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Jacqueline Magnarelli

Lauren Stricker

Dylan Fry

Jasmin Tahmaseb-McConatha

Frauke Schnell

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Jacqueline Magnarelli, Lauren Stricker, Dylan Fry, Jasmin Tahmaseb-McConatha, Frauke Schnell, and V. Krishna Kumar

Ageism in the Workplace: Ageing in the Age of Intolerance

Student Researchers: Jacqueline Magnarelli, Lauren Stricker, Dylan Fry

Faculty Advisors: Dr. Jasmin Tahmaseb-McConatha,
Dr. Frauke Schnell, Dr. V. Krishna Kumar

Department of Psychology, West Chester University



AGEISM: stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against individuals or groups due to age (WHO, 2020).

As people live longer, healthier lives, they also remain in the workforce longer and are more likely to experience discrimination. By 2050, the world's population aged 60 years and older is expected to total 2 billion (WHO, 2018). A majority (60%) of older workers, particularly female workers, report being subjected to discriminatory mistreatment (AARP, 2018a). Those 55 years and older constituted 40.1% of labor force participation in 2018 (BLS, 2018). The total number of age discrimination complaints filed by this group has steadily increased since 2000, along with their workforce participation (Lipnic, 2018; Barrington, 2015). In an AARP (2018b) survey, only 3% of respondents who experienced age discrimination made an official complaint, indicating the problem may be even more widespread than is documented.

CURRENT STUDY

- The purpose of this study is to assess perceived age discrimination in the workplace and to explore the psychological and social consequences of age discrimination. More specifically, this study explores perceptions of discrimination, stress, and workplace satisfaction among faculty and staff in an academic setting
- An online survey was sent to 1015 faculty members and 805 staff and administrators. Questions probed work experiences, work attitudes, stress, and life satisfaction.
- Quantitative analyses were used to assess responses to scale items.
- Qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify themes emerging from open-ended questions addressing participants' personal narratives and experiences, life satisfaction, and workplace stress.

RESULTS: QUANTITATIVE

- 183 of 364 respondents completed the scaled items.
- Workplace Age Discrimination Scale: 23 items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = "never, 5 = very often").
 - Scores ranged between 23 and 103, and 23 was the model score with 29.5% (n = 183) of the participants responding that they never experienced discrimination on any of the items.
 - Average score of 35.73 (SD = 16.29) and average rating of 1.55
 - Eleven respondents reported total scores of 69-103 and above (corresponding to the average rating between Sometimes [3] and Very Often [5]).
 - 70.5% of participants experienced some degree of age discrimination
- Older respondents reported experiencing greater workplace discrimination, respondents holding negative stereotypes about aging reported experiencing greater workplace discrimination, and respondents who perceived the workplace intergenerational climate as negative reported experiencing greater workplace discrimination

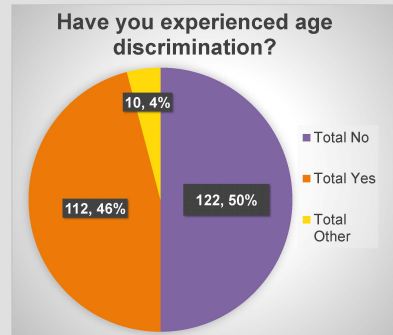
CONSEQUENCES OF AGEISM

Psychological & Social Consequences

- Increases stress (APA, 2016)
- Impacts self-worth and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Nelson, 2016)
- Increases feelings of alienation and isolation (Goll, 2005), as victims tend not to discuss their mistreatment (Brownell & Kelly, 2013)
- Reinforces age inequality, ageist language, and age segregation (Gendron et al., 2016)

Work-Related Consequences

- Decline in job engagement and satisfaction
 - Older workers feel that their contributions are unacknowledged and feel left out of decision making and planning (Blackstone, 2013)
- Older workers receive fewer hiring, training, and promotion opportunities since they are often viewed as less competent, less trainable, and less willing to cope with change than younger workers (AARP, 2018b; EEOC, n.d.).



Workplace Age Discrimination Scale (Sample Items)

Instructions: Please rate the frequency with which you experience the following workplace situations. 1 = never to 5 = very often.

- I have been passed over for a work role/task due to my age.
- I was not asked to take part in decision-making as often due to my age.
- I have been provided with fewer resources due to my age.
- Someone has inappropriately brought up my retiring.
- I have been restricted to use old technology due to my age.
- Courses I teach were taken from me and given to a younger faculty member.
- Someone at work has assumed I have health problems due to my age.

Negative Aging Meta-stereotypes Scale (Sample Items)

Instructions: Please rate the frequency with which you experience the following workplace situations. 1 = totally agree to 5 = totally disagree.

- I believe the majority of my colleagues think that performance declines with age.
- I believe the majority of my colleagues believe that older co-workers resist change.
- I believe the majority of my colleagues feel negative about older workers.

Sample items from the modified version of the Workplace Age Discrimination Scale (WADS) (Machiondo, Gonzalez, & Ran, 2016), and a modified version of the Negative Aging Meta-Stereotypes scale (Bal, de Lange, Van der Heijden, Zacher, and Otten, 2015), respectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS: BUILDING A MULTI-GENERATIONAL, SUSTAINABLE, & CULTURALLY SENSITIVE WORKFORCE.

- Institutions should address and provide education about ageism.
- Academia:
 - Older female faculty should become visible and vocal on the matter by incorporating issues of aging and gender into their teaching and advocating for older women.
 - Older women should study themselves and write about their own and other older women's life experiences.
- Implement institutional top down support for the "whole person" should be incorporated to focus on the lives of older women.

INTERSECTIONALITY: GENDER & AGEISM

Women bear the double burden of age and gender bias. Older women are subjected to what Susan Sontag (1972) called "double jeopardy"; that is, they are often victims of both age and gender discrimination.

- Research indicates that over 80% of women over 50 report having been subjected to age discrimination (McGuire, Klein, & Chen, 2008)
- As women age, they become increasingly invisible. They tend lose power and social status with age (Hatch, 2005).
- Studies of ageism in academia have found that younger colleagues may patronize older faculty, particularly female faculty (Harris et al., 2018)
- Older faculty are more likely to be excluded, while younger female faculty are more likely to be viewed as more committed, productive, and energetic (Castaneda & Isgro, 2013; El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, & Ceynar, 2018; Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012).

RESULTS: QUALITATIVE

- Forty-six percent (n = 112) participating faculty and staff members who responded to open-ended questions (n = 244) reported experiencing age discrimination.
 - 72 participants reported they experienced age discrimination as older adults
- Qualitative data analysis indicated that ageist treatment resulted in feelings of powerlessness, self-doubt, and isolation; many stated that they felt "invisible"
 - Older faculty often lowered their professional expectations, disengaged from their jobs, worked less, engaged in self-silencing, avoided interactions with colleagues of different ages, or even quit or retired from their jobs. Others were pressured to retire.
- Additionally, those who reported age discrimination also frequently experienced high stress levels at work because of interpersonal conflict; lack of input and feeling left out of decision-making processes; and lack of work-life balance, often due to having more work to do than time to complete it. This is consistent with past research (Blackstone, 2013; Brownell & Kelly, 2013).
- Intersectionality was a common theme
 - "When you are young, you aren't respected. When you are old, you aren't respected. There is a narrow middle point when age is to one's advantage, especially as a woman."

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