

Understanding the Aging Workforce: Defining a Research Agenda

Age Discrimination

This issue brief is based on the consensus report *Understanding the Aging Workforce: Defining a Research Agenda*, which offers a multidisciplinary framework for understanding the complex pathways between work and nonwork that adults traverse at older ages. The report reviews the current literature and proposes a comprehensive research agenda that highlights the need for more work exploring the ways in which these pathways are shaped not only by workers' individual and family characteristics but also by the current and historical social, economic, and policy contexts in which they live and work. To this end, it examines the role of workplaces, age discrimination and other forms of social inequality, labor markets, and social policy in shaping and constraining older adults' preferences and expectations for extending their working lives. This issue brief focuses on the role of age discrimination.

AGEISM

Although ageism shares many characteristics with other forms of discriminatory beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, it differs in some important ways. First, chronological age is measured continuously in years, but the definition of age-based group membership can vary contextually. For example, it can be categorized based on life stages ("old"), relative standing ("older than me"), cut-offs ("eligible for discount"), or changing roles ("grandparent"). Second, as with gender, people have both older and younger people within their own families,

creating a social interdependence between categories. However, unlike with gender, people expect themselves to transition between age categories throughout their lifetime. Each of these distinctive features of age complicates its measurement, because the meaning of "older" age depends on perspective, context, and purpose: who is asking about it, where, and why.

Ageism manifests in responses that range from explicit and overt bias (regular, reportable attitudes) to implicit, latent bias (subtle, modern, covert incivilities). Social psychology distinguishes among key indicators of both explicit and implicit bias: simple evaluative attitudes (preferences), cognitive stereotypes (beliefs, expectations), emotional prejudices (specific affect, such as pity or resentment), and discriminatory behavior (constraining action).

Attitudes and Preferences, Stereotypes, and Prejudices

Explicit attitudes and preferences are overt views that individuals are aware they possess and are willing to articulate and potentially act upon. Aggregate measures of attitudes demonstrate that on average, Americans hold moderately negative views of older people. Over time, these views have become less negative, suggesting that overt ageism has become less acceptable. In general, bias against older people as a group has decreased less than biases based on sexuality or race, but more than biases based on disability, skin tone, and weight.

Implicit biases are unconscious attitudes and associations that individuals hold about specific groups. Because they are unconscious, these biases cannot be directly reported and must be measured indirectly. Indirect measures of these attitudes about older adults assess the degree to which the concept of older people is connected to negative associations in individuals' minds. The most common measurement technique for implicit attitudes assesses the relative speed with which individuals pair in-group and out-group with other positive or negative concepts. The logic is that if negative associations have faster response times (old and bad go together) than positive associations, this reflects some evaluative tendency stored in the mind. On average, implicit associations with the category "old" are very negative and, in contrast to explicit attitudes, have remained stable over time.

Stereotypes are generalized beliefs based on group membership. **Descriptive stereotypes** about older workers are mostly negative, but not entirely; they are often ambivalent or mixed. Currently, ambivalence toward older people is the most common stereotype, not just within the United States, but globally. Across a variety of countries, older people are universally viewed as well intentioned but incompetent ("doddering but dear"). Older people are supposedly warm and friendly, but less ambitious, less responsible, and less intelligent. Ambivalent stereotypes are often unexamined and harder to detect, because they mix both positive and negative attributes and they are often reflected in mixed behavior. Stereotypes about older workers in particular suggest similar ambivalence: incompetent but trustworthy, if also unhealthy. Research examining the content of stereotypes about older workers has found they include contradictory pairs (e.g., both worse and better communication skills, both less and more productive, and both negative and warm personality). This could reflect individual heterogeneity—different people subscribing to different beliefs—or it could reflect differences in beliefs about subtypes of older workers.

In addition to descriptive stereotypes about the characteristics that older workers possess as a group, individuals also hold **prescriptive stereotypes** about

the ways in which older workers should behave. These prescriptive stereotypes serve as behavioral constraints that control older adults so they will "cooperate." People of different ages depend on each other's resource allocations, whether this concerns sharing money, handling tasks, or sharing information or time. Ageism's roots in intergenerational tensions lead younger and middle-aged people to endorse constraints for elders. These prescriptive beliefs can affect workplace participation, such as when succession plans pressure older workers to retire promptly, ceding power and resource control.

Prejudices are affective responses to cognitive beliefs and expectations. They include both good-bad evaluation (attitudes, preferences) and more complex emotional responses (pity, disgust, pride). Emotions directed at a target group (differentiated prejudices) are important because they reliably predict discriminatory behavior. Ambivalent stereotypes can also result in ambivalent emotional responses. For example, the "doddering but dear" stereotype evokes pity and active helping in response to older people's warmth, but neglect and disrespect in response to perceived incompetence. These are more specific than simple valenced preferences and, in turn, predict differentiated discriminatory behaviors.

Evaluating the Accuracy of Stereotypes About Age-Related Cognitive Decline

To be sure, individuals do experience physical and psychological changes as they age; however, research within the field of cognitive aging demonstrates that declines in healthy aging are exaggerated and that there is considerable variability in these processes across individuals. Longitudinal studies of cognitive performance find that fluid intelligence (identifying patterns and relationships, working memory, information processing, speed) tends to decline, but crystallized intelligence (knowledge acquired over time, vocabulary, experience) remains stable, perhaps even increasing over time. Overall, the elder stereotypes seem mostly inaccurate and certainly lack nuance.

For an aging workforce, the central questions about cognitive decline over time are, for any given occupation:

when and whether declines start to occur, with perhaps few if any effects on performance; when such declines might affect performance, but can diminish with training or by changing the work context; and when such declines become irreparably detrimental to performance. In general, if and when they occur, declines are not precipitous and might even be imperceptible to colleagues up until the workers is in their 70s. Moreover, these changes may not have a negative (or positive) impact on actual job performance in older adults. Current tests do not assess many job-dependent cognitive skills, such as employees' domain knowledge of job requirements, critical thinking, reading and writing skills, and individual motivation for engaging the work. The organizational context can also be noteworthy by offering policies and practices that can minimize the impact of declines, such as providing supervisor support, flexible work arrangements, and other inclusive efforts.

WORKPLACE AGE DISCRIMINATION

Self-Reported Experiences of Workplace Discrimination

A number of psychometric instruments have been developed to measure self-reported experiences of workplace age discrimination (**perceived discrimination**); however, there are only rare cases where these measures have been used in large and population-based samples. These studies have consistently shown low-grade but enduring discrimination that is consistent with the stable, moderately negative expression of implicit and explicit attitudes discussed above. However, other measures of workplace discrimination, including objective measures of coworker and supervisor discriminatory behaviors are lacking in the literature. In addition to their direct effects, experiences of workplace ageism can affect the ways in which older workers view themselves and perform within these spaces. **Stereotype threat** is when an individual worries that their own behavior or performance will fulfill and reinforce other people's stereotypical beliefs about their group. Many older people apply ageist stereotypes to themselves and worry that they actually might be, or might be seen as, losing their memory and general cognitive ability. Stereotype threat can affect performance and be self-fulfilling; when the situation makes their age salient, older people perform below their individual potential.

Individuals who are at the intersection of multiple marginalized characteristics—including older age, racial/ethnic minority status, women, and less education—report higher levels of lifetime experiences of discrimination at work and in their everyday lives. Age discrimination is a common experience among older adults—White, Black, and Hispanic—yet their meaning-making attributions to these experiences differ. Racial and ethnic minorities tie these experiences to their race, nativity, age, and gender, whereas older White adults mostly attribute these experiences to age and gender. Ageism and age discrimination are a shared experience across racial and ethnic membership groups, yet the variety of attributions these experiences are assigned underscores the need for an intersectional lens to understand discrimination in later life.

Perceived age discrimination has been associated with higher stress, lower job satisfaction, and higher turnover and retirement intentions, as well as various aspects of physical and mental health, such as hypertension, depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and global health. In addition, a small but growing body of research suggests that discrimination within the workplace may also cause distress at home. These findings are correlational and make a good case that ageism is bad for the health and well-being of older people; however, the causal link has yet to be established. An international meta-analysis suggests that ageism could impact health through three separate but interrelated components: “age discrimination (i.e., detrimental treatment of older persons); negative age stereotypes (i.e., beliefs about older persons in general); and negative self-perceptions of aging (e.g., beliefs held by older persons about their own aging).”¹

Age and Job Performance

The current literature on workplace productivity finds no solid evidence that productivity generally declines with age. Findings are sensitive both to the measures of productivity used and to job complexity. When job performance is broken down by type, age is unrelated to

¹ Chang E.-S., Kanno, S., Levy, S., Wang, S.-Y., Lee, J.E., and Levy, B.R. (2020). Global reach of ageism on older persons' health: A systematic review. *PLoS ONE* 15(1):e0220857

performance on core task performance, creativity, and training program performance. However, it is positively related to organizational citizenship behaviors, such as upholding organizational norms, helping coworkers who needed assistance, and avoiding negative behaviors such as gossiping and complaining. Because these citizenship behaviors are hard to measure, they are often excluded from performance evaluations. This exclusion can lead to biased assessments that underestimate older workers' performance in the workplace.

Labor Market Discrimination

The strongest evidence that older workers face discrimination in hiring decisions is drawn from audit and correspondence studies. **Audit studies** use actual job applicants coached to act alike and measure discrimination as differences in job offer rates.

Correspondence studies create fake applicants (on paper or electronically) and capture callbacks for job interviews. Both kinds of studies' artificial applicants have resumés indicating equal qualifications, except for their belonging to a different demographic group. Employers should treat them identically, unless they prefer one group over the other or make inferences based on group membership. Several correspondence studies have also examined the relationship between the use of age-based stereotypes in job ads and hiring discrimination. As a whole, these studies have provided consistent evidence of widespread age discrimination in hiring with the largest effects for those approaching retirement age.

It is important to note that women consistently experience greater age discrimination than men but are in a bind because they cannot generally have straightforward recourse to both age and sex discrimination laws at once. A parallel dilemma faces older Black Americans; to the extent that racial and age discrimination combine, the federal age antidiscrimination law (the Age Discrimination in Employment Act) limits enforcement where age is one of multiple factors.

FUTURE RESEARCH ON AGE DISCRIMINATION

The report outlines the need for further research that addresses how societal expectations about aging workers

(e.g., stereotypes) affect employers' and managers' preferences (e.g., attitudes) and how these in turn constrain older workers' options (e.g., discrimination), despite scant evidence of age-related performance issues. In addition, it highlights an overarching need for research that specifically addresses the experiences of vulnerable older populations, particularly the experiences of women, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, those with less education, those who have low income or limited savings and wealth, those living in rural or economically disadvantaged areas, and those with multiple intersecting vulnerabilities. The relative lack of attention to these populations in the existing literature limits understanding of the ways in which the legal system falls short in addressing the specific ways in which these populations experience the effects of age discrimination.

In particular, further research is needed to establish:

- Whether, when, and how discrimination occurs on the job, including evidence of employers', supervisors', and coworkers' reported and observed discriminatory behavior toward older people in the workplace, using methodologies that provide a rigor equal to that of audit studies;
- The causal link between implicit and explicit ageist attitudes and preferences and more explicit workplace attitudes and behaviors;
- Improved measures of ageist attitudes, stereotypes, and discrimination that capture their ambivalent and sometimes contradictory content;
- The implications of using measures of productivity and performance that omit dimensions on which older workers outperform younger workers, including how this exclusion affects researcher, supervisor, and peer estimates of worker productivity, workplace performance, and the value of retaining older workers;
- The causal link between workplace age discrimination and worker health and well-being.

THE PATH FORWARD

Work and retirement decisions are the result of individual preferences for work, expectations about the future, and constraints on work behaviors within larger social and organizational contexts. Extant literature demonstrates that age discrimination within workplaces and the labor market undermines worker well-being, erodes the value of extending one's working life, and limits the employment options available to older workers. Moreover, the current legal structure is insufficient to

address the discrimination experiences of older workers with multiple intersecting vulnerabilities. Future research can further elucidate the causal chain that links ageist attitudes to workplace behaviors and establish how they alter older workers' retirement and work preferences, their expectations regarding current and future employment, and constraints on work opportunities. Doing so will provide a social and political roadmap for addressing the effects of age bias in the workplace.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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