HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Work Aging Retire. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2022 August 02.

Published in final edited form as:

Work Aging Retire. 2022 May 30; 20(4): . doi:10.1093/workar/waac015.

Broadening the View of Workplace Ageism

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In their thought-provoking commentary, Murphy and DeNisi (2021) stated “the available evidence provides little support for the proposition that age stereotypes substantially affect high-stakes decisions made about individuals in organizations” (p. 1). Their narrow literature focus could leave the impression that age stereotypes are not complicit in actual personnel decisions. We respectfully disagree and contend there is ample evidence that a host of ageist beliefs operating at the societal, organizational, and individual levels are instrumental in actual workplace ageism (i.e., stereotyping, prejudice, or discrimination; Finkelstein et al., 2018), including personnel decisions. Moreover, the detrimental impact extends beyond the workplace.

In this commentary we argue for a need to expand beyond Murphy and DeNisi’s (2021) narrow perspective and use a wider-angled lens to examine workplace ageism and its insidious effects. First, we provide evidence of a broader range of ageist beliefs that likely bias personnel decisions, and of actors involved in those decisions. Second, perceptions of the targets of workplace ageism are presented, providing a more comprehensive picture of the real-world impact workplace ageism has on workers. Third, we offer evidence of the harm workplace ageism inflicts at multiple levels (societal, organizational, and individual), beyond personnel decisions. Finally, we outline recommendations for future research.

Beyond Stereotypes: Additional Ageist Beliefs and Actors Associated with Workplace Ageism

A broader view of ageist beliefs reveals additional biases that may affect personnel decisions. One is the depreciation model (Yeatts et al., 2000), an economic perspective that places low value (i.e., perceived contribution potential versus associated employment costs) on individuals early or late in their careers. Older workers’ value is expected to progressively decline, whereas young workers initially have low value with their potential expected to rapidly increase over time. Another widespread ageist belief is generational stereotyping (e.g., millennials’ technologically savvy, baby boomers’ resistance to change),

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Disclaimer: The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

which overlap with many age stereotypes (Perry et al., 2013) and are regularly promoted through media and literature (e.g., newspapers, trade publications, market reports) business leaders commonly access (Kroon et al., 2016; 2018).

Regardless of the label, (e.g., depreciation model perspective; generational or age stereotypes), ageist beliefs likely perpetuate workplace ageism. Contrary to Murphy and DeNisi's (2021) view that "stereotypes held by different individuals may, themselves, be different" (p. 3), common negative work-related age stereotypes reflecting these beliefs (e.g., older workers: resistant to change, technologically inept; younger workers: inexperienced, lack loyalty) tend to be strongly endorsed and are linked with poor work performance expectations (Petery et al., 2020; Society for Human Resource Management, 2021). Negative beliefs about older workers especially may exert greater influence on personnel decisions (Abrams et al., 2016), due to older workers perceived depreciating value. Investing (e.g., hiring, training, promoting) in older workers may be deemed too risky for some employers (Petery et al., 2020).

Familiarity with discrimination laws (e.g., human resource professionals) or participating in ageism research may inhibit ageist reactions (Plant & Devine, 1998), perhaps explaining the small and inconsistent effects noted by Murphy and DeNisi (2021). However, personnel decisions are rarely solely at human resources (HR) discretion. Recent large-scale research revealed that managers (26%) and executives (41%) were more likely to factor age into personnel decisions compared to HR professionals (15%; Society for Human Resource Management, 2021). Furthermore, 19% of HR professionals believed hiring managers intentionally wrote job descriptions to screen out applicants based on age. Turek and Henkens (2020) found support for this in a study involving vacancies at over 12,000 companies. Job descriptions stereotypically associated with younger workers (i.e., computer skills, physical work, creativity) reduced the likelihood of selecting applicants aged 50 and over. Subtle ageist messages also make their way into recruitment advertising, dissuading seemingly age-inappropriate job seekers from applying (Terrell, 2019; van Selm & van den Heijkant, 2021). Phrases such as 'recent college grad,' 'tech savvy,' and 'high energy' describe younger worker stereotypes and signal older applicants need not apply. Age-related information embedded in resumes or obtained from applications (e.g., birthdate, graduation dates; Perron, 2021) may activate ageist beliefs and expectations (Petery et al., 2020) when screening applicants, potentially influencing selection-related decisions. For instance, a resume correspondence study revealed that younger applicants had higher callback rates than middle-aged or older applicants (who had the lowest) with equivalent qualifications (Neumark et al., 2017). These examples raise doubts about Murphy and DeNisi's (2021) assertation that negatives effects associated with age stereotypes have not been observed in large-scale studies.

Importantly, individuals also stereotype themselves. Self-stereotyping describes viewing one's group's stereotyped traits as accurate and adopting them (Turner et al., 1989; Van Rossem, 2019). Stereotype embodiment theory (Levy 2009) proposes that internalization of age stereotypes begins in early childhood, operating unconsciously until a point when they become self-relevant, whereupon individuals begin to embody internalized age stereotyped beliefs. Both perspectives suggest that individuals who age stereotype themselves not only

reinforce age biased beliefs other have towards them and their age group but may also make age biased personnel decisions for themselves (e.g., not seeking development opportunities, not applying for jobs) (Voss et al., 2018). Similarly, age metastereotypes (the stereotypes an individual believes others believe about their age group) and may trigger stereotype threat, resulting in individuals behaving in ways that confirm those stereotypes (Finkelstein et al., 2018).

Although diversity and inclusion (D&I) is gaining traction in organizations to reduce disparate treatment, D&I policies and practices often overlook age. Roughly 70% of executives recently reported not including age in their D&I initiatives, reasoning age was unimportant (33%) or other aspects of diversity were more important (48%), despite 83% acknowledging workforce age diversity was important for business success and growth (Perron, 2020). Only 6% had unbiased age-related recruiting processes, and barely a third offered managers training on avoiding ageism in hiring (39%) and in offering training opportunities to employees (38%). Because age is often excluded in D&I programs, managers and supervisors may be unaware that ageist beliefs could unknowingly bias their personnel-related decisions. For instance, applying generational labels to job candidates may result in evaluating the candidates' abilities according to generational stereotyped traits (Perry et al., 2017).

Workers' Perceptions of Workplace Ageism

Murphy and DeNisi's (2021) argument of there being little evidence of age stereotypes effecting actual personnel decisions failed to account for the perspective of targets who experience these actions. Workers' perspectives of age biased treatment present a fuller picture of workplace ageism, coming in two forms. *Hard discrimination* (HD; Stypinska & Turek, 2017) is legally defined (e.g., in the United States the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, protects workers aged 40 and older from age discriminatory personnel decisions) and objectively indicated by charges filed. Evidence from the U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (n.d.) shows in 2020 over 14,000 new charges of age discrimination were filed, and 2,500 charges decided in favor of plaintiffs. *Soft discrimination* (SD) describes psychosocial workplace dynamics captured by individuals' perceptions (Stypinska & Turek, 2017), and is evident in nationally representative studies. A 2020 AARP study of workers aged 45 to 65 reported 78% had either experienced or witnessed age discrimination directed at older workers, the highest rate since 2003 (Perron, 2021), and up from 61% in 2018 (Perron, 2018). Additionally, 61% worried about losing their job due to their age. A recent Society for Human Resource Management (2021) study revealed 32% to 41% of workers aged 18 to 29 and 17% to 29% of workers aged 55 and older felt unfairly treated because of age in connection with job applications, routine business operations, organizational change, and promotion opportunities (percentage varied by type of personnel action). Likewise, a review of studies from 17 countries found older applicants reported they were less likely to get hired, older workers had fewer training opportunities, and experiencing ageism was associated with increased early retirement intentions among older workers (Chang et al., 2020). In sum, workers' accounts indicate workplace ageism is widespread and impacts many personnel-related decisions.

Beyond Personnel Decisions: Multi-Level Impact of Workplace Ageism

Evidence of the far-reaching impact of workplace ageism was not discussed by Murphy and DeNisi (2021). Nevertheless, hard and soft workplace discrimination is costly to society, employers, and workers. At the societal level, workplace ageism towards workers aged 50 and older cost the U. S. economy an estimated $850 billion in missed opportunities (i.e., involuntary retirements due to lack of opportunities or a hostile work environment; underemployment of qualified older workers, and duration of unemployment) in 2018, potentially growing to $3.9 trillion in 2050 if left unchecked (AARP, 2019). At the organizational level, employers paid over $76 million for substantiated age discrimination claims in 2020 alone (U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Employers also likely experience missed opportunities from workers who perceived workplace age discrimination. For instance, perceived ageism among older workers is associated with reduced job engagement, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Bentley et al., 2019; Macdonald & Levy, 2016; Paleari et al., 2019); decreased organizational productivity (Kunze et al., 2013), worsening of intergroup relations; and increased counterproductive work behaviors (Paleari et al. (2019).

Mounting evidence shows holding negative views towards aging, and embodying negative older adult stereotypes, has negative health consequences as individuals age, including impaired cognitive functioning (Levy, 1996; Levy et al., 2012), physical health (Levy, Ferrucci et al., 2016; Levy, Slade & Kasl, 2002; Levy, Zonderman et al., 2009), mental health (Bellingtier & Neupert, 2016; Levy et al., 2014), health behaviors (Levy & Myers, 2004; Levy, Provolo et al., 2020); and decreased longevity (Levy & Bavishi, 2018; Levy, Slade, Kunkel et al., 2002). Costs associated with absenteeism and increased health insurance rates stemming from poor health are shouldered by organizations. Moreover, at work, internalizing negative age stereotypes harms social motivations and sense of belonging (Rahn et al., 2021), and is related to lower occupational self-efficacy (Paggi & Jopp, 2015).

Perceiving workplace ageism also exacts a toll on workers' physical and psychological health and well-being, through increased risky health behaviors, stress and cardiovascular reactivity, mental distress and depressive symptoms, and long-term illness (Chang et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2016; Gonzales et al., 2015; Marchiondo et al., 2019; Xu & Chopik, 2020). The price of negative health outcomes associated with ageism are expressed through health care costs, estimated at approximately $63 billion in the United States over a single year (Levy, Slade et al., 2020), and indirectly through lost work time and reduced productivity. The harm to individual health associated with workplace ageism is alarming and evidence enough to take workplace ageism seriously.

Research Recommendations

The relationship between ageist beliefs and workplace discrimination is complicated, making it difficult to determine causal relationships. Voss and associates (2018) noted macro- and meso-level (e.g., societal and organizational stereotypes, norms, and climate) and situational (e.g., age salience, framing) factors likely influence cognitive aspects that

produce discriminatory behaviors and perceptions of discrimination, which may inform future research. Linguistic approaches (e.g., discourse analysis; Johnstone, 2018) may provide insights into ageist beliefs found at different levels and the processes that leads to discriminatory outcomes. For example, examining ageist language in literature targeted at business leaders (e.g., trade journals, market reports) could offer a better understanding of how ageist beliefs infiltrate and perpetuate in organizations. Another avenue involves multi-level research examining the impact of higher-order factors (e.g., organizational policies and practices) have on cognitive processes that lead to workplace ageism. For instance, are there organizational practices (formal or informal) that foster ageist beliefs held by individuals, and under what circumstances do these beliefs negatively influence actors' behaviors and targets' perceptions? Research is also needed to look at the effects self-stereotyping, meta-stereotypes, and stereotype threat have on individuals' own work-related actions and decisions.

Conclusion

This commentary argues for a broader view of workplace ageism and provides empirical evidence that organizations (knowingly or not) engage in ageist practices, workers experience ageism, and workplace ageism inflicts harms at multiple levels (societal, organizational, and individual). Workplace ageism is complex and should be examined holistically. We applaud Murphy and DeNisi's (2021) call for more research and encourage employing qualitative and multi-level approaches that incorporate social influences and workplace policies and practices with the attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of actors and targets of workplace ageism.

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