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**INVESTIGATING UNDERSTANDINGS OF AGE IN THE
WORKPLACE**

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Age in the workplace has become a hot topic of debate across different countries and sectors. Yet, to date, age has been one of the least researched aspects of diversity at work. Instead, we tend to assume certain 'facts' about how age affects people's ability to work, usually informed by stereotypes about the talents and capabilities of different age groups and generational categories. In this research, we aimed to scrutinise such stereotypes, exploring how they are constructed and their potential effect on experiences of work and employment across different age groups in the UK.

The Problem

The ageing of the population of the UK (and indeed elsewhere in Europe), has raised concerns about the 'greying' of the workforce.² Official statistics show that half of the UK population is now over 40 years old, with nearly 18% over 65¹. Associated changes have been made to pension regulations and the abolition of mandatory retirement. Such concerns are mirrored by anxiety about youth unemployment, since younger workers are often seen to represent the future of organisations.³ For such reasons, age has now become a protected characteristic within UK employment legislation.

As a result, managers are actively engaging in discussions about age at work, as organisations seek to comply with government regulation while also making sense of the implications for their own businesses. One popular means of understanding age within such discussions has been via the use of generational labels (such as millennials and babyboomers) to distinguish between age cohorts.

Research on the use of these generational labels has noted the emergence of clear stereotypes, such as the lazy, entitled but technologically savvy millennial or the wealthy, hardworking but slow to adapt babyboomer. Stereotypes are a psychological concept that refers to how complexity and variety, for example in relation to age identities, are made simple and manageable by using readily accessible and undemanding categories.⁴ However, this can be problematic when we make generalised assumptions about an individual based on the allocation of that person to a particular

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category (here, a generation) rather than seeking to understand the individual's own specific characteristics, skills, knowledge, etc.

Rationale For The Project

As age and age-related categories are some of the least researched aspects of diversity at work, there is a clear need for further research in this area. Moreover, because existing research has tended to focus on a particular age group, we identified a need for research which looked across older and younger ages and which develops an understanding of what stereotypes have emerged and how these might affect experiences of age at work.

Based on an initial review of how and where discussions of age at work were taking place, we decided to use online sources as primary data in our research. This had the advantage of capturing debates about age as they happened, which was particularly important given the numbers of regulatory changes that were taking place in the UK at the time.

What Was Done

Following a pilot study to assess the practicalities of using online sources, we collected data via a daily download over a six month period during 2011/2. We used freely available internet alert tools and a tested set of search terms each day to search the (English Language) internet and identify online sources that were relevant to our research. The tested key words used were: "older worker", "age regulation", "age discrimination", "age diversity", "youth employment", and the composite "generation" and "work". The online sources searched each day included news media and reports from organisations and institutions as well as blog posts or reader comments such as the 'below the line' comments on online newspaper articles.

This process resulted in a daily list of hyperlinks to review from which we logged, downloaded, and imported data into software used to support data management and analysis. Further material was collected via snowballing from the sources identified in each day's list by following links or connections to related online materials. After six months our dataset comprised over 1000 sources, where a source could include multiple texts, images, multimedia items, and links. All data we collected came from public sources, i.e., those not requiring log-on or membership for access.

What Was Found

Using qualitative data analysis approaches (including thematic, discursive and visual analysis), we identified several key themes within our dataset. Below, we outline two of the most important themes.

Comparing and contrasting generational stereotypes in online media texts

We focused our analysis on two specific generational labels: babyboomers (typically used as a label to describe those born after the second world war and before the 1960s) and the 'lost generation' (as a label to describe young people particularly those out of work, often used in conjunction with genY or millennials, and usually referring to those born between 1980 and 1999). We identified texts describing these generations and analysed how they were described in relation to their responsibilities as well as their entitlement and ability to work.

Our first concern was how generations were being socially constructed (that is, presented through language to the reader) and understood. We found that generations are constructed as a naturally occurring phenomenon whose presence is difficult to challenge. The validity of generational cohorts as a meaningful category of difference was rarely, if ever, questioned. Moreover, different generational labels were rarely explained and their bases were hardly ever discussed. This is of particular concern as many academic authors have noted the inconsistent use of labels and birth date ranges.⁵ We found that assumptions about year of birth are used to ascribe generational membership, with very little concern given to the disputed boundaries.

Generations often become caricatured, creating extreme differences and setting up tensions between generations whilst making it harder to look past these divisions to determine how generations may share similar concerns and issues. In contrast to the flexible notions of older and younger (where category membership changes with time), generations provide a means of fixing membership (once a babyboomer, always a babyboomer). In this way, stereotypes become regarded as permanent characteristics. Crucially using the language of generations allows the avoidance of accusations of age discrimination, thus potentially offering the means to undermine equality legislation. Further, by focusing on responsibilities, a 'blame-game' was played out between generations which largely let others (such as the government) off the hook in relation to work and employment issues.

Examining how gendered ageing is presented and understood in online images

Here we focused on the images that we found in our data; our particular aim was to examine intersections between age (older and younger) and gender (men and women).

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Our main attention was on the stock photo, a particular type of image which is significant since “we gradually come to accept them as showing us how the world really is”.⁶ As well as our own analysis of these images, we used views gathered from a group of 39 participants who were shown a selection of images depicting different ages and genders.

We found that many of the stereotypes reproduced in textual accounts were repeated and reinforced (that is, socially constructed) through these images. Our analysis showed that gendered ageing can be problematic for both men and women, though in different ways. We found that the precarious and disadvantaged situation of younger and older men contrasted with more positive stereotypes of the middle-aged male manager. This individual was represented at the centre of the picture and in a dominant position (for example, standing and leaning over a table whilst others were seated). The depiction of the women was more complex. In some ways femininity was shown as a potential advantage (particularly for a ‘pretty young woman’). However, we found that this was only afforded in youth and when under the gaze of other (older) men within the image. Older women were less visible and more peripheral in relation to any depiction of productive activity.

These two examples highlight the ways in which stereotypes are portrayed online. We suggest that these are rarely scrutinised or held up for debate and so have become accepted as representing reality. As stereotypes become more entrenched, so alternative ways of seeing and understanding issues associated with age become obscured. As we explore below, applying ideas from our research provides an opportunity to instead open up these issues for discussion.

Making A Difference

From presenting our work to organisations and practitioner audiences, we have found that opening up discussions about assumptions of age at work provides a useful opportunity for those who work in HR, are interested in diversity, or who lead and manage in age-diverse organisations. For example, we used a range of stock images with a large audience of MBA graduates to facilitate discussions about age at work, exploring questions such as: How did they read relationships between older and younger workers? What assumptions did they make of differential ageing between men and women? Who did they regard as old?

Organisations could apply a similar approach, taking either generic images (such as from a stock image provider) or exploring the images they use themselves (perhaps on their website, in recruitment brochures, or annual reports). We found that this ‘visual

audit' approach provides a useful basis for stimulating discussion about age at work. Reviewing and considering the language of age used in the workplace is also important. Our research found that while many organisations might abide by the appropriate legislation, discussing difference in terms of generation can still lead to problematic stereotypes about age, at both ends of the chronological spectrum. Managers can usefully review organisational reports and communications to look particularly for potential age-related stereotypes and aim to eliminate these.

Recommendations

- Age is more than just a number. Consider the assumptions that are made about age in your organisation
- Age is socially constructed via the language we use and the images we select across a wide range of media. Think about what you say, what you show, and how text and images work together
- Age discrimination is becoming more complex and organisations need to be careful how these engage with age-related discourses

Further Reading

Full research articles reporting this study have been published in the following journals:
Pritchard, K., & Whiting, R. (2014). Baby Boomers and the Lost Generation: On the discursive construction of generations at work. *Organization Studies*, 35(11), 1605-1626.

Pritchard, K and Whiting, R (2015) Taking stock: A visual analysis of gendered ageing. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 22(5), 510-528.

More detail on our research approach and methods are included in the above but are also provided in the following publications:

Pritchard, K and Whiting, R (2012) Autopilot? A reflexive review of the piloting process in qualitative e-research. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, 7 (3) 338-353.

Whiting, R and Pritchard, K (In Press) 'Digital Ethics' in SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods (Eds. Cassell, C; Cunliffe, A and Grandy, G) Sage.

Pritchard, K and Whiting, R (In Press) 'Analysing web images' in SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods (Eds. Cassell, C; Cunliffe, A and Grandy, G) Sage. Accepted, due for publication 2017.

For further details on publications and presentations arising from this research, Katrina and Rebecca's blog on age at work can be seen here: <http://ageatwork.wordpress.com/>.

References

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2. Loretto W., & Vickerstaff, S. (2015). Gender, age and flexible working in later life. *Work, Employment and Society*, 29(2), 233-249.
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