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Commentary

Different Shades of Discriminatory Effects of Age Stereotypes in the Workplace: A Multilevel and Dynamic Perspective on Organizational Behaviors

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Age-related stereotypes in the workplace are assumed to hamper the employment of older workers (Bytheway, 2005; Oude Mulders, 2020; Perry & Finkelstein, 1999), yet Murphy and DeNisi (2021) challenged this view mainly due to scarce and inconsistent findings. In this commentary, we argue that a lack of evidence for the relationship between age stereotypes and personnel decisions does not imply a nondiscriminatory work environment. When limiting the interest to the narrow category of “personnel decisions,” we ignore other areas where age discrimination occurs and restrict our ability to understand the underlying mechanisms.

This commentary makes three points. First, we argue that detecting and conceptualizing mechanisms of age discrimination can benefit from taking a multilevel organizational perspective. Accounting for the organizational structure and hierarchy helps to understand how discrimination develops in connection to age-related stereotypes and how it affects older employees in direct and indirect ways.

Second, age discrimination should not only be conceived as direct or “hard discrimination” in personnel decisions. Age-related stereotypes can also trigger more subtle practices, such as hearing an ageist comment or being treated with no respect because of age (Harris et al., 2018; Solem, 2016; Stypińska & Turek, 2017). Although less evident, they are common and detrimental for older workers (Rahn et al., 2021; Vickerstaff & Van der Horst, 2021). We discuss how hard, soft, and self-discrimination can be linked to age-related stereotypes through different multilevel mechanisms.

Third, a multilevel organizational perspective opens ways for future research on the dynamics of age discrimination from a complex-system perspective. We argue that computer simulations can provide insights into the complex, multilevel, and mutual interactions at work in which stereotypes and discrimination emerge and change over time.

The Multilevel Organizational Context

Age discrimination is embedded in the organizational context and driven by organizational processes. The multilevel theory of organizational behavior assumes that individuals’ attitudes, motivations, and behaviors result from an interplay of personal and organizational factors (Kozłowski & Klein, 2000; Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999). This approach is increasingly emphasized in aging literature, especially for considering how the organizational context constraints and stimulates individual agency in successful aging at work (Henkens, 2022; Rauvola & Rudolph, 2020; Wang & Shultz, 2010; Zacher et al., 2018). However, it received little attention in age discrimination studies (as exceptions see, e.g., Kunze et al., 2011, 2013, 2021).

To understand the variety of discriminatory effects of age-related stereotypes in the workplace, we must first recognize the relevant elements of the organizational environment and their hierarchy (Yaldiz et al., 2017). Stereotypes shared by employers and employees may differently affect personnel decisions, organizational policies, practices, climate, organizational social norms, and team-level interactions. For instance, Kunze et al. (2011, 2013) studied perceived age discrimination as an organization-level variable (age discrimination climate), linking it to organizational policies and managers’ age stereotypes. The within-organization hierarchy can be complex, with such levels as the general organizational context, departments, branches, teams, and dyadic relationships (Boehm & Kunze, 2015; Tse & Ashkanasy, 2015). Team-level appears particularly interesting for studying age discrimination because this is where the HR systems designed at the organizational level are implemented and perceived by employees (van Dijk et al., 2017).

In the next step, we should consider how these organizational elements are included in causal mechanisms and distinguish

individual, organizational and cross-level influences, as well as direct, mediated, and moderated effects (Jiang et al., 2012; Johns, 2006). For instance, stereotypes about older workers' low productivity can directly influence early-exit policies or restrict employment opportunities (Posthuma & Campion, 2009; Van Dalen et al., 2010). Organizational climate, on the other hand, can be expected to moderate between individual potentials and behaviors, establishing a cross-level interaction (Kanfer et al., 2013; Shalley et al., 2009). An ageist work climate may constrain the positive effect of older workers' skills on motivation to perform and discourage workers from fulfilling their ambitions (Ostroff et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2013).

The multilevel framework allows applying a diverse theoretical toolbox of organizational psychology and sociology. Among the more popular approaches are the abilities, motivation, and opportunities (AMO) framework applied to explain how HR systems influence individual and organizational performance (Jiang et al., 2012; Lepak et al., 2006), and social exchange theory that served to explain attitudes to organizations using the reciprocity norm (Takeuchi et al., 2007). The multilevel perspective can also be extended beyond organizations to anchor age discrimination in the workplace in societal culture (Marcus & Fitzsche, 2016), industry and macro-economic context (Stypińska & Nikander, 2018), and institutional contexts (Henkens, 2022; Szinovacz, 2012).

Different Shades of Age Discrimination

The multilevel perspective helps conceptualize three main types of age discrimination and their relation to age-related stereotypes (Figure 1). *Hard discrimination* refers to the top-down and direct effect of policies, personnel decisions, and implemented measures that produce unfair, age-based differentiation and *constrain older workers' careers, access to opportunities, and rewards. This definition is close (but*

not limited to) to the legal understanding of discrimination as a prohibited practice (Stypińska & Turek, 2017). Age stereotypes and prejudices may drive hard discrimination by affecting employers' decisions. Yet employers may also uncritically apply perceived group characteristics (older workers) to all group members (i.e., statistical discrimination, Phelps, 1972). Although often legally prohibited, hard discrimination may be difficult to prove in personnel decisions where employers have much autonomy and justify discrimination with ostensibly rational arguments (Rosigno et al., 2007). Hard discrimination is especially likely when information is limited, e.g., during résumé screening (Oude Mulders et al., 2018). Even if employers do not recruit based on age, they may discriminate older workers through job requirements that expect skills subject to age stereotypes, such as computer skills (Turek & Henkens, 2020).

Soft discrimination occurs predominantly in the interpersonal sphere of everyday relations and practices. It is a direct contextual effect of culture and climate, which may stimulate ageist attitudes and behaviors of organizational actors. Soft discrimination manifests in ageist language, remarks, jokes, interpersonal mistreatment, or disrespect and is rarely inscribed in the antidiscrimination legislation (Stypinska & Turek, 2017; Truxillo et al., 2015). Often, it operates unconsciously and without wrong intentions (e.g., implicit ageism, Levy & Banaji, 2002). Nevertheless, it can negatively affect older workers' engagement, satisfaction, and security (Harris et al., 2018; Solem, 2016; Vickerstaff & Van der Horst, 2021). Since employers and managers are often aware of legal restrictions to hard discrimination, soft discrimination may be more common and socially acceptable (Rothermund et al., 2021; Stypinska & Turek, 2017). Age stereotypes can drive soft discrimination mainly by affecting social norms and values regarding older workers, which constitute the reference framework for interactions, expectations, and evaluation of behaviors within organizations (Hitlin & Piliavin 2004). This

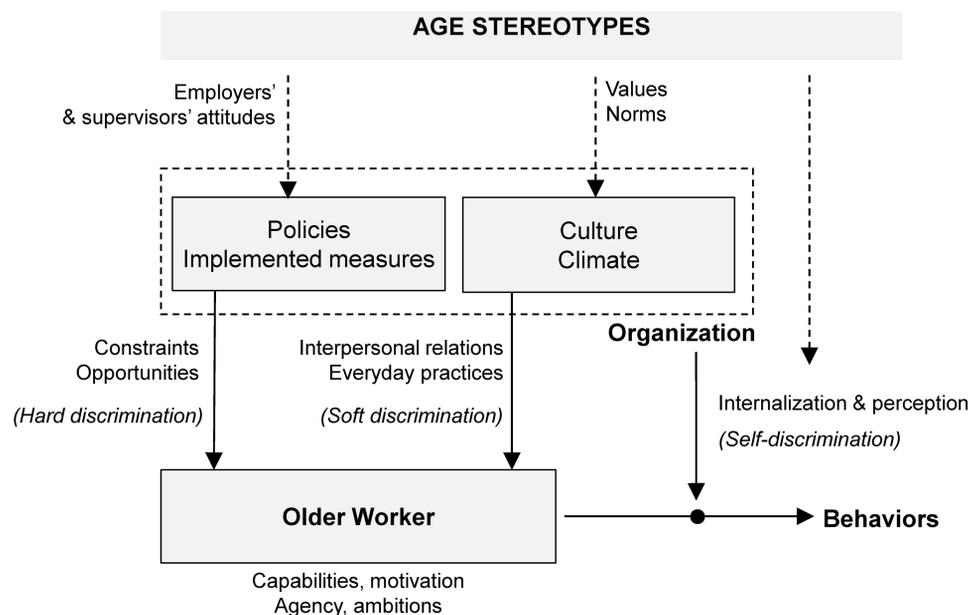


Figure 1. The relationship between age stereotypes and hard, soft, and self-discrimination in the workplace from the multilevel organizational perspective. Age stereotypes can affect (1) policies (via employers' attitudes) that constrain older workers' careers (hard discrimination); (2) culture and climate (via values and norms), which shape everyday relations (soft discrimination); and (3) the way how the organizational context is internalized and perceived by older workers, which can moderate between workers' attitudes and behaviors (self-discrimination).

collectively shared symbolic system, often referred to as organizational culture or climate (Schneider et al., 2013), enforces behaviors and regulates relations between individuals, and as such, contributes to age discrimination (Kunze et al., 2011, 2013).

Finally, *self-discrimination* refers to contextual influences that moderate the relationship between older workers' attitudes and behaviors in a way that constrains individual agency, potentials, and ambitions. Here, age-related stereotypes may affect older people in two ways. First, they can affect the perception of organizational context as (un)supportive for realizing individual intentions and plans. For example, older workers with the potential to continue working beyond retirement age may consider whether the work environment provides them with satisfaction and support (Kanfer et al., 2013). While hard discrimination would directly limit their potential and opportunities in this situation (e.g., no access to training), self-discrimination will constrain workers' agency in proactive and adaptive behaviors (e.g., disengagement from development despite capacities). Second, the salience of age-related stereotypes in society and organizations may lead to their internalization, resulting in compliance with stereotypes and self-sanctioning (Horne & Mollborn, 2020; Vickerstaff & Van der Horst, 2021). For example, strong shared beliefs that older workers do not fit a particular job can be accepted by older workers and discourage them from continuing work (Rahn et al., 2021). Marcus and Fitzsche (2016) explored this area beyond the organizational context and analyzed how societal culture influences age discrimination. The more frequent such beliefs are, the stronger is their internalization and incorporation into personal expectations and self-evaluations (Kornadt & Rothermund, 2012). Such meta-stereotyping (what older people think that others think of older people) has been shown to undermine self-efficacy and confidence, leading to work disengagement and self-discrimination (Finkelstein et al., 2015; Rothermund et al., 2021; Truxillo et al., 2015). Although difficult to detect, self-discrimination may profoundly affect successful aging at work and retirement decisions (Gaillard & Desmette, 2010; Rauvola & Rudolph, 2020; Vickerstaff & Van der Horst, 2021).

The Dynamic Perspective on Age Discrimination in Organizations

Recent literature shows rising interest in going beyond the top-down theoretical approaches and standard analytical models that mostly fail to capture emergent and reciprocal processes (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Crossley, 2021; Galesic et al., 2021; Goldenfeld & Kadenaff, 1999). We argue that the multilevel organizational perspective facilitates research into the dynamics and complexity of age discrimination at work. Complex-system theory (Elder-Vass, 2010; Hedstrom, 2005) and computational simulations (Gómez-Cruz et al., 2017; Macy & Willer, 2002) provide frameworks and tools to consider the processes through which ageist organizational context emerges from multilevel and mutual interactions. The complex-system approach to organizations assumes that networks of interdependencies between individuals constitute the context for individuals' actions, and these actions can, in turn, modify the organizational context (Fioretti, 2013). For example, discriminatory social norms that affect retirement decisions in a top-down direction may evolve because people

can decide whether to comply (Horne & Mollborn, 2020). Consequently, the form and strength of age stereotypes may change as members of the organization react to the external and organizational contexts.

Computational simulations, such as agent-based modeling (ABM), allow for studying such complex social processes. ABM aims to seek causal mechanisms in social dynamics based on micro-level interactions among adaptive agents who influence each other and react to the environment (Macy & Willer, 2002). ABM can be "calibrated" by empirical data (i.e., specifying key model input parameters, such as agents' and contextual characteristics) so that simulations better mirror the real-life mechanisms. Such experimenting with the hypothesized mechanisms allows for bridging the gap between measurement and theory building and more clarity in theorizing (Crossley, 2021; Galesic et al., 2021). ABM has been used for a variety of topics (Macy & Willer, 2002), including organizational relations (Gómez-Cruz et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2021) and age discrimination in the labor market (Lewkovicz et al., 2009). However, age stereotypes and age discrimination in the workplace are still uncharted territory. Applying computer simulations in the multilevel organizational framework can facilitate the development of theories related to ageist work environments.

Conclusions

Older workers may experience various shades of age discrimination in the workplace, ranging from mild to harmful practices. To distinguish between different forms of age discrimination and understand whether and how they relate to age stereotypes, we should consider the complexity of the organizational environment. The multilevel organizational perspective allows us to study the underlying mechanisms of how stereotypes affect hard, soft, and self-discrimination in direct and indirect ways. Another benefit is that it provides a framework to investigate the complexity and dynamics of these processes from a bottom-up perspective.

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