workers.

This paper critically appraises the usefulness of a rational choice theory approach (which emphasises the role of preferences as the main determinant of decision-making and behaviour) in interpreting the decision-making of these workers. It suggests that applying a life course approach allows offers a more comprehensive and nuanced way of analysing the complexities of work-related decision-making in Ireland in the twenty-first century. Specifically, it allows the space for workers to uncover the various constraints and enabling factors that they have encountered throughout their career and shows how this feeds into decision-making. It also highlights the restricting effects that lack of opportunities and resources earlier in life may have on career progression in later life.

It considers whether there are differences in terms of gender and age in relation to the centrality of work in the lives of the research participants. While there are obvious gender differences in relation to promotion decision-making, there is some evidence that these differences are becoming less pronounced over time. Further, it appears that it is not any one factor such as gender alone, but a complex mixture of ingredients including experience in the work-place, legislation, policy, socio-economic context, stage in the life-cycle and the normative environment that feed into a particular work-related decision for an individual at a particular time.