Tackling Ageism in the Workplace

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Abstract

This chapter outlines the ways in which ageism manifests in the workplace and in organizational settings. Specifically, it explores ageism on the grounds of perceived 'old age', most often directed toward older workers, and ageism directed towards the self, due to awareness and recognition of negative age stereotypes. The final part of the chapter outlines some promising social psychological approaches and interventions to tackle ageism in the workplace. Although it is widely recognized that ageism is a form of prejudice and discrimination that can affect anyone at any age, this chapter predominately focuses on ageism experienced on the basis of perceived old age.

Tackling Ageism in the Workplace

Many countries have encouraged policies to promote the labor market participation of older workers, who tend to be defined as those aged 50 and over.[1] Yet despite the existence of equality legislation which outlaws age discrimination in employment, ageism continues to be a core issue in the recruitment and retention of older workers. Ageism is defined as the stereotyping of and discrimination against individuals or a group of individuals because of their age.[2] It can limit opportunities afforded to workers, influence interactions within the workplace, and result in avoidance, exclusion or early exit from the labour market.[3] [4] However, workers can also be affected by *self*-ageism, which is the application of negative age stereotypes to the self that can result in modified behaviour, expectations and performance-based outcomes. [5]

This chapter outlines the ways in which ageism manifests in the workplace and in organizational settings. Specifically, it explores ageism on the grounds of perceived 'old age', most often directed toward older workers, and ageism directed towards the self, due to awareness and recognition of negative age stereotypes. The final part of the chapter outlines social psychological approaches and interventions to tackle ageism in the workplace. Although it is widely recognized that ageism is a form of prejudice and discrimination that can affect anyone at any age, this chapter predominately focuses on ageism experienced on the basis of perceived old age.

Ageism directed toward and experienced by older workers

Although many employers consider their older workers to be a valuable asset and attribute to them many positive characteristics, including reliability, loyalty, and institutional memory, [6] these are often outweighed by negative stereotypes about older workers that underpin ageism in the workplace. Common perceptions in Western cultures are that older workers do not

perform as well, are less productive, creative, innovative and have lower motivation, are more resistant to change, less able to learn, have a shorter job tenure, and are more costly compared to younger workers. [7] [8] [9] However, the prevalence of these stereotypes varies. For instance, they are more salient in industries with strong age norms, such as retail and advertising industries, where workforces are traditionally young, and in smaller companies rather than larger companies.[10]

These assumptions, which are largely unfounded by evidence, underpin discrimination and age bias against older workers because the strengths and abilities of older workers are overlooked, while more value is placed on positive traits and characteristics associated with younger workers.[11] [12] [13] For instance, evidence suggests that older workers tend to be judged less favorably compared with younger counterparts.[14] [15] In contrast, younger workers benefit from assumptions that they are good at learning new skills, being creative, are better at using technology and social media, and are open to new ideas.[16] Abrams et al. demonstrated that two equally positive skill sets, one associated with younger people (good at learning new skills, being creative, using technology, rapid decision making, being open to new ideas, using social media) and one associated with older people (good at settling arguments, understanding others' viewpoints, dealing with people politely, problem solving, being an effective complainer, using a library), can influence hiring preferences.[17] In three studies, participants of mixed ages were presented with profiles of two potential candidates. The candidates had similar qualifications and neither had previous experience in the job. However, Candidate A was presented as possessing the positive "old" traits while Candidate B was presented with the positive "young" traits. In all studies, participants more often selected Candidate B as a potential job candidate and estimated the age of this individual to be younger than Candidate A, thereby demonstrating that age

stereotypes or characteristics associated with older and younger people can influence hiring decisions, to the detriment of workers perceived to be older.

The final study revealed that the older-sounding profile was only preferred (equally to the younger-sounding profile) when the job position was presented as a subordinate role, whereas the younger-sounding profile was preferred when the role was presented as a supervisory or managerial position. The decision to hire the older-sounding profile for the subordinate role was mediated by the relative importance of the older attributes for the job and the relative favorability toward older traits. This supports the notion of pro-youth bias, even for leadership positions.

Some research suggests that this could be due to the preference for leadership potential in candidates, which has been associated with younger, but not older workers. For instance, Sun et al. found that when evaluators assessed candidates for a leadership role, they preferred candidates emphasizing the potential to be a good leader (leadership potential) over those with proven leadership performance.[18] In addition, they found that leadership potential candidates were perceived to be younger than those emphasizing leadership performance. Mediation analyses revealed a preference for leadership potential was partly explained by a pro-youth bias, with participants preferring the leadership potential target partly because they were perceived to be younger. However, the idea that younger candidates might have an advantage when applying for leadership positions because they are perceived to have greater 'potential' has not been replicated in the U.S., as Tormala et al. found no difference in the perceived age of leadership potential and leadership performance targets.[19] Sun et al. suggested that the contrast could be explained by a cultural difference in stereotypes of older and younger workers, their results reflecting Chinese cultural beliefs that potential is the property of youth,[20] whereas results from Tormala et al. reflected U.S. cultural beliefs that anyone can have potential.[21]

Conversely, research conducted by Hirschfeld and Thomas using archival data from 972 U.S. military officers found that older targets were perceived as having less observed leadership potential (OLP) than younger targets in evaluations from peers and observers.[22] Older candidates were also scored lower on tests of knowledge mastery, and this lack of mastery partly explained the relationship between age and perceived leadership potential. That is, candidate age was associated with less leadership potential partly due to lower perceived capability. Overall, the research suggests that a bias toward leadership potential is more likely to result in ageism toward older workers when there is lack of fit between stereotypes of older workers and the leadership role. Beyond suitability for leadership positions, assumptions made about decreasing potential and ability to learn with age also underpin other discriminatory practices within the workplace, such as lack of training opportunities.[23] (See also chapters X and X.)

Perceived ageism, including lack of development opportunities to support and enhance career progression, can also provoke exit from an organization or the labor market altogether. For example, Thorsen et al. examined the association between ageism (defined as perceived fit, or lack of, and space for older workers within the organization) and older workers' retirement plans, while taking health and workability of the employee into account. Their study, which analyzed a representative sample of over 3,000 Danish employees, revealed that ageism, as well as lack of recognition, and lack of career development opportunities were associated with older male workers' plans to retire earlier.[24]

At the interpersonal level, ageism in the workplace can be expressed in the ways we talk to one another and how we communicate; for instance, it can take the form of under- or over-accommodation, and miscommunication.[25] It can include ageist discourse, such as jokes or teasing, expressing ageist attitudes (about the traits and characteristics of older workers, or about

expectations and norms, e.g., people should retire when they reach a certain age), or communicating in an overly patronizing tone. Stereotypes regarding older workers underpin ageist discourse in the workplace. (See also chapter X.) For instance, negative stereotypes regarding physical appearance or physical ability and health changes that are associated with ageing are often the basis of hostile humour.[26] Stereotypes regarding older adults' cognitive abilities can also lead to inappropriate communication in intergenerational interactions, such as over-accommodation, infantilizing or dehumanizing speech.[27] Although much of this research is centered on speech within health and social care domains (e.g., care homes, hospitals, between caregivers and patients), it is also applicable to the workplace. The stereotype content model and the subsequent Behaviors from Intergroup Affect and Stereotypes (BIAS) map outline stereotypes denoting older adults as less competent but more warm and friendly than younger people. These result in feelings of pity and paternalistic prejudice, which in turn lead to behaviors, including over-helping or patronizing tones (known as active facilitation), or ignoring and avoidance behaviors (known as passive harm).[28] [29]

Ageist language can also be present in third party speech (e.g., comments about colleagues) and in attributions people make to age. Studies have shown that people erroneously use perceived age of people to inform evaluations of their performance. (See also chapter X.) For instance, identical errors in memory and communication made by younger and older workers were perceived differently according to the age of the target. Specifically, errors made by younger workers (aged 30 years) were perceived to be associated with 'lack of effort', but with 'lack of ability' when the worker was older (aged 70 years).[30] [31] More recent research shows that older employees received more severe reprimands for poor performance than did their younger counterparts.[32]

Similar to other forms of prejudice and discrimination, the experience of ageism in the workplace has serious consequences, including reduced well-being, job satisfaction,[33] [34] organizational commitment, work engagement, and increased intentions to resign and retire,[35] [36] but not all findings are consistent. In a sample of police officers from the U.K., perceived age discrimination at work was associated with lower job satisfaction and commitment.[37] In a sample of 800 workers across the U.S., perceived age discrimination was associated with lower job satisfaction, but not job engagement or commitment.[38] (See also chapter X.) In a study of Australian employees, aged 45 years and over from three different organizations, perceived age discrimination was found to be negatively related to work engagement, while work engagement was associated with increased retirement age (i.e., intention to work longer). The authors suggest that experiences of ageism in the workplace lead to disengagement, which in turn increases intentions to exit or retire.[39]

Therefore, the research suggests that negative stereotypes regarding the perceived competence of older workers, their perceived potential, a lack of perceived "fit" with the organization, and a lack of respect and appreciation of older workers, are all important factors that reduce well-being and job satisfaction and lead to exclusion of older workers. The research reviewed here has shown that ageism on the grounds of perceived old age can manifest at the point of hiring and in the unequal provision of training opportunities, but also in the evaluation of older workers. Much of the research demonstrating age bias in the workplace shows how older adults are disadvantaged, evaluated, or treated differently in comparison with younger workers or younger targets.

Self- ageism in the workplace

It is clear that ageism on the grounds of perceived old age can take many forms, and much of the research reviewed thus far focuses on experiences of ageism in the workplace, or the ways in which age biases can lead to the differential treatment of older workers. However, being a target of age discrimination is only one way age stereotypes can have an impact in the workplace. The Risks of Ageism Model draws upon the stereotype threat and stereotype embodiment literature to outline two other pathways through which negative age stereotypes can impact us all as we age (not just those perceived to belonging to the *old* age group).[40]

Stereotype threat is the fear of confirming a negative stereotype and involves fear of being judged negatively by others.[41] Age-based stereotype threat (ABST) transpires when age is the salient identity under threat due to corresponding negative age stereotypes. A recent review and meta-analysis has shown that under ABST, age stereotypes denoting older people as less competent than younger people have a detrimental impact on older adults' memory and cognitive performance, which in turn contributes to the self-fulfilling nature of age stereotypes.[42] For example, Abrams, Eller and Bryant found that participants performed worse on cognitive tests when they were told that the purpose of the study was to explore age differences in memory, compared to being told the purpose was to explore individual differences.[43] Other research has shown that older participants performed worse on memory tests when task instructions mentioned memory compared to not mentioning memory,[44] or when an age-social comparison is made salient (e.g., participants told that performance on the test will be compared to younger participants taking part) *versus* no comparison.[45]

This suggests that contexts that evoke stereotype threat, such as training and test performance situations within the workplace, have the potential to put workers at risk of

experiencing stereotype threat if the performance indicator is synonymous with a negative age stereotype.[46] Moreover, the wider stereotype threat literature suggests it can result in heightened anxiety,[47] [48] dis-identification and disengagement from stereotyped tasks or domains,[49] and reduced self-esteem and self-efficacy.[50] In practice, this means that workers may self-select and avoid engaging in tasks such as training where their performance may be judged negatively in terms of their perceived old age. This is a critical issue because training plays an important role in extending working lives; yet there is a sharp decrease in participation in training once workers reach their mid-50s.[51] (See also chapters X, X, and X.)

One study by von Hippel, Kalokerinos & Henry provides some evidence that stereotype threat experienced in the workplace is associated with lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment and increased intentions to resign.[52] Surveying 602 employees aged 50 to 75 years (mean age 56) from a large Australian media company and 473 employees aged 50 to 71 years (mean age 55) working in law enforcement, they measured the employees' experiences of stereotype threat, their attitudes toward their job, work-related mental health, and their intentions to resign and retire. The study revealed that feelings of stereotype threat were associated with lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and increased work mental health issues and intentions to resign and retire. More recently, von Hippel, Kalokerinos, Haantera and Zacher have demonstrated that age-based stereotype threat effects are experienced by both younger and older employees, but that older employees are more vulnerable to negative impacts on work outcomes, such as lower job satisfaction, commitment, well-being and higher intentions to quit. This is because the older employees are less likely to appraise the stereotype threat as a challenge, and more likely to think over and ruminate when they experience stereotypes threat.[53]

Stereotype threat has been shown to lead to underperformance in stereotyped domains which are relevant to workplace engagement and performance-based outcomes.[54] However, in addition to stereotype threat, the extent to which workers feel they fit within an organization can be informed by age stereotypes, prescriptive norms, self-perceptions, organizational identity and the perceived age-diversity within the organization.[55] [56] That is, there is sometimes a perception that certain jobs should be held by employees of a certain age. Research suggests that when there is lack of perceived fit (i.e., when the perceived 'correct' age of a person holding or applying for a particular job does not match the candidate's or existing worker's age) or lack of identity integration (when individuals perceive their age and the organizational age as incompatible), age stereotypes are more salient and more likely to influence individual decisions (e.g., when to retire, whether to apply for a job), organizational decision-making processes (e.g., hiring and firing), and make people more vulnerable to age-based stereotype threat.[57] A review of workplace stereotypes suggests that those favoring younger workers are particularly prevalent in certain industries, which are also considered to be 'young' or have disproportionate number of younger workers, such as finance, insurance, advertising, retail and information technology/computing.[58] In these industries workers may consider themselves 'too old' to apply for job positions or find themselves pushed out of the job earlier than they expected. It also could mean that workers in industries where age is a salient factor are more likely to experience threats to their identity if they are perceived as 'too old', as posited by stereotype threat theory.[59]

Prescriptive norms describe ways and expectations surrounding how one should or should not behave. In the workplace, common phrases ("Should you be doing that at your age?" "Shouldn't you retire at your age?") indicate people's expectations of others based on age. Social psychological theory suggests that prescriptive stereotypes typically involve one group

disproportionately targeting another, so as to foster some degree of social control or dominance and to maintain hierarchy.[60] In Western societies, middle-agers are perceived as holding highest social status followed by younger and then older people.[61] [62] Therefore, older people adhering to prescriptive age norms can be seen as benefitting younger and middle-aged groups by maintaining social structures and hierarchies.

Relevant to the workplace and connected to descriptive stereotypes of older workers' decline in cognitive ability, younger and middle-aged workers are likely to perceive older workers' delayed retirement as limiting their own opportunities to enter the workplace or to progress in their careers. There is a common notion that there should be a natural transition or succession of resources and positions from older people to those who are younger. In one study, participants (who ranged in age) were asked to evaluate the competence and warmth of younger, middle-aged, and older targets who either violated the norm of succession or adhered to it. The study found that younger participants most often disrespected the older succession violator, and were more respectful of the older target who adhered to succession norms.[63] Similar results were found for evaluations of targets who violated other prescriptive age norms, such as older adults disproportionally consuming resources (consumption) or behaving or dressing in ways that are conventionally youth-related (identity).[64] This research suggests that awareness of prescriptive stereotypes in the workplace could guide an individual's decisions about when to retire or exit the labor market in order to avoid a backlash from violating prescriptive norms.

In summary, the research suggests that awareness of negative age stereotypes regarding older workers can not only influence performance and job-based outcomes via stereotype threat processes but also the decisions people make about what jobs or roles are suitable depending on their age, and finally decisions about when to leave the labor market in order to adhere to

prescriptive norms. These latter processes are examined less often since the focus of research tends to be on older workers who are the target of discrimination, but they are nevertheless important because they reflect the power of age stereotypes to influence behavior by their application to the self. [65] [66]

Social psychological approaches to tackle ageism in the workplace

There should be wider recognition that ageism is a barrier to policies that aim to extend working lives, as well as greater awareness of the consequences of exposure to stereotype threat in employment contexts, and also of how self-directed ageism can disadvantage workers as they age. In response to these challenges, employers could focus on monitoring and increasing age diversity in the workplace, both in recruitment and when providing opportunities for training, and on reducing age segregation. Supporting and promoting workplace intergenerational contact can help to reduce age separation, break down age stereotypes held by younger employees,[67] and help to reduce age-based stereotype threat effects via the reduction of anxiety and in-group bias. [68] [69] (See also chapter X.) Increasing older adults' access to and participation in educational opportunities and promoting life-long learning strategies could also serve to reduce age segregation and change out-dated stereotypes regarding declining ability to learn with age.

The evidence reviewed suggests that recruitment and selection are vulnerable to unconscious bias favoring younger over older workers.[70] [71] In order to address and mitigate various types of bias in employment decisions, organizations increasingly offer training that aims to make unconscious bias conscious, focusing on characteristics such as gender, race and age and encouraging fair treatment of stigmatized groups and equality in the workplace.[72] [73] The training typically consists of an unconscious bias test and debrief of the results, education about the theories of prejudice and impact of unconscious bias, and techniques to mitigate its impact.

However, evidence regarding the impact of unconscious bias training on age bias in the workplace is limited. A recent review by Atewologun and colleagues of the effectiveness of unconscious bias training identified only two interventions focused on age bias. These interventions were linked with reduced implicit age bias, but there was no evidence that they raised awareness of such bias or led to behavioral change. Furthermore, unconscious bias training may lead to backfiring effects, whereby exposure to unconscious bias and stereotypes may encourage perceptions that they cannot be changed, serving to entrench the very biases the training seeks to overturn.[74] Further research is needed to assess whether unconscious bias training has any long-term effects in mitigating age bias in recruitment and selection, and whether its potential backfiring effects are outweighed by its benefits.

In line with the World Health Organization's focus on promoting age-friendly communities,[75] the creation of age-friendly workplaces has also been encouraged as a route to greater age equality on the job.[76] [77] An age-friendly workplace has a work environment that explicitly addresses the physical and psychological safety of workers of all ages, especially older workers, aiming to create an inclusive workplace culture that values age diversity.[78] [79] [80] (See also chapters X and X.) Although policies relating to fair treatment based on age are an integral part of this, they are not enough on their own to create an age-friendly workplace.[81] Organizational culture and workplace practices have been highlighted as essential levers in driving a workplace environment in which workers of all ages can excel and be valued.[82] [83]

A recent review by Eppler-Hattab et al. aimed to better define age-friendly workplaces, highlighting aspects of organizational culture (the shared values and beliefs within an organization) and organizational climate (employees' experience of the policies and practices that are supported and encouraged).[84] Their model of an age-friendly workplace is grounded in a

workplace culture that promotes fairness, equality and respect for older workers through initiatives such as training and opportunities for positive intergenerational contact. Within this culture, policies and practices that promote lifelong learning, sustain employee well-being and skill development, adapt job roles to improve performance, and offer flexible working patterns that support work-life balance, encourage an organizational climate in which workers of all ages are valued and evaluated on their skills and abilities rather than age-based assumptions.[85] [86]

Although based on a review of the existing research literature, the Eppler-Hattab et al. model also reflects current industry best practice, as set out in guidelines from the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices that similarly promote practices such as job design, flexible working, and training and development as foundations for creating age friendly workplaces.[87] Together, empirical research and industry best practice suggest that a range of interventions targeted at workplace culture and practice can create age-friendly conditions and reduce ageism in the workplace.[88] [89] In this chapter, we also advocate that these interventions should not only focus on stereotypes applied to others to reduce discriminatory practices, but should also encompass greater awareness of self-ageism and how people apply stereotypes to themselves, which is not currently addressed by unconscious bias training.

A final, perhaps less well-known intervention is the use of mindfulness-based meditation practices for reducing bias and heuristic processing which rely erroneously on stereotypes. Mindfulness is a particular mode of conscious processing[90] defined by Brown and Ryan as “the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present.” [91] As a result, mindfulness involves a greater receptivity to internal and external stimuli as they occur. The evidence suggests that people in a higher state of mindfulness would be more aware and receptive to what affects themselves and others, and therefore less likely to display bias.[92]

Research has begun to understand the consequences of mindful-based practices on a range of organizational outcomes, including task performance and turnover intentions,[93] [94] workplace well-being and job satisfaction,[95] yet relatively little research has explored its potential to reduce biasing effects of age stereotypes, despite promising evidence.[96] For instance, Chen et al. investigated whether making people more mindful by increasing self-awareness reduced age-bias. Sitting in front of a computer, participants read eight social judgments about a specific character. While doing this task, participants in the high self-awareness condition were able to see their own image in the computer screen, whereas participants in the low self-awareness condition saw images of a stranger. After reading the eight social judgments, half of the participants were then asked to read about a younger person and the other half about an older person. In each condition, participants were requested to make eight judgments about the last character they had been introduced to. Results showed that exposing people to age-related information was enough to activate age stereotypes and influence people's social judgment. However, the self-awareness manipulation, which was introduced to make people more mindful of the situation, dampened this effect. People who were in a high self-awareness condition were more sensitive to age information and also more aware of social norms against ageism, and therefore made fewer ageist judgments.[97]

Although these researchers did not directly use mindfulness as part of their manipulation, the literature suggests that increased self-awareness is the mechanism through which mindfulness should produce these effects.[98] However, Lueke and Gibson have shown that a 10-minute mindfulness meditation reduced implicit bias on the bases of race and age (measured using the implicit association test, IAT) of U.S. white college students compared to participants listening to a control audio describing historical events.[99] The mindfulness meditation is thought

to limit the reliance on past associations in memory, reduce automatic processing and increase focus on being non-judgmental and open to thoughts and experiences in the present.[100] This is in line with the wider literature on bias reduction. Bargh suggests that the only way to control the effect of automatic bias on behavior and cognition is by becoming aware of such biases, i.e., by bringing the unconscious into consciousness.[101] However, we have yet to see the impact of such an intervention tested and rolled out in organizational settings.

Overall this chapter outlines the ways in which ageism on the grounds of perceived old age can manifest in work and organizational settings. The majority of the research thus far tends to focus on age bias against older workers at the point of hiring, in the provision of learning, training and development opportunities, and ageism as a factor that pushes people out of the workplace and informs decisions to retire. However, negative age stereotypes regarding competence and ability to learn, but also prescriptive expectations about when people should retire can also be applied by individuals to themselves with self-limiting consequences. The implications of this self-ageism are less widely researched, yet they serve as a reminder to look beyond ageism as form of prejudice that harms older workers because they are targets of others' negative attitudes. Despite some promising interventions to tackle ageism by encouraging age-friendly workplace practices, including unconscious bias training, there is little exploration or evaluation of these in practice.

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