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# Stereotype Threat and Work Attitudes of Older Workers

Cheryl A. Countryman  
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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Cheryl Countryman

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

## Review Committee

Dr. Susan Randers, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty

Dr. Amy Hakim, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty

Dr. Lisa Scharff, University Reviewer, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer  
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2016

Abstract

Stereotype Threat and Work Attitudes of Older Workers

by

Cheryl Countryman

MA, St. Lawrence University, 2001

BA, State University of New York at Potsdam, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

June 2016

## Abstract

Despite an aging U. S. workforce, age discrimination at work remains an issue. Researchers have found that beliefs about the aging process affect workers' performance and attitudes. There is little research available examining this phenomenon from the perception of older workers. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of 7 workers aged 55 and older regarding ageism through the theoretical framework of stereotype threat theory. Research questions focused on identifying age-related stereotypes held by the participants, the influence of those stereotypes on perceptions of aging, perception of the impact of aging on job performance, and experienced ageism and discrimination in the workplace. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using a modified Stevick-Colazzi method to group significant statements into themes and form a composite description that included textural and structural description. Themes that emerged from the study included culturally absorbed stereotypes of helplessness, acceptance of the participants' aging process, positive perceptions of themselves as older workers, a perceived pressure to retire from coworkers, self-identified physical limitations, and life-stage acceptance. Overall, older workers reported a relatively positive self-image and positive perceptions of work performance by supervisors and coworkers. The findings of this study may contribute to social change by informing employers and employee assistance counselors how to address the realistic needs and concerns of older workers. Further studies in aging may promote understanding of aging not as equaling decline but as a time of opportunity to continue to make contributions to the community regardless of chronological age.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband and soul-mate of 40 years, James, whose love and support have given me the strength to persevere through this long journey. I am looking forward to another 40 years of adventure.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my thanks to my committee for their direction and support in the preparation of this dissertation. My committee chair, Dr. Susan Randers, helped me with insights, feedback, suggestions, and has been available for many panicked phone calls when I have lost focus. Dr. Amy Hakim has offered welcome feedback on my methodology, as well as much encouragement. Dr. Lisa Scharff has my eternal gratitude for all of her expert critiquing and helpful suggestions for keeping this paper on track.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Recently Grace, who gave her age as 64, stated that she had been employed in her present position for 2 years as a part timer. She stated that she had been employed for more than 30 years with a firm that had experienced a merger. Her job had been eliminated (G. Davis, personal communication, March 2, 2014):

After more than 30 years with the company, I got pink slipped. I was devastated. I loved my job and I was good at it. I expected to retire at 65 and start my own business. I heard later through the grapevine that the company wanted to start over with a younger and more dynamic work force. Dynamic? I could work circles around that crew of youngsters. I was out of work and aged 59. I spent endless hours on job applications and had some interviews. I think that they saw my white hair and crows' feet and said "she's too old." It took me 2 years to find this job. I love working. Those were 2 difficult years. It's like when you get up in the morning you don't have anywhere to go anymore. In another 2years I plan to resign. I have always had a passion for photography. I'm good at it. I've even sold some of my work. I am starting up a small business with a friend. It's a small gallery and framing business. We are an outlet for photographers to sell their work. My friend makes custom frames. What have we got to lose? I will never depend on job security again. I do plan to work as long as I can, but I will do it on my own terms.

Gullette (2011), a cultural anthropologist, affirms the necessity of revisiting ageism in our culture (2011). Ageism has been implicitly acceptable in western culture (Gullette, 2004). The basis for that acceptance has been the culturally embedded myths and stereotypes about the aging process and a decline ideology (Gullette, 2011) that have been passed through generations from messages absorbed through social and cultural assimilation (Levy, 2009). What Butler (2008) described as a new longevity revolution has produced a new kind of ageism or socially constructed platform of doom and gloom prophecies related to potential problems in meeting the needs of an aging population (Butler, 2008; Hudson, 2010). Social commentators and pundits have put forth a notion of potential conflict or competition between the young and the old. The assumption has been that the old will preempt resources and deny the young of opportunities (Gullette, 2004). Older people have been referred to as “greedy geezers” (Moody, 2010, p. 332) in the media. They have been presented as a group that is absorbing the resources and funding of social programs that could better benefit the young. It has been suggested that the growing tendency for older workers to hold on to their jobs is depriving younger workers of employment opportunities.

Ageism still exists in the workplace. Ageism tends to operate in quiet and subtle ways. It often goes unchallenged and unrecognized. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) was enacted in 1967 for the purpose of protecting the right of older citizens to equal opportunity in seeking and maintaining employment and for addressing age discrimination in the work place (Rothenberg & Gardner, 2011). The

passing of the ADEA has had only limited success in ensuring these protections (Chou, 2012; Neumark, 2009; Rothenberg & Gardner, 2011).

Despite an increasing number of older workers and older job seekers, discrimination practices in hiring, firing, and opportunities for training and for promotion continue to persist. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is responsible for the enforcement of the ADEA in cases related to workplace discrimination (Neumark, 2009). It has had only a limited effect on hiring, firing, promotion, and training decisions related to older workers (Rothenberg & Gardner, 2011). A study in 2006 revealed that cases involving age related job discrimination were the most common cases pursued by litigants and employment attorneys while forced retirement cases involving hiring are less common (Neumark, 2009). Cases involving age discrimination have been difficult to resolve (Weiner, Gervais, Brnjic, & Nuss, 2014). The economic recession of 2008 and resulting corporate restructuring displaced large numbers of older workers (Weiner, et al, 2014). Cases of age discrimination increased 29% or a total of 24, 582 cases (EEOC, 2009). Reasonable factors other than age (ROFA) were, and continue to be used, to justify companies' use of discriminatory practices if they could make the case of business necessity (Rothenberg & Gardner, 2011).

Researchers have documented the physical, psychological, and mental effects of aging. Studies exist that have investigated ageism and the effects of ageism on individuals (Von Hippel, Kalokerinos, & Henry, 2013), however, the bulk of the research findings on aging resulted from the use of quantitative research. Little has been

documented on the effects of ageism from the unique perspectives of older workers themselves.

### **Background of the Study**

Population aging refers to the average age of the population in a geographic (Glasgow & Berry, 2013) area. Population aging is generally measured by the percentage of the population aged 65 and older (Glasgow & Berry, 2012). Global population aging is the result of a declining birth rate and an increase in life expectancy particularly in industrialized countries (Butler, 2008). As pointed out by Butler (2008), increased longevity in both developed and developing countries is largely due to factors such as better sanitation, improvements in public health programs, medical advances that have overcome childhood diseases, and improved survivability of such conditions as heart disease, cancer, and diseases associated with aging. Included also are factors such as improved living standards, better nutrition, and greater access to education (Butler, 2008; United Nations, 2013).

The United Nations (UN) estimated that the world population in 1999 had reached 6 billion, up from 1.65 billion in 1970 (UN, 1999). The United Nations, in a revised study, estimated that the population would reach 8 billion in 2028, 9 billion in 2054, and 10 billion in 2200, when the world population growth could be expected to stabilize (UN, 1999). Similar estimates were projected by the U. S. Census Bureau study (2013). Another study by the U N (2013) estimated birth and death rates to 2055 based upon the rates from 1950. Population growth occurs when there are more births in a given population than deaths. The difference between birth and death statistics determines the

rate of population increase or decrease (Glasgow & Berry, 2013). The birth rate in 1950 was 23.4% compared to a death rate of 9.6% from 2010 to 2015. The projection was a birth rate of 13.24% and a death rate of 8.3%. from the projection for 2050 to 2055 was a 12.25% birth rate compared to a death rate of 10.2% (United Nations Census Bureau, 2013). The global population of people aged 65 years and older quadrupled from 128.4 million in 1950 to 530.5 million in 2010, a gain of 313% (UN, 2013). The gain for ages 15-64 years of age was 197% (UN, 2013). Based upon these estimates it can be concluded that by mid-21st century, individuals 65 and older will be more visible and perhaps claim a larger and more active role in society based on being a greater percentage of the overall population.

The estimated number of children born during the post-World War II baby boom years from 1946 to 1964 in the United States was 78.2 million, according to the United States Census Bureau (2006). By the year 2030 it has been estimated by the Centers for Disease Control and the Merck Foundation (2007) that 20% of the population, or 71 million, will be over age 65. According to the United States Census Bureau (2011) the average life expectancy is 78.64 years, up from 69.77 years in 1960. The oldest of the baby boom generation began to reach age 65 in 2011 (US Census Bureau, 2012). Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and the Merck Company Foundation (2007) projected that by 2030, 20% of the U S population will be over age 65.

The increase in longevity has been suggested as a great opportunity rather than focusing on the negative assumptions about aging (Butler, 2008). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of aging models emerged including productive aging (Butler, 1985), and

successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). These models refocused the emphasis on aging from a stage of life associated with decline and illness to looking at the more positive aspects of this phase of life (Butler, 2008; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). It can be argued that encouraging a healthy and active approach to aging may help offset some of the anticipated social problems, such as rising healthcare costs, suggested as a consequence of population aging (Butler, 2008). In addition, engagement in the workforce as a paid employee may contribute to continuing health and wellbeing in older employees (Chou, 2012; Rowe & Kahn, 1998).

Productive aging was described by Butler (1985) as relating to the promotion of older adults' contributions to society and was defined as the capacity of older people to work (Butler, 1985). Productivity and the possession of goals and aspirations have been associated with health and wellbeing in older adults as well as being a factor in increasing longevity (Butler, 2008; Butler, 1985). Chou (2012), as well as Robson, Hanson, Abalos, & Booth (2006), also found a similar association and suggested along with Butler (1985) the potential benefit of longevity to society as a whole. Butler (2008) suggested that older adults may possess knowledge and skills that can benefit society and that in the next few decades these skills will be necessary to maintain a healthy economy. This is corroborated by studies of the Dutch labor market by Conen, Henken, and Schippers (2011) who found that recruitment and retention of older workers was related to the condition of the labor market but that overall employers tended to continue to recruit and retain older workers even in periods of economic downturn.

Successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1987) presented a model of aging that put forth three criteria that included low probability of disease and disease related disability, high levels of functionality that includes both physical and cognitive components, and active engagement with life. The basic thinking behind this model is that successfully aging adults should be personally responsible for overcoming any barriers towards aging successfully (Dillaway & Bynes, 2009; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Rowe and Kahn's model focused on making healthy lifestyle choices and changes as a response to the aging process.

In 1969 Butler presented the term ageism and defined it as discrimination against people based upon their age (Butler & Beard, 1985). Ageism has been defined by many sources as a barrier to aging well and aging successfully (Angus & Reeve, 2006; Dixon, 2012; Mock & Eibach, 2011; Moore, Beets, Mitchell, & Bartholemew, 2012; Nemmers, 2000; Terry, 2008). Palmore (2004) described ageism as the "ultimate prejudice and the "cruellest rejection" (p. 41). Butler (2008) described ageism as "another form of bigotry (p. 40). Ageism or ageist beliefs begin early in life and remain largely accepted and unquestioned as people internalize these beliefs and may absorb and identify with the discrimination (Levy, 2009). Ageism has been defined differently by various researchers who study aging. Suggestion: add a summarizing sentence.

Research has established that ageism appears to be deeply embedded in western culture (Levy, 2009). Ageist stereotypes, both positive and negative, exist (Palmore, 1999) and continue to define social and interpersonal interactions (Angus & Reeve, 2006; Nussbaum, Pitts, Huber, Krieger & Ohs, 2005). Discrimination against aging individuals

has long been established to have been fueled by age related negative stereotypes that have been based upon a concept of aging in terms of deficit and loss, frailty, disability (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009; Levy, 2009), loss of sexuality (Dixon, 2012), and rigidity (Roscigno, 2010), and inability to learn new skills and technology (Van Dalen, Henkins, & Schippers, 2010; Von Hippel, Kalokerinos & Henry, 2013). The persistence of these negative stereotypes may affect the physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing of older individuals (Angus & Reeve, 2006; Dixon, 2012; Mock & Eibach, 2011; Roscigno, 2010) when the individual perceives that they are being attributed to him or herself.

Productivity, structure, and purpose have been positively related to physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing and have been related to healthy lifestyle choices (Moody, 2010). Butler and Gleason (1985) connected productive aging with maintenance of the individual's sense of wellbeing. Article 23 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly affirmed the right of everyone to work in "just and favorable conditions" and "to protection against unemployment (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) by its emphasis on "just and favorable conditions" (Article 23) affirmed the position of Butler and Gleason (1985) that stated a connection between the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of people to remain active and engaged in the workforce regardless of chronological age.

The White House Conference on Aging (WHCoA), a nonpolitical consortium of scientists, researchers, cultural anthropologists, and advocates meets every 10 years to discuss public policy related to aging as well as to propose resolutions to address issues

related to the aging population (Levant, 2008). Resolutions 11 and 12 addressed the need to remove obstacles to hiring and retention of older workers and to promote incentives to enable older workers to remain in the workforce (Levant, 2008). Despite legislation designed to protect older workers, workplace discrimination and bias continue to exist fueled by culturally accepted assumptions related to the aging process (Levant, 2008; Powell, 2010; Roscigno, 2010).

The present focus of discussion related to population aging has been fixed upon the following concerns: the economic and social implications of greater numbers of aging individuals, projections of potential drain on the healthcare system and perceived future threats to the solvency of social programs (Bartels & Nasland, 2013; Hudson, 2010; Karel, et al, 2012). It can be seen as encouraging that the present trend appears to be moving toward an increase in older workers remaining in the workforce past the traditional retirement age (Heidkamp, Mabe, & DeGraaf, 2012). Despite this trend, however, the traditional conceptualization of aging through a decline ideology persists.

Many quantitative studies can be found that document evidence that negative age related stereotypes continue to exist in the workplace. Quantitative researchers have also provided evidence that negative stereotypes of aging may adversely affect people's physical, emotional, and psychological health and their sense of well-being. There are fewer qualitative studies that explore the experiences of aging in the workplace, particularly studies that seek to investigate these experiences from the unique perspectives of individual workers identified as older workers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

My study was inspired by the research of Von Hippel, Kalokerinos, and Henry (2013). They investigated workplace attitudes, mental health, and intentions to retire among older workers (Von Hippel, et al. 2013). Their study focused on stereotype threat theory, or the fear that adverse performance on certain tasks would confirm for the individual any negative stereotypes ascribed to the group to which the person belongs (Steele, 1997). Von Hippel et al. (2013) provided evidence that the perception of being negatively stereotyped might result in the individual choosing to abandon the work domain.

Baby boomers are reaching retirement age. A 2010 report by the Pew Research Center projected that on January 1, 2011 the oldest baby boomers would be turning 65 and that for the next 19 years 10,000 more per day would reach age 65 (Crohn & Taylor, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2011). A survey by the Pew Research Center (2011) revealed that two-thirds of baby boomers aged 50 to 61 who still work expect to delay retirement primarily for financial reasons. People also remain in the workforce for other reasons such as desire to work and because they are able to work (Pleau & Shauman, 2012; Sterns & Dawson, 2012; Van Dalen, et al, 2010).

Predictions have been made that the expected increase in the cost of social programs, delivery of medical and healthcare services to older individuals will create a drain on the economy and the ability of the healthcare industry to meet their needs (Heidecamp, et al, 2012; Hudson, 2010; Karel, Gatz, & Smyer, 2012; Stephens & Flick, 2010). With an increase in the number of baby boomers living longer after the traditional

age of retirement, it would make sense that more people working longer might alleviate some of the projected fears that the increase in longevity might drain the economy.

Despite the social trend of older workers remaining in the workforce age discrimination continues to exist. Socially constructed myths and stereotypes related to older people continue to function as barriers to quality of life for older workers (Gaillard & Desmette, 2010; Neumark, 2009; Radl, 2012; Von Hippel, et al. 2013). Stereotype threat is increased when individuals internalize these negative myths and stereotypes. Von Hippel and colleagues (2013) found that when people feel that they are being judged because of negative stereotypes based on their chronological age their job performance, work satisfaction, and workplace mental health may suffer as a result.

A review of the literature revealed few qualitative studies that focus on the experience of aging in the workplace. The intent of this study was to explore, through a qualitative phenomenological research method, the subjective experiences of older workers who are or intend to continue to work past age 65. This study sought to better understand this phenomenon through the following research questions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of older workers' experiences in the workplace. The intent was to uncover themes related to the perception of ageism in the work environment and how individuals may find ways to cope with this. The literature review provided a background of the existing knowledge related to the current understanding of the aging process and of changes related to task performance of older workers.

### **Research Questions**

To answer the purpose of this study 4 research questions were developed.

**RQ1:** What aging stereotypes, if any, do older workers aged 55 and up remember from their childhoods?

**RQ2:** How have age related stereotypes influenced their conceptions of the aging process?

**RQ3:** What, if any, messages have people experienced from coworkers or supervisors about their work performance related to their ages?

**RQ4:** How have people found ways to cope with any negative age related stereotypes that they may have encountered in the workplace?

### **Purpose of the Study**

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### **Theoretical Framework**

A theory to understand the experiences of older workers in the workplace is Stereotype Threat theory. My study focused on the effects of stereotype threat upon older adults in the workplace and how it might affect their work performance, workplace mental health, and their intentions to remain in the workforce or to retire. My study was

inspired by the research of Von Hippel, Kalokerinos, and Henry (2013) who explored workplace attitudes, mental health, and intentions to retire among older workers. Their study applied stereotype threat and its effect of aging on the work experience of the workers (Von Hippel, et al, 2013). The results of the study emphasized the need for more qualitative research in order to tell the story from the point of view of the individuals affected by the phenomenon of aging in the workplace.

Stereotype threat is a theory that emerged from studies done by Steele and Aaronson (1995) on African American students and both African American and white female students' achievement on standardized testing, and in math performance. Stereotype threat theory emerged from the idea that groups such as women and African Americans are ascribed various stereotypes related to ability and intelligence (Steele & Aaronson, 1995). Steele (1997) stated that individuals from any group about whom there are negative stereotypes may experience negative effects from having internalized these stereotypes. He further stated that these internalized stereotypes may have the effect of creating anxiety in areas where anxiety about low performance on tasks causes the stereotype to become salient (Steele, 1997). The anxiety may activate the fear that not performing optimally in that area would confirm the stereotypes (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aaronson, 1995).

When Steele and Aaronson (1995) conducted experiments using standardized tests of achievement, they found that when they included items related to demographics and introduced the tests as tests of aptitude, scores were significantly lower for African American and female students. When they repeated the experiment with other groups but

did not introduce the tests as tests of aptitude and ability they found that the scores for both African American and female students were significantly higher (Steele & Aaronson, 1997).

Stereotype threat theory has been applied to older individuals in the workforce. Von Hippel, Issa, Ma, and Stokes (2011) found that negative stereotypes about older workers continue to exist and that they negatively affect the psychological well-being of older workers. Von Hippel and colleagues (2013) found supporting evidence in another study on older workers' intentions to retire or resign. They found that older workers who perceived that their work performance was being harshly judged due to negative stereotyping performed less well on work related tasks and workers reported more negative job attitudes and lower life satisfaction (Von Hippel, et al. 2013). They also found when considering a comparison between younger workers and older workers that older workers were more likely to be negatively affected by stereotype threat than younger study participants (Von Hippel, 2013). Younger workers also reported experiencing negative stereotyping in the workplace, such as being less responsible and more rebellious (Tolbize, 2008). However, Hehmer, Hehmer and Bugental (2013) suggested that the effects of stereotype threat on younger workers may be less permanent and will lessen as they mature and gain experience.

Labeling theory was also considered for this study. Becker (1964) stated that individuals who have been categorized by others as deviant may come to view themselves as deviant. Becker (1964) developed the theory while conducting research on marijuana use on college campuses in the 1960s. Becker's theory has been used in

criminology and in the context of mental illness (Becker, 1964). Becker maintained that powerful members of society make the rules. The powerful groups construct and apply attributes to other members of society (Vecjerm 1963). Since the purpose of this study is not to explore the experiences of older workers as a deviant group, labeling theory was not selected.

Stereotype threat theory connects with labeling theory in that both assert the knowledge that one is being labeled because of membership in a particular group may cause people who are aware that they are part of a stigmatized group to confirm the label through their behavior and through performance in various domains (Steele, 1995). Both theories also address power and control (Becker, 1964; Von Hippel, et al, 2013). In contrast, labeling theory emphasizes deviant behavior and is used in the context of criminology and mental illness (Becker, 1964). Since the focus of this study is not on deviance and crime this theory was not selected.

Another theory considered was social identity theory. Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed social identity theory to explain the nature of intergroup discrimination. . Social identity theory maintains that the individual's sense of self-identity and sense of self-worth develops through his or her association with a particular group with which he or she identifies (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Self-esteem is derived from associating more positive qualities to one's own identified group in contrast with other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory was not selected because while social identity theory addresses stereotypical thinking it does not address the effect of stereotyping on individuals.

After considering these other two theories stereotype threat theory was applied to this study. Older workers may experience stereotype threat in the workplace when they perceive that they are being judged more critically than their younger coworkers on their performance of work related tasks. As the theory of stereotype threat maintains, older workers may also experience more negative work attitudes and lower life satisfaction (Von Hippel, et al. 2013). This theory was selected to seek to explain the subjective experiences of older workers in the workplace.

### **Conceptual Framework of the Study**

The concept of ageism refers to the stereotypes and myths related to a particular age group and may be either positive or negative (Palmore, 1999). Palmore stated that positive stereotyping of older people may include the quality of wisdom. At worst, stereotypes about older people may be that they are frail, dependent, and senile (Palmore, 1999). Ageism may act to promote expectations of illness, disability, and dependency (Forbes & Schmader, 2010; Moody, 2010; Powell, 2010; Roscigno, 2010; Rupp, Vodanovich, & Crede, 2006; Woodcock, Hernandez, & Estrada, 2012). Negative stereotypes and myths about older people may promote discrimination.

Ageism was applied to stereotype threat theory in this study. To elaborate on how ageism relates to the proposed study, I provided examples to help with developing an understanding of how people conceptualize aging. Older workers may recall memories from his or her childhood about older people. He or she may recall hearing words and phrases such as “old geezer, over the hill, and senile” to refer to older people. Older participants may express expectations of physical, cognitive, and sexual incompetence.

Participants may relate experiences of being referred to as that old man or that old lady and may perceive that they have been excluded from socially relevant conversations by younger coworkers. I applied the approach of exploring how people's memories, experiences and perceptions of their experiences may have contributed to their perceptions of their own aging processes and how these experiences and perceptions may have influenced how they approached the workplace.

### **Nature of the Study**

Qualitative research is an appropriate method to explore and describe subjective interpretations and experiences and the meaning that individuals ascribe to a problem or phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative phenomenological inquiry explores individual participants' beliefs and behavior within the context of the phenomenon (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). LeCompte and Schensul (1999) defined context to refer to diverse elements in the environment that may influence individuals' behaviors and beliefs, (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) and stated that beliefs must be understood by examining a variety of elements such as political, economic, kinship, and "personal matrices" (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, v. 1, p. 19) that make up the context of the individual's environment.

Phenomenology is concerned with studying a phenomenon or experience from the personal perspective of the person who has lived it or who is living it (Moustakas, 1994). It is based upon the personal, subjective experiences of the person and focuses on how the individual perceives the experience, represents it and makes meaning of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (2007) also stated that phenomenological

research is also concerned with gaining an understanding of how individual conceptualize and represent a particular phenomenon or experience. Phenomenological research was deemed appropriate to this study. Data was generated through the subjective experiences of the participants through their reports of these perceived experiences.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Ageism*: Discrimination and bias against people because of their age (Butler & Gleason, 1985).

*Cognitive plasticity (or neuroplasticity)*: The brain's ability to rewire itself after damage. Neuroplasticity can occur throughout the lifespan. Types of plasticity include functional plasticity or the ability of the brain to move functions from a damaged area of the brain to other undamaged areas, and structural plasticity, or the brain's ability to actually change its physical structure as a result of learning and experience (Cherry, 2012).

*Older worker*: According to the United States Department of Labor (2010) a person aged 40 and older would be considered an older worker.

*Productive aging*: Butler & Gleason (1985) departed from the socially accepted concept of aging as a time of dependency, disability, illness, loss, and isolation, and focused on the potential of the individual to live a productive, fulfilling life regardless of chronological age.

*Successful aging*: Rowe and Kahn (1987) developed a model of successful aging within the context of the MacArthur Foundation Study of Aging in America (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Successful aging, according to this model, contains three elements: (a) low

probability of disease related disability, (b) a high level of cognitive and physical functionality, and (c) active engagement with life.

*Stereotype threat theory*: The risk, or perception of risk, that a negative stereotype of one's group will apply to oneself (Steele & Aaronson, 1995).

### **: Assumptions, Scope, Limitations, and Delimitations**

My research study reflected the assumption that interviewees who identify as older workers would provide the best data about the phenomenon from their own unique perspective (Creswell, 2007). A further assumption of this study was that interviewees would be able to remember ageist messages and incidents, and would have ageist incidents to discuss.

Data was collected from a sample of seven participants who were willing to commit to two interviews. The first interview took approximately 2 hours. The second interview took approximately 45 minutes. Given the rural nature of the geographic area, the findings might not be transferrable to more urban areas. The sample included seven participants, both male and female, ages 55 and older who were currently employed. No participant was excluded on the basis of race or ethnicity. The sample was limited to English speakers. The aim of participant selections was to include interviewees from the professions as well as individual who are in both semiskilled and nonskilled jobs. Participants were considered expert sources of information about the phenomenon.

### **Significance of the Study and Implications for Social Change**

A culture that embraces diversity must also consider a more diverse workforce that is inclusive of everyone regardless of chronological age. The workforce must be

encouraging of everyone who wishes to work. The development of a more diverse workplace culture that is more supportive and age neutral could contribute to the practice of focusing on the skills, knowledge, strengths, and experience of people regardless of chronological age. Such a culture might also contribute to changing the social and cultural conceptions we have of aging.

Positive social change as it applies to this study is to promote the dignity and quality of life of human beings regardless of age. Positive social change must focus on the promotion of basic human worth and dignity, or as defined by Walden University, lead to the promotion of the improvement of human and social conditions (Walden University, 2012). Ongoing research and education will play a major role in influencing policy in the work place.

On an individual level, older workers may be able to gain insight into their responses to their work environment and its demands based upon ingrained beliefs about the aging process. The study provided older workers the opportunity to describe their experiences from their own perspectives.

Community programs may also benefit from application of stereotype threat theory focusing on older workers. It was the intention of this study to elicit themes from older workers to which stereotype threat theory could be applied. This researcher, through those identified themes, hoped to gain information that could benefit employers seeking to hire or retain older, more experienced workers. Employers could benefit by understanding the needs and concerns of such workers in a more realistic way. For example, this knowledge may be valuable in informing company-based employee

assistance programs in ways to better address workers' needs and concerns. As the workforce ages, company training and retraining programs may be improved with more relevant understanding of the skills and experience that older workers have to offer. Moreover, social change implications for older workers may substantially increase or extend their number of years in the workplace.

The field of clinical psychology may benefit from themes gathered from participants that can inform how older workers may better cope and build on their personal strengths. An understanding of the issues and needs of older workers may help community based mental health providers and social workers with responding more appropriately in assisting older workers with meeting objectives and addressing life stage issues. As the workplace demographic continues to change towards an aging workforce many older workers may seek to reinvent themselves. Both older and younger workers may benefit from a workplace climate that is more age neutral. As older workers may be able to gain greater self-esteem and a sense of their continuing value in the workplace so could younger workers gain a broader view of their own place in the workforce as they themselves age.

On a higher social level the application of stereotype threat theory to this population, it was hoped would provide information on how to develop positive environments where young and older workers can share knowledge and work toward meaningful and collaborative goals. Overall, this study is important because stereotype threat themes collected from older workers may contribute to an awareness of the effect

of discrimination on the life satisfaction of people. This awareness may prompt the development of strategies towards promoting a more age neutral workplace.

Social change must be inclusive of the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge that contributes to the formulation of social policy that is perceived as fair to everyone regardless of an individual's position in the lifespan. As psychologists and agents of social change raising the awareness of older clients' age related issues, including the social policies that either contribute to or detract from their quality of life, is an important role of the profession of psychology.

### **Summary of Chapter One**

The phenomenon of an aging population including large numbers of baby boomers who are remaining in the workforce past the traditional age of retirement pose a dilemma for society even as it presents opportunities. Despite these increasing numbers, discrimination practices in hiring, firing, and opportunities for training and promotion persist. Researchers have presented evidence that suggests that when individuals who are part of a stigmatized group feel that they are being judged according to attributes assigned to that group they may feel anxiety and fear of confirming negative stereotypes (Steele, 1997). Such anxiety may affect individuals' physical, emotional, and psychological well-being and may interfere with their quality of life satisfaction (WoodCock, et al., 2012). Fear of confirming negative age related stereotypes may also negatively affect job satisfaction (Von Hippel, et al., 2013).

This study uncovered themes related to the subjective experiences of older workers. In this chapter I presented my chosen method of inquiry, qualitative

phenomenological research, and my method of data collection. This chapter is followed by chapter 2, which contains a review of the literature. Chapter 3 is a description of the design of the study as well as selection of participants, method of data collection, and final analysis procedures.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Research Strategy**

Several sources were utilized to conduct this literature review. Peer reviewed articles were located through the Walden University online library. Specifically, the PsychArticles, Sage, and PsychInfo databases were used to obtain peer reviewed journal articles in psychology and gerontology publications. To narrow the search, I used the general search terms *ageism*, *aging*, *stereotype threat*, *age discrimination*, and *older workers*. Additionally, sources were located through the Business and Management databases: Business Source Complete, Premier and Sage Premier, as well as the Multidisciplinary databases, Academic search complete and ProQuest Central. In addition, the St. Lawrence University Library provided additional resources to locate peer-reviewed articles not found online.

English language publications covering the past 8 years dated from 2005 to 2014 were considered. Articles dating earlier than 2005 were also considered where historically pertinent. Other materials such as works (e. g. books, popular media articles) by leading researchers and authors are also included to supplement and add support in this discussion. Additional sources for statistical information were provided through various official government websites. Articles were also located manually from review of reference pages of relevant articles and studies.

A review of historical and recent research on aging and ageism will provide a background for understanding social attitudes toward aging individuals. Peer reviewed articles and books by leading researchers in the field of aging will contribute to this

review of the literature. Through this review I hoped to provide a background and basis for understanding the assumptions and direction of aging research used in this study.

My interest in stereotype threat theory and the effects of negative age related stereotypes comes from the writings of Butler, a renowned gerontologist, who coined the term ageism, (Butler & Gleason, 1985), and the research of Steele (1997) and Aronson (Steele & Aronson, 1995) on the effects of stereotype threat on the academic performance of African American college students, and on the math performance of women (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Additionally, the research by Schmader and Johns (2003) on the effects of stereotype threat on working memory capacity, and the later study by Forbes and Schmader (2010) on the effects of stereotype threat on motivation and cognitive capacity provided insight into how stigmatized individuals may be motivated to push past stereotypes and achieve at more elevated levels. Finally, a study conducted by Von Hippel, Kalokerinos, and Henry (2013) examined the motivation of older workers under stereotype threat to disengage with the work domain. Von Hippel and colleagues (2013) found a connection between older workers' experiences of being negatively stereotyped because of age and poorer job attitudes, reduced mental well-being, and intentions to resign or retire.

While there appears to be much in the way of quantitative studies in the area of stereotype threat, I found little that used qualitative research strategies to explore the experiences of older workers of stereotype threat in the workplace. My decision to pursue a qualitative study was inspired by the research of Von Hippel and colleagues (2013).

They highlighted a need for qualitative studies on the effect of stereotype threat on the decision of older workers to retire. This area of inquiry provided an understanding of retirement decisions from the personal experiences of older workers themselves. The study provided a better understanding of the consequences of perceived negative stereotypes of older workers and uncovered themes related to research question 4: How have people found ways to cope with any negative age related stereotypes they may have encountered in the workplace?

### **Problems of Aging from a Society View**

Concerns have been raised that the aging of the baby boomers and the subsequent retirement of millions will have a negative effect on the economy and the delivery of services such as healthcare and social programs. It has been stated as a concern that this wave of retired persons will also place an undue strain on family services systems. Karel, Gatz, and Smyer (2012) projected an increase in the next decade in the demand for mental health care services to older people, with some 1 in 5 individuals diagnosed with some form of dementia, and an increase in such mental health concerns as late life depression (Karel, Gatz, & Smyer, 2012). They also predicted, based upon the numbers, an increase in need for primary care services and family caregiving services (Hudson, 2010; Karel, et al, 2012). A cautionary note in contrast to this dire prediction is evidence that cognitive decline and various forms of dementia are not normal, inevitable effects of aging ( Horstmann, 2012; Park & McDonough, 2010, Verhagen, 2011) and that most older individuals retain relatively good health and functioning ( American Psychological Association, 2014; Sterns & Dawson, 2012).

The partial solution to concerns related to negative effects upon the economy, healthcare costs, the delivery of healthcare services, and a perceived threat to the solubility of such social programs as social security, and Medicare, have been suggested as that of encouraging older workers to remain in the workforce for as long as possible past retirement age (Billet, Dymock, Johnson, & Martin, 2011; Szinovacz, 2011). There is evidence that employers, in order to remain productive and competitive in the present and future world markets, must consider the aging of the workforce (Johnson, Mermin, & Resseger, 2011) and the increasing importance of keeping older workers in the workforce (Blau, & Shvydko, 2011). In terms of federal expenditures on Social Security old age benefits and Medicare, these are expected to rise within the next 5 years (Hudson, 2010; Karel, et al, 2012). It has been proposed that encouraging older workers to remain in the workforce past retirement age (Tishman, Van Looy, & Bruye`re, 2012) may offset these costs.

Concerns have been expressed by employers on how to meet the needs of older workers amidst a growing trend for people to decide to work past retirement age (Pitt-Catsouphes, Weber, Gabrielson, & McNamara, 2008; Sweet, 2007; Van Dalen, Henkins, & Schippers, 2010). It has been projected that there may not be enough younger workers to fill positions left vacant by increasing numbers of retirees (Slack, & Rizzuto, 2013). To date, many employers are attempting to develop strategies for retaining and hiring older workers (Tishman, et al, 2012) in order to benefit from the knowledge, experience, and expertise that they possess (Conen, Henkens, Schippers, 2011; Szinovacz, 2011). It would make sense for employers to gain an understanding of the experiences of work for

older workers, and develop a sense of their unique needs in the workplace (Tishman, et al., 2012). It would also help to understand the effect of negative age related stereotypes on the psychological, emotional, and task related performance of older employees.

In the pursuit of the changing nature of the workplace of the future towards a more age neutral work environment, I believe that one barrier to this goal may be the persistence of negative myths and stereotypes of the aging process that have contributed to many discriminatory practices against older workers. Research that has focused on negative aspects of the aging process may have also contributed to attitudes and practices that have been seemingly biased against the abilities of older workers (Rowe, 2011). Assumptions of aging individuals have of themselves about the aging process and fears that they will confirm negative stereotypes associated with their age group may also affect work performance and work attitudes. While much quantitative research has been done in this area, I concluded that there is a need for more qualitative studies reflecting the experience of people who are classified as older workers from their own perspectives.

### **The Aging Workforce**

Statistics reveal a pattern and tell the story of an aging workforce. Data presented by the United States Census Bureau (2013) reporting on the employment of people aged 65 years and older indicated that during the past two decades the labor force participation of people aged 65 and older has increased ( Rix, 2013). The pattern presented by this data presented a trend towards increasing labor force participation from the year 1990 when the participation of people aged 65 and older was 12.1% compared with 75.6% of

workers between the ages of 16 and 64 (Rix, 2013). The labor market in 2010 (Kromer & Howard, 2012) showed that the percentage of people aged 65 and older was 16.1% with 74.0% for the 16 to 64 age group (Kromer & Howard, 2012; Toosi, 2012). The greatest increase was noted for those aged 65 through age 69, from 21.8% in 1990 to 30.8% in 2010, a 9.0% increase (Kromer & Howard, 2012; Toosi, 2012). The United States Census Bureau data for 2011 showed a national labor force participation rate of 16.2% for individuals aged 65 and older compared with 73.5% for those aged 16 to 64.

As the world population ages, the workforce is also aging. People seem to be choosing to work longer after the traditional retirement age (Adler & Hilber, 2009; Calo, Patterson & Decker, 2013; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). People may choose to remain in the workforce for a variety of reasons including the need for health insurance (Blau & Shvydko, 2011), financial need (Calo, et al, 2013), and because they are able to work (Pleau & Shauman, 2012; Sterns & Dawson, 2012; Van Dalen, et al, 2010). Longer periods of retirement and the need to maximize retirement income may be partly responsible for this trend. During the last half of the 20th century, the average life expectancy past retirement age increased approximately from 10.9 years to 19.3 years (Leonesio, Bridges, Gesumaria, & Bene, 2012).

### **Theoretical Foundations of Stereotype Threat Theory**

Stereotype threat is the belief that negative stereotypes about the group to which an individual belongs may adversely affect performance in a variety of domains (Estrada & Schultz, 2012; Hehman & Bugental, 2013; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aaronson, 1995).

When faced with performing a cognitive task, these negative stereotypes may create self-evaluation leading to stress (Inzlicht & Kang, 2010) that may take the full attention from the task and could detract from the performance of the individual, especially in a domain that the individual values (Estrada, & Schultz, 2012; Forbes & Schmader, 2010; Gaillard & Desmette, 2010; Von Hippel, et al 2013). As a possible outcome the individual may disengage with the domain (Woodcock, Hernandez, Estrada, & Schultz, 2012) by devaluing the domain as a means of self-protection (Von Hippel, et al., 2005; Weiss & Lang, 2012).

Historically, investigations into the possible effect of culturally absorbed negative stereotypes have focused on African Americans and women in their academic performance on achievement tests, in the domain of math performance (Steele, 1997). Steele conducted a series of studies on stereotype vulnerability. The findings of these experiments replicated the findings of an earlier study by Steele and Aaronson (1995) that the threat of confirming negative stereotypes about one's group lowered performance on standardized tests of both African American students and women (Steele, 1997), particularly when individuals feel that their ability is being evaluated. The findings of empirical studies (Gaillard & Desmette, 2010; Steele, 1995; Steele, Steele & Aaronson, 2002; Von Hippel, et al., 2013) appeared to show that the activation of negative stereotypes about stigmatized groups affected the performance of individuals in various domains examined.

In the first series of experiments conducted by Steele and Aaronson (1995) African American and white students were asked to complete a standardized test. The test items selected consisted of the more difficult items from the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE). The experiment was initiated by introducing two separate conditions. One group of students was told that it was a test of intellectual ability. The second group was not presented with this condition. African American students under the first condition answered fewer questions and their answers were less accurate than white students (Steele & Aaronson, 1995). No significant differences were seen in the second group (Steele & Aaronson, 1995). The results of these experiments consistently demonstrated that the effect of activating stereotypes ascribed to various groups was lowered performance on standardized tests.

Steele (1997) conducted a series of studies on stereotype vulnerability. He added female students to his sample. Participants selected were individuals who had been identified as proficient in the domain of mathematics. A math test was given to students one at a time. The test items consisted of items from the advanced math section of the GRE. He found that women underperformed in comparison with equally qualified male students (Steele, 1997). Subsequently he administered a test consisting of advanced literature questions from the GRE to both female and male students, both of African American and white ethnicity. The results showed that women performed equally well with male students (Steele, 1997). Steele concluded that these results suggested that there is a relation to women not being negatively stereotyped in the literature domain.

Findings of these studies also indicated that anxiety played a major role in the underperformance of individual participants when stereotype threat is activated (Steele 1995; Steele & Aaronson, 2002). This was accomplished through asking participants to identify the groups to which they belong, e. g. gender, age and race, prior to the performance of the task compared to the groups that identified their group once the task had been completed (Steele, 1995, Steele & Aaronson, 2002). Results indicated that the importance the individual places on the task or the domain, may determine the strength of stereotype threat (Steele, Spencer, & Aaronson, 2002). To place the effects of stereotype threat on the performance of older adults in various domains in perspective, I next present a brief explanation of Ageism theory through the definitions of ageism developed by some of the major ageism theorists.

### **Ageism Explained**

Addressing the Salzburg Seminar in 1985 Butler described the aging of global society as a “triumph of survival (1985, p. 1), and referred to the latter half of the 20th century as “The Century of Old Age” (Butler & Beard, 1985, p. 2). Moody (1999) called the rapidly growing demographic of people aged 65 and older in America as the “Graying of America” (Moody, 2010); Nelson, 2004). Butler (2008) coined the term “Longevity Revolution”, and described the 21st century as a time of “social transformation” and of increasingly healthy, active, and socially involved older people (Butler, 2008, p. xv).

In 1965 Butler (Butler & Beard, 1985) defined ageism as the discrimination against people because of their age. Butler expanded this definition in 1975 as a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old (Butler,

1975; Bytheway, 1990). Other theorists have built upon and expanded Butler's definition. Bytheway (1995) described ageism as an ideology (p. 44) that drives social policy (Nelson, 2005) and defined ageism as a belief system based upon "biological variations" between people and "relating to the aging process" (Bytheway, 1995, p. 14). Palmore (1999) defined ageism as a prejudice or discrimination against or in favor of a group because of age (p. 4). Palmore (1999) expanded this definition to include both negative and positive discrimination. Iverson, Larson, and Solem (2009) also included prejudice and discrimination for or against a group because of their age. Minichiello, Browne, and Kendig (2000) defined ageism as discrimination against older people in terms of social relationships based upon the belief or view of older people as different, or even as a group set apart. This assumption is based upon overgeneralization and oversimplification of the characteristics and traits of that group (Allport, 1954). Moreover, Nelson (2005) concluded that ageism reflects our own fears of the aging process.

Given these findings, I conclude that ageism may be deeply embedded in our culture. Ageism reflects a widely accepted social practice of inequality of opportunity and access to optimal quality of life. It has its basis upon negative myths and stereotypes that are rooted in a possible lack of acceptance or realistic understanding of the physical changes that mark the process of the human life stages, and of human biological diversity.

### **Myths and Stereotypes of Aging**

Ageism is based upon socially accepted myths and stereotypes of older people (North & Fiske, 2012). In Allport's studies on prejudice (1954) he pointed out that human beings perceive the world and other human beings by a process of classification of concepts and categories that form the basis of how we experience our day to day environment. Allport (1954) defined a stereotype as "an exaggerated belief associated with a category (p. 191) and described it as a fixed idea. People are assigned a category or group based upon this process. We automatically categorize people by gender, skin color, and age (Grefe, 2011). People are assigned categories that serve as the basis of their association with group membership, which forms their social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1989). Stereotypes are beliefs associated with a person based on his or her perceived membership in a group and the characteristics associated with that group (Allport, 1954).

Negative stereotypes have persisted and form the basis of ageism and discrimination against older people (Nelson, 2004; Moody, 2010). Historically, myths and stereotypes about the aging process have been accepted and unchallenged and have existed through subliminal messages that have persisted traditionally through cultural expression (Grefe, 2011; Klein & Liu, 2012). Older adults continue to be stigmatized (Beck, 2012; Forbes, 2010; Rosigno, 2010; Von Hippel, Kalokerino, & Henry, 2013).

Western culture has traditionally established beliefs about older adults as characterized by illness and disability (Klein & Liu 2013; Karel, et al, 2012), memory

loss and cognitive decline (Salthouse, 2012; Wilson, et al., 2013), physical weakening, loneliness, isolation, and depression (Hehman & Bugental, 2013). The belief persists that older people are set in their ways (Palmore, 2011), as well as tedious, complaining, and boring (Brose, Schieb, & Schmiedeck, 2013; Mitchell & Bruns, 2011).

Negative stereotypes of the aging process operate in the workplace as well, and often provide a rationale for discrimination against older workers and older job seekers (Von Hippel, et al, 2013). Older workers have been stereotyped as less motivated (Cala, Patterson, & Decker, 2013; Gaillard & Desmet, 2010; Van Dalen, et al., 2010), less productive (Von Hippel, et al., 2013), slower, less flexible, and as having more difficulty learning new tasks (Chou, 2012; Ennis, Hess, & Smith, 2013; Forbes & Schmader, 2010; LaPlante, Tougas, Lagace, & Bellenhumeru, 2013), more forgetful (Rosigno, 2010), and more expensive in terms of use of health insurance and implementation of health and safety standards (Johnson, Mermin, & Resseger, 2011; Szinovacz, 2011). This view of older workers is a barrier to employers' hiring of older job applicants and to promoting and training older employees (Nehmer, Lindenberger, Steinhagen-Theissen, 2010; Rosigno, 2010).

Evidence from research during the past few decades suggests that rather than significant loss of productivity in the workplace in job related performance of older workers as compared to younger workers, there is little difference (Conen, et al., 2011). Although older workers may have age related medical conditions, they are no more expensive in terms of utilization of employee benefits such as health insurance than

younger workers (Rosigno, 2010) and may even present lower costs in terms of health care than younger workers (Klein, 2013; Houghton, Bruyere, & Wagner, 2011)). It appears that for the most part older workers, even those with health conditions and disabilities are generally remaining quite functional (Houghton, et al., 2011; Klein, 2007; Klein, 2013; Johnson, Mermin, & Resseger, 2011; Lichtenberg, 2010). Given these findings, I conclude that despite great progress that has been made in health care, education, and improved standard of living that has resulted in generally healthier and more active and engaged older adults, socially accepted negative myths and stereotypes about older adults persist, and continue to act as barriers to equality and to emotional and psychological well-being in older adults.

### **Aging Successfully**

Aging well, positive aging (Butler & Gleason, 1985; Butler, 2008) and successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1998) have been applied as goals for an aging global society in the last half of the 20th century and in these early decades of the 21st century. Butler, in his 1985 address to the Salzburg Seminar, stated that we value human beings in relation to what they contribute to society (p. xii). Butler (Butler & Gleason, 1985; Butler, 2008) also equated health and productivity in that people feel connected when they have a social role such as work, and that people who experience economic dependence and lack of a feeling that they are productive members of society may be at higher risk of illness and of depression, as well as isolation (p. 3). Rowe and Kahn (1998) stated as one of their three criteria for successful aging, a state of continuing active engagement through productivity and through a strong social support group (p. 29). As a central principle of

their models of aging Butler (Butler & Gleasons, 1985) and Rowe and Kahn (1998) maintained that it is essential to the physical and emotional health of older people to have an equal opportunity to work.

The MacArthur Foundation Study of Aging in America was created in the 1980s as a consortium of researchers from a variety of disciplines for the purpose of studying the aging process and quality of life of aging adults from the perspective of defining the ways in which people age optimally (Rowe & Kahn 1998). The study addressed negative myths and stereotypes of the aging process from a holistic point in terms of future effect of an aging population on family systems, health care, economic productivity, and the community (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Conclusions from this ongoing study include the necessity for adaptation to this demographic phenomenon that is occurring as a result of medical, social, and technological advances that have increased life expectancy (Olshansky, Goldman, Zheng, and Rowe, 2009; Rowe, 2011). In addition, the studies showed evidence that individual productivity and engagement in the family and community, are both necessary for health and wellbeing (Rowe, 2011).

Butler (2008) more specifically defined productive aging as “the capacity of an individual to serve in the paid workforce, take part in volunteer activities, assist in the family, and maintain oneself as independently as possible throughout the life cycle” (p. 242). Rowe and Kahn (1998) set forth three criteria for aging successfully: low risk of disease and disease related disability, high mental and physical function, and active engagement with life (p 38). Given these findings, I conclude that while these researchers

and theorists make an excellent case for healthy and productive lifestyle choices as being necessary for maintaining health and independence up into later adulthood successful aging may be subjective. As adults age there are inevitable changes in physical and cognitive function (Horstman, 2012). Placing too much emphasis on lifestyle choices as the criteria for aging successfully sets up a possible climate where individuals may be blamed for certain unavoidable health conditions (Weir, Meisner, & Baker, 2010), and disabilities in later life. Successful aging must also focus on how individuals are able to adapt and maintain functionality and independence (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Much can be learned about the ways in which people continue to engage in the work domain despite physical and cognitive changes.

### **Themes of Cognitive Aging Research**

This section focuses on aging with respect to cognitive function. While research bears out the assumption that in some areas there is a decline in cognitive function (Butler & Weywadt, 2013; Clapp, Rubens, Sabharwal, & Gazzely, 2011; Ennis, Hess, & Smith, 2013; Noak, Lovden, & Lindenberger, 2012; Passow, et al., 2012; Ratcliff, Thapar, & McKoon, 2011) associated with aging, these losses may not be as drastic or general as have been traditionally emphasized (Park & McDonough, 2010; Salthouse, 2011; Verhaghen, 2011).

Research presented in this review in cognitive aging studies is primarily quantitative. The decision to review quantitative studies in aging research is based on the importance of emphasizing the quantity of quantitative studies available, the scarcity of qualitative studies, and the serious scientific effort to study the effects of advancing age

on the performance of executive control, working memory, processing speed and attention. Quantitative studies have served the purpose of informing possible areas for qualitative studies in order to gain a deeper understanding from the point of view of the individual.

Research into cognitive aging and the effects on the performance of cognitive tasks has produced mixed results. Studies of the effects of aging on executive control, working memory, processing speed, and attention have produced some evidence that there may be slight losses or changes in these areas when confronted with certain tasks under experimental conditions (Basu, 2013; Forbes & Schmader, 2010; Geraci & Miller, 2013; Mackenzie, 2012; Noak, Lovden, & Lindenberger, 2012; Pase, et al., 2011; Scholey & Pipingas, 2013; Schmader, et al, 2008). However, these cognitive losses may also reflect the presence of some disease condition (American Psychological Association, 2014; Basu, 2013; Ortega, Gomez-Ariza, Romain, & Bajo, 2012; Geraci & Miller, 2013; Horstmann, 2012). Caution must be exerted when interpreting results of such studies. A study by Pase and colleagues (2013) of the role of blood pressure as a factor in the development of cognitive decline linked higher systolic blood pressure and higher pulse pressure with poorer Stroop processing in a sample of 493 adults aged 29 to 82 years old (Pase, et al, 2013). A similar study by Emery, Finkel, and Pederson (2012) found a directional association between pulmonary function and cognitive aging reflected in performance in spatial and processing speed tasks as well as moderate declines in verbal and memory tasks (Emery, et al., 2011). Given these findings it appears that more attention to research in these areas may be needed. Researchers must be cautious when

forming conclusions regarding the association of chronological age with declines in cognitive performance (Horstman, 2012).

### **Processing Speed, Memory, and Attention**

It is important to consider the research in executive function, processing speed, attention, and working memory when considering cognitive aging. This topic is relevant to the position of older workers as it relates to the stereotype of associating cognitive deficits with older adults. Decades of research have provided evidence that although there are some deficits that occur with age, these are less drastic than was once assumed (Verhagen, 2011).

As the workplace becomes more cognitively demanding rather than physically demanding (Besen, Matz-Costa, James, & Pitt-Catsoupes, 2012) and with the concern on the part of employers with remaining competitive in the marketplace (Eversole, 2012; Houghton, Bruyere & Wagner, 2011; Minton-Eversole, 2012; Roscigno, 2010), worker productivity is a priority (Butler & Gleason, 1985; Butler, 2008; Conen, et al., 2011; Nelson, 2004, p. 168; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Van Dalen, et al., 2010). While employers seem to have a positive attitude towards older employees (Palmore, 1999, p. 173; Szinovacz, 2011) there continues to be a negative association between advanced age and productivity of workers (Palmore, 1999; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Szinovacz, 2011; Van Dalen, et al., 2010). There persists the assumption that cognitive decline in older workers is inevitable and will interfere with productivity (Butler & Gleason, 1985; p. 87-88; Nelson, 2004, p. 168; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Roscigno, 2010; Van Dalen, et al., 2010). The results of a study done by Rupp, Vodanovich, and Crede' (2006) indicated that

productivity of older workers was not generally related to increasing age, but provided empirical evidence that when performance is rated by supervisors who have internalized negative age related stereotypes about older workers, age bias accounts for lower performance ratings compared with ratings for performance of younger workers (Rupp, et al., 2006). The literature would suggest that in the absence of the worker feeling judged negatively that work performance may not differ sharply with the performance of younger workers.

Similarly, Yeung and Fung (2009) in a cross sectional survey study consisting of a five day experience sampling examining influences of selection, optimization, and compensation (or SOC) strategies on job performance that compared older workers and younger workers, found the following results. First, in examining compensation strategy, they found a positive relationship among older workers in performance maintenance. Second, in looking at selectivity, they found higher sales productivity in both older and younger workers (Yeung & Fung, 2009). In a second experiment involving highly difficult tasks older workers employing elective selection displayed higher rates of task performance (Yeung & Fung, 2009). These experiments revealed that when the job related performance of older workers is compared with that of younger workers there is no evidence of lower performance when older workers employ adaptive strategies to respond to the challenges that developmental changes place on completing tasks (Yeung & Fung, 2009). In a later study on cognitive function and task performance, Deary and colleagues (2010) found that there is little evidence that there is a significant difference in

the task performance of older workers due to decreased cognitive function and physical disability.

In a study on task switching, Clapp and colleagues (2011) conducted experiments comparing working memory disruption in older and younger workers. The premise was that the workforce is increasingly becoming more cognitively demanding in terms of distraction and the need to multitask. They found that there is more of a delay after interruptions and distractions in reconnecting to the primary task in older workers than in younger workers (Clapp, et al., 2011). They also found that older workers take longer to disengage from the distracting stimuli than younger workers (Clapp, et al., 2011). However, they also found that this process towards longer delays in task switching or working memory disruption actually begins somewhere in early adulthood (Clapp, et al, 2011; Reade, 2013).

Executive function, as a construct (Salthouse, et al, 2003; Verhagen, 2011) involves the mental processes that are involved with planning, organizing, attention to detail, memory for detail, and space-time management (Salthouse, et al, 2003; Verhagen, 2011). Executive function is associated with working memory and processing speed. Attention to studies on executive function is important because executive function, including working memory and processing speed allows for productivity and the timely and accurate completion of tasks (Deary, Johnson, & Staff, 2010; Robataille, Piccinin, Muniz-Terra, Hoffman, Johansson, Deeg...Hofer, 2013).

In longitudinal studies examining both the direct and indirect effects of age on processing speed they found only slight evidence of age related effects on processing

speed and other aspects of cognitive functioning such as memory, reasoning, and spatial visualization (Robitaille, et al., 2013). General cognitive ability was found to be a factor in accounting for individual differences in completing processing speed tasks (Deary, et al., 2010). In considering these results it may be possible to suggest other conclusions such as that older workers' experience may cause them to be more deliberate in performing tasks and thus they may make fewer errors.

In exploring biomarkers of cognitive aging, Deary and colleagues (2010) administered processing speed tests consisting of the Wechsler Digit Symbol Coding and Symbol Search, simple reaction time, choice reaction time, and inspection time to participants at age 70 years. They found that the results of individual measures of processing speed correlated with cognitive ability originally measured at age 11 (Deary, et al., 2010). Similarly, Proust-Lima, and colleagues (2008) found that factoring in gender, participants with higher educational attainment performed better on psychometric tests than participants with less educational attainment (Proust-Lima, et al., 2008). Their conclusion was that education and test taking experience could be significant factors in the individual rates of cognitive aging (Proust-Lima, et al., 2008) in all but processing speed.

In a later study Ritchie, Bates, Der, Starr, and Deary (2013) replicated these findings. In two studies taking data from longitudinal studies, they tested whether there is an association between higher IQ and higher levels of educational attainment with higher scores in cognitive ability tests in older participants. In study one, a base score was obtained in childhood they used data from the London Birth Cohort 1921, Moray House

Test (MHT), 1936. The mean age at initial testing was 10.90,  $SD=.29$  (Ritchie, et al., 2013). Follow-up studies on surviving community dwelling participants were conducted in 1999-2001 where the mean age was 79.06,  $SD=.28$  and in 2003 with the mean age of 83.35,  $SD=.58$  (Ritchie, et al., 2013). In study two, data were obtained from the Lothian Birth Cohort, 1936 which utilized the Scottish Mental Survey, 1947 with the mean age 10.94,  $SD=.28$ . Follow-up studies were conducted on surviving community dwelling participants in 2003-2005 with a mean age of 69.53,  $SD=.83$  (Ritchie, et al., 2013). Both samples were screened for dementia. The results of both studies indicated a connection between the effects of continued education on IQ score (Ritchie, et al., 2013). The most significant affect was seen in those participants with lower cognitive ability in childhood. Studies such as these seem to indicate that individuals do not lose their capacity to learn and to develop new skills as they age. Further, as demonstrated by Deary and colleagues (2010), chronological age must not be the only determinant of cognitive age, but that cognitive aging must be identified on a more individual basis.

As individuals age there appears to be a reduction in explicit memory, or the ability to intentionally remember and recall everyday information such as names on demand. In contrast, ability to recognize old learned information does not decrease (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Through experimental enquiry into recall and memory recognition Danckert and Craik (2013) found that there were greater age related differences in the ability of older participants to recall specific information, but that recognition memory accounted for only slight differences. The results of their study imply that tasks that are more familiar are less problematic for people as they age and that

recall becomes more problematic with advanced age (Danckert & Craik, 2013). The implication for this finding is that in tasks related to item recognition, older people perform as well as younger people. In the study by Ratcliff, Thapur, and McKoon (2011) 4 memory tasks were examined: item recognition, associative recognition, cued recall, and free recall. Little decline with age was seen in the results related to item recognition and associative recognition when younger participants were compared with older individual's performance (Ratcliff, et al., 2011).

In examining retrieval process and the ability of older adults to retrieve information or instructions for performing tasks, Mullet, Scullin, Hess, Arnold, and Einstein (2013) investigated the effect of aging on prospective memory, otherwise referred to as spontaneous retrieval. They found that when there was the absence of monitoring (Mullet, et al, 2013) or the ability to retrieve or recall instructions given for performing belated tasks, there was little difference in the results comparing younger and older participants in the presence of focal cuing (Mullet, et al., 2013). This means that the results may show that both older and younger adults perform prospective memory tasks more successfully in the absence of distraction and the presence of high motivation (Mullet, et al, 2013).

The effect of aging on implicit memory or the unintentional storing of information was tested by Ward, Berry, and Shanks (2013) in a series of experiments. The results demonstrated that with less priming, there is a reduction in recognition memory in older participants compared to younger participants, creating the notion that priming has less effect than recognition (Ward, et al, 2013). Given these findings, I conclude that in the

presence of distraction from the primary task, there may be little difference in the ability to recall previous instructions, with priming, for completing the task between older and younger adults when motivation is high but in the absence of priming, there is some difference in older adults' recognition memory, or ability to recall instructions compared to younger adults.

### **Cognitive Plasticity**

The good news, in light of the accepted notion that cognitive deficits are a normal part of the aging process is that more recent research has demonstrated that though the brain decreases in size as we age, it has many adaptive responses to any cognitive changes that we may experience (Butler & Weywadt, 2013; Horstman, 2012; Landi & Rossini, 2010; Park & McDonough, 2013). In contrast to what was originally assumed, individuals do not lose their ability to learn new information and to perform new tasks as they age, but may perform these functions differently as the brain adapts to changes related to the natural aging process. This process of the aging brain actually begins early in life (Clapp, et al, 2011) around the mid-twenties.

Cognitive plasticity is also called reserve capacity (Ballesteros, Botella, Zamarron, Cabras, Schettini, & Tarranga, 2012) or the ability of the brain to react to novel stimuli (Lai & Rossini, 2010). This has been an area of interest as far as cognitive aging because of the long held belief that as individuals age they lose their learning potential (Ballesteros, et al, 2012). This myth has played into the assumption that older employees are either unable to learn new tasks or knowledge, or are only minimally re-trainable (Billet, Dymock, & Martin, 2011; Horstmann, 2012; Rosigno, 2011).

Earlier findings in studies of cognitive plasticity seemed to indicate that cognitive reserve or plasticity declines with advancing age (Ortega, et al., 2012). A 1991 study by Singer, Lindenberger, and Baltes that examined episodic memory through the Berlin Aging Study samples found that older adults showed only moderate gains from mnemonic training and that in very old age, structural or biological conditions were related to declines in cognitive reserve capacity (Singer, et al., 1991). Similar results were observed in a study by Singer and colleagues (2003). Contradicting these findings, Yang, Krampe, and Baltes (2006) studied retest learning and found that retest practice improved performance and found evidence that cognitive reserve capacity may be present at age 80 and older (Yang, et al, 2006).

Significant differences in cognitive plasticity were found in an earlier study (Petersen, 2000) when individuals aged 65 to 90 with normal aging, or absence of a diagnosed dementia, were compared with individuals with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) on tasks testing delayed recall. The most significant differences were found in individuals with MCI as compared with normal aging individuals (Petersen, 2000). Ballesteros and colleagues (2012) found that cognitive plasticity is present throughout the life cycle in normal individuals, but that in verbal learning tasks performance decreases. They did not conclude that learning stops, but that as the normal aging process advances, the learning process becomes slower (Ballesteros, et al, 2012). The results of studies such as these have implications for employers seeking to recruit or retain older workers in that part of the challenge may be to modify training programs aimed at older workers (Bryck

& Fisher, 2012) and to provide environmental modifications that will assist older workers with maintaining productivity (Houghton, et al, 2011; Nehmer, et al., 2010; Klein, 2013).

Studies on memory, learning, and attention have been conducted in the past few decades within the context of stereotype threat theory and its effects on task performance. Studies on the effect of stereotype threat on the performance of individuals from stigmatized groups such as African Americans and women (Steel, 1997; Steel & Aaronson, 1995) revealed that when students feared that their performance may prove negative stereotypes and beliefs about the groups to which they belonged they generally did not perform well in domains that they valued (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aaronson, 1995). The results of these studies may be applied to older workers with roughly the same results.

Given the above findings I conclude that it may be possible that in earlier research on cognitive aging the results based upon the performance of older adults may have been influenced by stereotype threat where older test participants may have experienced stress related to perceiving that they would be negatively stereotyped (Wout, Shih, Jackson, & Sellers, 2009). This experience may also be repeated in the work place. The fear that any errors or failure to produce a product or perform a task at optimal efficiency may be perceived as being related to being older rather than to other factors such as the effects of feeling that one's job performance is being unfairly scrutinized.

### **Confronting Stereotype Threat**

In review of the essential literature, I raise an important question. How does Stereotype Threat theory relate to older workers? The activation of stereotype threat

creates anxiety in the individual in which the individual's attention is divided between the task, and anxiety related to their own performance of the task (Steele et al, 2003). Slowed processing speed and efficiency may be the effect of such distraction (Mazerole, Regner, Morisset, Rigalleau, & Huguet, 2012). Stereotype threat affects performance by increasing cognitive load in which the individual must expend more effort, leading to deficits in executive control (Inzlicht & Kang, 2010; Ortega, et al., 2012). When the threat of being stereotyped becomes a real possibility to the perceiver, or the fear of performance levels being criticized more harshly in the workplace becomes more salient the individual's performance on task, particularly if the individual has internalized the belief that their cognitive ability will decline with age, the performance of the person suffers (Geraci, Miller, 2013; levy, 2009).

Research into Stereotype Threat Theory has produced mixed results. In a study on aging and memory impairment Barber and Mather (2013) utilized a working memory task under stereotype threat conditions. Where stereotype threat was not activated regulatory fit and executive control interference as potential factors in activating stereotype threat they found that results did not support the executive interference model that suggested that stereotype threat reduces executive control reserves required to perform some memory tasks (Barber & Mather, 2013). In addition, their results did not show a consistent tendency for stereotype threat to impair working memory (Barber & Mather, 2013). In tests using the Stroop task to activate stereotype threat as a test of verbal processing skills errors and reaction time, Hutchison, Smith and Ferris (2013) found that distraction negatively affected performance in individuals with reduced

working memory capacity when stereotype threat was activated. Levy (2009) also found that for older adults the activation of stereotype threat has a negative effect on memory where negative age related stereotypes and myths have been absorbed by individuals through culture (Levy, 2009), and activated through subliminal priming in laboratory experiments.

Stereotype threat affects individual psychological well-being in the workplace and may affect work related attitudes (Hehman & Bugental, 2013; Von Hippel, et al., 2013). Productive work is important to the wellbeing of the individual (Besen, et al., 2012; Butler & Gleason, 1985; Butler, 2008). Stereotype threat may result in the individual disengaging with the work domain particularly if it is part of the individual's self-identity (Woodcock, Hernandez, Estrada, & Schultz, 2012).

Von Hippel and colleagues (2013) tested the hypothesis that there is a relationship between stereotype threat and the attitudes and job commitment in older workers. The stated purpose of the research was to fill a gap in the literature between historical findings related to negative effects of stereotype threat on work performance and the effects of stereotype threat on attitudes and psychological well-being of older workers related to the relationship between stereotype threat and the intention of workers to disengage from the work domain (Von Hippel, et al., 2013). Their study examined perceptions of stereotype threat, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to resign or retire, work satisfaction, and overall life satisfaction (Von Hippel, et al., 2013). The results of the study presented an association between older employees' perceptions of stereotype threat

and lowered work attitudes, work mental health, and intentions to resign or retire (Von Hippel, et al., 2013).

In a similar study of psychological disengagement, using survey data, taking into consideration individual differences, Laplante and colleagues (2010) compared the process of psychological disengagement between groups of individuals in lower status jobs and individuals in careers or work that the individual viewed as a career, or calling (Laplante et al., 2010. ) They found that there was less disengagement or devaluing when individuals saw purpose in their work. Individuals who were emotionally invested in their jobs tended to be less vulnerable to stereotype threat (Laplante, et al., 2010).

Steele (1997) stated that the possible consequence of members of stigmatized groups to exposure to negative stereotypes related to their groups over the long term is domain disengagement. When the domain is an important part of the individual's self-identity, when success in that particular domain, such as the person's career or work, is a large part of that person's self-esteem or self-definition, experiences over time of stereotype threat may cause the person to begin to devalue that domain, and to disengage with it as a way of preserving self-image (Woodcock, et al., 2012). Weiss and Lang (2012) presented similar findings but posited that when older adults feel that their self-identity and self-conception feels threatened by negative stereotypes, older individuals may dissociate with their age groups as a defensive measure (Weiss & Lang, 2012).

The findings of the research indicate that when confronted with stereotype threat, aging workers may, to preserve self-conception, either disengage from the work domain, or decide to take a denial stance and disengage with their age group by deciding to stay in

the work force for as long as possible. It may also be possible that individuals may decide to become even more focused and competitive as a means of coping with the threat of being stereotyped. Steele (1997) proposed that when individuals are faced with the threat of confirming negative stereotypes about the group to which they identified that possible responses to the pressure and the anxiety may be disengagement with the domain.

### **Social Construction and Conceptualization of Retirement**

In the 20th century retirement emerged as a marker of success, a reward for years of hard work and accomplishment (Klein, 2007; Smith & Dougherty, 2012). While prior generations planned to slow down upon reaching the traditional retirement age the present age group, the baby boomers, have generally reported no plans to slow down (Kromer & Howard, 2013; Radl, 2012). A search for qualitative studies on people's decisions to retire produced only a few results. It would be beneficial to gain a greater understanding of this process through exploring the stories of individual. Smith and Dougherty (2012) interviewed 84 individuals about their expectations for retirement. An emerging theme from this study was that retirement is a social construct. Retirement occurs as a socialization narrative over time. They further stated that even as diverse groups of people have different experiences similar personal stories emerge, creating a kind of master narrative. From this master narrative emerge expectations for retirement.

Why do people retire? Reeuwijk and DeVaney (2012) interviewed 30 Dutch employees, aged 60-64, who had retired early, through face-to-face interviews. They identified "push factors" and "pull factors". Push factors were factors that pushed workers toward early retirement. These included organizational changes, high work

pressures and demands including physical and cognitive tasks, insufficient use of their skills and knowledge by employers, and the perception of having been encouraged by employers to retire (Reeuwijk & DeVaney, 2012). Pull factors included a wish to pursue other interests, need for more flexibility and freedom, family concerns, and financial opportunity (Reeuwijk & DeVaney, 2012). Not clearly stated in the study were the specific messages that were perceived by older employees that employers were encouraging them to retire. It would be helpful to have more in depth responses related to the personal experiences of older employees of feeling pressured to retire.

Similarly, in a study of workers in New Zealand, Simpson, Richardson, and Zorn (2012) identified themes related to retirement decisions as a desire to make better use of skills and knowledge in seeking “jobs that matter” (p. 429) and to make meaningful contributions to society. Robinson, Demetre, and Corney (2011), in interviewing 30 white-collar workers in the United Kingdom found concurring results. Themes explored included desire for positive continuity and challenge, freedom, loss and gain, restriction, regret, and decline. Results indicated that retirement has changed from a sudden stoppage of work to phased retirement (Robinson, et al., 2011). Phased retirement includes bridge employment (Simpson, et al, 2012) that eases the individual into retirement (Robinson, et al., 2012; Pleau & Shauman, 2012) and opting for part time employment.

In a qualitative study of employers and employees conducted by the Commission on Aging of the State of Connecticut a similar theme was identified (Klein, 2007) employees’ responses obtained in unstructured interviews and through focus groups included desire for gradual retirement. Among situations desired were phased retirement,

job sharing, part-time employment, and changing jobs (Klein, 2007). Responses of employers also reflected desire to employ or retain older workers by offering more flexibility in work hours, offering more part-time work, and project oriented work (Klein, 2007) as a means of attracting older workers.

The meaning of retirement has changed from that of a time to slow down and enjoy leisure time, to focusing on living an active life for as long as possible (Forbes, 2014). The master narrative of decline (Smith & Dougherty, 2012) traditionally accepted has changed to the expectation of maintaining an active involvement and an opportunity to reinvent oneself through seeking meaningful employment or “jobs that matter” (Simpson, et al, 2012, p. 429). Schultz and Wang (2012) noted responses that related employees’ decision to remain on the job or to seek new careers as influenced by the degree of respect, dignity they experienced, and the value that employers and coworkers placed on their knowledge, experience, and expertise.

A literature search produced few qualitative studies on the meaning of work and retirement for older workers from their own unique perspectives. In addition, there are few qualitative studies that focus on whether and in what ways culturally absorbed stereotypes about the aging process have influenced their conceptualization of their own aging process related to their work roles. Responses of interviewees may uncover themes related to whether retirement could be a means of coping with being stereotyped and discriminated against in the workplace for those interviewees who have experienced this.

## **Aging and Social Change**

Reflecting on the literature review, aging may be positioned within social change in the following ways. First at the individual level, aging adults are faced with a culture that focuses on decline in defining the aging process (Gullette, 2004) as our culture encourages dissatisfaction with aging bodies, and devalues the wisdom and expertise of older adults (Gullette, 2011). Ageism not only denies the individual the great opportunity that a longer and healthier life could offer in terms of living a more productive and personally satisfying life well into old age (Butler, 2008), but also continues to present to younger generations a bleak picture of aging by perpetuating myths and stereotypes about the aging process (Gullette, 2011). This disparaging picture of aging may tend to perpetuate ageism by activating long held fears that humans have harbored of growing old, sick, dependent, and dying (Nelson, 2005). Present research has shown that people age at varying rates and in varying ways, raising the issue of diversity within age groups (Horstman, 2012). The growing body of research in the area of aging studies has the great potential to upset the traditionally accepted notion of advancing chronological aging as a time of decline leading to death and may add greater dimension to the story of life span development.

Second, at the community level, older individuals can benefit from continuing engagement in the community (Butler, 2008). Older adults have been valuable contributors in the community as volunteers and as social activists (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Research presented in this review has shown that older individuals may be valuable assets in the workplace in terms of accumulated skills, experience, and expertise

(Eversole, 2012; Haslam, et al., 2012; Kromer & Howard, 2013; Minton-Eversdale, 2012; Rowe, 2011; Van Dalen, et al., 2010). Normal changes in physical ability and cognitive functioning older adults continue to perform at nearly the same levels of competence as younger workers (Van Dalen, et al., 2010).

Third, at the larger societal level, aging research may affirm the value of all age groups including older adults. Older adults have long been viewed as a burden on social programs, the healthcare industry, and family systems (Karel, et al, 2012). In light of this increasing demographic of aging baby boomers, it is important to form a more accurate picture of the social role that is actually filled by older adults. As a social category older adults are a group that has long been set apart from the mainstream of society (Bytheway, 2005) through segregation of age groups (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005). Older adults portrayed in the popular media are often presented as annoying, complaining, and as figures of ridicule. An example was the popular situation comedy *Everybody Loves Raymond*, where the aging parents were seen as cranky, overly critical, and with little else to occupy them than to interfere in their children's lives. A quick look at news channels such as CNN reveals that news anchors and commentators on talk shows tend to be young. There are a few examples of more mature news correspondents such as Barbara Starr, Candy Crowley, and Christiane Ammanpour, but overall, youth dominates in western culture where youthful appearance is all-important.

. The study answered a need stated by Von Hippel and colleagues (2013) regarding the need for more qualitative studies focusing on older workers. Much can be

learned about the lived experiences, the issues, and the needs of these workers by uncovering themes gleaned from their responses to interview questions.

### **Summary of Chapter Two**

Human beings are living years longer than previously after the traditional retirement age. It is predicted that by the year 2030, 20% of the population of the United States, or 71 million people will be aged 65 or older, and that number is expected to increase to 88.5 million by the year 2050. The baby boomers, the largest cohort group in history, began reaching retirement age in 2011. The study addresses the relationship between aging theory and theory of stereotype threat.

Through the past few decades much research, mainly quantitative studies, has addressed ageing. Researchers have presented evidence that in healthy individuals the aging process causes few significant negative physical, cognitive, and mental and cognitive losses even into very old age. Research has also revealed that older individuals are still able to perform tasks that younger people are able to perform. An examination of the labor statistics revealed that increasing numbers of workers are deciding to remain in the workplace for longer periods of time after the traditional age of retirement.

There is little qualitative research to be found that explores the lived experiences of older workers. Phenomenological qualitative studies are needed to gain a realistic understanding of the experiences of older workers from their own perspective. Much can be learned about the realistic concerns and needs of these workers.

The next chapter provided information on how this qualitative phenomenological study was performed. The chapter will provide information as to how participants were recruited. Research questions will be presented as well as how data was collected, analyzed and stored.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

In the previous two chapters I provided an outline of the phenomenon of an aging population. I discussed negative stereotypes and myths related to the aging process. . Ageism contributes to discrimination against older people. The discrimination against older people in the workplace and in the job market is related to the accepted myth that older adults cannot compete with younger workers in task performance, and in their inability to acquire new knowledge and train for new skills (Forbes & Schmader, 2010; Powell, 2010; Roscigno, 2010). The research into cognitive aging bears out that although some cognitive changes occur with normal aging, older adults function quite well in the workplace (Haslam, et al., 2012). This study examined the experiences of older workers in the workplace through the lens of ageism and stereotype threat theory. The study also explored what, if any, affect these have on the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of individuals who are experiencing the phenomenon of aging in the workplace from their own perspectives.

While there is a plethora of quantitative studies focusing on negative age related stereotypes of older people, there are few qualitative studies examining the phenomenon of aging in the workplace from the older workers' own unique perspectives. The purpose of this research was to help to close this gap. This qualitative study was designed to gather rich data from the responses of those who are experiencing the phenomenon. In this chapter I will outline the qualitative method chosen for this study.

For exploring the lived, subjective experiences of mature workers qualitative methodology was selected. There are a large number of quantitative studies on the effect of stereotype threat on cognitive ability. In chapter 2 I included quantitative studies on cognitive aging, the effects of aging on memory, executive control, and cognitive plasticity to show recent empirical research that provides evidence that as individuals age there is little significant loss in these areas due to the aging process and that older workers need not necessarily lack the ability to perform tasks and to function in the workplace. Qualitative methodology was selected because it can better explore the thoughts and beliefs of the individuals themselves as they experience the phenomenon.

There is a stated need for qualitative studies on the work experiences of older workers and a need to investigate the effects of ageist stereotypes and stereotype threat on the decisions of individuals to remain in the workplace past the age of traditional retirement or to exit the workforce (Von Hippel, et al., 2013). There are many quantitative studies available in the field of aging that provide information related to aspects of cognitive and physical aging. An expanded body of literature provided by qualitative inquiry would provide a deeper understanding of the actual lived experiences of older workers. The main value of qualitative research design is its interpretive approach and more flexible design (Maxwell, 2013). Unlike quantitative methods, in qualitative research design variables are not predetermined (Creswell, 2003) but rather through the data collection process themes emerge or are uncovered, and theories are generated through an open ended process oriented approach.

Qualitative research has traditional focuses or approaches. It is interpretive, naturalistic (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2012) and seeks to construct meaning from the experiences of individuals in the context of their unique worlds. For this study, my approach was interpretive inquiry aimed at interpreting what is heard and observed, gleaned from individual accounts of lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Interpretive inquiry is an aspect of Heuristic Research, which Moustakas (1994) described as a process that begins with a problem or question that the researcher wishes to answer (p. 17). Important components of Heuristic research are dialogue and self-inquiry as a way of observing and understanding human experience. Heuristic inquiry is not separate from the experience and background of the researcher. Rather than being neutral, the researcher, throughout the process of data gathering, brings to the table his or her own unique experience, knowledge, assumptions, and outlook (Creswell, 2003; Maxwell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). It has been traditionally taught that research must be value free, and this has been the assumption of more structured, conventional research methods. Objectivity has been viewed as the best way to gather data without biasing the results. It is the responsibility of the researcher to engage in a continuous process of self-inquiry and reflection. I address the process of checking for bias later in this chapter.

I selected phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of older workers. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to explore and understand the “essence of experiences” of individuals who are or have lived a particular phenomenon from their own unique perspective (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). The purpose of phenomenological inquiry is to inform and is appropriate for understanding the unique needs of this group. A more

realistic understanding of the needs and concerns of this group can assist mental health providers with helping individuals address their unique needs and issues related to aging and to their roles as employees.

### **Research Design**

Creswell, (2007) described five designs commonly used to conduct research. These include narrative, grounded theory, ethnographic, case study, and phenomenological research designs. These methods differ in the goals that they seek to accomplish, but are similar in the methods employed for data collection and analysis of data (Patton, 2002). I have selected phenomenological research method because phenomenology provides insights through descriptions that help the researcher to develop an understanding of the true essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34).

Other methods of phenomenological research were considered but not selected. Narrative research examines life stories of participants in the participants' own words (Creswell, 2003). Data is provided through stories that allow the researcher to form a picture to discover the meaning of the experience based upon the experiences emphasized or illustrated by the participant (Creswell, 2003; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Narrative research, however, may yield information that is not relevant to the problem being investigated. Grounded theory was not selected because while it gleans data that may be utilized in forming a theory that was not the purpose of this study. Ethnographic study examines cultural groups in their own environment by observing and collecting data in the field over time (Creswell, 2007). It examines the interactions of a

large group of individuals, and develops structure and theory that informs further investigation (Creswell, 2007, p. 6). This method was not selected because the purpose of the research was not theory development. The case study method was also considered. The goal of case study research is to gain a detailed and in depth description of a small number of units, for example individuals, groups, organizations, or specific programs (Creswell, 2007). While case study research also utilizes interviews, it deals with experiences over time. This study explored individuals' experiences in the present time so the case study method was rejected.

Phenomenological research is designed to study the nature of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The focus of phenomenological research is to explore the essence of a human experience of a phenomenon through the experiences of individuals who have lived or are living the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological research utilizes in depth interviews from individuals who have lived the experience and compiles the data to create a kind of story or description of the shared meaning of the experience (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of my study was to explore common themes or meanings that individuals have made of the experience or phenomenon of aging in the workplace. . Phenomenological research was deemed appropriate for my study.

Phenomenology is most appropriate method for describing the lived experiences of older workers who are approaching or have reached traditional retirement age, and for uncovering themes related to forming a comprehensive picture of this experience. The goal of this research was to describe the shared essence of the experience from the

viewpoint of the individuals who are experiencing this phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological research must begin with guiding questions that provide some structure and purpose for the research (Patton, 2002). The guiding question for this study aligned with the stated purpose for phenomenology, which is “what are the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience for this person or group of people?” (Patton, 2002, p.104). Phenomenology was chosen as the method best suited to answer the purpose of this study which was to explore the lived experiences of older workers.

### **Participants of the Study**

Participants selected for this study consisted of seven individuals aged 55 and up who were still in the workforce as either full or part-time workers working at least 20 hours per week. Participants were not excluded based upon sex, ethnic background, and educational background. Potential participants were not excluded on the basis of type of work performed (e. g., professional or manual laborer). According to the U. S. Department of Labor projections by 2018 over 40 million workers or nearly a quarter of the labor force will be aged 55 and older (Toosi, 2009). This represents an increase of approximately 43% (Toosi, 2009). For this reason, I selected a sample consisting of workers aged 55 and over.

Participants were recruited by placing advertisements through flyers placed in local newspapers. The advertisement included information about the researcher and the proposed study including its nature and purpose, description of criteria for the proposed

study participants, and the researcher's contact information (Appendix A). The voluntary nature of participation was stressed.

For this study I developed a brief participant screener (See appendix B) based upon the research questions and research purpose, and guided by the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Walden IRB approval number is 2015.08.0414:22:38-05; 00'. The screener was utilized during initial contact to determine whether a potential study participant met the selection criteria. Essential selection criteria, according to Moustakas (1994) were that the participant must be experiencing the phenomenon, be interested in understanding the nature and meaning of the experience, and be willing to participate in a lengthy interview (p. 107). The individuals must also be willing to give permission to record the interview and must understand how the data collected will be used.

### **Measures**

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of older workers in the workplace and to extract related themes. The following questions were designed to elicit responses that would result in the formation of a composite picture of the collective experiences of those who are experiencing the phenomenon of aging in the workplace.

1. What aging stereotypes do older workers aged 55 and older remember from their childhoods?
2. How have these stereotypes influenced their conceptions of the aging process?
3. What, if any, messages have people experienced from coworkers or supervisors about their work performance related to age?

4. How have people found ways to cope with any negative age related stereotypes that they may have encountered in the workplace?

### **Ethical Protection of Participants**

The participants in this study were individuals who identified as older workers. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Risk of harm to participants as a result of participation in this study was considered low. Participants were informed that they were free to decline to answer any questions that they considered too intrusive.

Participants were informed that audiotapes would be transcribed by a contracted stenographer. No identifying information was included and the audiotapes were transported in a privacy envelope. The participant was informed that audiotapes, transcripts, and paper files would be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office and that only I would have access to these files. Electronic files are password protected and no one else has access to my office computer. All audiotapes, transcripts, field notes, paper files, and electronic files will be destroyed after 5 years.

Prior to beginning the interview, all participants were informed about confidentiality (Appendix C) and of what information must be legally shared with appropriate persons (e.g., whether the participant discloses intent to harm himself or herself or any other person). I also familiarized myself with the New York State Elder Abuse Law (CH. 642, L. 2004). Under the Elder Abuse Law any suspected abuse or neglect of an elder is subject to mandated reporting; participants were informed of this

limit to confidentiality. . During the course of the data collection process no concerns were raised by any of the participants. Before pursuing research involving human subjects it is important to seek formal ethics training. . I have had training through the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a person who is nearing age 60, I am also approaching the traditional retirement age. I have no intention of doing so. In the workplace, I have encountered the usual age jokes, suggestions that forgetting might be related to “having a senior moment” and have been asked when I plan to retire. Having lost my job in January 2002 at age 48 I am sensitive to the process of looking for employment as an older worker.

My experience with this phenomenon as an older job seeker, and now as someone who is approaching traditional retirement age with no intention of retiring enabled me to be sensitive to the needs and concerns of my study participants. I have knowledge of the distinctive local culture, patterns of communication, including nuances of speech, and local customs. I was conscious of the need to maintain appropriate boundaries and to not disclose any personal information that would remove the focus from my study participants and onto me. I was also aware of the necessity of maintaining ongoing self-awareness and to maintain an open dialogue with my mentor to avoid identifying with my study participants in any way that would produce the risk of biasing my study results.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The first step in conducting the proposed study was to place an advertisement in the local newspapers. Respondents to this advertisement were asked questions from the participant screener (Appendix B) to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria. Participants were selected according to their potential to inform this study and whether they met the screening criteria. If the caller met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study, an interview time and date were scheduled.

Data was collected from seven individuals through in-depth, audiotaped interviews. Of the 10 respondents, six potential participants met the inclusion criteria. One participant was recruited through a participant. In total seven participants were interviewed. All seven participants were able to inform the purpose of the study.

Each initial interview took approximately two hours. The interview began with the review of the letter of invitation (Appendix C) and completion of the informed consent document (Appendix C). The participants were encouraged to ask any questions that they had about the study. Each process took approximately 15 minutes. With the participants' permission the interviews were audio taped using two SONY TCM-200DV audio tape recorders with two external microphones.

The data collection interview consisted of asking focused questions informed by the specific research questions. Moustakas (1994) recommended an informal, interactive process with open-ended questions and comments (p. 114). He also recommended developing a series of questions to guide the interview process (see appendix D). To

address the first and second research questions the participant was asked questions one and two from the interview guide (see appendix D). The participant was asked about stereotypes absorbed about older people remembered from childhood and whether or not stereotypes have influenced their concept of aging. Research questions three and four were addressed by asking questions three and four from the interview guide. Participants were asked to describe any experiences that they may have had where they felt that they were being stereotyped either positively or negatively because of age. Participants were asked whether they have experienced comments from supervisors or coworkers about their job performance related to their age and to describe these. Research question four was addressed by participants' responses to interview question five regarding how they may have coped or responded to any messages about their job performance related to their age.

After the interview was completed I reviewed data obtained and summarized my understanding of what the participant said. The participant was encouraged to correct any misconceptions, clarify any points, and add additional information. The participant was also provided with a study debriefing form reviewing the purpose of the study (Appendix E).

The next step was to schedule a second interview. The second interview was scheduled from two to three weeks after the first interview in order to allow time for transcription. The participant was encouraged to review the text of the transcripts and to

identify any errors and make any corrections. The participant was also asked if there were any changes that they wished to make or anything that they would like to clarify.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data was modeled on the Stevick-Colazzi-Keen method modified by Moustakas (1994, p. 121). Moustakas described the series of steps for processing the data that is obtained from data collection methods. Audiotapes should be transcribed as soon as possible after the interview. A transcriber with court transcription experience was contracted to perform this function. The transcript was read thoroughly to help in gaining an understanding of the experience from the perspective of the interviewee. While listening to the audiotapes any audible responses and verbalizations were noted. Any verbalizations (e.g., pauses, sounds, and other audible behaviors) were transcribed literally (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The next step was to highlight significant statements from the verbatim transcripts that were relevant to gaining an understanding of the individual's experience of the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) refers to this as "horizontalization." By thoroughly reading the transcribed verbatim interviews the researcher may glean from the text a list of significant statements about how the individual is experiencing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Next a process of reduction and elimination was utilized to test each significant statement for two conditions. Each statement designated as a significant statement was examined to determine if it contained components or units of meaning necessary for understanding the phenomenon. Meanings were extracted and labeled. Any

overlapping, repetitive, or vague expressions were eliminated (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). Horizons were labeled according to significance to the participant's experience of the phenomenon.

Significant themes and statements were used to construct a textural description of the experience. Significant statements were grouped into themes. By clustering common themes from participant responses a composite description was constructed to represent the experiences of the group through incorporation of common themes. The composite description developed captured the "meanings and essences" (Moustakas, 1994, p 121) in order to produce a picture of the experiences of the group as a whole. The data analysis procedure is listed as follows:

1. The researcher set aside her own experience of the phenomenon by providing a full description of the experience. The researcher must be able to focus on the participant. This enables the researcher to be aware of personal biases and assumptions related to the phenomenon.
2. Verbatim transcripts of interviews were thoroughly read. The researcher gleaned from the text a list of significant statements about how individuals are experiencing the phenomenon. The process of "horizontalization" (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) is the listing of these significant statements and the development of a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).
3. Significant statements were grouped into themes.

4. A description of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon, or a "textural description (Creswell, 2007, p. 159) of the experiences was developed. Verbatim examples were included.
5. A structural description or an account of how the experience happened which reflected on the context of the experience was written. An example would be an individual's experience of age discrimination.
6. A composite description of the phenomenon that included textural and structural descriptions was created. The purpose of this was to capture the essence of the experience (Creswell 2007; Moustakas, 1994). A story was created in this way of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon.

I was continuously aware of my own personal experiences, biases, and assumptions. I provided a full description of my own experiences of the phenomenon. By setting aside my own biases and experiences, I was able to focus on the participant's experiences. The peer review process as well as feedback from my faculty mentor as well as my peer reviewer also helped to control for the intrusion and influence of my own personal experiences.

### **Verification of Trustworthiness/Authenticity**

Reliability is a concept used in evaluating quality in quantitative research. Quantitative research relies on statistics to evaluate research findings. The purpose of qualitative research is to explore and gain an understanding of the experiences of individuals and groups and of how they make meaning of experiences and phenomena.

The concept of reliability can be misleading in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

It has been argued that the concept of validity cannot be applied to qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Yet, Golfshani (2003) recognized that there is a need for a method or means of checking research. Given the subjective nature of qualitative research it can be recognized that the validity of a study may be influenced by the researcher's subjective concepts of validity (Golfshani, 2003). Lincoln and Guba (1985) redefined the concepts of reliability and validity to apply to qualitative research. To measure and check qualitative research, Creswell (2007) listed several methods prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) which included familiarity with the culture or prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, rick, thick description, and external audits (p. 208-209). The steps chosen for verification of findings are as follows:

1. Clarifying researcher bias. It is important for the researcher to understand any biases or assumptions that may affect interpretation of the data.
2. Member checking. The researcher establishes credibility by encouraging the participant to review the data through presenting selected materials such as the verbatim transcripts of the interview and encouraging the participant to verify interpretations and conclusions.
3. Triangulation. A second interview was scheduled so that the researcher could verify the data collected and interpretations of the researcher.

4. Rich, thick description. Detailed descriptions of participants' experiences allow the transferability of the study. Through rich description, the researcher is able to establish patterns that may be relevant to other populations, cultures, and social groups (Creswell, 2007). Thick descriptions were also achieved by keeping detailed process notes of interviews, highlighting of horizons, and examples of verbatim portions of participants' responses to interview questions. In addition, I kept detailed notes in a field journal of my own thought processes to control for bias.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 presented an explanation of the process of selecting qualitative phenomenology as the research method. Also presented were the criteria for selection of study participants, data collection procedures, steps for ethical protection of study participants, procedure for data analysis and interpretation, and the role of the researcher.

Qualitative research has been demonstrated to be the best method for studying social problems and phenomena from the perspectives of individuals experiencing them. For this reason, the method of data collection selected is in-depth interview in order to explore for emerging meanings or themes. Chapter 4 will discuss these themes.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The longer life expectancy of the cohort group referred to as baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, has resulted in an aging workforce. People are living longer and choosing to remain in the workforce longer. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of older workers in the workforce and to uncover themes related to those experiences. There have been many quantitative studies documenting the concerns of older workers. Fewer qualitative studies have been done to explore the lived experiences of older workers and their subjective perceptions of aging. The purpose of this study was also to contribute to the body of literature to better understand the experiences of older workers from their own accounts of their experiences.

For this study, seven participants were interviewed: five women and two men. . The participants provided detailed information about their perceptions of aging from various life stages that may have influenced their own aging processes, and about their experiences in the workplace. This chapter provides information about the recruiting process, participant profiles, data collection, data analysis, storage of data, and verification of findings. The chapter also explains identification of themes.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through a flyer placed in three local newspapers. . Participants contacted the researcher by phone and were screened over the phone. Three respondents did not meet the criteria. Of the 10 respondents who met the inclusion criteria. One respondent dropped out due to suddenly deciding to retire and leave the

area. Two respondents dropped out of the study for personal reasons, and one dropped out due to time constraints. The seventh participant was recruited through one of the interviewees. The ages of the participants ranged from 55 to 80. The average age of participants was age 60.

### **Participant Profiles**

To ensure the privacy of all participants, pseudonyms were assigned.

**#1 Anne** is a 62-year-old Certified Nursing Assistant who has three grown children and two grandchildren. She has worked as a Nursing Assistant for 31 years. . She is attending college full time. Anne was raised by her grandparents. Her grandfather died when Anne was 9 years old. She described her grandmother as active, employed full-time, and stated that her grandmother was also active in doing volunteer work.

**#2 Betty** is a 60 year-old female who has worked in the food service industry for 43 years. Betty stated that three of those years were “student time.” Betty is married with two grown children and one grandchild. Betty was adopted as a child and raised by her grandparents. Betty works for a contractor who contracts with a local university to provide food service on campus.

**#3 Carol** is a 60 year-old female who works in the billing department of a regional mental health facility. Carol is married with two grown children. Carol and her husband are raising their two grandsons. Carol has worked in her present job for 30 years and is considering retirement at 65.

**#4 David** is a 60 year- old male who is married with three grown children, and two grandchildren. David met his wife in high school and was married after graduation.

David was employed as a water treatment plant operator for 30 years. Recently, David survived cancer. He retired from his main job at age 58 and now is employed in a variety of part-time positions.

**#5 Ellen** is a 59 year- old married female who teaches at two universities in the science department. She also works on call as a funeral director. Her career includes being a licensed funeral director, having taught mortuary science at a state university for many years, and having been an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) for 23 years. Ellen also owned and operated a general store for more than 20 years. Ellen has one sibling and a niece. She cares for her mother, who lives nearby.

**#6 Fred** is a 55 year- old male. Fred is married with no children. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice, and a Master's Degree in Sociology. He has been retired from the State Police department for two years after 25 years of service. Fred now works as County Coroner and is in a rock and roll band. Fred also cares for his father who has Lewy Body dementia and who lives nearby.

**#7 Geri** is an 80 year- old female who has been a widow for 14 years. She has two grown daughters, one who lives locally and one who lives out of state. Geri worked as a nurse for 48 years. She was a nurse prior to her marriage and returned to work after her youngest daughter started school. Geri described her marriage as traditional. Geri retired from nursing at age 62, and has since then worked various part-time jobs in customer service. Geri is now working part- time and attending college part- time.

### **Themes Identified**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of older workers and to uncover themes related to these experiences. The study also sought to learn whether older workers remembered stereotypes from childhoods and whether any remembered stereotypes influenced their conceptions of their own aging process. The findings were organized by research questions. Each participant was asked questions from the interview guide according to the research question that was being addressed.

### **Research Question One**

Participants were asked whether they remembered any stereotypes or images of older people that they may have absorbed from their childhoods or life stages. The theme identified through participant responses addressed the first research question: What age related stereotypes, if any, do older workers aged 55 and older remember from their childhoods? Participants were able to recall images and stereotypes absorbed from various sources such as media and language.

### **Stereotypes absorbed through culture**

Participants' responses related to stereotypes were similar in that they were all able to recall memories of having heard various remarks, labels, and jokes from their lives as well as messages about older people. David recalled having heard labels such as "old fart," "old hag," and "over the hill." "I never thought about it. It was just the stuff you heard, like "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" and "you're too old for that." Anne recalled images from childhood of old women as being white-haired and plump and as grandmothers who baked cookies. Anne remembered references to old women as old

hag, old crone, old biddy. Betty and Carol recalled jokes about growing old on media such as birthday cards that showed less than flattering images of old people.

Betty remembered jokes about old people being forgetful and senile. “It was always in your face. You know. There were images on birthday cards. You know. We saw those things all the time about being over the hill. I remember a birthday card that joked about old being concerned with the hereafter because you walk into a room and forget what you’re hereafter.” Carol and Betty both recalled everyday language used to refer to older people. Carol gave the example of references to older drivers such as “drives like an old lady.” Carol recalled her mother once joked about a neighbor who had remarried at the age of 70, stating “there’s life in the old boy yet.”

Stereotypes presented of old people as frail, dependent, and in need of care were gleaned from participant responses. Fred stated “I always heard that my elders were frail and needed to be protected and cared for, and that older people were wise and knew things. Frailty, illness, dependency, and passivity were included in all participant responses. The rocking chair image emerged unanimously with participants. Fred stated that he decided not to be the old man sitting in the rocking chair. Carol stated “Grandparents were expected to sit on the porch and rock. They were expected to slow down.” Betty remembered that a friend of the family had once joked that “when you get old you go from the rocking chair to the wheelchair.”

### **Discrepant Findings**

Despite having been exposed through media, language, and social culture, to stereotypes of old age as a time of physical and mental decline, illness, frailty, dependency, and loneliness, participants indicated that these stereotypes were different from what they actually experienced in their families.

Participants recalled having experienced their elders as active and self-sufficient. Betty, who was adopted by her grandparents, described her experiences of growing up.

“I guess I never really thought about old people that way. No. It was because I was around them all my life. I was raised by my grandparents. I was used to old people. My grandmother was active. She worked. She had friends, people she played cards with. She went to dances.”

David recalled that after his grandfather retired he continued to work part-time jobs and was active and self-sufficient.

“When my grandfather retired he got part-time jobs and that’s how they lived. They grew their own stuff in the garden behind the house. They canned their own stuff. They were pretty much self-sufficient. My grandfather cut wood. He went out into the woodlot and cut wood.”

Ellen remembered having lived close to her grandmother.

I grew up around my grandmother. She lived next door. She worked full-time at school. She was active in the Eastern Stars. She did volunteer work. We always had her. She didn’t fit the description of old women as being lonely and irrelevant. She definitely wasn’t a sweet little old lady.

Overall, the group was able to identify stereotypes absorbed from various sources such as the media, language, as well as social and family culture. For participants, these stereotypes and images differed from what they remembered about their actual experiences.

## **Research Question Two**

### **Acceptance of the physical aspects of aging**

Participants were asked whether they believed that any stereotypes that they might have absorbed from their childhoods and life stages. Participants' responses addressed the second research question: How may age-related stereotypes influenced their conceptions of the aging process? Participants were able to discuss images and stereotypes that have influenced how they conceptualized their own aging process. While it is acknowledged by participants is that society's view of what is old is based upon chronological age, participants reported not feeling old despite acknowledging some physical and cognitive changes such as appearance.

Participants acknowledged physical and cognitive changes but ascribed many of these changes to factors other than aging. Betty stated that she had had an increase in aches and pains as she has grown older. She did not completely attribute these aches and pains to getting older, but also to having had polio as a child. Ellen admitted that she monitored her memory and attributed some forgetfulness and poor eyesight to a brain injury sustained in a motorcycle accident several years ago. Ellen stated "I wear glasses all the time now." David placed some physical limitations that he was experiencing as

being the result of the effects of having undergone radiation therapy. Geri stated that she experienced a back injury on the job which left her with lingering back pain.

The responses of participants indicate that they accepted any physical limitations that they were experiencing. However, participants stated that these limitations could also be due to factors other than age. Participants also described life experiences as equally responsible for their physical limitations.

Physical changes in appearances were also accepted by participants' responses included perceptions that older people were less physically attractive than younger people. Anne acknowledged a conscious awareness of the image projected by society of older women and that it did influence how she presented herself physically. Anne stated that she had started dying her hair in her thirties in order to look younger for job interviews. Anne also referred to being conscious about her clothing choices when shopping. "I find myself going shopping for clothes and consciously avoiding clothes that look like old lady clothes." David and Fred both emphasized an effort to stay in shape. David stated that even though he lived an active lifestyle, he had to work harder as he got older. Fred also acknowledged an effort to stay in shape due to both of his retirement jobs. "I see myself as vigorous and strong. I work in the entertainment business. Youthful appearance is very important."

Participants noted discrepancies between how they thought of themselves and the physical evidence of their aging process. Betty stated: "Your body is telling you that you are older but your mind is not. Yeah-cause you look in the mirror and think "Who the hell are you? You old hag, Look at your hair! Geri stated "I don't feel old. Even at 80 years

old. I don't know I'm old until I look in the mirror." Participants' responses indicated awareness of the aging process and the physical indicators of aging, but appeared to be surprised when reminded of the reality of their physical aging processes and the contrast between their mental images of themselves and their physical appearance.

All seven participants' responses indicated that while maintaining physical appearance and cognitive ability were important they also accepted some of the changes associated with aging. All seven participants' accounts of their conceptions of the aging process were tied to physical appearance, physical health, mental sharpness and lifestyle choices. Overall, the group indicated an acceptance of the aging process. However, participants had mixed feelings about the physical changes related to aging.

### **Research Question Three**

The third research question was developed to determine whether participants had experiences of hearing negative comments about their job performance related to their age. Participants were also asked whether they had ever perceived that they were being pressured to retire.

### **Positive Perceptions of Older Workers**

To address the third research question participants were asked whether coworkers or supervisors had made comments about job performance related to age. The responses of the group indicated that their experiences with supervisors and coworkers related to their job performance were generally positive. Carole recounted that her direct supervisor regularly praises her work and asks her to head up projects. "My supervisor is always telling me how reliable I am and how much she depends on all of my experience."

Carole also stated “My boss always asks me to train new employees because she says I have so much knowledge and experience. I don’t know, but I guess it’s because I have worked in all of the departments.”

Carole’s account reflected that she took great pride in her work and in the positive perceptions of her work by her supervisors, and in being dependable.

I have higher up people to answer to not only in my agency but in the county as a whole. They call and want numbers. I make sure my work is up to date so I can give them an accurate number. When I send out the numbers, I know I sent it correctly and I won’t have to resubmit. I know that the younger ones do things much faster, but they make mistakes. When something critical needs to be done they ask me to do it.

Anne, who worked in a nursing home, stated that her supervisor always gave her top evaluations, and had never given her negative feedback. Anne recounts “My supervisor praised my willingness to come in early or stay a little late so that I can have time to stop and talk to some of the residents.” When asked about her perceptions of how her coworkers viewed her, Anne stated:

How do I get along with younger coworkers? They would tell me that I’m more compassionate and patient with the residents because I’m older. I don’t know about that. I think that compassionate people just go into careers like this.

David, who worked in water systems, stated that he had positive experiences with younger coworkers. David also stated that his job evaluations were generally positive.

I didn't like my boss, but that was personal. My job evaluations were always good. When new employees came in, I had to train them. Right up till I retired from the plant I kept hearing that they didn't know what they were going to do when I was gone because I know everything about that place!

Betty also stated that she has gotten good work evaluations from supervisors. Betty recalled that evaluations contained language that included reliability, punctuality, problem solving ability, and that she gets along well with her coworkers and the students.

We have a good time. Some of the younger workers are real gems and really want to learn. Part of my responsibilities is to train new workers and to make sure that they know where things go. I'm training a new employee how to do the orders.

I'm one of the ones who have been here the longest so my supervisor asked me to kind of teach the new ones the ropes. Sometimes we have a really good time with some of the student workers. Some of them ask us what it was like here "back in the day."

Geri, a retired nurse, was not able to recall anything negative about her evaluations regarding her work in her former career. "I heard all the time that I did good work and the residents liked me. I don't think that I ever heard anything bad or negative about my job performance." Geri stated that in her present job in food service she had good relationships with the kitchen supervisors, whom she said praised her work.

Five of the participants recalled that their job performance was generally evaluated positively. Participant's accounts emphasized traits that were applied to them. Their responses reflected that positive evaluations of their work, and positive perceptions

of personal traits related to people skills or getting along with others, reliability, compassion, dependability, patience, punctuality, and problem solving ability. All five reported being evaluated by supervisors and coworkers as knowledgeable, and took on mentoring roles of new employees.

Two of the participants' experiences were slightly different. Ellen was able to recall some negative experiences with her department chair at the college where she is an instructor. Ellen's negative experiences with her supervisor, she affirmed, were not due to her age, but to her gender, and her lack of a doctorate degree. Ellen attributed the professor's negative comments to academic arrogance. Overall, Ellen reported that in her profession as a funeral director, age is an advantage.

Fred, whose retirement jobs include County Coroner and being in a rock band, stated that he had not had any negative experiences in his job as coroner, but that in this position, "maturity, experience, and knowledge matter." Fred also stated that his band members are in their 20s and 30s but that age has not been an issue. "We just play and have a good time." Fred did recall that in his former career he had been passed over for a promotion in favor of a younger officer. Fred's perception of this was that it was due to his age and to his nearing his contracted retirement age.

### **Pressure to Retire**

The group described a variety of experiences when addressing research question three when asked whether they had ever felt pressure to retire. The responses of the group varied widely. Only four participants recalled blatant messages about retirement or being questioned about when they intended to retire. Betty stated that she is regularly asked by

coworkers and her supervisor when she is going to retire. “My first day back at work, one of the supervisors said to me “So when are you retiring?” I said “So why are you harassing me? I’m not telling you when I’m retiring.” Carole recounted comments made by coworkers, such as, “What difference does it make? You’re going to retire soon anyway?” David and Fred, who are retired and working second careers, recalled that prior to retirement they were frequently asked by coworkers about retirement intentions. David stated that coworkers frequently told him “You can take it easy till you retire. We’ll take care of you.” Fred felt pressure for a different reason that included mandatory retirement. “I was asked by the supervisor when I was going to retire. But that goes with mandatory retirement for state police. I went in originally under the twenty-five year plan. Now the mandatory age for state troopers is sixty-two.”

### **Self-Identified Physical Limitations**

Rather than specifying external pressures to retire, three participants, Anne, Geri, and David, reported feeling some physical limitations in performing their job duties. Anne and Geri both related employment decisions to the physical demands of patient care on the body. Anne stated: “Nursing is hard on the body. There is a lot of lifting and like that. There is turning people over in bed, helping people in and out of wheelchairs, and bathing people. It takes its toll-on the body, I mean.”

Geri, a retired nurse who has returned to school, reported: “You slow down a bit. It gets hard on the body.” Geri suffered a back injury. “There’s a lot of lifting and bending. I hurt my back and decided that it was time to retire.” David’s experience as having survived cancer was slightly different. David experienced some fatigue and

residual nerve damage that resulted from radiation therapy. “Especially after the cancer, I felt better when I knew I could retire. When she (wife) had to throw me out of bed to go to work I just didn’t want to go to work.”

Though the theme emerged from the information provided by only a minority of participants, it was important to be considered for this study. It may also speak to an acceptance of the physical aspects of the aging process rather than from external pressure to retire.

#### **Research Question Four**

The fourth research question was developed to explore how participants may have been coping with any negative stereotypes or messages that they may have perceived in their working environment related to their chronological ages. A surprising result from this part of the study was that participants have experienced more positive messages than negative. Participants have experienced more positive messages from their actual experiences both from early life and in their work places. While most of the group related that they had been asked by supervisors and coworkers when they planned to retire, most of the group related their decisions whether to continue to work or to retire to other factors. The responses of the majority of the group seemed to indicate that rather than coping with negative experiences related to being stereotyped, participants were adapting to life changes such as physical changes, desiring a career change, and to family considerations..

#### **Life Stage Acceptance**

Participant responses indicated an awareness of time limits in relation to their jobs or careers as they move toward retirement age. As indicated in previous responses to research questions one, two and three, individual responses reflected an acceptance of their life stages and the physical and cognitive changes occurring. Anne, Geri, and David accepted the physical changes that they were experiencing. All three participants referred to “slowing down.” Fred, in his previous career, indicated that he had accepted that he was approaching mandatory retirement age. Betty and Carole had plans for when they would retire. Ellen’s responses indicated that her career would continue after retirement age but that her responsibilities might change. Geri, who was a retired nurse, stated that she had selected a second career as a counselor because which she felt that age would be an advantage. Participants described the time as a time of transition, of making choices. Choices made by participants included whether or not to work at their present jobs after retirement age, to change careers, or whether to accept full retirement. The choice to retire included making choices for how they would spend that stage of their lives. Responses to interview questions corresponding to this research question produced a variety of responses, yielding sub-themes related to how individuals coped with this stage of life.

*Traditional retirement:* Two of the participants, Carole and Betty indicated that they planned to retire in the near future. Carole stated that she and her husband would travel. “We’ll take the RV out to Utah. I have cousins out there that I haven’t seen in years. From there, I don’t know.” Betty stated that she planned to spend more time with

her grandson. “He’s going to be two years-old this year. He’s getting older. We have a blast with him. I need to be around more.”

*Retirement jobs:* Two participants, David and Fred were retired and working retirement jobs. David stated: “There’s freedom in the way I work. There’s no stress. I shoot the breeze sometimes with all of them. I have a god time. I’m only part-time. If I don’t want to go to work there I don’t go.”

Fred, who worked as county coroner and played in a rock band, stated:

I get to do what interests me. In my job as coroner I don’t work all the time-only when I get a call. I still get to use the skills I learned as an investigator. The band that I’m in generally only plays one night a week. We just play and have a good time.

*Late life career changes:* Two participants, Anne and Geri, both were employed and attending college part-time. Anne continued to work as a nurse, and is working towards a degree in social work.

I’m in college working on my bachelor’s degree in sociology. I plan to work in the human services field-maybe as a caseworker. I’ll work until I can’t walk, then I will wheel myself back and forth to work!

Geri, the oldest of the group at 80 years of age, retired from her nursing career and worked for several years in customer service. Geri now attends college part-time and works part-time with food service on campus. Geri stated: “I’m working on a bachelor’s degree in psychology. I think that I would like to do grief counseling for issues such as death of a loved one or adjusting to retirement. Psychology is a field where age is a plus.”

From the participants' responses, it can be seen that the group overall has made decisions to pursue late life career changes. Only one participant, Ellen, indicated an intention to remain in her present job. Late life career changes may be seen as a way of coping with physical changes related to aging. In addition, the desire to pursue other interests presented as a reason for retiring.

### **Additional Findings**

Responses of the participants to interview questions yielded an unexpected finding. A theme that emerged from accounts of participants' experiences was a perceived difference in work ethic between generations. All participants interviewed worked in multi-generational work environments that included at least three generations of workers.

### **Intergenerational Differences in Work Ethic**

As participants described their experiences in the workplace, a common theme among all of the participants emerged. While affirming that work relationships with younger workers were generally positive, participants perceived that subsequent generations of workers had a different approach to the workplace. Participants defined this difference as differences in work ethic. Betty stated "Very few young people have the work ethic whereas the older group-they all have the work ethic. Carole stated "They only do what they have to do." David's response was similar. "No pride in work anymore. They only do what they have to do." David recalled an incident.

I went down there (Water Plant) this winter because I go down there once a month for water samples. The sidewalk wasn't shoveled-nothing-I mean there

was nothing done there. We went out every day. People didn't have to worry about walking on our sidewalk. It was shoveled and salted.

Betty perceived that younger workers seemed less dedicated.

They are constantly calling in. You know, when we were raising our children we all had baby sitters. We all had little kids. They think nothing of calling in and saying "I don't have a baby sitter. That is not a legal excuse. That's your problem. You have a job to do. You should come to work no matter what. I mean, if your child is sick-that's different. But now they are like-I don't have a baby sitter or my car won't start. No dedication. It's all self-centered.

Four of the participants, Betty, Carole, David, and Ellen, specifically referred to cell phone usage and socializing among younger workers as an observation. Carole stated that younger workers wasted more time socializing and talking on their cell phones "on agency time" when they should have been generating revenue. Betty stated that younger workers often answered their cell phones or texted while at work. "If you need to take a call, ask for someone to cover for you, and leave your work area." Ellen observed that some of the younger professors texted while teaching. "I try to discourage students from texting while in class. Professors should set a better example."

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to report the findings of this study. The study sought to answer four research questions concerning the lived experiences of older workers. The group's responses indicated that they had absorbed age related stereotypes

from their childhoods as depicted in the media, language, and culture. Despite these stereotypes, participants' actual experiences differed in that what they observed around them, particularly in their families did not match these stereotypes. Participant responses indicated despite not having observed stereotypical behavior in their experiences in early life, stereotypes did have some influence over how they conceptualized their own aging process. The group as a whole reported positive evaluations and relationships with employers and coworkers, and that even though they may have been asked when they intended to retire, they experienced no direct pressure to retire. Themes related to coping with negative comments about work performance and pressure to retire did not reflect external influences. Rather, the group indicated internal reasons for either making retirement plans or continuing to work. An additional finding among the group was a perceived difference in younger workers' approaches to the work place. Findings of this study and conclusions will be discussed in chapter five.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

It has been predicted that by 2030, 20% of the United States population will be over the age of 65 (Centers for Disease Control and the Merck Company Foundation, 2007). People are living longer and choosing to work past the traditional retirement age of 65. Existing literature has mainly focused on an overburdened health care system, threats to programs such as social security and Medicare, as well as heavy burden and stress on family systems due to the care of aging family members. Also documented have been concerns about a negative effect on the workplace due to massive waves of retiring baby boomers. Existing literature also documents the perpetuation of negative, age related stereotypes about aging and continuing age discrimination in the workplace. It has been established in much of the literature that these factors may contribute to lower psychological well-being, lower levels of productivity, less work satisfaction, and may result in workers' decisions to disengage from the workplace.

The starting point of this study was to explore the lived experiences of older workers in the workplace and to uncover themes related to their perceptions of these experiences. Qualitative, phenomenological method was chosen to inquire into the experiences of older workers from their own unique perspective. This study explored whether older workers remembered ageist stereotypes from their life stages and whether these stereotypes influenced their own perception of their aging process. Participants' possible experiences with workplace discrimination were also explored.

Participants for the study ranged in age from 55 years to age 80 and were located through advertisements placed in 3 local newspapers. One participant was referred by a study participant as someone who could provide information relevant to the study. Five of the participants were female and 2 were male. Research focused on participants' experiences as older workers and in uncovering themes related to their perceptions of these experiences. The research sought to answer the research questions related to whether individuals remembered stereotypes from earlier life stages, whether they perceived age discrimination in the workplace, and to uncover themes related to coping with any age-related stereotypes and discrimination they may have encountered.

### **Interpretations**

The purpose of this study was to answer the research questions through exploring the lived experiences of older workers in the workplace and to uncover related themes. In this study, it was found that the older workers who were interviewed are experiencing a relatively stable positive self-image. Participants may have perceived some age discrimination in the workplace but have not described a lower sense of psychological well-being. Participants who are retired are engaged in second careers, and those who are planning retirement are planning active retirement and second careers. Interpretations of these findings focus on themes of culturally absorbed stereotypes, acceptance of the aging process, positive perceptions of older workers, pressure to retire, self-identified physical limitations, and life-stage acceptance.

### **Stereotypes absorbed through culture**

To address the first question, participants were asked to reflect on any age related stereotypes that they might remember from various life stages. All participants were able to recall that through such sources as the media, language, and social culture, the messages that they absorbed were related to aging as a time of increasing physical and cognitive deterioration. All were able to provide examples of negative age-related stereotypes. Examples of stereotypical images included references to physical signs of aging. Anne and Betty provided examples such old women being white haired and plump. Images absorbed through language also appeared in the accounts of the group. Language recalled by participants included such labels as “old hag, old crone, old biddy, grumpy old man.” Frailty and dependency, as current research on age related stereotypes affirm (Klein & Liu, 2013; Salthouse, 2012) also emerged as stereotypes related to physical and cognitive decline. Fred recalled that he had been taught that older people were frail and dependent and needed care.

Current research has established that negative age related stereotypes continue to exist and may be embedded in popular culture (Moody,2010; Nelson, 2004) and have remained largely unchallenged (Palmore, 1999; Von Hippel, et al., 2013). The recounted observations of the group, confirmed through examples of stereotypes absorbed from childhood, confirmed the continued existence of these stereotypes.

### **Acceptance of physical aspects of aging**

With aging come some physical changes. As each individual ages differently, individuals vary in how they approach these changes (Moore, et al., 2012; Sargent-Cox,

et al., 2012; Shallcross, et al., 2013; Verdon, 2012). To address the second research question participants were asked whether they thought that early stereotypes related to aging influenced their conceptions of their own aging process.

Participants acknowledged some physical and cognitive changes related to aging process. However, self-image among the group appears to be relatively positive. . Participants did not attribute these changes to be entirely due to chronological age but to other factors such as the result of childhood illness and in one participant, a brain injury from a prior accident. Also noted were discrepancies between how they thought of themselves and the physical evidence of their aging process, but all participants indicated an acceptance of those changes.

The group acknowledged that age related stereotypes may have some influence on how they conceptualize their own aging process. One image that emerged from the responses of participants was the image of the rocking chair. Anne recalled the story read to her by her mother about a grandmother who sat in a rocking chair and knitted. Betty stated, "I'm not ready to just sit in my rocking chair." Ellen recalled that her grandmother was employed, active, and "definitely did not sit around in a rocking chair and knit." Carole stated "I'll let you know when I'm old enough to sit and rock." Fred stated "Well, we're baby boomers. We aren't going to get old. I didn't want to do the sitting around in a rocking chair thing." David stated "I like to be active. I won't just sit and rock and watch the world go by."

Remaining active and engaged in the workplace and the community was presented by Butler (2008) as being related to physical and emotional health and well-

being in older adults. Active engagement was stated by Rowe and Kahn (1998) as one of the criteria for successful aging (Rowe, 2011; Rowe & Kahn, 1998). The responses of the participants of this study indicated that seem to indicate that they were influenced by early stereotypes. The rocking chair image that emerged from their responses as they explained it indicated that the overall choice of this group of participants is to remain active and engaged.

### **Positive perceptions of older workers**

The aim of the third research question was to determine whether participants had experienced negative evaluations that they felt were attributed to their chronological ages and whether they had perceived statements from employers and coworkers that it was time to retire. Participants were able to recall that they had been asked by supervisors and coworkers when they intended to retire.

Overall, the group response was that employer evaluations were generally positive. They also reported no negative comments from younger coworkers. Carole, Betty, Geri, and Anne reported positive evaluations that included being reliable, dependent, experienced, and knowledgeable. Carole reported frequent praise from her supervisor related to the accuracy of her work. Anne recalled her supervisor praising her willingness to report to work early or stay late so that she could spend more time with the nursing home residents. Betty recalled that her evaluations from supervisors noted that she was reliable, punctual, and praised her problem solving ability. The experiences of all seven participants were similar.

Despite research evidence that employers generally have positive attitudes toward older workers (Palmore, 1999; Szinovacz, 2011; Van Dalen, et al., 2010) a traditional decline mentality toward older workers persists as the assumption of inevitable cognitive decline and loss of productivity (Nelson, 2004; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Rosigno, 2010). The experiences of the study participants did not reflect the results in much of the literature. The experiences of the study participants reflected the findings of empirical research that affirms that there is little significant difference in productivity and task performance between older workers and younger workers (Deary, et al., 2010; Young & Fung, 2009).

### **Pressure to Retire**

The group described a variety of experiences when addressing research question three when asked whether they had ever felt pressure to retire. The responses of the group varied widely. Only four participants recalled blatant messages about retirement or being questioned about when they intended to retire. Betty stated that she is regularly asked by coworkers and her supervisor when she is going to retire. “My first day back at work, one of the supervisors said to me “So when are you retiring?” I said “So why are you harassing me? I’m not telling you when I’m retiring.” Carole recounted comments made by coworkers, such as, “What difference does it make? You’re going to retire soon anyway?” David and Fred, who are retired and working second careers, recalled that prior to retirement they were frequently asked by coworkers about retirement intentions. David stated that coworkers frequently told him “You can take it easy till you retire. We’ll take care of you.” Fred felt pressure for a different reason that included mandatory

retirement. “I was asked by the supervisor when I was going to retire. But that goes with mandatory retirement for state police. I went in originally under the twenty-five year plan. Now the mandatory age is sixty-two.” Rather than external pressure to retire, three participants, Anne, Geri, and David reported self-identified physical limitations. Anne and Geri, both nurses, reported that they began to “slow down” and felt the effects of the strenuous duties of patient care. David cited the residual physical effects of radiation therapy after surviving cancer.

The fourth research question was intended as a follow-up to research question three, and sought to explore how participants coped with any negative messages or stereotypes they may have experienced or perceived in the workplace related to their ages, and to cope with any perceived pressure to retire. Only one participant, Betty, reported that she perceived pressure to retire in that her supervisor asked her several times when she planned to retire, and that coworkers continued to ask her “when are you getting done?” Overall, the group indicated that rather than finding ways to cope, they were adapting to life stage changes in making plans to retire or to pursue second careers and post-retirement employment.

### **Theoretical considerations**

**Stereotype Threat theory.** The findings from information gathered through interviews does not support the application of stereotype threat theory to the experiences of older workers. While there have been many quantitative studies that suggest that stereotype threat theory can be applied to older workers’ work related performance, work related well-being, engagement with work, and decision to retire (Von Hippel, et al.,

2013), the results of this qualitative study did not support this theory. It is worth considering is the small sample size and the demographic make-up, and rural status of the county as having an effect on the results. Further studies conducted on a larger sample of participants and in a more populated and diverse geographic area would, perhaps, yield different results.

Ageism was also a theory applied for understanding the experiences of older workers in the workplace. Two participants recall some awareness of negative stereotypes about aging. Anne remembered images projected in printed media and in advertisements. Both Anne and Geri, who have returned to college, reported feeling irrelevant due to their age, and being excluded from many conversations. Betty recalled hearing statements such as “At your age...” Ageism, however, was not a dominating factor in the related experiences of participants.

### **Implications for Future Study**

**Intergenerational differences in work ethic.** An additional theme that emerged from interviews was that of perceived differences in work ethic between older and younger workers experienced in the workplace. While this theme does not address any of the research questions, it is a topic worth considering for future study. Participants focused on perceived differences in motivation, dedication, and commitment to work. Participants used statements such as “There’s not the work ethic.” “No pride in work anymore. These younger workers are absolutely terrible.” From the comments made by study participants it would appear that workers of different age groups approach work differently. Betty made reference to younger workers being more likely to take time off

work. Carole stated that the younger workers only learn what they need to do to get the work done.

You talk to the younger new employees and they don't even think about that. All they think about is I work 8 to 4. I have a half hour lunch. See you. I pick up my paycheck on Friday. See you. It's done. So they're sitting around for a half hour first thing in the morning talking about what series everyone is watching on TV.

Intergenerational differences could perhaps be examined in terms of differences in the shared experiences of each generation, and how these experiences have shaped the values, attitudes, and behaviors of each generation with regard to how they approach work. Further study in this area is warranted as part of optimizing the functioning of what appears to be an increasingly diverse work place in terms of age distribution.

It appears to be a growing phenomenon that the workplace has been developing into a multigenerational environment, with some work places being made up of at least 3 generations of workers, and in some cases, 4 generations (Tolbize, 2008). A theme that emerged from the responses of the study participants was a perceived difference in work ethic and work attitude between the generations. Ageism occurs when people are treated differently or unfairly due to their ages as a result of age related myths and stereotypes. Just as there are negative stereotypes related to older workers, information gained from this study indicates that there are negative stereotypes also attached to younger workers (Palmore, 2004; Tolbize, 2008). Positive social change is possible if people of different generations are able to learn from each other (Grefe, 2011). A multigenerational work culture may benefit both older workers in that they may continue to be active, engaged,

and productive for as long as they wish or are able, but that younger workers may glean from interacting in this type of environment a more optimistic conception of aging. In the spirit of fostering this type of work environment, further studies into intergenerational differences could be beneficial.

### **Implications for Social Change.**

Positive social change in the context of this study focuses on the need to promote basic human worth and dignity for all human beings regardless of age. People have the right to work or not to work if they choose. If they choose to work, they have the right to have their work valued. The results of this study may contribute to ensuring the optimum functioning of an increasingly diverse work force.

Human Resource (HR) managers may benefit from research focusing on the realistic needs and concerns of older workers. Employers and Human Resource Managers may be able to develop more effective strategies to retain older workers (Haslam, et al., 2012; Tishman, et al, 2012). It will be crucial in the coming decades for HR managers to understand where older workers fit into the work culture as increasing numbers of older people choose to remain in the work force. A realistic understanding of the changing and more diverse work force and the development of strategies to optimize the contributions of all age groups could result in greater work satisfaction, emotional and psychological sense of well-being, and general quality of life for all workers regardless of age.

Employee assistance counselors, by understanding the experiences of older workers in the workplace may be able to better assist workers with changes and the issues that result during various life stage transitions. One outlying theme that two of the

participants raised was that of caring for elderly parents while balancing a career.

Understanding the needs and concerns of older workers may help counselors to connect with older employees in terms of offering appropriate supports and making informed referrals to community services where needed.

The larger community may benefit from the continued presence of older workers in the workplace as valuable contributors. Older individuals contribute to the community in a number of other ways as volunteers and social activists (Butler, 2008), and a better understanding and greater insight into the contributions of older individuals in other ways such as family caregivers could do much in terms of inclusion of all age groups as valued members of the community. An expanding body of research related to studies focusing on aging well can only increase community awareness of the ability of all age groups to function optimally in the community and to increase the wellbeing of all people regardless of age.

### **Recommendations**

Human Resource Departments, Employee Assistance counselors, and mental healthcare providers can be informed by the results of this study. More studies focusing on the lived and subjective experiences of older workers, as well as attention to empirical evidence regarding the cognitive and biological aging process could provide more realistic information about older workers. Greater knowledge about the aging process could debunk many of the myths and misconceptions about the aging process that have previously informed practices related to hiring, on the job training, promotions, work assignments, and retirement policies. Results from the literature search have provided

evidence that as healthy individuals age there are few significant cognitive losses and that people do not lose the capacity to learn new skills as they age (Clapp, et al, 2011). In studies of executive function, the mental processes for planning, organizing, attention to detail, and space-time management, there is little difference as people age (Clapp, et al, 2011; Salthouse, et al, 2005; Verhagen, 2011). It has also been documented that where there are changes in cognitive functioning, through a process of cognitive plasticity, the brain adapts to those changes (Clapp, et al., 2011; Landi & Rossini, 2010; Park & McDonough, 2013). A greater understanding of the physical and cognitive aspects of the aging process could inform the interests of employers in retaining the experience and expertise of older workers, and in including older workers in hiring, promotion, and training decisions.

The increasing need for more training programs in gerontology for mental health care providers is clear (Fernandez-Ballesteros, 2006; Fisk, Zimmerman, & Scoggin, 2011). Programs that train psychologists, social workers, and mental health counselors should increase their focus on issues related to this developmental stage (Holtzer, Zweig, & Seigel, 2012; Wurtele & Maruyana, 2012). Mental healthcare providers could better understand the real concerns of older individuals in terms of life stage transitions. Such understanding could serve to improve the provision of appropriate mental health care to older clients. In addition, Human Resource Departments, Employee Assistance counselors, and Mental Healthcare Providers would be better aided creating services and developing programs aimed at providing for the needs of older workers by gaining a

better understanding of the role that work plays in terms of health, both physical and mental health in older clients.

A theme that emerged from this study was that of intergenerational differences in work attitudes. Five study participants referred to differences between generations as a lack of work ethic. Detected from participant significant statements was a feeling of tension and of some degree of resentment between the age groups related to attitude and dedication towards the work. An area for future study would be in the area of Cross-Generational research in order to gain a better understanding of the attitudes and values of different generations-baby boomers, and what has been referred to as generations X and Y, and of how these influence relationships in increasingly diverse work environments (Tolbize, 2008). Many benefits could be gained in this respect from understanding, also, how specific experiences throughout the life stages of the generations may have had an impact on values, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations related to the world of work.

The scope of this study was limited to 7 participants, 5 female and 2 male, located in St. Lawrence County in Northern New York. This geographic area is rural. A growing trend in the United States, as in other developed countries, is the increasing of the aging population in rural areas. This is partly due to out-migration of younger people to more urban areas in response to the need to secure sustainable employment and to retirement-age people migrating to more rural areas (Glasgow, et al., 2013). Studies focusing on the experiences of aging in rural areas would provide insight into the effect this has on the

workforce in rural areas. Of interest also, in terms of future study would be to address diversity of aging in a rural context.

### **Conclusions**

The population is aging as people are living longer. Increased longevity has been attributed to advances in medical care, the eradication of many childhood diseases, lower infant and child mortality rates, improved technology related to improved quality of life, and better education. As the population is aging, so is the workforce. People are choosing to work longer past the traditional retirement age for a number of reasons which include economic necessity, dedication to a profession, desire to work, and the need to remain relevant and engaged socially.

The participants of this study both individually, and collectively, have demonstrated that their experiences in the workplace as older workers have, in general, been positive. Older workers in this study reported relatively high emotional and psychological well-being. Participants have demonstrated various strategies for coping with any negative ageist assumptions and pressure to retire that they may have encountered. Five participants indicated plans to either work past traditional retirement age, to seek retirement jobs, or were planning second careers.

The theoretical foundation of this study was in attempting to apply Stereotype Threat Theory to older workers' decision to remain in the workplace or to retire. The findings of this study did not support this theory. Rather, the participants interviewed for this study indicated only minimal exposure to negative age related stereotypes, and discrimination in the workplace. Employer feedback related to work performance was

reported to be positive with all interviewees. Desire to pursue second careers and other interests were the dominant reasons presented for retirement or for retirement planning.

The findings of this study from participant interviews were that the study participants' attitudes toward work, work related values, decisions to retire or to work past retirement age were directly related to role models. All of the participants of this study were either raised in multi-generational households or grew up in close proximity to grandparents. In comparison with social image or expectations of aging participants self-images were positive. The social image, or stereotypes of aging based upon the assumptions of physical and cognitive decline were not present and did not match how participants viewed themselves. Participants acknowledged physical and cognitive changes related to aging, but did not indicate that these changes created any major limitations in the workplace other than, as Betty and Ellen both expressed it "slowing down" a bit. In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that older workers seem to be coping well with any physical and cognitive changes related to aging, are accepting of their own aging process, continuing to live an active lifestyle, and planning an active retirement that includes second careers, and the pursuit of individual interests and passions. In short, older workers appear to be receiving few negative messages about their work performance, and have developed good coping skills for dealing with any messages that they may have received. Older workers seem to be functioning well.

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### **Appendix A: Flyer: Stereotype Threat study**

Research Study: Older Workers, Stereotype threat and work attitudes

This research study is for older adults who are active in the work force. Researchers at Walden University want to learn more about the experiences of older workers in the workplace.

Research is always voluntary.

#### **Would this study be a good fit for you?**

This study would be a good fit for you if:

- You are age 55 or older.
- You identify as an older worker.
- You are engaged in the workplace either as a full-time or part-time worker (20 + hours per week).

Potential participants for this study will not be excluded on the basis of sex, ethnic or racial background, sexual orientation, educational background, or socio-economic status.

If you decide to take part in the study you will be asked to :

- Complete a face-to-face interview lasting approximately 60 to 120 minutes in a private office at \_\_\_\_\_
- Agree to have the interview audio-taped
- Complete a second shorter face-to-face interview lasting approximately 20 to 30 minutes in a private office at \_\_\_\_\_ to review the verbatim transcript, to ask questions, and to make any corrections.

There may be no direct benefit to you from being in this study. Your participation may shed insight into the lived experiences of older workers in the workplace from your own unique perspective. For the participant who takes part a \$20.00 Wal-mart gift card will be provided after the first and second interview.

For more information contact at \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix B: Participant Screening Instrument**

Thank you for your interest in this study on aging in the work force. I would like to ask you a few questions to determine whether you meet the criteria for participation.

This should take about 10 minutes of your time.

1. Do you identify as fitting into the age group 55 and older?
2. Are you employed?
3. Do you personally identify as an older worker?
4. Are you willing to discuss openly your experiences as an older worker?
5. Are you willing to commit to 2 interviews? The first interview should take from 60 to 120 minutes. The second interview should take approximately 30 minutes or less.
6. Would you agree to your in-depth interview being audio-taped?
7. Would you like to schedule an interview? (if the potential participant meets the inclusion criteria).

If the person meets the inclusion criteria schedule an interview.

If the person does not meet the inclusion criteria thank them for their time and politely end the call.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact number: \_\_\_\_\_

What is the best time to reach you by phone? \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix C: Invitation to Participate/Informed Consent**

You are invited to take part in a research study of older workers' experiences in the workplace. This form is part of the informed consent process. The process of informed consent allows you to gain an understanding of what the study is about before you decide to participate.

The study is being conducted by XXXXXX, a doctoral student at Walden University. Through this study I hope to learn more about the experiences of older workers in the workplace. You may find this study interesting because you may learn more about factors that you have associated with continuing to be involved in the workforce. In addition, the results of the study may help employers, therapists, social workers, and may inform employee assistance programs to better address the realistic needs of individuals in the age group on which this study focuses.

Criteria for participation:

- Participant must be aged 55 and up.
- Participant must be employed (either part time, full time, or self- employed).
- Must be willing to describe your experiences of aging in the work place.
- Must be willing to commit to two interviews.
- Must have no objection to your interview being audiotaped and made part of a written report for a doctoral dissertation.

#### **Procedure**

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to :

- Review all information on this form and ask any questions that you may have.

- Sign this informed consent form.
- Complete an in-depth interview of approximately 60 to 120 minutes that will be audiotaped.
- Complete a study debriefing after the first interview.
- Schedule a second brief interview.
- At the second interview-review the verbatim transcript of your interview to check for accuracy.
- Provide feedback on the research process and ask any question that you may have.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will be respected. If you decide to participate in the study you may withdraw participation at any point during the study without penalty. If you experience stress during the study you may stop. You may choose not to answer any questions that you feel are too personal.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

Reflecting on certain experiences of aging in the work force may cause some emotional stress. Benefits to participation may be that adults have the opportunity to reflect upon and to process their experiences of aging in the work force.

Compensation

To help compensate the time that participants must invest in this study, and as a thank you, a \$25.00 Walmart gift card will be offered at the end of the study. The card may be used at any Walmart store.

### **Confidentiality**

Any information that you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not be connected with any information that you provide except in a password protected database file that only I, the researcher, will have access to. All paper files will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my private office and will be destroyed after five years per Walden University policy. There will be no identifying information on any audiotapes of interviews. Each interview will be assigned a number. Your data will not be used for any other purpose without your full written consent. Nothing that can identify you will be used in the written report of this study.

### **Contacts and Questions**

You may ask any questions that you have now. If you have questions later you may contact the researcher at XXXXXX by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you wish to discuss privately your rights as a participant you may contact the Walden University representative who can discuss your concerns with you. Her number is

\_\_\_\_\_.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information and understand the nature of the study. I feel able to make a decision about whether or not to participate in the study.

- I have received answers to any questions that I may have had.

- I am aged 55 or over.
- I consent to participate in this study.
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time with no penalty.
- I consent to the audio taping of this interview.

Printed Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Consent \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix D: In-depth Interview Guide

Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Start time: \_\_\_\_\_ End Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Arrive 15 minutes early. Set up and test both tape recorders. Survey the environment for potential distractions.

Greet Participant and ensure that he/she is comfortable and introduce myself. Possibly start with some small talk. Example: How was your trip here?

Remind participant of the purpose of this interview and the study. Go over the consent form and have the participant sign, after being encouraged to ask any questions that they might have.

I really appreciate your sharing your time with me. This will not be a typical interview. It will be more like a conversation between us. I will ask you some questions to get started and ask follow-up questions to keep the conversation going. We are going to cover your experiences of aging in the workplace. We will also cover some of your perceptions of the aging process as they relate to your conception of your own aging process related to working.

Ask some warmup questions.

1. What is your occupation?
2. How long have you worked there? (If self-employed: How long have you been self-employed?)

3. Can you tell me about your job duties? (If self-employed: Can you tell me something about the nature of your business or the service that you provide?)

Thank you. Now I would like to start the interview.

1. What if any stereotypes (or messages) about older people do you remember from your childhood?

Tell me more about that. (Encourage the participant to explore messages or stereotypes from other stages of the life span)

2. Do you think that those stereotypes or messages influenced your concept or of your aging process?

If yes-How? Or –Can you tell me more about that? (To facilitate more in-depth information-Ask-do you think that these messages might have influenced how you feel about working?)

3. Have you had any experiences or incidents in the workplace when you felt that you were being either negatively or positively stereotyped?

If yes-Can you tell me about that? How did you feel about that?

4. Have any coworkers or supervisors made comments about your job performance related to your age?

If yes- What were they? Can you tell me more about that? How did you feel about that?

5. If you have experienced comments or messages about your job performance related to your age how have you responded to or coped with any of these messages?

(Encourage the participant to expand on this information) Can you tell me more about that? Encourage-Go on...

6. Is there anything else that you want to share about your experiences in the workplace?

(Encourage the participant to expand on this information) Can you tell me more about that? Encourage-Go on...

Last question: Given that I am trying to understand the experiences of aging in the workplace what else do you think I should have asked you that I didn't ask?

Thank you so much for your time! The information you've shared with me will be a valuable part of this study on the experience of aging in the workplace.

(Stop the tape recorder)

I want to remind you that the information that you shared with me will be kept confidential. I am the only person who will have access to this information. There will be no identifying information to connect you with this taped interview. A number will be assigned to the interview instead of your name.

Introduce the debriefing form (Appendix D) and go over it with the participant. This should take about 10-15 minutes.

Ask the participant if they would like to schedule a second interview.

Thank you again for helping me with my research!

### Appendix E: Study Debriefing

Thank you for your participation in my study older workers, stereotype threat and work attitudes. For this study you were asked to participate in an audiotaped interview that would take approximately 90-120 minutes and complete a debriefing about the study. You were told that the purpose of the study was to understand your experiences as an older worker in the workplace. The actual purpose of this study was the same as the stated purpose.

If you have questions later you may contact me at ( )-xxx-xxxx or my advisor XXXX at XXXXXXXX.

If you wish to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Walden University Research participant Advocate who can discuss this with you at \_\_\_\_\_.

If you experience any distress as a result of your participation in this study the \_\_\_\_\_'s 24 hour crisis hotline phone number and the local emergency mental health referral hot line are provided if you were to need mental health support.

The next step is to schedule a shorter interview of about 30-45 minutes to review the researcher's interpretation of the interview.

What day and time are best for you?

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_