The social network of actors influencing age discrimination in the human resources recruiting process

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to map the area where the social construction of age discrimination in the recruiting process is perceived as taking place, especially those individuals or organized groups with enough power and interest to influence this unethical reality. The research was carried out in 2010 and 2011 in Cluj-Napoca, Romania; it uses multiple qualitative methods (focus-group and interviews) and covers three layers of perception: candidate's perception, employer's perception and recruiter's perception. Usually, the main social actors publically perceived as influencing age discrimination in the recruiting process are the employers (as the main responsible), some public institutions (as guardians) and the candidates (as victims). The findings of the paper show that the number of social actors perceived as interested and with power by the main social actors (employers and candidates) is much higher than the number classically targeted by researchers, reaching 20 or more.

1. Introduction

"Our lives are defined by age: the age when we learn how to drive, vote, have sex, buy a house, retire and travel free of charge with the local bus... Society emits constant judgment about the moment when we have the right age for something – and when we are too old for something else" (Age Concern, 2000, p.2) Age is one of the social coordinates that is so fundamental for the human perception that evaluating a person by this criteria is a "primitive", "automatic" process (Nelson, 2005; Ferris, et al, 1991). A social construct is

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obviously useful in social interactions, but only up to a point. This paper tries to map the area where the social construction of age discrimination in the recruiting process takes place and especially the social individuals or organized groups with enough power and/or interest to influence this unethical reality. The discussions regarding age discrimination are grouped around one employment step – the recruiting process. Why the recruiting process? Because when recruiting, since the employer has not met the candidate yet, and is only advertising for the job, the direct or indirect mentions about age constitute an *a priori discrimination*, which cannot be camouflaged. In the selection process, the employer can build, post factum, various arguments concerning the candidate's apparent lack of competence, but this is not the case for recruiting. As a consequence, age discrimination in the human resources recruiting process can be relatively easy to prove compared to age discrimination in other human resources activities (selection, training, and reward) and is more visible for the general public.

The ideas of this paper have similarities with *contemporary critical theory*, as presented by Crotty (1998). There are a series of power relations between actors (employer and candidate); there is an ideological component to the problem or at least one connected with organizational culture (age diversity/heterogeneity oriented culture); the various meanings of a phenomenon are not stable, but mediated by production and consumption relations (age discrimination manifests great temporal sensitivity according to macro economical tendencies) and some social groups are privileged compared with others and reinforce their privilege when the oppressed are ignorant (employers have an advantaged position in negotiating this reality). This similarity continues with Freire (2000), an important figure for the contemporary critical theory. He argues that in some situations we have a "culture of silence" accentuated by myths designed to maintain confusion, apathy, fatalism, fear of liberty and assuming responsibility. Some of Freire's ideas are present in the Gunderson (2003) observation that age discrimination is a silent type of discrimination compared with gender, ethnicity or disability, because the emotional load attached to it is not as powerful and militant. The oppressed are domesticated in spirit by an oppressive regime initiated by the employers, as much as by their own oppressive ignorance. Another Freire idea connected with age discrimination is the fact that a sense of inferiority for the oppressed is gradually constructed: "they don't know anything, they are not capable to learn anything", "they are sick", "they are not efficient". These quotes are strikingly similar to the negative characteristics employers associate with older candidates (Brosi and Kleiner, 1999; Gregory, 2001; Shore and Goldberg in Dipboye, 2004; Kulick, 2004; Sargeant, 2007).We agree with certain aspects of critical theory but we have to underline the fact that, apart from the main social actors (employers and candidates) involved in the construction of this reality, in order to gain a deeper

understanding, we have to be aware that there are other actors, less visible, or even invisible, with enough present or potential power, interest and momentum to change things.

The main objective of the paper is *to map as much as possible the people, groups or institutions* and their roles in the social construction of age discrimination, on a specific labour market (Cluj-Napoca, Romania), in a specific moment in time (2010), in a specific human resource activity (recruitment), as perceived by the main actors (candidates and employers). In other words, the paper investigates the social network awareness, and the potential for change regarding age discrimination in the recruiting process. The research questions were: Which are the persons, group of persons, organizations or public institutions influencing age discrimination in employment? Which of these persons, group of persons, organizations or public institutions promote age discrimination in employment and which are against it? What is the degree of interest for the persons, group of persons, organizations or public institutions when it comes to age discrimination in the employment process? How does the power balance appear to these persons, group of persons, organizations or public institutions?

2. Literature review

Browsing through other studies on the topic of age discrimination in the human resources recruitment process helps getting a "historical perspective" on the research topic, a better understanding of terminology, previous research directions and contributions that became milestones in the specialty literature (Buchanan and Bryman, 2007). It was important in this review to identify: *the subjects of the studies and the main methods used to gain information about them and from them*. We may say that we identified in the literature review a group of visible actors, frequently present in the majority of papers (employers, recruiters and candidates) and a group of less visible actors (students, employees and investors), aimed at by researchers in rare but interesting cases. Regarding the methods used by researchers, it seems we have a big diversity of methods used and simple research designs (mainly mono-method).

Employers are the subjects of most field social experiments (Bendick, Jackson and Romero, 1993, 1996; Bendick, Brown and Wall, 1999; Riach and Rich, 2002, 2006, 2007; Bennington, 2002; Wilson and Kan, 2006; Wilson, Parker and Kan, 2007). Employers are considered the main responsible actors for the phenomenon and have a central importance in understanding age discrimination. Beyond its obvious merits, the social experiment method seems to suggest a "legal" paradigm in approaching the topic, as it stresses on proving "the crimes of the employers" as an argument for punitive measures and a lot less on going in depth or finding the "rationale" for this behavior. Data was gathered from the employers with the help of a survey run by Busch, Dahl and

Dittrich (2009), but both the design of the survey and the interview came very close to the structure and the declared purpose of a social experiment. Bennington (2002) and Wilson and Kan (2006) used the interview to gather data from the employers. In the first case, 180 employers were asked, by telephone, questions that looked at their attitude on anti-discrimination legislation. In the second case, 20 employers went through a structured interview that aimed to identify the motives and mechanisms used by employers to discriminate. Document analysis, a more specifically qualitative research of recruitment announcements, is another method aimed at the employers (Bennington, 2002; Anghel, 2003; Ursel and Armstrong-Stassen, 2006; Basim, Sesen and Sesen, 2007). Because these actors are seen as responsible for age discrimination, there is a tendency to choose "neutral" methods from the standpoint of interaction with them, or methods that put a comfortable distance between the researcher and the subject, and avoid the implicit guilt projected by the research process that can give birth to mutual tension or to excessive filtration of information.

Candidates for the position, especially the unemployed and those who fit in the threatened age groups are targeted by interviews or focus groups (McMullin and Marshall, 2001; McVittie, McKinlay and Widdicombe, 2008; Berger, 2009). The contact with them, through these methods, is much more interactive and the exchange of information does not look only at confirming a type of behavior, but also at the entire range of information attached to it: emotions, thoughts, logic, intentions, attitudes, values; aspects that are not visible in methods like the experiment or document analysis. The approach is also more empathic, because we have a higher sensitivity towards age discrimination, this time, from the victim's position. The methods used allow the researcher to take into account the impact of age discrimination, the traumas suffered and to personalize the act of research.

Students are preferred in the case of surveys (Peaboy and Sedlacek, 1982; Schwalb and Sedlacek, 1990; Palmore, 1977, 1981, 1988 quoted by Palmore 2005; Loretto, Duncan and White, 2000; Busch, Dahl and Dittrich, 2009) and this raises some questions about the choice. Given the proximity towards the subject and the easy way to gather data in the academic environment, we can consider accessibility as the main factor for choosing students. It must be considered though that students lack real experience about the phenomenon, most of them not being professionally involved and not suffering from age discrimination. Even if we consider the exception of those who work through college (Loretto, Duncan and White, 2000), they do not have enough experience to develop a professional identity; they do not know and do not interpret enough the legislation on age discrimination. If the objective of these researches were observing the education and socialization as a generator of prejudices and stereotypes (attitudes), then the limits of the study would be clearer. Given the weak involvement of students in the labor market, they are not an active actor in

the discrimination process (behavior) and they cannot project their own experience. Speaking from a phenomenological perspective, they expose their own opinions about a reality they have not lived enough and are not aware of, until the moment of the survey.

Specialists in the recruitment agencies are rarely the objects of studies although, as intermediaries, they seem to be responsible for the most part of age discrimination in the human resources recruitment process. Bendick, Jackson and Romero (1996, 1999) in their social experiment targeted the recruitment agencies alongside with employers and they have noticed that the agencies are more likely to discriminate in the recruitment process. A study run in Washington in 1999 shows that 84% of the recruitment agencies are discriminating compared to only 29% of the companies that do their own recruitment. A possible explanation can be the fact that companies, which ask the recruitment agencies for services, solicit this discriminatory behavior (directly or indirectly), and the recruitment agencies, focused on profitability, listen to the clients' requests. Wilson and Kan (2006) give another explanation that underlines the cynical answer a recruiter gave him during an interview. He confesses that it is in the interest of the recruiter to attract candidates that seem good for the job, but who leave after a few years, insuring in this way the repetitiveness of his business; and the perfect profile for this type of candidate is that of young people.

Employees are the subjects to very few studies on age discrimination, although the theory on relational demography shows that they are an important influencing factor in the discriminatory practice. It seems obvious that the demographic profile at the working place is influencing the recruitment policy. McMullin and Marshall (2001) target the employees as they interview them to see how they interpret their experience with age discrimination. Their study shows a series of critical conclusions among which employers who develop well thought discriminatory practices in order to get rid of the union members who "by chance" are older, thus solving the political obstacle brought by relational demography at the work place and age diversity.

Investors enter the stage as interested or involved social actors in age discrimination as a result of a study run by Ursel and Armstrong-Stassen (2006). This study shows that there is a link between age discrimination and the price of actions on the stock exchange. Unfortunately, it is the only study of this kind in the literature and of interest to investors in the big companies and only in countries with a tradition in law suits on age discrimination.

3. Materials and methods

Since we studied a small-scale community (Romania, Cluj-Napoca, Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Business) the method that fits the bill for these ideas is the *case study research*, because it "has the ability to embrace

multiple cases, to embrace quantitative and qualitative data, and to embrace multiple research paradigms" (Dooley, 2002). The research paradigms considered, according to the Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.109) classification, are: critical theory ("historical realism virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallized over time") and constructivism ("relativism-local and specific constructed realities").

"The purpose of most case study research is to answer why and how questions" (Dooley, 2002, p.339), but although we acknowledge these questions, the leading one for this paper is "Who?" The main goal of this paper is to map the social actors perceived as having power or being interested in one specific social phenomenon – age discrimination in the human resource recruiting process. The research design involves *multiple methods on two concurrent strands (focus-group and interview)* in order to achieve methodological complementarity. Complementarity given by the pluralism of methods tries to increase the quality of research by giving more details and enhancing the understanding of multiple perspectives, generating solid inferences and the distinct value of the researched topic. (Esterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, and Locke, 2008). The focus group guide and the interview guide had the same questions, except for one section of the focus group, a written exercise meant to stimulate reflection and group discussion. Those questions were adapted in the interview, but were designed having the same objectives in mind.

The *focus group* technique was used in this research, mainly because this method has certain sensitivity to the idea of social construction, the negotiation of reality, and the continuous social interaction, which defines the borders of age discrimination in the recruiting process. As Patton said, (2002) the focus group identifies reactions to something more than dives into the details. Participants also share their view and dynamically adjust their attitudes. The focus group allows us to collect information regarding the "short term memory", or the dynamic information.

For the focus group a purposive sample was used, targeting a particular group - students from Babeș-Bolyai University, Faculty of Business, Cluj-Napoca, students who answered recruitment ads published in the local press, have lived in Cluj-Napoca in the past five years and have at least 1 year of work experience (are active members of the workforce). The main reasons behind this choice are that this group can provide information about a relevant segment of the workforce and help to build a case study useful to them as well as to future generations of students in awareness trainings. This purposive sample was stratified following two social-demographic variables: gender and age (Table 1). 6 focus groups were organized, each with 4 males and 4 females from the same age category. Saturation of categories (types of social actors involved) was achieved after the first 4 focus-groups. Also, about the same time, the emergence of regularities started to appear (the types of roles the social actors play: public

institution as guardians, employers as the villain, candidates as the oppressed etc.)

Table 1. Sampling scheme for the focus group candidates

Gender	Age category		
	Under 30 more than 1 year of work experience	**Between 30 – 45** more than 5 years of work experience	**Over 45** more than 10 years of work experience
women	8	8	8
men	8	8	8

Sampling intends to get relatively homogenous groups, so that in the same focus group participants have the same education level and age group, in order to create a safe environment. Gender is the only diversity element in the focus group. In terms of age, the lifelong learning program of the faculty mentioned above provided the needed diversity.

The focus group contained a written exercise, as suggested by Patton (2002) in order to focus participants' attention; give them a moment to structure their arguments and to form a bigger picture before having group discussions. In this way the spontaneous influence or the pressure of conformity in group discussions is diminished and the quality of group discussions is increased. Information reflected upon in the written exercise was then discussed in the focus group. The gathered information answered the research questions mentioned at the beginning regarding: social actors involved, their position in terms of age discrimination, their interest in the problem and the perceived balance of power.

The second technique chosen is the *interview* and complements certain aspects missed by the focus group in a dynamic, social context, like: personal feelings, core values and intentions. "Interviewing is rather like a marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed door there is a world of secrets" (Oakley, 1981, p. 31). If we are to believe Kaplowitz (cited by Patton, 2002), interviews are as much as 18 times more effective than focus groups in studying delicate subjects because they allow to pass by "the information prepared for outsiders" and reach the "inside information". Age discrimination in the recruiting process is a delicate subject and, in order to access valuable information, it is important to use more projective and empathic techniques (Rugg and Petre, 2007). In the case of interview, the focused stratified sampling takes into consideration the need to answer the research questions and targets those people who are deliberately selected for the relevant information they have and that cannot be gathered otherwise (Teddlie and Yu, 2007). Interviews target 6 employers (decision makers in HR recruitment – companies and NGOs) and 6 recruiters (recruitment

consultants outside the hiring company) because of the proximity and influence they have on the phenomenon. The socio-demographic variables considered are: gender and age (Table 2). The focused sampling pursues data gathering not only from the most relevant actors, but also from subjects with a great involvement and rich information. This is why the sampling requires building intensity criteria (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007; Patton, 2002), which come in the shape of compulsory socio-professional variables: college degree (to maintain the technical level of the discussion), number of recruitment campaigns (minimum 10), workplace in Cluj-Napoca in the last 5 years and recruitment activity aimed at Cluj-Napoca candidates.

Table 2. Sampling scheme for employers and recruiters interviews

Gender	Age categories		
	under 30	between 30 - 45	over 45
women	2 recruiters	2 employers	2 recruiters
men	2 employers	2 recruiters	2 employers

The interview guide developed to answer the research questions was based on two instruments: the five-step Gallup method and the question route as described by Krueger and Casey (2000) gathered information for the same research questions as the focus groups. The five-step Gallup method consists of: getting information about the degree to which subjects are aware of the topic or have information about it; identifying general attitudes towards the discussed topic; identifying specific attitudes that the subjects have about the topic; identifying motivations, causes for the attitudes, including motives, rationale and invoked arguments, and estimating the intensity of these attitudes. The question route consists of: opening, introduction, transition, key questions and final questions.

At the end of this chapter we address shortly the methodological problem of generalization. To paraphrase Becker (1998), the specific chemistry of one place, Cluj-Napoca (climate, demography, economy, birth rate, mortality and education or age discrimination in this case) cannot be reproduced by any other place and that is why the researched social phenomenon is influenced by the "personality of the place." Flyvbjerg (2004, p.421) also considers that "in the study of human affairs, there appears to exist only context-dependent knowledge" and it is important to not stress the idea of proof but the idea of learning, of knowledge development. If "knowledge cannot be formally generalized, it does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field of society". (Flyvbjerg 2004, p.424).

Considering this views, the concept of generalization becomes a tricky one. How can we generalize something unique? Is it necessary to generalize? These problems are answered by the concept of "moderatum generalization" as

described by Williams (2000) and Payne and Williams (2005). According to their criteria, the scope of what is claimed by this paper is moderate (it applies only to the social unit studied in our case, and it is of narrow utility). The statements are moderately held, and they are open to change - perceived social actors involved in age discrimination may change or evolve in time, influenced by local regulations and by the social awareness surrounding this topic. The claims of the paper are limited to basic patterns and tendencies - there will always be some clear roles for the actors involved, roles like: employers, candidates, public institutions, mediators and spectators.

4. Results and discussions

Although the initial stage of the research was aimed at the main actors involved - the employers (the oppressors) and the candidates (the victims) - as the research advanced, it became obvious that the number of persons directly or indirectly involved, or interested in this topic, is much larger, reaching over 20 more or less visible actors in the "social network" of things. We are sure that, in future researches, this number will increase even more. These new actors were grouped in various emergent roles, outlined by the focus groups and interview participants. The categories formed are not necessarily a reflection of reality, but an interesting blend of how they perceived reality and how they imagine things ought to be in terms of equal opportunities regarding age. Also, some of the actors were sometimes placed in two categories, having multiple roles (Figure 1).

The first role category is the *employers* and consists of: private companies, public institutions, NGOs and individuals. They are considered as the main actors responsible for directly influencing age discrimination in recruiting process, and as being interested to maintain the status quo of things. Privately owned companies – to be more specific, international corporations, insurance companies, IT companies and banks- are seen as the negative character in the story. Public institutions and NGOs have a dual role, first as an employer and then as a guardian of equal opportunities in the private sector. Considering these, they are not perceived as virulent discriminators, but some discussions indicated public institutions as having a higher average age (because of their constant resizing- newcomers being the first to leave), and NGOs a lower average age than most organizations (because they were considered a career vestibule for young people).
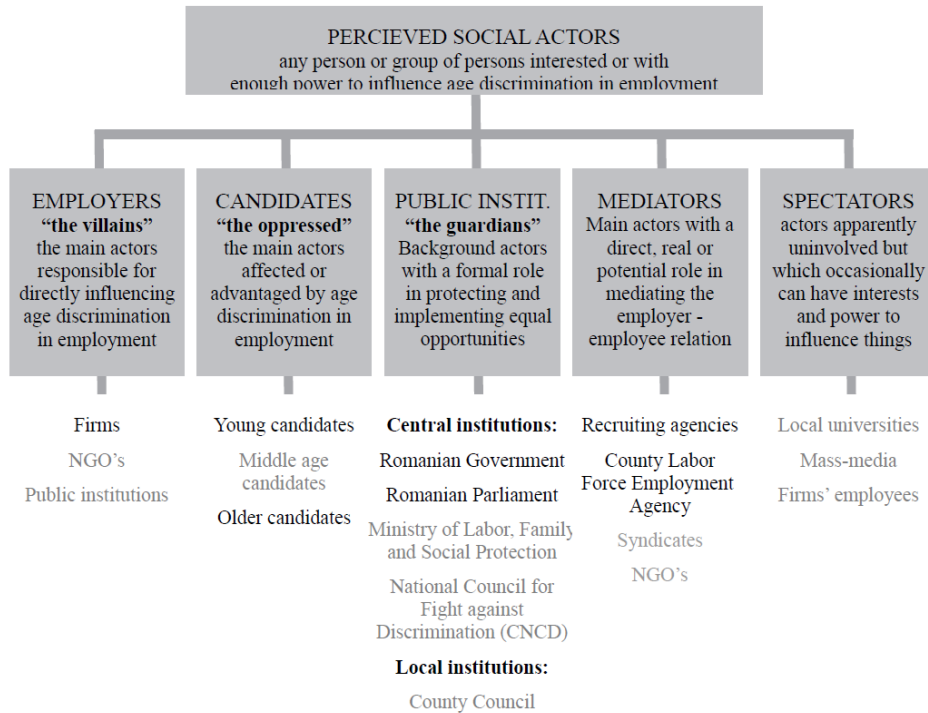
The second role category is *candidates* and consists of: young candidates, middle-aged candidates and older candidates. Young candidates are considered mildly affected by age discrimination (a kind of transitory discrimination until they build some professional experience); middle age candidates are considered to be in advantage (because they are at the peak of their career); older candidates are considered to be severely affected by this phenomenon. This information actually confirms Palmores' ageism theory that age discrimination actually

affects only older people (1977, 1981, 1988, and 2005).

The third role category, the *mediators,* is responsible for facilitating the relations between employers and candidates and this role is played by: County Labour Force Employment Agency, trade unions, recruiting agencies and NGOs. Mediators have a special position of intermediaries between employer and candidates, and their interest can be a formal one (for the first two actors), a financial one (for recruiting agencies) and an ethical one (for NGOs). Their interests lead to a specific behavior and efficiency in fulfilling their roles. The County Labour Force Employment Agency is perceived as an age diversity advocate but very inefficient because of limited resources at its disposal. Unions are perceived as outdated forms of organization, with low real influence over age discrimination and having a historical inertia. Recruiting agencies are very present on the labour market, "as mushrooms after rain" (focus group participants) and their professionalism and ethical status seems to be corrupted by their financial interests. Even though NGOs are not a major player on the labour market, they are seen as a potential counterbalance for the employers, as a community reaction to age inequity.

The fourth role category, *the "guardians"* consists of national institutions: Government; Parliament; Labour Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection; National Council for Combating Discrimination; and local institutions: District Council, Local Council and City Halls. Their perceived role is to insure compliance with legal requirements regarding equal opportunities. Unfortunately, the participants' opinions regarding guardians are that their social impact is mediocre at the most. The Romanian Government and Parliament are seen as being more preoccupied with other "stringent" matters than age discrimination in recruitment due to the economic crisis. The Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection were the institutions mentioned especially by older focus group participants, some interviewed employers and recruiters. Younger candidates were not aware of these institutions' social role. The National Council for Fighting Discrimination is another national institution mentioned in one focus group, but, unfortunately, the entire name of the institution was not known by participants. Its local impact was relatively invisible. Local institutions (District Council, Local Council and Municipality) are seen as insufficiently involved in age discrimination, but as having an ideal position to change the situation according to local, specific conditions. Participants see intervention as more successful at the local level trough public policies, and not at a national level trough legislation and coercion.

Figure 1. Different role categories of social actors in age discrimination in the human resource recruiting process

PERCIEVED SOCIAL ACTORS
any person or group of persons interested or with
enough power to influence age discrimination in employment

EMPLOYERS "the villains" the main actors responsible for directly influencing age discrimination in employment	CANDIDATES "the oppressed" the main actors affected or advantaged by age discrimination in employment	PUBLIC INSTIT. "the guardians" Background actors with a formal role in protecting and implementing equal opportunities	MEDIATORS Main actors with a direct, real or potential role in mediating the employer - employee relation	SPECTATORS actors apparently uninvolved but which occasionally can have interests and power to influence things
Firms	Young candidates	**Central institutions:**	Recruiting agencies	Local universities
NGO's	Middle age candidates	Romanian Government	County Labor Force Employment Agency	Mass-media
Public institutions	Older candidates	Romanian Parliament		Firms' employees
		Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection	Syndicates	
		National Council for Fight against Discrimination (CNCD)	NGO's	
		Local institutions:		
		County Council		

The last role category, *"the spectators"*, even though they do not have a clear, immediate interest in age discrimination in the recruiting process, they have the power to influence this social phenomenon. As spectators we could mention: universities, mass media, and employees. Even though the main local universities from Cluj-Napoca (Babes-Bolyai University, Technical University and University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iuliu Hatieganu) apparently have no immediate interest in age discrimination in the recruiting process, they warp the time and space trough their "social gravitation", influencing the labour market. Students represent almost 1/3 of the total population in Cluj-Napoca, they are perceived as a cheap and flexible labour force, reducing the age profile of the employers and recruiters. Mass media is seen as a useful ally, because even if age discrimination in recruiting is not a perceived as a big topic for them, they have an impressive power to promote equal opportunities campaigns as media partners or to promote age discrimination as advertising providers for employers and recruiters. Employees are another emergent actor identified in by focus group and interview participants because of the relational demography of the work place. Sometimes, the employer can feel a pressure from its employees to recruit candidates in the same age group as most of them for better integration,

communication and teamwork.

Discussing the invisible or less visible character of some social actors willingly involved from social inertia, or just with potential involvement in the social construction of age discrimination we can draw a line and create for at least three sides: visible actors, less visible actors and invisible actors. *Visible actors* are those quickly identified by the public, with a clear role for them in the social network of age discrimination and frequently present in their discourse (private companies, young and older candidates, Romanian Government, Romanian Parliament, recruiting agencies, and County Labor Force Employment Agency). The *less visible actors* are those that are not easily identified by public, with a certain ambiguity floating over their role and less frequently present in their discourse (NGOs, public institutions, middle age candidates, Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection, National Council for Fight Against Discrimination, County Council, Local Council, Cluj-Napoca Municipality, unions, local universities, mass-media, employees and clients). *Invisible actors* are those the public is unaware of, with an undetermined role, absent from the public discourse (private individuals, clients and investors).

The private individuals as employers are invisible actors for persons involved in the focus group and interview, because they are not perceived as "real employers". In the reality of the local labor market, private individuals employing people for jobs like baby-sitter, housekeeper, and nurse for elderly people are responsible for 2,5% of the recruiting ads containing age discriminatory information, published in one local newspaper in the last 10 years[1].The organization's clients are another invisible spectator/actor exerting influence. Even though these actors were not visible for the participants in interviews and focus groups, we are certain that their influence regarding age discrimination in recruiting is substantial. The main argument, inspired by Thomas and Ely (1996), comes from the fact that employers make "business sense" to reflect in the employees' age, the age profile of their clients. An employer hinted this aspect when he said that he could not hire an older candidate when all his clients were students. Finally, another invisible actor we want to discuss is the investor, who can represent a whole new role category. Investors, as we said before, are mentioned in a very creative research paper (Ursel and Armstrong-Stassen, 2006) that shows an immediate connection between age discrimination and the price of actions on the stock exchange. However, this is not yet the case of Romania, where age discrimination is not a "valuable commodity" on the stock market. The key words are "not yet".

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[1] The data was extracted in a parallel research from a weekly advertising publication, "Piața de la A la Z", for the last 10 years, and reflect a greater presence or discriminatory ads coming from private individuals as employers than from the part of other organizational actors like NGO's as employers.

Gradually, the labor market and the stock market will begin to accurately reflect the "worst practices" regarding age discrimination with a direct impact over the investor's interest.

If we go deeper with our analysis of the network that social actors create, with regard to age discrimination in the recruiting process in Cluj-Napoca, we notice what seems to be an *interactive play, where reality is socially constructed by the main actors, where the border between actors is sometimes blurred, and where every actor that is close to the phenomenon can contribute in various degrees to the social reality depending on their awareness, power and interest in the matter*. The actors' "geopolitical map", as drawn by the focus groups participants, reveals the degree of interest and the power of the main actors they perceived (Figure 2).

The four main areas in the figure reflect the central role of the employers (*interested and with great power*). As one focus group participant eloquently says it: *"Metaphorically speaking, if employers represented different nations, then the employer would be the USA and all other actors would be Liechtenstein"*. Inspired by the conflict strategy model developed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974), we can say that the employer is in a strategic position that naturally implies a forcing strategy. For employers, the gain perceived in continuing the discriminatory practices is seen as important; the long term relation with the candidates is not important because the labor market is rich; the power in hand is great and is not really challenged by the public institutions or by the "victims"; and finally, the recruiting process is a speedy one. Employers are definitely protecting their status quo and, implicitly, age discrimination in the recruiting process, disregarding poorly implemented laws and public policies. Private local companies, international corporations, banks, IT and insurance companies are a few specific actors/employers mentioned by participants. Recruiting agencies/intermediaries represent another actor with power and interest, but as suggested by some researchers (Bendick, Brown and Wall, 1999; Wilson and Kan, 2006) they do not necessarily have enough professionalism and ethical attitude to be the best practice example.*"Our clients usually give us an age interval for the desired candidates; it is their choice, their option and, in the end, it is them who are my clients. The best I can do is tell them that I will not be able to find candidates in the age interval that they require, but it makes no sense for a selection process that ignores their specific requirement, if it has no chance to succeed."* (interviewed recruiting agency specialist).

The Parliament, Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection and Local Councils represent the second area on the geopolitical map (*uninterested but with great power*). As we mentioned earlier, public institutions are not so interested in the matter, mainly because their priorities are concerned with stringent economic problems, but also because this social problem is relatively new in the Romanian legal and organizational culture. For example, the

legislation for fight against discrimination (OG. no. 137/2000) was launched in 2000, immediately after the European directive (2000/78/EC) was adopted, and was mainly a formal action for the country accession to the European Union. Since then, the implementation in tackling with this problem was perceived as inefficient. It seems that coercion through legislation is losing its power. Participants considered that the Local Councils are in a good position to intervene and that they should be directly interested in age discrimination given the social cost attached to this matter. Participants stressed the importance of local institutions (Local Council, County Council and Municipality) in negotiating equal opportunities clauses with foreign investors.

Employees of companies are next on the chart (*interested but without power*). This is an interesting position because it seems that employees are more interested in the matter than the candidates. Some employee participants in the focus group declare that they feel *"chained to their job"* because they know that the older they get, the harder it is for them to find another job. Thus, their mobility on the labor market is reduced and the age discrimination phenomenon is amplified in a self-fulfilling prophecy. They do not seem to have a great amount of power but they have the greatest interest manifested in some participants' opinions.

Finally, at the bottom of this map we have: The Government, Local Agency for Employment, Municipality, NGOs, universities, organization's clients, trade unions, students and, unexpectedly, the candidates themselves (*uninterested and without power*). What is worrying in this picture is the fact that the candidates indulge themselves into this "victim" situation, unwilling to approach it critically because *"this is how things are done around here",* and they will not change soon. The degree of victimization, the fact that the victims do not care or are not aware of the gravity of the situation, the atrophy of the critical attitude, is a form of self-sabotage regarding the equal chances on the labor market. This process reminds us of Freire (2000) and his "Pedagogy of the oppressed" because we need a process of raising awareness, a process of critical education in order to break the silence and counterbalance the power distribution. As one student participant said it, *"We have a lot of organizations but we are still divided… we are united in our little "churches". We are members of two or three student associations but we do not act as one, we act separately with less power and sometimes against each other… If we took in consideration our number and our common interests we could have the greatest influence".*

If we consider the political position of the actors regarding age discrimination, we can see that some have a clear position: *against age discrimination in the recruiting process* ("-": The Parliament, Government, Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection, County Council, Local Council, Municipality, Local Agency for Employment, unions, NGOs, candidates, and students); some are in favor of *keeping age discrimination in the*

recruiting process ("+": employers: international corporations, insurance agencies, banks); and some have ambiguous positions ("+/-": recruiting agencies, mass-media, local universities, clients and employees). As a strategy for change, actors with ambiguous positions have the greatest potential as future allies for either side. One focus group participant reacted at the end of the discussions: *"everybody seems to be against age discrimination, all the state institutions… and yet, in spite of all these, the companies and recruiters have the greatest power and say in the matter".*

Figure 2. *Actors map* for age discrimination in the recruiting process, as resulted from focus-groups discussions
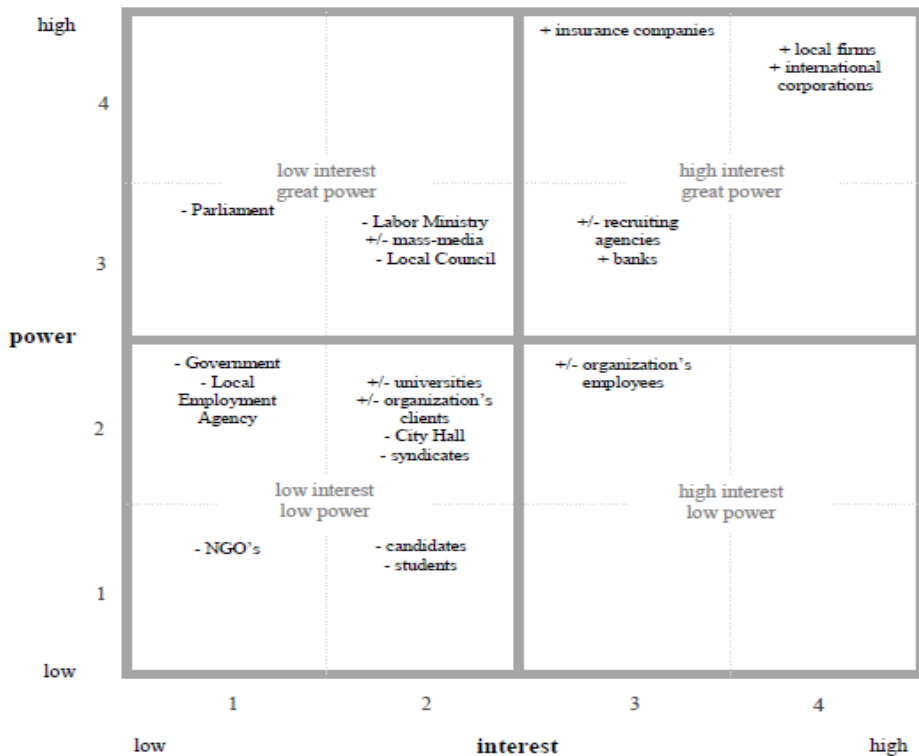
Note:
"-" means that the social actor is perceived as being against age discrimination in the recruiting process;
"+"means that the social actor is perceived as favoring age discrimination in the recruiting process, and
"+/-" means that the social actor has an ambivalent position.

5. Conclusions

It is important to have a coherent image of the social context where a problem exists before imagining a solution, create plans and implement change. The active implementation of solutions as public policies, public protests or well planned programs that promote equal chances on the labor market for age discrimination in general and in the recruiting process in particular, is prone to fail if we do not have a good "geopolitical map" for the social network existing around this problem. The general public does not usually have time and resources to strategically analyze all the people involved in one way or the other in the social construction of age discrimination in the human resources recruiting. This paper tried to offer a glimpse inside the less visible or invisible social arena and to help future research endeavors to go further. Some social actors have to be activated or reactivated in order to change the social structure of age discrimination.

The degree of awareness regarding age discrimination seems to rise steadily, as well as the critical thinking about this topic that characterized the participants in the focus groups and interview, but unfortunately, concrete actions are yet to appear. The cohesion of the "oppressed" (young and older candidates) is low, their power of negotiation is not significant, and the legal mechanisms are powerless because of the long and complicated process. Age discrimination is still "silent" because there is no actor with a powerful enough voice to channel the energy of those disadvantaged and to tackle the lack of equal opportunities. At the same time, the majority of social actors involved or connected with age discrimination are "invisible" and their real or potential power to influence things remains unknown.

It seems that we almost have a form of negation attached to age discrimination. This pathological reaction cannot go on for a long time, because age discrimination is a problem growing rapidly and affecting a constantly growing part of the labor market. If we look at the bigger picture (the macroeconomic context of discrimination), there are alarm signals some participants in focus groups and interviews are aware of, warnings that a major change is on the way. A "perfect storm" is approaching because the population is ageing[2], the birth rate is extremely low[3] and emigration is huge[4] -*"We will be*

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[2] According to INSSE, data for Cluj district, show that between 2000 and 2008 population aged between 0-14 years of age dropped from 114955 to 90652, meaning 24303 persons, while population aged over 60 years of age grew from 137037 to 141726, meaning 4689 persons.

[3] Birth rate in Romania is in the interval 2000-2008, according to Eurostat, 1.3, one of the lowest in European Union.

[4] According to Eurostat, between 2001-2009, the number of Romanian citizens established abroad in an EU country raised from 0,3 millions, to 2 millions.

forced to work with employees of 60 years of age… it will be a common fact even without state intervention because you will have no other age category to recruit. This is sad because the state will force you and me to work after the age of 70" (employer - NGO executive director). We hope these warnings will be noticed before they come true; we hope to act, not to react. Or maybe not... and here comes the final twist. If we are to cite one interviewed employer: *"we will solve the problem of age discrimination as other European countries did…not by hiring a diverse work force in terms of age, but by using immigrants: Polish, Romanian and even Chinese. I think we will reorient towards China, or even Africa as an option"* (employer - general manager).

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