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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fostering intergenerational harmony: Can good quality contact between older and younger employees reduce workplace conflict?

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Abstract

This study examines how workplace conflict between multigenerational co-workers arises and can be reduced. Utilizing social categorization and intergroup contact theories, we hypothesized that good quality contact between older and younger employees decreases task and relationship conflict by reducing perceived age discrimination (PAD), above and beyond trust as a typical social exchange mechanism prevalent in relationships between co-workers. Furthermore, we predicted that task interdependence would exacerbate the relationships between PAD with task and relationship conflict. We applied structural equation modelling using a sample of 567 older and younger British employees to test our hypotheses while controlling for trust as an alternative mechanism. In line with our predictions, we found that good quality contact between older and younger employees reduced employees' PAD, which in turn reduced task conflict and relationship conflict (above and beyond trust as a control mechanism). The indirect effects of intergroup contact on workplace conflict via PAD were further enhanced when cross-age co-workers were highly interdependent in conducting their work tasks. Our findings suggest that organizations should create practices to improve cross-age contact in the workplace.

KEYWORDS

age discrimination, age diversity, intergroup contact, relationship conflict, task conflict, task interdependence

Practitioner points

- Perceived age discrimination has a damaging impact on relationship and task conflict among younger and older co-workers, which is exacerbated when work tasks require greater interdependency between the co-workers.
- Good quality contact between younger and older co-workers can reduce the damaging effects of perceived age discrimination and task interdependence on workplace conflict.
- To reduce workplace conflict, organizations can provide contexts for younger and older workers to have good quality contact and run interventions such as educational diversity training and cross-age mentorship programmes.

Global demographic shifts related to age are leading to the employment of a greater number of generations within the workforce (Beier et al., 2022; Truxillo et al., 2015). These changes require organizations to better understand the dynamics of relationships between an increasingly wider age range of employees. One challenge to overcome in this emerging context is increased workplace conflict between workers of different age groups (Boehm & Kunze, 2015). This is also referred to as *intergenerational* conflict, defined as disagreement, friction, or tension during exchanges between older and younger employees (Rudolph & Zacher, 2015). Although little is known about the impact of intergenerational conflict at work, generic workplace conflict has been found to damage team performance, team member satisfaction, and well-being (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Sonnentag et al., 2013). As reducing age diversity in the workplace is neither an ethical nor a practical way to tackle this issue, a more fine-grained understanding of the antecedents and possible reduction of workplace conflict arising from age diversity is required. Although the causes and impact of intergenerational conflict are theorized (North & Fiske, 2012; Rudolph & Zacher, 2015), empirical studies focused on its antecedents are limited in scope. Therefore, the drivers and potential solutions to intergenerational workplace conflicts are yet to be fully understood.

An enduring psychological paradigm often employed to understand relationships between co-workers is social exchange theory (SET). Accordingly, good quality relationships develop via mutually beneficial reciprocal behaviours (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), and when individuals abide by the 'rules' of social exchange, loyal and trusting relationships evolve (Blau, 1964). Thus, we could theorize that the probability of conflict between cross-age (intergenerational) co-workers would be lower when trust exists between them, and that trust arises from the positive social exchanges they experience. However, SET does not consider how relationships are affected when co-workers belong to different social groups (e.g., age). Therefore, it overlooks important social categorization and group processes. Social categorization refers to how we identify with social groups we are members of, and how we view other groups (Turner & Oakes, 1989), resulting in ingroup favouritism or outgroup discrimination. We contend that it is vital to consider these processes, given the abundant literature that links them to conflict outside of the workplace (Hewstone et al., 2014).

To better understand psychological processes involved in intergenerational conflict, we explore social categorization processes that give rise to task and relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995) between cross-age co-workers and intergroup relations processes which may reduce them (Allport, 1954; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In line with social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), we maintain that positive interactions between cross-age co-workers will be associated with reduced conflict. However, we move the focus from trust as an overriding mechanism, to social categorization. We argue that because task and relationship conflict involve interactions between co-workers who may vary by age group, social categorization processes provide a crucial lens through which to understand these conflicts. Social categorization is considered in a few intergenerational studies (Ho & Yeung, 2020; North & Fiske, 2016) and conceptual works connect diversity and performance via conflict (Van Knippenberg

et al., 2004). However, insights from this perspective have yet to be applied to conflicts experienced between cross-age co-workers, thus acknowledging the relevance of this lens for the study of diversity within organizational behaviour (Fletcher & Beauregard, 2022).

Our proposed model (see Figure 1) pivots on perceived age discrimination (PAD) as a social categorization mechanism that explains intergenerational conflict. PAD refers to being aware of negative attitudes and behaviour towards oneself based on age group membership (Kunze et al., 2011; Watermann et al., 2023). Feeling that one's age group is discriminated against and devalued is likely to stimulate conflict due to an increased awareness of age group differences and a need to protect one's ingroup, which can prompt derogation of the outgroup (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). To explore intergenerational conflicts in particular, we adopt two factors of Jehn's (1995) conceptualization of workplace conflict. These align well with a theoretical definition of intergenerational conflict which describes it as disagreement, friction, and tensions during intergenerational exchanges (Rudolph & Zacher, 2015). First, this definition corresponds with Jehn's (1995) task conflict, which is cognitive in nature and arises from divergent understandings and opinions about tasks, such as disagreements about procedures and policies (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Priem & Price, 1991). Second, intergenerational conflict maps well onto relationship conflict, which Jehn (1995) posits as arising from incompatibility between co-workers and creates tension, hostility, and irritation.

Moreover, we highlight that intergenerational relationships do not take place in a vacuum; instead, the typical working arrangements matter. We thus explore working conditions that may mitigate or exacerbate the detrimental links between PAD and conflict. Specifically, we expect a moderating effect of task interdependence (i.e., the degree to which workers depend on each other for the successful fulfilment of their jobs, Van der Vegt et al., 2000). Task interdependence is crucial for organizational behaviour and performance among generic groups and within teamwork (Černe et al., 2017; Hu & Liden, 2015; Staples & Webster, 2008), and it may matter even more for diverse groups, such as cross-age co-workers, as diverse co-workers, who may elsewise not voluntarily come together (Dietz & Fasbender, 2022). Furthermore, research demonstrates that when task interdependence is high, conflict has more damaging effects on organizational outcomes (Jehn, 1995). The requirement for greater cooperation and collaboration between cross-age co-workers is

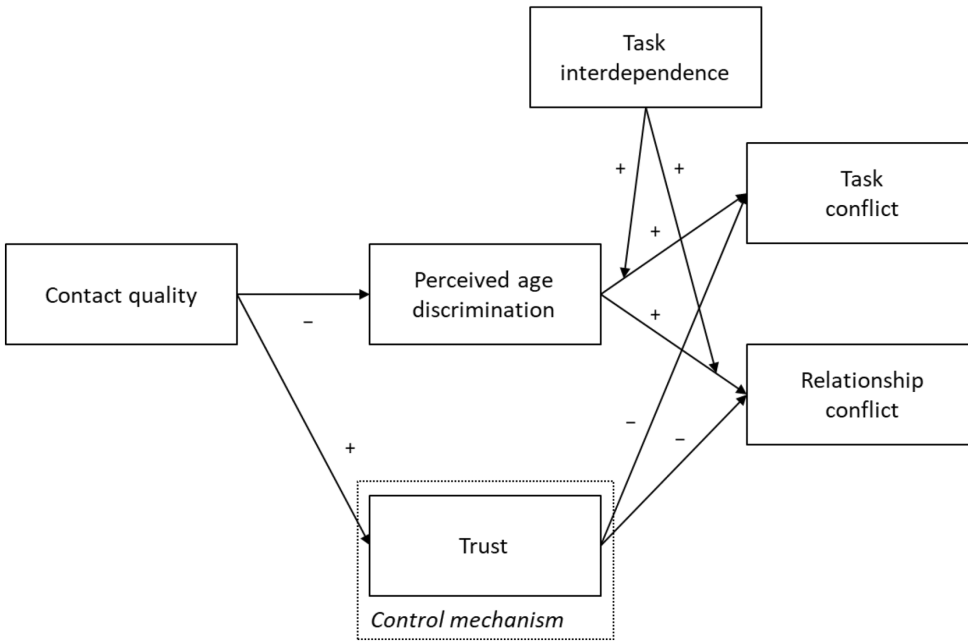

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model on overcoming workplace conflict with good contact quality between cross-age co-workers.

likely to lead to more conflict when a worker feels that they, or their group, are being unfairly treated because the involuntariness associated with task interdependence makes people feel stuck. Specifically, the positive associations between PAD and both task and relationship conflict should be increased the more workers rely on each other to complete their work tasks.

On a positive note, we propose a possible solution to this series of hypothesized relationships associated with increased conflict. Specifically, we argue that cross-age co-workers who enjoy good quality intergroup contact (Allport, 1954) are likely to experience lower PAD because it reduces their awareness of social categories and creates intimate knowledge of the other age group, altering how they view their intergroup relations (Dixon et al., 2010). In turn, reduced PAD will be linked to reduced conflict, thus good quality contact will provide an indirect pathway to reduced conflict, which is particularly relevant for cross-age co-workers working under high task interdependence conditions. Figure 1 shows our conceptual model.

Our study makes three novel contributions. First, we extend knowledge of the underlying mechanisms related to intergenerational workplace conflict by moving beyond a social exchange perspective (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) to consider the effects of social categorization, in particular PAD. Second, we contribute to the understanding of the complex role of task interdependence as a moderating variable in diverse work settings (Joshi & Roh, 2009; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Specifically, we illuminate how within cross-age contexts task interdependence exacerbates the detrimental link between PAD and intergenerational conflict. Conversely, our findings further demonstrate how task interdependence can become beneficial following the introduction of good quality contact to our model, which alters the relationship between PAD and conflict from disadvantageous to advantageous. Third, we contribute to diversity and age-diversity literature (e.g., Boehm & Kunze, 2015; De Meulenaere & Kunze, 2021; Liebermann et al., 2013; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004) by investigating good quality contact as a potential solution to avoid task and relationship conflict among cross-age co-workers, thus providing a framework upon which to develop interventions to navigate possible challenges arising for diversity.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

We adopt a social categorization perspective (Turner & Oakes, 1989) to determine the antecedents of task and relationship conflict within multigenerational workforces and the mechanisms and working conditions that lead to their reduction. Social categorization is a functional psychological system employed to help us process and make sense of the world around us (Turner & Oakes, 1989). Evaluating each person we encounter (e.g., co-worker) on their individual characteristics would be too cognitively demanding and time-consuming. Thus, we use cues to social categories (e.g., age, race, gender) to guide our understanding of social situations with others (Brewer, 1988; Swift et al., 2018). Prior knowledge (i.e., societal assumptions or stereotypes) of social groups is used to direct our cognitions, interactions, and behavioural responses. However, due to an instinct to promote and protect our own ingroup identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), social categorizations that are formed on even arbitrary groups, can lead to intergroup conflict through ingroup favouritism or outgroup discrimination. Consequently, by considering social categorization processes instead of (or beyond) social exchange processes, our theoretical model has the capacity to capture the psychological processes that occur during the emergence of conflicts between individuals who belong to different social groups (i.e., age groups). To account for social exchange processes as an alternative theoretical hypothesis, we include trust as a control mechanism within our proposed model.

Perceived age discrimination and workplace conflict

First, based on social categorization theory (Turner & Oakes, 1989), we theorize how PAD prompts greater social categorical cognitions and is related to conflict. Perceiving discrimination towards oneself

based on age, or towards others in one's age group, is likely to make age more salient in our thinking. Experiencing discrimination towards one's group affects conflict by making differences in one's own and others' social groups more salient (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Accordingly, this heightened awareness of one's age group membership will prompt a need to protect one's age group identity, leading to the devaluation of the other age group and thus workplace conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Perceived age discrimination is experienced by both younger and older workers (Snape & Redman, 2003). Next, we examine how PAD would be specifically related to each task and relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995).

Task conflict

In the case of task conflict, employees of different ages are likely to have different skills, knowledge and abilities (Hough et al., 2001). These varying skills, perspectives and approaches may contribute to opposing interpretations of, and solutions to tasks, resulting in task conflict (Priem & Price, 1991). The additional feeling that one's age group is discriminated against should prompt a motivation to protect self-esteem and ingroup identity. To achieve this, the skills of the worker's own age group will be perceived as more beneficial than those of other age groups, thus devaluing the other group's know how (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and likely triggering greater disagreement over tasks.

Heightened group awareness resulting from PAD, is also linked to a reliance on stereotypes (Hogg & Turner, 1987), which should further increase task conflict. Many stereotypes of different aged workers exist (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Posthuma & Campion, 2009) and expecting colleagues to act in line with negative stereotypes will hamper the degree to which co-workers can successfully collaborate on tasks. For example, during a discussion about how to approach a task, older workers may expect younger workers to react in line the arrogance stereotype (Finkelstein et al., 2013) and display caution and reluctance, thus contributing to conflict. On the other hand, if older workers are expected to be resistant to change and less adaptable (Posthuma & Campion, 2009), their younger colleagues may employ more determined strategies to collective tasks provoking task conflict.

Stereotypical thinking can also make one more aware of negative stereotypes held by others of one's own group (meta-stereotypes), which can lead to stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat induces anxiety and hinders behaviours in line with the negative age stereotypes. Age-based stereotype threat negatively affects performance on tasks (Lamont et al., 2015) and therefore has the potential to damage collaborative tasks, prompting task conflict. It affects employees of all ages, with a greater impact on older workers (von Hippel et al., 2019). In a daily diary study of 280 cross-age workers, older workers reported high levels of disengagement due to age-based stereotype threat. If cross-age workers are disproportionately engaged with their shared work tasks, this may also lead to greater task conflict. Taken together, PAD should thus be linked to higher levels of task conflict among cross-age co-workers.

Hypothesis 1a. Perceived age discrimination is positively related to task conflict.

Relationship conflict

Relationship conflict is characterized by anxiety, fear and feeling disliked (Jehn, 1995). We contend that each of these states can be triggered by perceived discrimination and are therefore likely to induce relationship conflict. First, perceived discrimination elicits anxiety and suspicion of outgroups (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Dion & Earn, 1975; Dixon et al., 2010). This occurs because victims of prejudice view themselves as targets of unpleasant attitudes and intentions by the outgroup, resulting in a source of unpredictable psychosocial stress (Dion, 2002). Second, fear can be the result of experiencing anxiety within an intergroup context, (Stephan, 2014). For example, anxiety of interacting with a specific

outgroup member is related to fear of that outgroup (Van Zomeren et al., 2007). Thus, anxiety arising from perceived age discrimination should also trigger fear. Third, being the target of unpleasant attitudes (Dion, 2002) and unfavourable evaluations by others (Kaiser & Miller, 2001) that occur during perceived discrimination, should contribute to an assumption of being disliked.

Empirical support for our hypothesis arises from a cross-sectional study by Marchiondo et al. (2016) that found age discrimination to be positively correlated with relationship conflict, although the population of this study was restricted to younger workers only. Given our conceptual ideas and the initial empirical support, we hypothesize that PAD should lead to higher levels of relationship conflict among cross-age co-workers.

Hypothesis 1b. Perceived age discrimination is positively related to relationship conflict.

The moderating role of task interdependence

As the context for workplace conflict exists within organizational structures and specific job-related arrangements, it would be prudent to consider under which working conditions PAD shapes workplace conflict. Specifically, we examine the role of task interdependence as a moderator in our model, and argue that it strengthens the association between PAD and workplace conflict. Task interdependence occurs when it is a necessity that co-workers share resources such as information, materials and advice to successfully execute their roles (van der Vegt et al., 1999). Co-workers rely on each other to attain successful outcomes and need to engage in more frequent interaction and collaboration.

We argue that greater task interdependence will exacerbate the deleterious relationship between PAD and each of task and relationship conflicts. First, PAD negatively impacts knowledge sharing between cross-age co-workers (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2021). Specifically, in two studies utilizing dyadic and longitudinal designs, PAD reduced older workers' occupational self-efficacy (Schyns & von Collani, 2002) which in turn reduced their knowledge sharing with younger co-workers. Thus, PAD is likely to damage crucial sharing activities required within task interdependency and could lead to difficulty overcoming divergent thinking and disagreements which typify task conflict (Jehn, 1995), or result in failed tasks which may lead to task conflict among cross-age co-workers.

Second, the co-operation and collaboration needed in tasks which are highly interdependent (Van Der Vegt et al., 2000) mean that co-workers will be required to engage with other co-workers they may not ordinarily choose to interact with. When interactions are involuntary, this can be associated with social experiences that are typified by fear, irritation and anger (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008a). Thus, if higher task interdependence means the imposition of greater involuntary collaboration between cross-age co-workers, this has the potential to lead to feelings synonymous with relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995).

Hypothesis 2. Task interdependence moderates the relationships between perceived age discrimination with (a) task conflict and (b) relationship conflict in a way that the positive associations are stronger when task interdependence is high (vs. low).

Cross-age contact quality and perceived age discrimination

Having hypothesized that PAD will be associated with greater conflict, especially under working conditions requiring more task-focused co-operation, we now turn to a potential solution to this series of events. Based on the intergroup contact hypothesis (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), we contend that good quality cross-age contact should be associated with lower PAD at work.

Good quality cross-age co-worker contact, is the experience of positive and natural social exchanges between members of opposing age groups (Fasbender et al., 2020). It can take place within or outside

of the workplace and develops based the voluntary exchange of personal information from both contact partners (Turner et al., 2007). It has no specific objective aim (unless part of an intervention), although the common result is more positive attitudes towards the contact partner and others of the contact partner's age group (Henry et al., 2015; Iweins et al., 2013). From a conceptual perspective, it is important to note that good quality cross-age contact is distinct from task interdependence. Although both involve relationships, task interdependence assumes the purpose of delivering an objective outcome; the successful completion of a work-related task (Van de Vegt and Janssen, 2003). Workers are obliged to exchange work-related information and advice to succeed and it takes place within the structures and processes of the work context. Unlike good quality contact, social categorization processes are not a relevant feature of task interdependence. It is due to these processes that we predict that good quality cross-age co-worker contact will reduce PAD.

First, contact reduces the tendency to categorize the self and others into distinct social categories, which leads to a dependency on over generalized views and stereotypes of the outgroup. Second, it reduces awareness of social categories, which in turn encourages more interpersonal (rather than intergroup) relations (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Pettigrew, 1998). Finally, it acts as a 're-education', improving our understanding of our relationships with other social groups (Dixon et al., 2010). Less readiness to rely on stereotypes, less saliency of group memberships and improved attitudes towards intergroup relations decrease perceptions of discrimination (Dixon et al., 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008b). Therefore, co-workers will become less aware that they and their colleagues belong to different age groups and because of this reduced age group salience, will be less likely to attribute any negative behaviour to age discrimination.

Comparable research corroborates our theory; good quality contact is negatively related to perceived discrimination for interracial and interethnic groups in non-work contexts (Dixon et al., 2010; Tropp et al., 2012), young adults with intergenerational friends perceive less criticism from older adults (Van Dussen & Weaver, 2009) and cross-age contact at work is related to reduced age stereotypes about older workers (Iweins et al., 2013). There is some tentative support for a link between workplace cross-age contact and discrimination of others at work (Lagacé et al., 2019). Younger workers who experience more cross-age contact perceive that older workers are subjected to less age discrimination at work. However, the conceptualization of PAD in this study varies from the present research. Lagacé et al. (2019) examined how contact is related to PAD experienced by other age groups, whilst we focus on associations between contact and PAD towards the self. Additionally, their measure of contact was combined with other scales (reduced stereotypes, inclusiveness and positive feelings). Therefore, research is needed to isolate the relationship between contact and PAD towards one's own age group. Moreover, based on research suggesting that good quality contact can reduce perceived discrimination across various other outgroups, such as different ethnicities (Dixon et al., 2010; Tropp et al., 2012), we argue that the experience of good quality cross-age contact at work will be negatively associated with perceived age discrimination.

> **Hypothesis 3.** Good quality cross-age contact is negatively related to perceived age discrimination.

The indirect relation between contact quality and workplace conflict

Bringing our arguments together, we predict that the quality of older and younger workers' contact is negatively related to task and relationship conflict via reduced PAD. First, good quality contact between cross-age co-workers should reduce social categorization processes including the degree to which they feel aware of differences in age groups. Avoiding dividing selves and others into competitive independent groups should encourage workers of different age groups to feel that they are less opposed by, and more connected to, other age groups resulting in lower PAD. Further, feeling less defined by the ingroup and closer to colleagues of other ages should reduce the anxieties and hostilities between

cross-age co-workers leading to more harmony and less relationship conflict. Collectively, we expect that good quality cross-age contact at work is indirectly related to task and relationship conflict through reduce PAD. Thus, we hypothesize:

> **Hypothesis 4.** Contact quality has negative indirect effects on (a) task conflict and (b) relationship conflict via perceived age discrimination.

Finally, we integrate our arguments and predict that the beneficial indirect effects of good quality contact on task and relationship conflict should be enhanced under conditions of greater task interdependence. Within the indirect model of the effects of good quality contact on conflict hypothesized above, reduced PAD will be related to reduced conflict. We argue that when cross-age co-workers lack the negative influence of PAD, task interdependence will be beneficial as it will enhance the positive influence of low PAD on conflict by requiring the co-workers to interact more closely.

> **Hypothesis 5.** Task interdependence moderates the indirect effects of contact quality via perceived age discrimination on (a) task conflict and (b) relationship conflict in a way that the negative indirect effects are stronger when task interdependence is high (vs. low).

METHOD

Sample and procedure

During November and December 2018, we collected data from older and younger employees in the United Kingdom. We collaborated with an established data collection institute (i.e., Qualtrics) to have a wide range of participants (i.e., from various organizations and industries; Landers & Behrend, 2015) and to increase the probability of participants revealing sensitive phenomena, such as PAD and workplace conflict, without the involvement of their employing organization (Griffin et al., 2016). Participants were selected according to (a) their age (i.e., being either 50 years and above or 35 years and below) and (b) having regular contact (i.e., at least once a week) to colleagues of the respective other age group. Although there is no fixed definition of who are 'older' and who are 'younger' employees, we carefully chose these age cut-off values based on the recommendations of previous research on age in the workplace (e.g., McCarthy et al., 2014) and age discrimination (e.g., Zaniboni et al., 2019). All participants provided informed consent. We asked participants to fill out online questionnaires across three waves with a two weeks' time lag. Two weeks were chosen because employees' task and relationship conflict can vary weekly. Furthermore, scholars recommended the use of short time lags to identify the highest possible relationships by reducing the probability of individual or organizational events interfering with the tested relationships (Dormann & Griffin, 2015).

At Time 1, 572 employees participated in the study. Of all participants, 5 were removed because they did not provide data for some of the study variables, resulting in a sample size of 567 participants. Of these, 301 participants took part at Time 2, and 298 participants took part at Time 3. To maintain statistical power and reduce bias in analysing the data, we followed previous suggestions on dealing with missing data in longitudinal studies (i.e., Graham, 2009; Wang et al., 2017) and modelled missing values with robust maximum likelihood estimation of participants who did not take part at Time 2 and Time 3. Therefore, the final sample size is 567 participants.

Participants' age ranged between 18 and 35 years in the younger age group ($M = 29.45$, SD = 3.58) and between 50 and 77 in the older age group ($M = 58.29$, SD = 5.78). Of all participants, 55.4% were women. Participants worked on average 37.46 hours per week (SD = 7.30) in a broad array of industries including consumer goods, education, healthcare, professional services, and the public sector, among others. Majority of participants (74.1%) were white collar employees working mainly in office jobs.

We conducted a drop-out analysis following the recommendations of Goodman and Blum (1996) to inspect possible non-random sampling effects. In particular, we tested if the group of 'stayers' including participants who participated at Time 3 differed from the group of 'leavers' including participants who dropped out at Time 3. We entered all variables at baseline (Time 1) in a multiple logistic regression analysis predicting the probability of being included in the final sample to assess the presence or absence of non-random sampling. The results of the multiple logistic regression analysis showed significant differences in contact frequency, age group, and task interdependence, indicating that participants with more contact frequency to the other age group and older participants were more likely to remain, while those participants with higher levels of task interdependence were less likely to remain in the sample. However, no significant differences were found for contact quality or baseline task and relationship conflict. We further investigated the mean differences of the 'stayers' and 'leavers' in contact frequency, age group, and task interdependence with t-tests for independent samples and found significant differences for contact frequency (Mstayers = 4.26 (SD = .90), Mleavers = 4.04 (SD = .98), ($t(565) = -2.758$, $p = .006$)), age group (Mstayers = 1.67 (SD = .47), Mleavers = 1.42 (SD = .49), ($t(552.456) = -6.273$, $p < .001$)), and task interdependence (Mstayers = 3.47 (SD = .94), Mleavers = 3.72 (SD = .91), ($t(565) = 3.201$, $p = .001$)). Given these mean differences, we also conducted a sensitivity analysis to test whether the findings differ between 'stayers' and the entire sample. Importantly, we found that the pattern of results remained stable and significant in the hypothesized direction, which indicates that non-random sampling is not a major concern in the present data.

Measures

We measured all study variables (apart from contact frequency) with scales consisting of multiple items. Unless indicated elsewise, participants responded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We temporally separated the measurement of predictor and moderator (contact quality, contact frequency, age group, task interdependence), mediator (PAD, trust), and outcome (task and relationship conflict) variables to strengthen the causal inference (Wang et al., 2017) and to reduce potential common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Contact quality

We assessed the contact quality between younger and older employees with the three-item scale from Fasbender et al. (2020). Participants indicated the degree to which their interaction with their [younger/older] colleagues was 'positive', 'natural', and 'cooperative' in the last week (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$).

Perceived age discrimination

We measured PAD with the six items from Bayl-Smith and Griffin (2014, 2017). Participants reported the degree to which they felt unfairly treated because of their age. An example item was: 'Last week, I have sometimes been unfairly singled out because of my age' (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$).

Task conflict

We assessed task conflict with the four-item scale from Jehn (1994). Participants indicated how often task-related tension was present between them and their (younger or older) colleagues using a 5-point

scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The scale was introduced with 'Last week, when interacting with your [younger/older] colleagues…' followed by the items. An example item was: 'How often did your [younger/older] colleagues disagree with you about ideas regarding the task?' (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$).

Relationship conflict

We measured relationship conflict with the four-item scale from Jehn (1994). Participants reported how often they experienced personal tension between them and their (younger or older) colleagues using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The scale was introduced with 'Last week, when interacting with your [younger/older] colleagues…' followed by the items. An example item was: 'How much emotional conflict was there between you and your [younger/older] colleagues?' (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$).

Task interdependence

We assessed task interdependence with the three items from Van der Vegt and Janssen (2003). Participants reported the degree to which their tasks are dependent on their [younger/older] colleagues. An example item was: 'I need to collaborate with my [younger/older] colleagues to perform my job well' (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

Control variables

We controlled for employees' *contact frequency* with their [younger/older] colleagues to exclude that the effects are driven by frequency rather than the quality of contact with [younger/older] colleagues (Fasbender et al., 2020; Fasbender & Wang, 2017). Moreover, we controlled for age groups including 1 (*younger employees*) and 2 (*older employees*) to understand whether hypothesized relationships hold for both younger and older employees. Participants were asked: 'Last week, how often did you interact with your [younger/older] colleagues at work?' responding on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*daily*). In addition, we included employees' trust towards their [younger/older] colleagues as a control mechanism in the model because social exchange theory would argue that good quality contact at work leads to trust, which in turn reduces conflict at work (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). We measured trust with four items from Larzelere and Huston (1980). An example item was: 'I felt that I could trust my [younger/older] colleagues completely' (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).

Analytical strategy

We started with running a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to assess the construct validity of our measures. We then used structural equation modelling with Mplus Version 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2019) to test the hypothesized relationships. In addition to the hypothesized relationships, we included the direct effects of contact quality on task and relationship conflict because not including these may lead to an inflation of indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Furthermore, we tested trust as an alternative mediator to the effects of contact quality on task and relationship conflict. Moreover, contact frequency and age group as our control variables were regressed on both the mediator (PAD and trust) and the outcome variables (task and relationship conflict).[1] To estimate the effect sizes, we used the robust maximum likelihood command (MLR) to account for deviations from normality and missing

[1]In line with the recommendations by Bernerth and Aguinis (2016), we estimated the final model with and without control variables and found that the pattern of results is robust even if we did not control for contact frequency, age group, and trust.

values, and to test the latent interaction effects of task interdependence with the XWITH command (Muthén & Muthén, 2019). The confidence intervals of the indirect and conditional indirect effects were computed using parameter-based bootstrap with the Monte Carlo method in R (Preacher, 2015; Preacher & Selig, 2012; R Core Team, 2017).

RESULTS

Preliminary analysis

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables. Table 2 shows the fit indices for the CFAs. The proposed 6-factor structure fitted well to the data, and showed a better model fit as compared to the alternative 5-, 3-, and 1-factor models, supporting the construct validity of the six multi-item measures used here.

Hypothesis testing

Tables 3 and 4 show the results of structural equation modelling.[2] In line with Hypotheses 1a and 1b, we found that PAD (above and beyond trust) had positive effects on task conflict ($\gamma = .28$, SE = .07, $p < .001$) and relationship conflict ($\gamma = .26$, SE = .06, $p < .001$). Furthermore, we investigated the moderating role of task interdependence on these relationships and found that task interdependence strengthened the effects of PAD on task conflict ($\gamma = .15$, SE = .07, $p = .031$) and relationship conflict ($\gamma = .13$, SE = .06, $p = .046$). To further investigate the effects of the PAD on task and relationship conflict contingent upon task interdependence, we conducted simple slope difference tests. With regard to task conflict, we found that the effect of PAD was significantly stronger for employees with a higher (+1SD) task interdependence (*simple slope* = .40, SE = .10, $p < .001$) as compared to employees with a lower (−1SD) task interdependence (*simple slope* = .15, SE = .08, $p = .042$, *slope difference* = .25, SE = .11, $p = .031$). Also with regard to relationship conflict, we found that the effect of PAD was significantly stronger for employees with a higher (+1SD) task interdependence (*simple slope* = .36, SE = .10, $p < .001$) as compared to employees with a lower (−1SD) task interdependence (*simple slope* = .16, SE = .05, $p < .001$, *slope difference* = .21, SE = .10, $p = .046$). We plotted the two interaction effects in Figure 2. Together, these findings support Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

In line with Hypothesis 3, we found that contact quality had a negative effect on PAD ($\gamma = -.61$, SE = .14, $p < .001$). Moreover, we found significant negative indirect effects of contact quality on task conflict (*indirect effect* = −.17, 95% CI [−.30, −.07]) and relationship conflict (*indirect effect* = −.16, 95% CI [−.27, −.07]) via reduced PAD, therewith supporting Hypotheses 4a and 4b. Furthermore, we investigated the moderating role of task interdependence on these indirect relationships. In this regard, we found that the indirect effect of contact quality on *task conflict* through PAD was −.24 (95% CI [−.43, −.10]) when employees' task interdependence was high (+1SD), versus −.10 (95% CI [−.22, −.01]) when employees' task interdependence was low (−1SD). Moreover, the difference between the two conditions was significant (*difference* = −.15, 95% CI [−.32, −.01]), therewith supporting Hypothesis 5a. Similarly, we found that the indirect effect of contact quality on *relationship conflict* through PAD was −.22 (95% CI [−.39, −.09]) when employees' task interdependence was high (+1*SD*), versus −.10 (95% CI [−.18, −.03]) when employees' task interdependence was low (−1SD). Again, the difference between the two conditions was significant (*difference* = −.13, 95% CI [−.27, −.01]), therewith supporting Hypothesis 5b.

[2]Classical model fit indices are not available when computing latent interactions in Mplus. The model fit without the latent interaction between perceived age discrimination and task interdependence was however acceptable (χ^2 (260) = 657.50, $p < .001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .07).

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables.

Variable	*M*	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Contact frequency	4.15	.95	–									
2. Age group[a]	1.55	.50	.10*	–								
3. Contact quality	4.34	.57	.27**	.05	(.77)							
4. Perceived age discrimination	1.87	.94	−.06	−.22**	−.24**	(.93)						
5. Trust	4.00	.71	.02	.11*	.36**	−.31**	(.91)					
6. Task interdependence	3.59	.93	.04	−.17**	.17**	.06	.14*	(.78)				
7. Baseline task conflict	2.09	.82	−.02	−.12**	−.18**	.40**	−.05	.20**	(.93)			
8. Baseline relationship conflict	1.54	.73	−.07	−.14**	−.27**	.50**	−.19**	.12**	−.06	(.91)		
9. Task conflict	1.97	.81	.01	−.18**	−.17**	.36**	−.05	.16**	.55**	.59**	(.94)	
10. Relationship conflict	1.40	.65	−.09	−.17**	−.35**	.49**	−.14*	.07	.52**	.67**	.60**	(.93)

Note: $N = 567$ at Time 1, $N = 301$ at Time 2, $N = 298$ at Time 3. Reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) are shown in parentheses on the diagonal.

[a]Age group is coded with 1 = younger employees, 2 = older employees.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

TABLE 2 Confirmatory factor analysis fit indices for measurement model.

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)	*p*-Value $\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Six-factor model	545.16	237	–	–	.95	.05	.04
Five-factor model[a]	1154.20	242	609.04 (5)	<.001	.85	.08	.08
Three-factor model[b]	2450.72	249	1905.56 (12)	<.001	.65	.12	.14
One-factor model[c]	3874.20	252	3329.04 (15)	<.001	.42	.16	.18

Note: $N = 567$. Difference of chi-square values ($\Delta\chi^2$) were estimated to compare to the six-factor model.

Abbreviations: CFI, Confirmatory Fit Index; RMSEA, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual.

[a]Task and relationship conflict loading on one factor.

[b]Time 1 variables (contact quality, task interdependence), Time 2 variables (perceived age discrimination, trust), and Time 3 variables (task and relationship conflict) loading on one factor each.

[c]All items loading on one common factor.

TABLE 3 Results of structural equation modelling (direct effects).

	Perceived age discrimination			Trust		
	Coeff (SE)	beta	*p*-Value	Coeff (SE)	beta	*p*-Value
Contact frequency	.04 (.06)	.04	.520	−.09 (.04)	−.13*	.034
Age group[a]	−.37 (.11)	−.21**	.001	.16 (.08)	.13*	.037
Contact quality	−.61 (.14)	−.33**	<.001	.70 (.11)	.52**	<.001
R^2		.15**	.003		.30**	<.001
	Task conflict			**Relationship conflict**		
	Coeff (SE)	beta	*p*-Value	Coeff (SE)	beta	*p*-Value
Contact frequency	.04 (.05)	.05	.426	−.02 (.04)	−.03	.622
Age group[a]	−.17 (.10)	−.11	.090	−.10 (.07)	−.10	.133
Contact quality	−.30 (.13)	−.19*	.023	−.37 (.11)	−.32**	.001
Trust	.07 (.10)	.06	.451	.08 (.07)	.10	.203
Perceived age discrimination (A)	.28 (.07)	.33**	<.001	.26 (.06)	.42**	<.001
Task interdependence (B)	.26 (.09)	.28**	.006	.16 (.08)	.24*	.047
Interaction (A × B)	.15 (.07)	.15*	.031	.13 (.06)	.17*	.046
R^2		.24**	.001		.38**	<.001

Note: $N = 567$.

Abbreviations: beta, standardized coefficient; Coeff, unstandardized coefficient; SE, standard error of unstandardized coefficient.

[a]Age group is coded with 1 = younger employees, 2 = older employees.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

Supplementary analysis

To account for the autoregressive effects of our outcome variables, we conducted an additional analysis in which we added baseline assessments of task and relationship conflict to our model. Task conflict at baseline had a significant autoregressive effect on task conflict 4 weeks later ($\gamma = .48$, SE = .08, $p < .001$), also relationship conflict at baseline had a significant autoregressive effect on relationship conflict 4 weeks later ($\gamma = .46$, SE = .10, $p < .001$). Moreover, we found that relationship conflict at baseline had a significant effect on PAD ($\gamma = .59$, SE = .15, $p < .001$), while task conflict at baseline did not ($\gamma = .05$, SE = .13, $p = .716$). Furthermore, the pattern of findings remained similar,

TABLE 4 Indirect effects of contact quality on workplace conflict via perceived age discrimination.

Contact quality via perceived age discrimination	Task conflict			Relationship conflict		
	Coeff	CI LL	CI UL	Coeff	CI LL	CI UL
Unconditional effect at						
Average task interdependence	−.17	−.30	−.07	−.16	−.27	−.07
Conditional effects at						
High (+1*SD*) task interdependence	−.24	−.43	−.10	−.22	−.39	−.09
Low (−1*SD*) task interdependence	−.10	−.22	−.01	−.10	−.18	−.03
Diff	−.15	−.32	−.01	−.13	−.27	−.01

Note: $N = 567$.

Abbreviations: CI LL, lower level of bias-corrected 95% confidence interval; CI UL, upper level of bias-corrected 95% confidence interval; Coeff, unstandardized coefficient; Diff, difference of Coeff higher task interdependence and Coeff lower task interdependence.

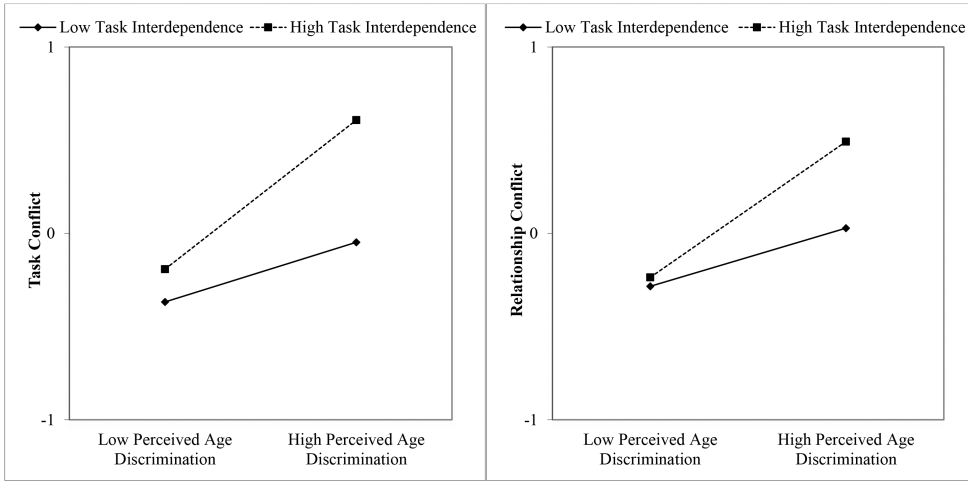

FIGURE 2 Task interdependence moderates the effects of perceived age discrimination on task and relationship conflict.

the effect sizes were smaller but continued to be significant in the hypothesized direction for most effects when controlled for the baseline assessments of task and relationship conflict. Regarding relationship conflict, however, we found that the effect of PAD was only marginally significant ($\gamma = .10$, SE = .06, $p = .085$), whereas the moderation effect of task interdependence was no longer significant at a two-tailed p-value level ($\gamma = .07$, SE = .04, $p = .108$). Tables 5 and 6 show the results of the supplementary analysis in more detail.

DISCUSSION

Managing co-worker relationships in increasingly multigenerational workforces is essential for organizational functioning, yet the interaction of multiple age groups at work may provoke conflicts to erupt. Disharmony and conflict between workers of different age groups can arise via naturally occurring social categorization processes. In our social categorization model, we proposed that good quality cross-age contact would lower social categorization processes by altering the way workers of different age groups construe their relationships with each other, thus reducing perceived age discrimination. In turn, feelings of less discrimination would reduce task and relationship conflict.

TABLE 5 Supplementary analysis (controlling for baseline task and relationship conflict): Results of structural equation modelling (direct effects).

	Perceived age discrimination			Trust		
	Coeff (SE)	**Beta**	***p*-Value**	**Coeff (SE)**	**Beta**	***p*-Value**
Contact frequency	.05 (.06)	.06	.345	−.09 (.04)	−.13*	.031
Age group[a]	−.20 (.11)	−.11†	.058	.16 (.08)	.12*	.048
Baseline task conflict	.05 (.13)	.04	.716	.15 (.08)	.17†	.068
Baseline relationship conflict	.59 (.15)	.44**	<.001	−.16 (.09)	−.16†	.086
Contact quality	−.30 (.13)	−.16*	.024	.67 (.11)	.50**	<.001
R^2		.31**	.003		.30**	<.001
	Task conflict			**Relationship conflict**		
	Coeff (SE)	**Beta**	***p*-Value**	**Coeff (SE)**	**Beta**	***p*-Value**
Contact frequency	.03 (.04)	.04	.419	−.02 (.04)	−.04	.572
Age group[a]	−.10 (.09)	−.07	.261	−.05 (.06)	−.05	.365
Baseline task conflict	.48 (.08)	.47**	<.001	–	–	–
Baseline relationship conflict	–	–	–	.46 (.10)	.57**	<.001
Contact quality	−.10 (.12)	−.06	.405	−.15 (.10)	−.14	.128
Trust	−.02 (.08)	−.01	.845	.04 (.06)	.05	.463
Perceived age discrimination (A)	.16 (.06)	.19**	.009	.10 (.06)	.17†	.085
Task interdependence (B)	.11 (.06)	.13†	.073	.05 (.04)	.07	.242
Interaction (A × B)	.15 (.06)	.14*	.012	.07 (.04)	.09	.108
R^2		.41**	.001		.53**	<.001

Note: $N = 567$.

Abbreviations: beta, standardized coefficient; Coeff, unstandardized coefficient; SE, standard error of unstandardized coefficient.

[a]Age group is coded with 1 = younger employees, 2 = older employees.

†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

TABLE 6 Supplementary analysis (controlling for baseline task and relationship conflict): Indirect effects of contact quality on workplace conflict via perceived age discrimination.

Contact quality via perceived age discrimination	**Task conflict**			**Relationship conflict**		
	Coeff	**CI LL**	**CI UL**	**Coeff**	**CI LL**	**CI UL**
Unconditional effect at						
Average task interdependence	−.05	−.12	−.003	−.03	−.08	.01
Conditional effects at						
High (+1SD) task interdependence	−.08	−.19	−.01	−.05	−.12	.004
Low (−1SD) task interdependence	−.01	−.07	.04	−.01	−.06	.02
Diff	−.07	−.17	−.004	−.03	−.09	.01

Note: $N = 567$.

Abbreviations: Coeff, unstandardized coefficient; Diff, difference of Coeff higher task interdependence and Coeff lower task interdependence.

Abbreviations: CI LL, lower level of bias-corrected 95% confidence interval; CI UL, upper level of bias-corrected 95% confidence interval.

Our findings provide support for this mediation model and further identified that the positive indirect effects of good quality cross-age contact are particularly beneficial at high (vs. low) levels of task interdependence.

Theoretical implications

Our findings contribute to the literature in three ways. First, our finding that PAD operates between contact and workplace conflict contributes to both the workplace conflict literature (Jehn, 1995; Pelled & Adler, 1994) and the cross-age contact at work literature (Burmeister, Hirschi, & Zacher, 2021; Iweins et al., 2013). The inclusion of trust in our model, which is a critical mediating factor (Nelson, 1989) linking social exchange variables (such as contact) to workplace outcomes, allows us to make conclusions over and above the prevalent social exchange perspective (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). We go beyond this popular theory to show how workplace contact reduces conflict via social categorization processes. Thus, we provide empirical support for theoretical links espoused by researchers of workplace conflict. For example, Pelled and Adler (1994) posit that workplace diversity shapes social categorization processes by prompting stereotyping of outgroups, which increases conflict. We support this notion by showing that cross-age co-workers' PAD increases relationship conflict. In both cases, the impact on conflict involves social categorization processes (i.e., group salience, stereotyping, and perceived discrimination) which create more distance and hostility between groups.

An unexpected finding from our correlational analysis was that trust was not related to task conflict and only weakly to relationship conflict. Furthermore, when PAD was included in the model, relationships between trust and conflict disappeared. In support of our theoretical arguments, one reason for this may be that PAD is better aligned theoretically with age-diverse conflict because both involve group processes, unlike trust. Thus, although social exchange theory (and trust) matter for conflict more widely, when conflict is group-related, social categorization and identity processes (PAD) better capture its antecedents. Our findings suggest that it is not merely reciprocal negative actions and behaviours between cross-age individuals (i.e., social exchange) that are related to age-diverse conflict, but that the experienced group-based devaluation has a more profound effect.

Furthermore, we connect the literature on workplace conflict (Jehn, 1995) with intergenerational conflict (Rudolph & Zacher, 2015; Urick et al., 2017). The extant literature on intergenerational conflict at work is limited. Its causes and impact are theoretically discussed (North & Fiske, 2012; Rudolph & Zacher, 2015), yet empirical evidence is sparse. The few existing studies we are aware of are conducted from a resolution perspective, via a qualitative approach and in specific, limited populations (Ho & Yeung, 2020; Pelled et al., 2001; Urick et al., 2017). Thus, although the literature provides a rich theoretical understanding, it lacks empirical evidence to fully understand the nature of intergenerational conflict in the workplace. To build on these conceptual and empirical foundations, we directly measured intergenerational conflict and explored its antecedents and ways in which it could be ameliorated. In doing so, we conceptualized intergenerational conflict using the established theory and measures of relationship and task conflict (Jehn, 1995), uniting these two lines of literature. Our findings, which identify how both task and relationship conflict occur between cross-age co-workers, contributes theoretical clarification that this approach can be utilized within the study of intergenerational conflict. Our study also provides organizational researchers with a methodological approach to examine intergenerational conflict and test the suggested theoretical links (Rudolph & Zacher, 2015).

Second, we contribute to literature exploring how task interdependence acts as a moderating factor. Over and above its varied and complex influence on the relationship between diversity and performance (Joshi & Roh, 2009; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007), task interdependence can intensify the association between relational variables (i.e., knowledge hiding, incivilities) and both advantageous and disadvantageous outcomes (Černe et al., 2017; Hu & Liden, 2015; Staples & Webster, 2008; Welbourne & Sariol, 2017). For example, incivilities are positively related to counterproductive work behaviours at higher levels of task interdependence (Welbourne & Sariol, 2017). Our findings add to this understanding by demonstrating that task interdependence has an adverse role when work dyads or teams consist of diverse members and the psychological processes involved are related to social categorization. Specifically, when co-workers are cross-aged and they perceive age discrimination from their colleagues. Furthermore, the indirect relation of good quality contact via PAD with conflict provides a context in which the contribution of task interdependence can be flipped from detrimental to beneficial.

Finally, we contribute to the age-diversity and broader diversity at work literature (Boehm & Kunze, 2015; De Meulenaere et al., 2023; Liebermann et al., 2013; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Although the age-diversity literature discusses the antecedents and consequences of intergenerational conflict (North & Fiske, 2012; Rudolph & Zacher, 2015), few studies explore strategies to combat such conflict. We extend this understanding by demonstrating that good quality contact between colleagues of different age groups is related to reduced intergenerational conflict. Moreover, this finding contributes to our wider understanding of the negative relationship between social categorization and performance in organizations (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). We identify an additional type of conflict that influences this association (i.e., task as well as relational conflict), and discover a means to overcome the conflicts (i.e., via intergroup contact). We further contribute to the age-diversity literature by highlighting differences in PAD across age groups. The inclusion of age group as a control variable in our analyses uncovered no association with task or relationship conflict, yet our findings revealed that older employees reported significantly less PAD than younger employees. This pattern of age differential findings is echoed in research focused on age discrimination in everyday life, as reported by British adults aged over versus under 50 years old (Abrams et al., 2012). Age discrimination at work is often conceptualized as an issue for older employees (Fasbender, 2017, 2020). However, our findings suggest that to avoid age-diverse task and relationship conflict, it is paramount to also take account of the experiences of younger workers.

Practical implications

To promote the beneficial outcomes of cross-age contact, organizations can develop environments and interventions to encourage good quality contact. Good quality cross-age contact occurs when employees experience positive, natural and co-operative interactions with their age-diverse co-workers (Fasbender et al., 2020). Thus it would be important for organizations to provide both age-diverse work environments and opportunities for good quality contact to arise. Although there is a trend of increasing age diversity, companies are not actively managing diversity, for example, by introducing affirmative action programmes (Kunze et al., 2011). Prescribing and tracking age-diversity across the overall workforce and within distinct work groups should create a wider context for cross-age contact to occur (Boehm et al., 2014). In tandem, it would be important for employers to guide the good quality of the contact. To experience good quality and meaningful interactions, it is important for cross-age colleagues to be aware of organizational support for contact and have the time and space to engage in personal conversations (Allport, 1954; Marinucci et al., 2021). For example, organizations could create physical meeting spaces and hold regular social events for age-diverse colleagues to get to know each other in positive and natural environments. Importantly, organizations should also monitor the quality of the age-diverse interactions to ensure they are positive. For instance, job satisfaction surveys could explicitly capture the relationship quality among age-diverse employees.

In addition, our findings highlight the relevance of interventions that are targeted at improving good quality cross-age contact. In this regard, an age diversity training based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) provides practical steps organizations can implement (Burmeister, Gerpott, et al., 2021). Co-workers complete a series of educational modules focused on reducing the impact of social categorization processes and age stereotypes. Cross-age dyads work together to identify shared similarities to reduce intergroup boundaries, thereby improving contact quality. The training also encourages less focus on age stereotypes, which is linked with reduced perception of discrimination (Dixon et al., 2010), thus this intervention has potential to directly reduce PAD, and therewith workplace conflict. Another effective intervention to foster cross-age contact quality is cross-age mentorship programmes (Eby & Robertson, 2020; Liu et al., 2009). Motivation to engage in workplace cross-age contact is driven by generativity opportunities for older workers and developmental opportunities for younger workers (Henry et al., 2015). Thus, mentorships that team older mentors with younger mentees should create the chance to engage in generativity for older workers (e.g., passing on their skills

and knowledge) and development for younger workers (e.g., learning skills and knowledge to improve their workplace abilities). Cross-age mentoring can also be conceptualized as reverse mentoring, when a younger worker mentors an older worker (Singh et al., 2021), which has been demonstrated to be effective in fostering good-quality contact between different age groups (Gadomska-Lila, 2020). Therefore, via the introduction of age-diversity training or cross-age mentorship programmes, organizations can provide optimal conditions for good quality cross-age contact at work to arise and thereby reduce task and relationship age-diverse conflict.

To enhance the benefits of good quality cross-age co-worker contact, organizational structures should be adapted to encourage greater task interdependence (Weldon & Weingart, 1993; Yakubovich & Burg, 2019). Our findings demonstrate that when task interdependence is high, the positive effects of good quality contact on conflict via reduced PAD are increased. Ensuring that tasks assigned to age-diverse work groups require interaction and cooperation should lead to greater task interdependence. Task interdependence can also be encouraged via shared motivation (Scager et al., 2016), such as being aware of a need to interact closely to achieve shared goals and that the achievement depends on each workers' contribution. Thus, careful job redesign within age-diverse workforces can enhance the positive outcomes of good quality contact. However, practitioners should be aware that task interdependence can act as a double-edged sword. Our results also indicate that high task interdependence alone, when not proceeded by good quality contact, could increase the detrimental impact of PAD on conflict. In other words, our findings demonstrated that workplace conflict can be reduced best if both, good quality age-diverse contact and task interdependence are high. This stresses the need for work design to incorporate methods to maintain high levels of good quality cross-age contact along with high levels of task interdependence.

Limitations and future research directions

We highlight limitations to the present research and directions for future research. Our survey design may create issues arising from common-method bias. We employed the procedural remedy of separating the measurement of the predictor, mediators and outcome variables to reduce these concerns (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Future studies could collect data from diverse sources and adopt more objective measures. For example, multi-source data could be provided via a dyadic design in which a younger and older dyad provide assessments of their contact quality, task and relationship conflict. Similar designs have been employed to examine cross-age contact and organizational outcomes (Fasbender & Drury, 2022). Observational data could provide a more objective measure of task and relationship conflict, such as objectively coding instances of task and relationship conflict that take place during co-worker meetings (Le & Jarzabkowski, 2014).

Our research design impedes our ability to infer causality. Although our analysis suggests that good quality contact reduces task and relationship conflict via its effects on PAD, we cannot be sure that the effects occur in this order. In a supplementary analysis, we controlled for the baseline assessments of task and relationship conflict and found that while smaller, most effects continued to be significant in the hypothesized direction. Regarding relationship conflict, however, we found that the effect of PAD was only marginally significant. Furthermore, baseline relationship conflict had a significant effect on PAD, which indicates a reciprocal relationship between PAD and relationship conflict. Future research may use continuous time modelling, which allows the investigation of reciprocal effects as well as different time intervals in which change happens (Voelkle et al., 2012). Moreover, future research should also employ experimental designs to test the effect of good quality cross-age contact and reduced PAD. For example, researchers demonstrated that experimental contact increases a sense of belonging (Burmeister, Hirschi, & Zacher, 2021). Following this design, an intervention in the field could require younger and older participants to work together to solve a work-related task, such as planning a project, and reflect on their solution then report levels of PAD.

Our findings provide a platform for future research. Studies may explore alternative dependent measures influenced by good quality contact's reduction of PAD, and which organizational outcomes beyond reduced conflict good quality contact are indirectly related to. We suggest a focus on productivity and satisfaction. Age diversity can lead to poor firm performance, via increased PAD (De Meulenaere & Kunze, 2021; Kunze et al., 2011). Thus, the link between good quality contact and reduced PAD should extend to improve organizational performance. Prior studies within nationally diverse workforces suggest that relationship and task conflict damage perceived group performance and group satisfaction (Vodosek, 2007). Research should examine whether good quality contact can improve performance and satisfaction via reduced conflict. The literature supports this notion as a more positive intergenerational work climate, which includes good quality cross-age contact, is directly related to satisfaction at work and indirectly via reduced PAD (Lagacé et al., 2019).

Future research should also consider the repercussions of the incongruences of cross-age co-workers' experiences of task and relationship conflict. Conflict can be exacerbated when co-workers perceive different levels of conflict from one another (Jehn & Chatman, 2000). When one party perceives higher conflict than their co-worker, this can be more damaging than when both parties perceive high (or low) conflict (Jehn & Chatman, 2000). Importantly, younger, compared to older, workers react more emotionally to intergenerational conflict (Yeung et al., 2021), thus putting them at greater risk of the negative consequences of conflict.

CONCLUSION

In times of global population ageing, it becomes more important to understand and mitigate possible intergenerational tensions at work. Because workplace conflict between intergenerational employees can seriously harm organizational functioning, we explored ways to foster intergenerational harmony. We adopted a social categorization lens to show that good quality contact between intergenerational employees reduces workplace conflict via lower levels of perceived age discrimination. We further established that task interdependence was able to improve this beneficial pathway from good quality contact to reduced workplace conflict.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Lisbeth Drury: Conceptualization; investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology. **Ulrike Fasbender:** Methodology; formal analysis; conceptualization; investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are not conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data is available upon request.

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