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Age Discrimination as a Bone of Contention in the EU:

A Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

Global population aging is driving the need for understanding and challenging social categorization as a cause of age discrimination. In this paper, I disentangled stereotypes (i.e., cognitive component of social categorization) from prejudices (i.e., affective component of social categorization) and explained their joint impact on discrimination toward older workers (i.e., behavioral component of social categorization). Moreover, I challenged the assumption that age discrimination happens primarily to older workers by pointing to research on reverse age discrimination depicting that both younger and older workers alike suffer from higher levels of age discrimination as compared to middle-aged workers. I highlighted that being too old or too young can be a cause of discrimination and thus encourage policymakers to combat discrimination on the grounds of any age.

1. Introduction

Extending working lives is on the agenda of policymakers to ensure fiscal sustainability in times of global population aging (European Commission, 2014). In maintaining social security and pension systems, policymakers in many industrialized countries have gradually increased retirement ages (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2015). Therefore, workplaces become older and more age-diverse in nature (Truxillo, Finkelstein, Pytlovany, & Jenkins, 2015). Although working side-by-side can lead to many positive outcomes, there is a risk that higher levels of age diversity lead to negative outcomes due to arising “faultlines” between younger and older workers (Fasbender, 2017; Finkelstein, King, & Voyles, 2015). For this reason, the understanding of social

categorization at work leading to the age discrimination of (younger and) older workers is of increasing importance.

In following, I comment on Gözde Kaya's focal work (2019, in this volume) "Age Discrimination as a Bone of Contention in the EU" taking a psychological perspective. In this regard, I will shed light on the process of social categorization that can lead to age discrimination at work. Specifically, I will disentangle stereotypes from prejudices and explain their joint impact on discrimination toward older workers. Furthermore, I will challenge the assumption that age discrimination happens primarily to older workers by focusing on reverse age discrimination. I will conclude with final remarks on age discrimination and highlight implications for research and practice.

2. Social categorization can lead to age discrimination

Investigating social categorization as in forming stereotypes and prejudices toward others has a long tradition in psychology; most notably the early conceptualizations of Gordon W. Allport. In his book entitled '*The Nature of Prejudice*', Allport (1954) refers to prejudgment as natural cognitive process in which we categorize people into groups based on perceived similarity vs. dissimilarity to oneself. In other words, people categorize others in so called "ingroup" and "outgroup" (Fiske, 1998). On the one side, social categorization reflects the wish to be different from others (i.e., distinctiveness toward outgroup members), and on the other side, it helps individuals to gain social identity and to resolve self-concept uncertainty (i.e., assimilation toward ingroup members). Following the tripartite view of attitudes, *stereotypes* can be described as cognitive, *prejudices* as the affective, and *discrimination* as behavioral components of categorization-reactions – which are reactions toward people from groups based on their perceived difference from oneself (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Fasbender, 2017; Fiske, 1998).

The most common and persisting stereotype seems to be that older workers show lower levels of job performance than their younger counterparts do. People often think of older workers as less motivated, less competent and more prone to stress, thus leading to declining job performance (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Krings et al., 2011; Perry et al., 1996). Yet, to date, there are at least four meta-analyses (McEvoy & Cascio, 1989; Ng & Feldman, 2008; Sturman, 2003; Waldman & Avolio, 1986) providing no empirical support for a decrease of job performance as workers age. In fact, Ng and Feldman (2008) report even higher levels for prosocial behaviors (e.g., helping colleagues out or taking steps to prevent problems at work) and lower levels for counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., theft, sabotage). In addition, another meta-analysis on job attitudes (Ng & Feldman, 2010) reported positive relationships between employee age and affective commitment, interpersonal and organizational trust, job involvement, loyalty and organizational identification, which are expected to emerge in positive work outcomes. Although there are many (positive) and negative stereotypes about older workers (see North & Fiske, 2015 or Posthuma & Guerrero, 2013 for a comprehensive cross-cultural overview of stereotypes), it is important to note that stereotypes are often distorted and inaccurate as they are based on unfounded assumptions, preconceived ideas, or hearsay (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Besides, it is false to infer that all members of an (age) group are similar (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Prejudices have been far less studied than stereotypes (Fiske, 1998; Stangor, 2016). As both components are part of the same underlying social categorization process, there is a sizable relationship between stereotypes and prejudices (Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson, & Gaertner, 1996). In fact, prejudices are often rationalized by stereotypes (Sinclair & Kunda, 2000). In explaining prejudices toward older people, terror management theory (Greenberg, Landau, Kosloff, Soenke, & Solomon, 2016; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) has been influential. As thinking about one's mortality is frightening to everyone, people create

self-esteem as a belief of having an outlasting purpose and place in the world protecting us from feeling anxious (Nelson, 2011). However, older people can be reminder of mortality (Martens, Goldenberg, & Greenberg, 2005). Therefore, being confronted with older people can result in higher anxiety and negative affectivity (Martens, Greenberg, Schimel, & Landau, 2004). In the workplace, this may lead to feeling alien around older colleagues, feeling uncomfortable about decisions made by an older supervisor or being afraid of older people in general. Research revealed that the fear of older people is linked to age-biased behavioral tendencies in working with older people, for example in the social work (Chonody, Webb, Ranzijn, & Bryan, 2014).

Stereotypes and prejudices toward older people are seen as cause of age discrimination bringing thoughts and feelings into action against older workers (see Marcus, 2015 for a review on age discrimination). In fact, there is empirical evidence showing that important decisions at work are based on age-related stereotypes and prejudices (e.g., Fasbender & Wang, 2017b, 2017a; Finkelstein, Burke, & Raju, 1995; Meisner, 2012; Perry et al., 1996). Yet, stereotypes and prejudices can be also a consequence of discrimination. For example, missing opportunities for training and development may lead older workers to be negatively evaluated and perceived as resistant to change, which can turn into a vicious circle of negative categorization-reactions (Fasbender, 2017). In the workplace, older people are likely to be disadvantaged in different areas of operations, such as recruitment and selection of employees, career opportunities, training and development, assignment of tasks and turnover or retention strategies. Most research has been conducted with regard to recruitment and selection of employees. There is clear evidence of age discrimination in hypothetical situations (Fasbender & Wang, 2017b; Richardson & Webb, 2013) and in actual hiring practices (Gringart & Helmes, 2001). Although other applicant characteristics are relevant, age has been found to bias interviewers perceptions and hiring recommendations (Morgeson,

Reider, Campion, & Bull, 2008). For example Krings, Sczesny and Kluge (2011) found that older workers were judged as less competent than younger workers, which was reflected in hiring situations. Regarding career opportunities, scholars have pointed to the argument of intergenerational solidarity, which can disadvantage older people by providing career opportunities for younger people at work (Manfredi, 2011). Research also revealed resentments toward older workers when it comes to training and development (Chiu, Chan, Snape, & Redman, 2001; Loretto & White, 2006).

3. Reverse Age Discrimination

Researchers and policymakers primarily focus on the treatment of older workers (Finkelstein, Ryan, & King, 2013). Kaya (2019, in this volume) argues that: “the number as well as the scope of the cases brought before the courts reveal that it is mostly and particularly older people who are subject to this unfair treatment.” Yet, it is conceivable that younger people may underreport cases for different reasons. As they get older and therewith their situation likely changes, younger people may prefer to wait for the change to take place rather than make a case. Younger people may be at risk of losing their face when claiming legal support, whereas older people may have “nothing to lose”. In addition, younger people likely possess fewer resources (financial resources, knowledge about specific employment rights, legal literacy) that are necessary to build a case.

Scholars have highlighted that younger workers also suffer from structural trends as well as age discrimination embedded in organizational practices and labor law. Blackham (2019) explains that unemployment rates among younger workers is particularly high as compared to average unemployment rates. In addition, younger workers are often in rather precarious and insecure jobs; for example, younger workers (aged 16-24 years) hold 37% of zero-hour contracts in the UK (Blackham, 2019). Psychological research showed that

younger workers (under 30 years) report significantly higher levels of perceived age discrimination as compared to middle (30 to 49 years) and older workers (50 years and older), pointing to so called reverse age discrimination (Snape & Redman, 2003). A more recent study found a U-shaped pattern of age discrimination with higher levels for both younger and older workers as compared to middle-aged workers, highlighting that workers at either end of the age spectrum are most vulnerable to discrimination on the grounds of age (Marchiondo, Gonzales, & Ran, 2016). Despite their possible dissimilarities, younger and older workers alike are subject to more negative stereotypes (Finkelstein et al., 2013), possess fewer resources and less influence as compared middle-aged workers (North & Fiske, 2012). Policymakers should therefore pay attention to reverse age discrimination and combat discrimination on the grounds of any age.

4. Conclusion

Global population aging is driving the need for understanding and challenging social categorization as a cause of age discrimination. Social categorization means that people automatically categorize others into groups of “younger” and “older” workers based on perceived similarity. As part of this social categorization process, people form stereotypes (i.e., cognitive component of social categorization) and prejudices (i.e., affective component of social categorization) about these groups. Together age-based stereotypes and prejudices can lead to age discrimination (i.e., behavioral component of social categorization), bringing thoughts and feelings into action against older workers. Yet, age discrimination does not only happen to older workers, as younger workers also experience age discrimination (i.e., reverse age discrimination). Indeed, both younger and older workers alike suffer from higher levels of age discrimination as compared to middle-aged workers. Because being too old or too young can be a cause of discrimination, policymakers need to combat discrimination on the grounds of any age.

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