

The Consequences of Perceived Age Discrimination Amongst Older Police Officers: Is Social Support a Buffer?

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Is Social Support a Buffer?**

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the possible psychological consequences of perceived age discrimination, and the possible buffering effect of social support. Findings, based on a study of perceived age discrimination amongst police officers in the North of England, suggest that age discrimination acts as a stressor, with officers experiencing negative effects of perceived age discrimination on job and life satisfaction, perceived power and prestige of the job, and affective and normative commitment, along with positive effects on withdrawal cognitions and continuance commitment. For work-based social support, there were positive main effects on job and satisfaction, power and prestige of the job, and affective and normative commitment, and a negative main effect on withdrawal cognitions. However, there were no significant moderating effects for work-based social support, and we found the anticipated buffering effect for non-work-based social support only for life satisfaction, with reverse buffering for job satisfaction and normative commitment. The limitations and implications of the study are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

For many individuals, encountering age discrimination at work can be a distressing experience, and there is evidence that this is a major problem facing older workers in the UK. Age discrimination is insidious, widespread and permeates many aspects of working life, and recent UK evidence suggests that managers may hold a negative stereotype of the older worker (Chui et al, 2001; Warr and Pennington, 1993). The US Age Discrimination Act of 1978 protects workers over 40 years old from unfair age-based discrimination. In contrast, UK governments have relied on voluntary approaches to addressing such discrimination, with initiatives such as the *Code of Practice on Age Diversity* (1999) and the New Deal 50 plus, launched in 2000 and providing advice, training allowances and employment credit to help older people on benefits move back into work. However, such voluntary initiatives appear to have had only a limited impact, with evidence that employers make little use of, and may even be unaware of, the code of practice (DfEE, 2001)

More recently, UK government employment policy has placed a higher priority on taking action to reduce age discrimination. Policy goals have included seeking to increase the labour force participation rates of people aged over 50, to reduce the high levels of youth unemployment, to address employability issues of the workforce by raising skill levels, and pension reform to facilitate longer working lives. Following the EU Employment Equality Directive, the UK is set to introduce anti-ageism legislation in October 2006, although at the time of writing the exact form of the new legislation was still to be announced.

Although the evidence suggests that age discrimination is widespread in UK workplaces, very little is known about the impact of age discrimination on those who are subjected to it. This paper makes two main contributions in this respect. First, it examines the psychological consequences of perceived age discrimination in the workplace, in terms of key work attitudes. There is already evidence that perceived discrimination in *general* has

negative psychological consequences for those who are exposed to it, but we know little as yet about the impact of perceived *age* discrimination as the vast majority of existing studies have focused on race and gender discrimination. Second, the paper considers how employee resources in the form of work based and non-work social support can buffer the potentially negative consequences of perceived age discrimination and lessen the impact on work attitudes. There are already studies on the coping behaviours of those who feel they suffer race discrimination, but we can find no studies examining potential moderators of the relationship between perceived age discrimination and psychological outcomes.

There are methodological concerns with many of the existing studies on the impact of perceived discrimination in general. First, there have been limitations in the conceptualization and measurement of perceived discrimination. In particular, much of the literature assessing the association between discrimination and psychological outcomes has relied on single-item indicators (Utsey, 1998; Brown, 2001). Second, as Deitch et al (2003:1309) note, few of the studies have focused on discrimination in the workplace, with many using general population and student surveys, and laboratory experiments using student groups. Finally, almost all of these studies have been conducted in North America. Clearly, there is a need to test the applicability of the findings in a UK workplace based sample, using a multi-item measure of perceived age discrimination.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on the nature and extent of age discrimination in the workplace and on the possible psychological consequences of discrimination. Next, we consider the concept of social support, and suggest that support resources have a potentially buffering role with respect to the effects of age discrimination. We then report our study of perceived age discrimination amongst Police Officers in the North of England, designed to evaluate the possible impact of perceived age discrimination

on employee attitudes and also the possible buffering role of social support. We conclude by discussing the limitations and implications of our findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND PREDICTIONS

Age discrimination at work

We conceptualize discrimination at work as a form of unequal treatment involving decisions that directly effect the employment status of individuals or their treatment in relation to their terms and conditions of employment. The CIPD emphasizes that ageism is not restricted to older workers in defining ageism in employment as ‘action that disadvantages an individual because of their age or on the basis of assumption, misconception or stereotypes about age and ability, and hinders the proper consideration of an individual’s talents, skills, potential and experience. It can be used to the detriment of people of any age and occurs across all aspects of human resource management’ (2003:6). According to Warr, age discrimination occurs when ‘individuals are refused employment, dismissed from jobs, paid less, or denied promotions, training, or other benefits because of their age’ (1994: 488). Discrimination is thus distinct from the related concept of harassment, which is seen as threatening verbal conduct or exclusionary behaviour which is directed at the target because of their age, race, gender, or sexuality (Schneider, Hitlan and Radhakrishnan, 2000).

Age discrimination emerged as a key debate in the UK in the 1990s during a period of industrial restructuring and downsizing, which led to low labour participation rates of older workers, and particularly males over 50. Workers may experience age related discrimination at recruitment, and through all the main stages such training, development and appraisal, to selection for dismissal, redundancy, or retirement. There is a well-developed empirical literature reporting the extent and nature of age discrimination in the UK (DWP, 2001a; DWP, 2001b; CIPD, 2003). There is evidence of age discrimination for both older and

younger workers, although in this paper we focus in particular on the experience of older workers.

The Department for Work and Pensions conducted a major research programme in the late 1990s and early 2000s including over 800 interviews with employers, 500 interviews with older workers and follow up case studies of organizational practice. The general finding was that age discrimination was endemic in the UK and particularly acute at the recruitment stage. Although far fewer job advertisements now carry specific age limits than in the past (around 1 in 8 of employers in the DWP sample still used these), less overt forms of age discrimination still persists, with recruiters increasing their use of ‘inferred preferences’ in relation to age (McGoldrick and Arrowsmith 1993). Thus, the DWP employee interviews found one in four older job applicants felt they had suffered age discrimination. The CIPD (2003) research found twenty percent of workers were discouraged from applying for a job because the advert had age restrictions. Older job applicants tend to experience longer periods of unemployment, as job search lengthens with age and the number of interviews gained declines.

Older employees are particularly disadvantaged in terms of training (Snape and Redman, 2003). It seems that managers’ negative stereotypes of older employees as being hard to train, lacking in creativity, unable to adapt to new technology and inflexible, influence training and development decisions. Studies of performance appraisal report older employees receiving lower performance ratings than their younger counterparts (e.g. Saks and Waldman 1998). The suggestion is again that negative stereotypes held by appraisers may colour appraisal rating, independently of actual performance.

Older and younger workers are more likely to be selected for redundancy than are workers in middle age groups. Redundancy selection based on the last-in-first-out (LIFO) system has largely been replaced in the UK by selection based on job performance reviews.

While ostensibly removing overt age discrimination criteria (especially against younger workers), these reviews are open to prejudice and managerial manipulation, relying heavily on subjective judgments which, given the negative stereotyping of older workers, may substantially disadvantage them.

Finally, one of the persuasive explanations for the persistence in age discrimination in the UK is the fact that it is still not unlawful, unlike discrimination based on race, gender and disability. According to Hepple (2002), this may encourage the perception amongst employers that it is legitimate and fair to discriminate on the basis of age.

Psychological consequences of perceived discrimination

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that experiencing discrimination produces negative psychological consequences for the individual. However, most of this work has examined racial and to a lesser extent gender-based discrimination rather than age. Whilst we are not arguing that the impacts of age discrimination are necessarily exactly the same as race and gender discrimination, the race/gender literature may provide some useful insights in a study of age discrimination.

Studies of racial discrimination suggest that such discrimination acts as a stressor, consistently reporting an inverse relationship between the experience of racial discrimination and variables such as life satisfaction, depression, general happiness and self-esteem (Finch, Kolody, and Vega, 2000; Broman, 1997; Jackson et al., 1995; Smith, 1985). Laboratory-based studies have examined the physiological and affective reactions of African Americans to videotaped vignettes of discriminatory behavior, with findings indicating that exposure to race based discrimination leads to increased cardiovascular and psychological reactivity (Anderson, Myers, Pickren, and Jackson 1989; Jones, Harrell, Morris-Prather, Thomas, and Omowale 1996). In a series of Canadian studies, Dion and his colleagues have used

experimental manipulation of discrimination in the laboratory setting, finding a strong association between discrimination and increased psychological distress for Jewish undergraduate males (Dion and Earn 1975), and Chinese students (Pak, Dion, and Dion 1991)

Population-based studies have also linked racial discrimination to individual well-being. Thompson (1996) found that self-reports of discrimination were positively related to psychological distress in a sample of African Americans. An analysis of the National Study of Black Americans by Williams and Chung (1997) found that perceived discrimination was positively related to psychological distress and inversely related to happiness and life satisfaction. Studies of Hispanic women have found a positive relationship between perceived racial discrimination and psychological distress (Salgado de Snyder 1987; Amaro, Russo, and Johnson 1987). In the Americans' Changing Lives study, perceptions of racial/ethnic discrimination were found to be associated with physical and mental health (Jackson et al. 1997). Several studies have been conducted using samples of students, with findings suggesting an inverse relationship between students' experiences of racial discrimination and their life satisfaction and self-esteem (Utsey and Ponterotto, 2000; Saldana, 1994; Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, and Broadnax, 1994).

Workplace-based studies also provide evidence of a negative psychological impact of racial discrimination. Deitch et al (2003), using archival data from three US samples, found that everyday racial discrimination reduced job satisfaction, and emotional and physical wellbeing at work. Foley et al (2002) in a study of Hispanic lawyers reported that perceptions of ethnic discrimination were positively related to quit intentions. Sanchez and Brock's (1996) study of Hispanic workers found perceived racial discrimination to reduce organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and increase work tension. Enshner, Gant Vallone and Donaldson's (2001) study of ethnically diverse operator-level employees found

perceived racial discrimination to reduce organizational commitment, job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviour.

Turning to the findings on sex discrimination, one consistent finding is that women report lower levels of psychological well-being than men (Blumenthal, 1994), and sex discrimination has been suggested as a significant contributory factor to this. Studies of perceived gender discrimination find that it is associated with negative emotions such as psychological distress, depression and anxiety (Corning and Krengeal, 2002), as well as with physical symptoms (Dion, Dion, and Pak, 1992; Dion and Earn, 1975; Landrine, Klonoff, Gibbs, Manning, and Lund, 1995). Gutek, Cohen and Tsui (1996) found that perceived gender discrimination for women was associated with lowered feelings of power and prestige in the job, increased work conflict, and a lessened willingness to make the same career choice again. Studies of the experiences of non-white females report the ‘double-jeopardy’ impact of possible race and sex discrimination (Pak, Dion, and Dion, 1991; Krieger, 1990). Again, a general finding is that non-white women have even lower levels of well-being than have white women (Allen and Britt, 1983).

Studies of the psychological impact of other forms of discrimination are much fewer in number but the findings are similar. Perceived discrimination on the basis of sexuality has been found to be inversely related to life satisfaction for gay male and lesbian adults (Birt and Dion 1987). Mays and Cochran’s study of perceived discrimination amongst lesbian, gay and bisexuals found it to be positively associated with harmful effects on quality of life and indicators of psychiatric morbidity (2001). Hassell and Perrewé’s (1993) study of a mixed sample of employees found that age discrimination was associated with reduced self-esteem, job satisfaction and feelings of personal control. Orpren’s (1995) study of Australian financial service workers found that perceived age discrimination in relation to older age only was correlated with reduced job satisfaction, organizational commitment and job

involvement. A study of perceived age discrimination amongst UK local authority employees found that the experience of age discrimination was associated with negative psychological consequences for both young and older employees (Snape and Redman, 2003), with older and younger workers both reporting decreased affective commitment and the older employees also had higher levels of continuance commitment and intent to retire.

This discussion leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Perceived age discrimination will have a negative impact on a). job satisfaction, b). life satisfaction, c). the perceived power and prestige of the job, d). job involvement, e). affective commitment, and f). normative commitment, and a positive impact on g). continuance commitment, and h). withdrawal cognitions.

Social support

Employees draw upon networks of extended family and friends and work colleagues for support in their personal and work lives. Many studies have found that diverse social networks contribute to individual well-being and that women in particular draw upon social support at home and at work as a coping strategy for dealing with workplace conflicts (McMullin and Marshall, 1996). Social support has thus been identified as a direct source of well-being and as a buffer against the negative effects of work stressors.

Although there is some disagreement on how to conceptualize social support, most definitions revolve around an exchange of resources with the intention of enhancing individual wellbeing. Shumaker and Brownell define social support as ‘an exchange of resources between at least two individuals and perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient’ (1984: 13). Differing forms and sources of social support have been identified. Social support is typically seen as being of two main types, instrumental and emotional. Instrumental social support includes those tangible

helping behaviours such as loaning money and helping with specific tasks. Emotional support is defined as the caring behaviours such as the provision of trust, empathy or evaluative feedback. In this paper we are concerned with emotional support in that it is theoretically of greater relevance in relation to support for those experiencing discrimination at work than instrumental support given the institutional nature of age discrimination. A supportive work colleague or family member can provide empathy for an employee who, for example, is passed over for promotion or denied access to training because of their age, but can do little to reverse or influence these workplace-based actions, which generally emanate from management decisions.

A further distinction in the social support literature refers to the source of the support. Research suggests that support from all sources may not be equally effective and this has led to theorizing on the matching of the source of the support, the type of support, and the needs of the support recipient. The theory of person-environment fit provides a theoretical rationale for the idea that not all types and sources of social support will be equally effective in all situations. Different sources of support may vary in effectiveness for different individual circumstances. In general, it has been found that support is most effective when the source of the support is relevant to the stressor being experienced (Beehr, King, and King, 1990; Cohen and Wills, 1985; Ganster, Fusilier, and Mayes, 1986). Having said that, given the exploratory nature of this research, we offer no hypotheses on the relative impacts of the two main sources of social support: work and non-work sources.

Our interest in this paper is in the role of social support as a moderator of perceived age discrimination–psychological consequences relationships. Stress researchers have theorized two main models of how social support can influence an individuals' experience of stress: the main effect or direct effect model and the buffer or moderating effect model. According to the main effect model, social support is positively related to well-being,

irrespective of the level of stress experienced. The main effect model suggests that regardless of stress level, high levels of social support will improve wellbeing.

The buffering model has found more support in the literature and suggests that stress has a stronger negative effect on well-being when social support is low than when social support is high (e.g., Beehr et al., 1990). Johnson and Hall (1988) redefined the job-strain model of Karasek (1979), introducing the concept of work-related social support, and suggesting that supportive interpersonal relationships at work may function as a moderator in stressful jobs. Social support functions as a coping resource because it contributes to lower levels of strain for a given level of stressor, in this case perceived age discrimination. That is, individuals with more coping resources would be less prone to increasing levels of strain when they face increasing work stressors. Therefore, the effects of stress are weaker when social support is high. Consistent with this, much of the evidence suggests that the psychological consequences of exposure to stressors can be reduced by social support (Cohen and Wills, 1985).

This discussion leads to the following hypotheses on the main/direct and buffering effects of social support:

Hypothesis 2. Work-based social support will have a positive impact on a). job satisfaction, b). life satisfaction, c). the perceived power and prestige of the job, d). job involvement, e). affective commitment, and f). normative commitment, and a negative impact on g). continuance commitment, and h). withdrawal cognitions.

Hypothesis 3. Non-work based social support will have a positive impact on a). job satisfaction, b). life satisfaction, c). the perceived power and prestige of the job, d). job involvement, e). affective commitment, and f). normative commitment, and a negative impact on g). continuance commitment, and h). withdrawal cognitions.

Hypothesis 4. Work based social support will buffer the effects of perceived age discrimination on employee outcomes, so that these relationships will be weaker when social support is high.

Hypothesis 5. Non-work based social support will buffer the effects of perceived age discrimination on employee outcomes, so that these relationships will be weaker when social support is high

METHOD

Sample

A self-administered questionnaire was distributed in September 2002 to 1107 police officers in a force in northern England. Questionnaires were completed anonymously and returned to the university in a reply-paid envelope. A total of 402 useable questionnaires were returned, for a response rate of 36.3 per cent. Following deletion of missing values, we had a final sample of 393 police officers. Amongst this sample, the mean age was 38.94 years, with a minimum age of 19 and a maximum of 57. The mean years of service with the police force was 15.38 years, with a minimum of six months and a maximum of 33 years. Only 17 percent of respondents were female, with 83 percent married or living as married. Seventy-three percent of the sample were constables, 16 percent sergeants, 8 percent inspectors, and 3 percent chief inspector or above. This sample is very representative of the uniformed grades in this force with 17 percent of these females and a mean age of 39.5 years. There is nothing to suggest that this police force was atypical in its workforce structure, being broadly in line with figures of 18 percent of police officer posts being held by women in 2002 (Home Office, 2002).

Measures

Dependent variables were measured as follows. *Job satisfaction* was measured with three items from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (as reported in Spector, 1997), for example: “Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with this job”. *Life satisfaction* was measured with three items from Neal, Sirgy and Uysal (1999), for example: ‘I am generally happy with my life’. We added a fourth item: ‘All in all, I am satisfied with my life as a whole’. *Perceived power and prestige of the job* was measured with four items adapted from Gutek et al’s (1996) scale, for example: ‘My job is quite prestigious’. *Job involvement* was measured with five items adapted from Kanungo’s (1982) scale, for example: ‘I live, eat and breathe my job’. *Affective, normative and continuance commitment* were measured using items drawn from Meyer and Allen’s (1997) measures, using four, three and three items respectively. *Withdrawal cognitions* were measured with five items, for example: ‘I may start to ask friends and contacts about job opportunities elsewhere’.

Perceived age discrimination was measured as the extent to which the respondent had experienced discrimination generally, containing no reference to whether this was due to being ‘too young’ or ‘too old’. This was an average of the following four items, which were responded to on a five point Likert-type scale from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’: ‘I personally have never experienced age discrimination in my job’ (reverse scored); ‘My age prevents me getting jobs for which I think I am qualified’; ‘The people I work with treat me less favourably because of my age’; and ‘My immediate superior treats me less favourably than other workers because of my age’.

Emotional social support was measured with six items. A factor analysis produced two-factors with eigenvalues greater than one, accounting for 68 percent of total variance. Four items had primary loadings on the first factor (lowest .56, highest .88). All four items referred to support from either family or friends from outside work, so we referred to this as ‘*social support (non-work based)*’. Sample items are: ‘I can talk over work problems with

members of my family’, and ‘My friends outside work provide me with encouragement when things go wrong in my job’. Two items loaded primarily on the second factor (loading .92 and .90), for example: ‘I can talk over problems with my work colleagues’. We referred to this as ‘*social support (work based)*’.

We included the following *control variables* in our analyses: police force tenure (in years), age (in years), gender (female = 1; male = 0), *role conflict* and *role ambiguity*. Role conflict was measured six items and role ambiguity with four items, taken from Rizzo, House and Lirtzman (1970).

RESULTS

Mean, standard deviations, correlations and alphas for the study variables are reported in table 1. All the multi-item scales had alphas greater than .7, except for continuance commitment, which was only marginally below (.68).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The regression results are shown in table 2. Of the control variables, role ambiguity negatively predicted all dependent variables except for continuance commitment, where it was non-significant, and withdrawal cognitions, which it positively predicted. Role conflict negatively predicted job satisfaction, affective commitment, and normative commitment (with non-work social support only), and positively predicted job involvement continuance commitment and withdrawal cognitions. The demographic control variables were less important, except in the case of continuance commitment, where police force tenure

(positive) and age (negative) were significant. Police force tenure was also a significant positive predictor in the power and prestige of the job analysis. Gender was significant in none of our regression analyses.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Hypothesis 1 anticipated a negative effect of perceived age discrimination on each of our dependent variables, except for continuance commitment and withdrawal cognitions, where a positive effect was anticipated. The findings in table 2 show a negative effect in the case of job satisfaction, life satisfaction, power and prestige of the job, and both affective and normative commitment, along with a positive effect for withdrawal cognitions and for continuance commitment (although the latter was significant only with non-work social support equation). These findings provide considerable support for hypothesis 1, with perceived age discrimination being non-significant only in the case of job involvement.

There was partial support for hypotheses 2 and 3, concerning the main or direct effects of social support. Work-based social support had positive main effects on job and satisfaction, power and prestige of the job, and affective and normative commitment, and a negative main effect on withdrawal cognitions (hypothesis 2). Non-work based social support had a positive main effect only on life satisfaction, with no significant main effects in the case of other dependent variables (hypothesis 3).

Hypothesis 4 concerned the buffering effect of work-based social support on the relationship between perceived age discrimination and the various outcomes. There is a positive main effect of work-based social support on job and life satisfaction, power and prestige of the job, and affective and normative commitment, and a negative main effect for withdrawal cognitions. These findings suggest that support from those at work has a positive

impact on employee attitudes. However, we found no significant interaction effects for work-based social support, thus providing no support for the moderation hypothesis in this case.

Hypothesis 5 suggested that non-work-based social support would have a buffering effect. There was only one significant main effect, suggesting a positive relationship between support and life satisfaction. This time, there were three significant interaction effects. Contrary to our expectations, the negative interaction term in the job satisfaction and normative commitment analyses suggest that higher levels of non-work-based social support actually enhances the negative effect of perceived discrimination on job satisfaction and normative commitment. There is thus no evidence of buffering here. Instead, non-work-base social support exerts a ‘reverse buffering’ effect. It appears that the presence of support from family and friends outside work increases the negative attitudinal response to perceived discrimination, perhaps by legitimizing feelings of having been offended against. However, in the case of life satisfaction we found the anticipated buffering effect, with a positive coefficient on the interaction term.

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that police officers experienced a negative effect of perceived age discrimination on job and life satisfaction, perceived power and prestige of the job, and affective and normative commitment, along with positive effects on withdrawal cognitions and continuance commitment. Whilst there was no significant effect on job involvement, overall, these findings provide considerable support for the view that age discrimination acts as a stressor, with adverse psychological consequences.

We found some support for the main or direct effect model of social support, particularly in the case of work-based social support, with positive main effects on job and satisfaction, power and prestige of the job, and affective and normative commitment, and a

negative main effect on withdrawal cognitions. These findings suggest that work-based social support contributes to employee attitudes independently of the level of the perceived age discrimination stressor.

However, in the case of the buffering model, our findings were less supportive. There were no significant moderating effects for work-based social support, and we found the anticipated buffering effect for non-work-based social support in the case of life satisfaction, but reverse buffering for jobs satisfaction and normative commitment. In themselves, these moderation findings are straightforward enough to interpret. Buffering involves the receipt of support, which serves to comfort and compensate the individual in the face of perceived discrimination, thus reducing negative attitudinal effects. The finding of buffering by non-work-social support on the case of life satisfaction appears plausible, with a match between the non-work nature of the support and the outcome. It appears that support from non-work sources allows the individual who experiences age discrimination to reassess their feelings about their life as a whole, offsetting any negative consequences of discrimination through both main and buffering effects. However, non-work support appears to have no such main or buffering effects for work or organization-related attitudes, and indeed there is reverse buffering for job satisfaction and normative commitment.

Reverse buffering also involves the receipt of support, but this time the support has negative consequences for the negative attitudinal response. According to Kaufmann and Beehr (1986), there are three possible reasons for this. First, if the support comes from the same source as the stressor, then any contact, even if ostensibly to provide support, may intensify the strain experienced. Given that perceived age discrimination is being measured as a workplace experience, but the reverse buffering moderation in our findings occurs only for non-work-based support, this seems an unlikely explanation for our particular findings. A second possibility is that individual is reassured by the supporters about the legitimacy of

their ill-feeling towards the discriminating organization, so that the negative attitudinal effects are heightened. This seems to be a more likely explanation for our reverse buffering findings. What may be happening is that individuals who have higher levels of support from non-work sources are reaffirmed in their negative feelings about the job (job satisfaction) and their reduced sense of obligation to the organization (normative commitment), but at the same time are comforted and reassured about their life as a whole (life satisfaction).

A third explanation for reverse buffering has also been suggested (Kaufmann and Beehr, 1986). This hinges on reverse causation, with those who experience strain being the ones more likely to seek support, thus explaining the coincidence of high levels of stressor, strain and support. Whilst our cross-section methodology does not allow us to address issues of causation directly, it seems to us that reverse causation is an implausible explanation for our moderation findings, not least because of the mixed nature of these findings across the different dependent variables and sources of social support. Nevertheless, future researchers could usefully consider a longitudinal study to address causation more completely.

In addition to this, our study has several other limitations. Whilst we have examined a range of possible outcomes, all of these were measured by self reports in the same survey as the independent and moderator variables, and are therefore vulnerable to possible common method bias. However, a series of confirmatory factor analyses involving perceived age discrimination, social support and each of the outcome variables showed reasonable fit for the hypothesized measurement models, and better fit than models which loaded all the questionnaire items on a single factor. This demonstrates discriminant validity amongst our independent, moderator and independent attitudinal variables, and suggests that severe common method bias was not present. Another possible limitation concerns the generalisability of our findings, based as they are on a single sample of police officers from

one police service. Clearly, this can only be addressed by conducting similar studies in a range of organizations, or perhaps involving general samples.

Having said all that, we can draw some possible policy implications from our findings. First, the negative attitudinal consequences that flow from perceived age discrimination at work are considerable. As we noted earlier, from 2006, UK employers will be compelled by legislation to address the issue of age discrimination. So far, the reaction of many employers has been to view such a prospect as at best an unnecessary irritant and at worst a bureaucratic burden. Taken as a whole, the findings of this study suggest that there is a clear business case for employers to tackle age discrimination in the workplace, as workers who feel discriminated against are less satisfied in their jobs, less committed, and more likely to think about leaving their organizations.

Second, the negative attitudinal consequences of age discrimination do not stop at the factory gate or the office door, as employees who report being discriminated against also have reduced levels of life satisfaction. Given the amount of time devoted to work and its importance in the lives of workers in industrialized economies, such a spillover effect is to be expected, and reducing levels of perceived age discrimination has the potential to improve the quality of the work and non-work domains of employees' lives.

Third, the implications of our findings on social support are more complex. The domain in which employers can assert most influence, social support at work, had no buffering effect on the effects of perceived age discrimination. We examined only emotional support, leaving open the possibility that work-based instrumental support may have an influence. It is clear, however, that it is to friends and family that employees will turn to for emotional support. One might suggest, then, that the key policy implication for employers seeking to minimize the negative impact of age discrimination on employees' attitudes is to adopt policies designed to eliminate discrimination in the first place.

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Table 1 - Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities and Correlations Among the Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Force tenure	15.38	8.29	--									
2. Age	38.94	7.34	.85***	--								
3. Gender	.17	.38	-.18***	-.21***	--							
4. Role conflict	4.58	1.14	.00	-.00	-.11*	.82						
5. Role ambiguity	3.13	1.07	-.10*	-.12*	-.05	.29***	.70					
6. Perceived discrimination	2.11	.74	-.02	-.03	-.01	.22***	.25***	.77				
7. Social support (Work based)	5.10	1.37	-.05	-.06	.08	-.15**	-.33***	-.26***	.83			
8. Social support (Non-work based)	4.58	1.33	-.05	-.07	.11*	-.13*	-.21***	-.11*	.29***	.77		
9. Job satisfaction	4.85	1.58	.02	.01	.10*	-.37***	-.49***	-.35***	.39***	.15**	.92	
10. Life satisfaction	5.39	1.19	.02	.03	.05	-.19***	-.34***	-.33***	.27***	.31***	.50***	.92
11. Power & prestige of the job	4.38	1.29	.12*	.09	-.01	-.22***	-.50***	-.34***	.34***	.17**	.63**	.38***
12. Job involvement	2.82	1.43	-.06	-.06	.01	.08	-.11*	.03	.08	-.03	.29***	-.04
13. Affective commitment	4.31	1.44	.03	.02	.05	-.30***	-.48***	-.35***	.33***	.12*	.73***	.39***
14. Normative commitment	3.73	1.51	.07	.06	.05	-.22***	-.40***	-.24***	.35***	.13**	.66***	.34***
15. Continuance commitment	4.57	1.52	.12*	.02	-.03	.22***	.14**	.15**	-.15**	-.01	-.19***	-.23***
16. Withdrawal cognitions	2.92	1.48	-.04	-.02	-.04	.35***	.42***	.37***	-.33***	-.20***	-.72***	-.42***

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

$N = 393$.

Note. Scale reliabilities are on the diagonal.

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Variable	11	12	13	14	15	16
11. Power & prestige of the job	.79					
12. Job involvement	.28***	.89				
13. Affective commitment	.64***	.32***	.81			
14. Normative commitment	.62***	.37***	.79***	.80		
15. Continuance commitment	-.13*	.11*	-.20***	-.09	.68	
16. Withdrawal cognitions	-.48***	-.15**	-.60***	-.50***	.08	.86

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

$N = 393$.

Note. Scale reliabilities are on the diagonal.

(table continues)

Table 2 – Results of Moderated Regression for the Effects of Perceived Discrimination

Variable	Job satisfaction		Life satisfaction		Power & prestige of the job		Job involvement	
	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β
<i>Step 1</i>								
Force tenure	.04	.04	.01	-.01	.16*	.16*	-.04	-.04
Age	-.05	-.06	-.01	.01	-.10	-.11	-.04	-.05
Gender	.04	.05	.02	.01	-.04	-.04	-.01	.00
Role conflict	-.20***	-.21***	-.06	-.03	-.05	-.05	.12*	.11*
Role ambiguity	-.33***	-.38***	-.22***	-.21***	-.38***	-.42***	-.15**	-.17**
ΔR^2	.30***	.30***	.13***	.13***	.27***	.27***	.03*	.03*
<i>Step 2</i>								
Perceived discr.	-.17***	-.19***	-.23***	-.27***	-.19***	-.21***	.06	.04
ΔR^2	.04***	.04***	.06***	.06***	.04***	.04***	.00	.00
R^2	.34***	.34***	.18***	.18***	.31***	.31***	.03*	.03*
<i>Step 3</i>								
Soc supp. (Work)	.21***		.13***		.16**		.07	
Soc supp. (Non-work)		.03		.22***		.06		-.05
ΔR^2	.04***	.00	.02**	.05***	.02***	.00	.00	.00
R^2	.38***	.34***	.20***	.23***	.33***	.31***	.04*	.04*
<i>Step 4</i>								
PD x SS (Work)	-.02		.01		.05		-.05	
PD x SS (Non-work)		-.09*		.15**		-.01		-.03
ΔR^2	.00	.01*	.00	.02**	.00	.00	.00	.00
R^2	.38***	.35***	.20***	.26***	.34***	.31***	.04	.04

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

(table continues)

$N = 393$. Note. Standardized regression coefficients from the final equation (step 4) are shown.

Table 2 (continued)

Variable	Affective commitment		Normative commitment		Continuance commitment		Withdrawal cogn	
	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	β
<i>Step 1</i>								
Force tenure	.05	.05	.11	.10	.34***	.34***	-.10	-.10
Age	-.06	-.07	-.05	-.06	-.26**	-.25**	.10	.10
Gender	.00	.01	.01	.02	-.00	-.01	.01	.01
Role conflict	-.13**	-.14**	-.09	-.11*	.17**	.17**	.21***	.21***
Role ambiguity	-.35***	-.39***	-.28***	-.33***	.04	.07	.25***	.28***
ΔR^2	.26***	.26***	.18***	.18***	.09***	.09***	.24***	.24***
<i>Step 2</i>								
Perceived discr.	-.19***	-.21***	-.09*	-.11*	.08	.11*	.22***	.23***
ΔR^2	.04***	.04***	.02**	.02**	.01	.01	.06***	.06***
R^2	.30***	.30***	.19***	.19***	.10***	.10***	.29***	.29***
<i>Step 3</i>								
Soc supp (Work)	.15**		.23***		-.09		-.16**	
Soc supp (Non-work)		-.01		.05		.05		-.09
ΔR^2	.02**	.00	.04***	.00	.01	.00	.02***	.01
R^2	.32***	.30***	.23***	.19***	.10***	.10***	.31***	.30***
<i>Step 4</i>								
PD x SS (Work)	-.05		-.07		.03		-.05	
PD x SS (Non-work)		-.05		-.11*		-.04		.06
ΔR^2	.00	.00	.01	.01*	.00	.00	.00	.00
R^2	.32***	.30***	.24***	.20***	.10***	.10***	.32***	.30***

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

$N = 393$. Note. Standardized regression coefficients from the final equation (step 4) are shown.