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Age discrimination

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Introduction

Age-based discrimination in the workplace refers to discriminatory practices and behaviors addressed against individuals due to their age. It stems from age-based attitudes (Nelson, 2009), which include beliefs, feelings and behavioral intentions regarding different age groups. In the late 60s, the term "ageism" was coined to indicate negative attitudes toward older people and the aging process (Butler, 1969). Subsequently, the construct was refined to include not only prejudicial attitudes but also, and explicitly, discriminatory practices against the elderly that are either implemented at the organizational level (i.e., in employment) or at the societal level. While the original term referred exclusively to discrimination against older workers, the World Health Organization (2021) has recently clarified that "ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) directed towards others or oneself based on age" (p. 2). As such, it is also possible that age-based discrimination and ageism (that we use as synonyms) are addressed against younger workers.

Conceptual approaches

Because age discrimination is mostly rooted in what people believe about age, rather than what age brings about, the main theoretical approach used to understand ageism is rooted

in stereotypes. *Stereotypes* are generalizations of specific individual traits to entire social groups, and are used to differentiate groups from one another (Nelson, 2009). Although stereotypes are cognitive structures (schemas) developed with experience and automatically activated, they are still susceptible to interventions and change.

Stereotypes exert two main functions: 1) they help understand the social context without spending too much cognitive effort (i.e., they are "shortcuts"); 2) they indicate how to behave in the social context, thus acting as social norms (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Consistent with these functions, two types of stereotypes have been proposed in the literature. *Descriptive stereotypes* refer to what people allegedly "are" (e.g., North & Fiske, 2013), or the beliefs about the attributes, roles, and behaviors that characterize a certain group. Examples of descriptive stereotypes regarding older workers are that they are harder to train, less adaptable, less flexible, and more resistant to change (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). *Prescriptive stereotypes* refer to "should"-based expectations that seek to control what members of a certain social group are to do. A prescriptive stereotype regarding older workers is that, as retirement approach, they should step aside, opening up new opportunities for the younger ones (North & Fiske, 2013).

The processes through which descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes theoretically lead to workplace discrimination are different. The former ones highlight a "lack of fit" for a certain occupation, and do not require any prejudicial intent to discriminate, nor do they require the decision maker to harbor any hostility toward the discriminated group. The latter ones lead to discrimination against individuals who violate the prescriptive stereotypes as norms' violation often results in backlash (Rudman et al., 2012). In this sense, discrimination originated from prescriptive stereotypes generally takes the form of disparate treatment (Heilman, 2001).

Parallels to descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes and their consequences can be found in the labor law literature that distinguishes between indirect and direct discrimination (e.g., Forshaw & Pilgerstorfer, 2008). *Indirect discrimination* originates from a differentiation based

on an apparently neutral criterion, which has the effect that a group protected by non-discrimination law is disadvantaged compared to another group. For example, to impose a criterion for candidates to have held a driving license for 10 years, might be indirect discrimination against younger workers. Although there seems to be no prejudicial intent to discriminate against younger workers, they are put in disadvantage (as the younger the person the less likely it is – or even impossible – to comply with the requirement). An employer would only be able to justify the use of this criterion with objective reasons based on the requirements of the job rather than descriptive stereotypes of a "reliable" or "safe" driver. *Direct discrimination* occurs when a person is treated less favorably than others because of a particular characteristic (such as age, taken that age, per se, is not a relevant criterion for hiring decisions). This takes the form of disparate treatment and can be associated to prescriptive stereotypes (e.g., when people of a certain age group are immediately sifted out of a recruitment process).

The notion of discrimination can be more nuanced or explicit as suggested by the constructs of subtle and overt discrimination. The first one can be defined as "interpersonal discrimination that is enacted unconsciously or unintentionally and that is entrenched in common, everyday interactions, taking the shape of harassment, jokes, incivility, avoidance, and other types of disrespectful treatment" (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011, p. 1205). On the other hand, overt or blatant discrimination is described by Jones et al. (2016) as explicitly negative demeanor and/or treatment enacted toward social minorities on the basis of their minority status membership that are necessarily conscious. It occurs when differential and unfair treatment is clearly exercised, with visible structural outcomes, and takes the form of behaviors that are intentional and easily recognizable (e.g., Van Laer & Janssens, 2011). Indirect and subtle discrimination are less likely to be unlawful, when compared to direct and overt discrimination (e.g., Jones et al., 2016).

Stereotypes, and the discrimination they lead to, only capture one side of the social

perception process; people also have their own perceptions of the stereotypical images other groups hold of them. These are called *metastereotypes* and are formally defined as beliefs individuals have concerning the way they (and their group) are perceived by other individuals belonging to an out-group (Finkelstein, King & Voyles, 2015). Therefore, younger, middle-age and older workers have metastereotypes about what the other groups think of them. Negative metastereotypes may induce individuals to self-select out of certain opportunities. Nonetheless, they may also trigger reactions that disconfirm the stereotype; this depends on the appraisal people do of the stereotypes as perceived threats or perceived challenges and opportunities (Finkelstein et al., 2015).

The last theoretical approach useful to understand ageism and the bidirectionality of age discrimination in the workplace is *age normativity*. This theory suggests that there are implicit shared beliefs in society about the "appropriate" age to hold specific positions (Lawrence, 1988). These beliefs are normative in that they are used to dictate what is acceptable and unacceptable from people, and to regulate the behaviors of members in a society. Accordingly, younger workers may be disregarded for promotions to higher positions because "it is not yet the right time" and older workers may be penalized when looking for entry-level jobs or changing career path. It is also important to note that age normative beliefs (i.e., when a person is considered "too old" or "too young" for a job) change by industry, sector, and occupation.

Key Findings

Ageism against younger workers

Although 28% of young employees indicated experiencing age discrimination (Raymer et al., 2017), the effects of ageism against younger workers have largely been under-studied (de la Fuente-Núñez et al., 2021). In particular, those aged 30 and below lamented age

discrimination during all phases of the employment relationship, from recruitment to promotions and lay-offs (Snape & Redman, 2003). Younger workers report not feeling valued, receiving belittling comments, being generally perceived as incompetent because they look young, and receiving fewer development opportunities (Raymer et al., 2017).

As the research showed, this is in most cases related to the content of stereotypes about younger workers, who are portrayed as less loyal and less emotionally stable (e.g., Gibson et al., 1993). On the positive spectrum, they are seen as more work-motivated, ambitious, and quicker learners than older workers. Further descriptive stereotypes about younger people in general – but relevant for the work context are: eager, bright, tech-savvy, entitled, argumentative, and inexperienced (Francioli & North, 2021). Similarly, company managers regarded the youngers as goal-oriented, technologically savvy, innovative but not experienced, in high need of support, seeking the most work–life balance, not etiquette-savvy, and uncommitted to the company (Van Rossem, 2019).

The work by Finkelstein and colleagues (2013), revealed that younger workers' metastereotypes converged. Indeed, the stereotypes younger workers believe older workers hold about them are: tech-savvy, arrogant, hardworking, nimble, and tardy. Similar findings were reported also by Rožman and colleagues (2016).

In a different perspective, a longitudinal study by Paleari et al. (2019) showed that the more employees held prejudices toward younger (or older) workers the more they experienced increasingly negative interactions with that group over time, which negatively affected behaviors toward all co-workers and, marginally, their vitality at work and organizational identification. Employees holding ageist attitudes also enacted more counterproductive behaviors.

Ageism against older workers

There is abundant empirical evidence of older workers' disadvantage in the workplace, particularly in hiring and training (Bal et al., 2011) and authors report that ageism occurs even at relatively early ages (e.g., 46 years old) and for small differences in age. In a simulated hiring situation, Ahmed et al. (2012) found that a fictitious 31-year-old applicant received over three times more responses from employers than a fictitious 46-year-old applicant – while keeping everything else constant. In a vignette study Fleischmann and Koster (2018) found that employers were less likely to offer training to older employees and that this effect started linear and accelerated with employee increasing age.

Research shows that negative age norms shared within organizations constitute the main reason for discriminations, either in recruitment, training or retention. Oude Mulders and colleagues (2017), in a sample of over one thousand organizations from six European countries, found that when top managers shared age norms for equality, their organizations were more likely to recruit older workers and encourage them to remain at work until the retirement age. The opposite was found when top managers held norms that favored younger workers. Most importantly, these effects were found after controlling for the implementation of HR policies and practices aimed at managing older workers (see entry on Age differences). Finally, it seems that older workers are more likely to be invited for job interviews when economic conditions are florid than during recessionary times (Oude Mulders et al., 2018). With respect to country differences, ageism seems not to have boundaries, such that older workers perceive themselves as less externally employable than younger workers across 30 countries (Dello Russo et al., 2020). Dello Russo and colleagues explained their observed relationships by referring to both ageism and metastereotypes.

Older workers' metastereotypes are often more negative than the stereotypes about them (Finkelstein, Ryan, & King, 2013). Older workers believe to come across as grumpy, boring, conservative and stubborn. We argue that the excessive emphasis on generational

differences that characterized the media in the last decade risks exacerbating both stereotypes and metastereotypes, perpetuating negative views that are detrimental to cross-age and cross-generation interactions (Urick et al., 2017).

Cross-age interaction is especially difficult when it violates the implicit age norms, for example when younger managers coordinate older collaborators. At the organizational level, the average age differences between younger supervisors and older collaborators are associated with negative emotions experienced by the workforce, likely due to status incongruence and the violation of age norms. Negative emotions, in turn, have a detrimental effect on company performance although their effect can be buffered by emotion suppression (Kunze & Menges, 2016). However, status incongruence may also trigger positive behaviors, as it was found in a study in which workers who were relatively older than their immediate supervisors displayed less frequent absences and more frequent citizenship behaviors than workers who were relatively younger than their supervisors (Perry et al., 1999). Even though this study draws on a very small sample, it invites to better understand the mechanisms explaining the different reactions individuals may have to age norms violations.

Outlook

The literature on age discrimination in the workplace attests to the bidirectionality of the phenomenon, such that both older and younger employees face ageist attitudes and practices – in the form of either direct and overt discrimination or indirect and subtle. At the roots of these practices are long-lasting stereotypical beliefs that, although unfounded (Posthuman & Campion, 2009), offer heuristics to understand and navigate the social world. Not only are individuals' behaviors affected by stereotypes; individuals' beliefs are influenced too, as in the case of introjected stereotypical views that become metastereotypes. Research findings suggest that ageism is not only detrimental to the target workers, but also to

those who hold such biases and the overall organization. A promising direction for future research is zooming in on how stereotypes and metastereotypes affect dyadic relationships and how these cognitive schemas play out – and remain constant or evolve over time – in "anti-stereotypical" dyads (such as, older workers who report to younger supervisors) that are, nonetheless, more and more common, and violate age norms.

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