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GUEST EDITORIAL

Facilitating age diversity in organizations – part II: managing perceptions and interactions

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Abstract

Purpose – Due to demographic changes in most industrialized countries, the average age of working people is continuously increasing, and the workforce is becoming more age-diverse. This review, together with the earlier *JMP* Special Issue "Facilitating age diversity in organizations – part I: challenging popular misbeliefs", aims to summarize new empirical research on age diversity in organizations, and on potential ways to support beneficial effects of age diversity in teams and organizations. The second part of the Special Issue focusses on managing mutual perceptions and interactions between different age groups.

Design/methodology/approach – A literature review is provided summarizing and discussing relevant empirical research on managing mutual perceptions and interactions between different age groups at work.

Findings – The summarized research revealed a number of challenges to benefit from age diversity in organizations, such as in-group favoritism, age norms about appropriate behavior of older workers, intentional and unintentional age discrimination, differences in communication styles, and difference in attitudes towards age diversity. At the same time, managerial strategies to address these challenges are developed.

Originality/value – Together with the first part of this Special Issue, this is one of the first reviews on ways to address the increasing age diversity in work organizations based on sound empirical research.

Keywords Age, Stereotypes, Demographic change, Age diversity, Aging workforce

Paper type Viewpoint

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The ongoing demographic changes in most industrialized countries provide new challenges for the management of organizations. In particular, the percentage of workers older than 50 years has significantly increased during the last years, with direct consequences for the frequency and size of age diversity in working teams and organizations (e.g. Baltes *et al.*, 2011; Hedge *et al.*, 2006; Wegge *et al.*, 2008). Today, business companies, but also public administrations, law enforcement units, hospital management, etc., are seeking advice how to manage age diversity at work. As with diversity in general, both potential benefits and challenges exist (e.g. Horwitz and Horwitz, 2007; Joshi and Roh, 2009). On the one hand, high diversity in teams or other organizational units might increase creativity, innovation, and problem solving due to multiple perspectives and backgrounds of the different workers. On the other hand, high diversity often come with higher needs for communication, coordination, and conflict management due to differences in role expectations, working styles, and general values. Therefore, in order to benefit from diversity, the accurate management of mutual perceptions and interactions is crucial.

The aforementioned challenges might be particularly relevant for age diversity in organizations because differences between older and younger workers are often quite salient, increasing the risk of social categorization and perceived in-group thread that might additionally impede mutual collaboration (e.g. Van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, age-related stereotypes are quite popular and often rather negatively biased (e.g. Finkelstein *et al.*, 1995; Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Rauschenbach *et al.*, 2012; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2009; see also Hertel *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the current review addresses specific challenges of age diversity in organizations. In doing so, we believe that the ongoing demographic changes not only provide additional challenges but also new opportunities for working organizations, given that difficulties are appropriately addressed. In general, research activities on age diversity at work have increased over the past years, as indicated by recent special issues on this topic (e.g. Issues 4 and 8 of Volume 23 of *Journal of Managerial Psychology*; Issue 2 of Volume 84 of *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*; Issue 2 of Volume 32 of *Journal of Organizational Behavior*; Issue 2 of Volume 8 of *Zeitschrift für Personalpsychologie*; forthcoming issue of *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*). However, many questions are still under-researched and lack empirical evidence. Moreover, as Finkelstein *et al.* (1995, p. 652) stated: "in the studies where age discrimination has been found, it often has been difficult to interpret the findings in terms of why the discrimination might have occurred because of the lack of well-developed theories of age discrimination&. Given that the described demographic changes are happening right now, new theory-based empirical studies are urgently required, together with proposals on how to address these new situations (see also Hertel *et al.*, 2013).

This Special Issue on "Facilitating age diversity in organizations" presents new research on the interplay and collaboration between different age groups at work, with the general goal being to benefit rather than to suffer from the ongoing demographic changes. Given the many high-quality submissions that we have received after our call for papers, we are very happy that both the editor and the publisher of *Journal of Managerial Psychology* provided us with space for two parts of this Special Issue, including ten excellent and innovative contributions on this important and fascinating topic. Half of these contributions focus on potential strengths of older workers that are often overlooked due to age-related biases and misbeliefs. These contributions have

been published in the first part of this Special Issue ("Facilitating age diversity in organizations – part I: challenging popular misbeliefs"; see Hertel *et al.*, 2013), and contribute to facilitating age diversity in organizations by critically reflecting and partly refuting negative pre-assumptions and stereotypes about older workers. In the second part of this Special Issue ("Facilitating age diversity in organizations – Part II: managing mutual perceptions and interactions") we concentrate on difficulties and challenges that might arise during the interaction in age-diverse organizations. Exploring these difficulties based on rigorous scientific research not only leads to a better understanding but also supports a more thorough development of tangible means and interventions that help to benefit from age diversity.

The five studies published in this second part of this Special Issue provide empirical research on how workers of different ages mutually perceive and interact with each other, requiring more flexible management approaches. The empirical data reveals specific challenges and potential misunderstandings as well as sound explanations of possible underlying processes of the observed diversity effects that might be interesting for both scientists and practitioners alike.

In the first contribution, entitled "Age effects on perceived personality and job performance", Bertolino *et al.* (2013) explore age differences in the perception of other workers in terms of the Big Five personality traits and in the light of different aspects of job performance. The authors expected that the perceptions of colleagues at work generally reflect existing age differences in personality traits, such as higher conscientiousness and lower extraversion of older as compared to younger workers. Additionally, however, the authors expected that perceptions of colleagues at work are also affected by in-group favoritism (e.g. Hewstone *et al.*, 2002) as a function of the age of a perceiving person. As a consequence, positive stereotypes about older workers was assumed to be higher among older as compared to younger workers, and vice versa.

Based on a sample of 155 administration employees aged between 25 and 61 years and working in different schools in Italy, the authors found support for their expectations for most of the focused attributes. Specifically, they observed in-group biases of younger and older workers in terms of perceived conscientiousness, openness to experience, neuroticism, and organizational citizenship behavior (but not in terms of perceived extraversion, agreeableness, and task performance). Surprisingly, the results generally revealed more positive perceptions of older than of younger workers, showing no negative stereotypes about older workers. The authors explained this result by means of recent changes in age stereotyping, which would be good news for sure. Moreover, the specific job branch (administrative employees in public schools) as well as cultural differences (high respect for older workers in Italy) might also account for these findings (for instance, Rauschenbach *et al.*, 2012, found no evidence for age-related in-group favoritism among workers in Germany).

In the second contribution, entitled "Hiring retirees: impact of age norms and stereotypes" Karpinska *et al.* (2013) extend existing research on age discrimination by connecting influences from managers' attitudes towards older workers with applicants' attributes as well as with organizational context variables. The authors recruited a sample of 238 managers from an internet panel in The Netherlands. After measuring managers' age norms (i.e. at which age they believed a worker should retire) and age-related stereotypes about workers' soft and hard skills, attributes of early retirees applying for a job and organizational context conditions were manipulated in a

vignette study that was conducted one month after the first questionnaire with the same participants. That way, measuring participants' age-related attitudes was separated from the manipulation of (hypothetical) job applicants' attributes and organizational context variables. The main dependent variable was the hiring decision made by participants based on the described scenario on each vignette. Participants were asked to rate the perceived desirability of hiring different applicants varying in age (58-65), job experience, and energetic appearance. Moreover, organizational context was manipulated suggesting a high or low supply of workers from the labor market.

The results showed that hiring early retirees was more likely in a situation of hypothetical labor force shortages as compared to downsizing situations. However, early retirees of a higher age (i.e. 65 years) were still less likely to be hired than younger early retirees (aged 58 or 63). Moreover, the results also showed that managers' propensities to hire early retirees was clearly affected by their general age norms (i.e. at which age they believed a worker should retire) in addition to applicants' relevant job experience and energetic appearance. Thus, societal beliefs about appropriate behavior of older and younger people additionally influenced hiring decisions made by managers in these hypothetical settings. Interestingly, managers' age norms were only weakly related to their age-related stereotypes, suggesting that general age norms might be a rather independent (and so far often overlooked) factor for potential age discrimination. This contribution highlights the importance of including both intra- and inter-personal perspectives in age discrimination research. In addition to intra-personal processes or subjective perceptions of (victimized) ageing workers, it is important to further investigate inter-personal perspectives and changing age norms in relation to age discrimination at the workplace as well.

The third contribution to this Special Issue, entitled "Exploring the workplace impact of intentional/unintentional age discrimination" (James *et al.*, 2013), further extends the focus on organizational consequences of age-related discrimination by demonstrating effects of perceived unlikelihood for promotion of workers aged 55 and older on their engagement. Moreover, this contribution distinguishes between intentional and unintentional age discrimination, providing a more differentiated analysis of discriminating acts, for instance, from managers, herewith facilitating reflection and communication processes about age-discrimination among managers. With the term "unintentional discrimination", the authors described instances when older workers were less likely to be promoted than their younger colleagues (i.e. age discrimination) but at the same time were perceived as being less interested in promotions and/or less fit for promotions. The authors assumed that such "unintentional" age discrimination has less severe effects on workers' engagement because reciprocity norms (e.g. Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986, 2001) are not violated.

The authors tested their assumptions using an organizational sample with 4,713 employees from a large retail chain in the USA. The age range in this sample was between 18 and 94 years. None of the participants had supervisory responsibilities. Interestingly, measured work engagement was, on average, higher for older than younger workers. Moreover, perceived discrimination of older workers seemed to have affected work engagement of both older and younger workers alike. In fact, younger as compared to older workers reacted even more negatively when age discrimination was intentional, i.e. when older workers were less likely promoted even though they were seen as fit and motivated for promotion. On the other hand, "unintentional

discrimination" had more demotivating effects for older workers, perhaps reflecting pessimistic (resigned) self-stereotyping effects among older workers in addition to perceived discrimination.

The fourth contribution, entitled "Age, forgiveness, and meeting behavior: a multilevel study" (Schulte *et al.*, 2013) explored age as a predictor of counterproductive team behavior, such as complaining or denying interest or responsibilities for the current task or problem. Using videotaped and coded behavioral data from regular meetings of 313 employees, nested in 54 organizational teams, dealing with organization-wide continuous improvement processes, the authors examined age effects both at the individual and at the team level (that is, age diversity). Whereas age was positively related with counteractive meeting behavior at the individual team member level (on average, older employees exhibited more counteractive meeting behaviors), age diversity was negatively related to counteractive meeting behavior at the team level (on average, fewer counteractive meeting behaviors occurred in more diverse teams). Moreover, the authors found that individual team members' forgiveness buffered negative age effects. Thus, while older workers seemed to have a higher potential for counteractive behaviors, there seem to be tangible means to address these challenges both by team staffing as well as by communication strategies.

Finally, the fifth contribution to the second part of this Special Issue is entitled "Managing knowledge exchange and identification in age diverse teams" (Ellwart *et al.*, 2013), and focusses both on cognitive as well as affective consequences of age diversity in teams. In general, the authors expected that age diversity hampered both information exchange and team identification. Based on a questionnaire study with 73 organizational teams comprising 516 employees recruited from finance and control departments of Swiss companies, multilevel analyses showed that objective indicators of age diversity correlated indeed negatively with knowledge exchange and team identification, although these effects were only minor and not significant at the team level. Interestingly, these relationships were moderated by participants' diversity beliefs (but not diversity perceptions) at the individual level, showing a better knowledge exchange and higher team identification in age-diverse teams when diversity beliefs were positive among the team members. These results fit nicely into prior work showing attitudes towards diversity to be a crucial buffer or moderator variable (e.g. Homan *et al.*, 2007; Van Dick *et al.*, 2008; Wegge *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, diversity beliefs of team members are often changed more easily than existing age structures of a team. Therefore, these results are encouraging and suggest potential starting-points for interventions in order to facilitate positive age diversity effects in organizations.

Together, the five contributions illustrate specific challenges of age diversity in organizations, such as in-group favoritism, age norms about "appropriate" behavior of older workers, intentional and unintentional age discrimination, age differences in communication behavior, such as counteractive meeting behavior, and positive or negative attitudes towards age diversity itself. Apart from stressing these challenges – most of them rather under-researched – all five contributions also suggest concrete means to facilitate age diversity in organizations.

As in the first part of this Special Issue, all five contributions of the second part also describe cross-sectional research only, providing no information on age-related changes within workers over time. Such longitudinal data are of course desirable to understand developmental aspects of aging at work, and to distinguish age effects from cohort

effects or (self-)selection. However, given that a considerable age diversity is reality in many organizations today, and has to be addressed regardless of the underlying processes, the present results should still be quite helpful for managerial decisions and organizational interventions (see also Hertel *et al.*, 2013; Wiernik *et al.*, 2013).

The different studies presented in this special issue are among the first explicitly addressing age diversity in organizations. Indeed, systematic research on age diversity and related changes in organizations is still at the beginning. Important questions remaining for future research include, for instance, which intra- and inter-personal age-related biases or perceptions affect successful aging before, during, and in case of bridge employment, or after retirement (cf. Wang *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, we do not have a good overview of which moderators and mediators at the micro -, meso -, and macro level matter in explaining the age diversity effects presented in the publications of this Special Issue. For example, at the micro level, processes such as self-categorization and group faultlines can be meaningful moderators that deserve to be further examined in future research. Specifically, the accessibility and situational fit of a particular stereotype might determine which group variable or characteristic becomes more salient (Haslam, 2001). When social stereotypes are more salient, people tend to see themselves, to a large extent, in terms of the respective social group and its associated characteristics. Thus, salience of social stereotypes not only determine the currently perceived identity of a person, but also which attitudes, emotions and behaviors are expected from this person in a given situation (Hornsey and Hogg, 2000). In other words, if the identity of being an older worker is salient, the relevant age norms of managers and workers themselves can have more detrimental effects compared to a situation in which identities are salient that are more relevant to the task (e.g. being a marketing expert). Furthermore, according to group faultline research (cf. Hogg, 1996), it is important to control for the strength of potential group faultlines. More specifically, if a group has a high faultline strength, subgroups exist that align on multiple characteristics (for example, two older females are working together with two younger males). Earlier research has revealed that groups with high faultline strength are associated with more tensions and relationship conflict within the group compared to other types of groups (Hogg, 1996).

At the meso level, moderation or mediation effects of team stability might be considered that both facilitate learning within teams (e.g. Akgün and Lynn, 2002) but also cause collective blind spots and group think (Snell, 2010). Finally, at the macro level, labor market differences and age norms' discrepancies across occupational sectors should be considered in future research.

In the first part of this Special Issue, we have emphasized the importance for organizations to develop a comprehensive age-friendly culture at the workplace that reflects a life-span perspective (Hertel *et al.*, 2013). We highlighted that leaders and human resource management representatives need to support this by offering programs that can be tailored to the individual situation (see also Deller *et al.*, 2009). The papers that are included in the second part of this Special Issue point to the importance of the group level as well. In addition to their theoretical implications, the five contributions suggest concrete practical recommendations for leadership and human resource management in order to support the benefits of age diversity in organizations at different levels of analysis. Addressing the challenges in such a way that new opportunities for organizations can be developed requires more flexible management approaches. These approaches need to translate the diversity of empirical

research findings into daily practices of individual and team leadership. Leaders and human resource management representatives need to understand the relevance of interpersonal and intergroup perceptions, and how to manage these. Several tools are available for this, for example including awareness training, perceivable role model behaviors, and selection systems controlling for unwanted perceptions. Among the more specific hints for the management of age-diverse groups are:

- Avoid high salience of age-related categorization in order to prevent detrimental subgroup identification and social (meta)- stereotypes as well as in-group favoritism and identity thread (cf. Bertolino *et al.*, 2013). Perspective taking is generally accepted to be a constructive way of perceiving the world. However, when combined with knowledge about prominent stereotypes of certain groups, perspective taking can also have an intra-personal distorting effect on attitudes and behavior (Vorauer *et al.*, 1998).
- Be aware of and reflect age norms about what might be seen to be appropriate for older persons at work and in general (Karpinska *et al.*, 2013).
- Avoid both intentional and unintentional discrimination of older workers as it strongly affects engagement and commitment of workers of all ages (e.g. James *et al.*, 2013); thus, you might also lose valued young employees.
- Recognize age stereotyping/discrimination early when it happens.
- Avoid age as a central category during personnel strategies and decisions (e.g. Posthuma and Campion, 2009).
- Provide training in age diversity and support positive diversity beliefs that increase both the understanding of diversity as a resource, and a mutual awareness of the strengths of different age groups (e.g. Ellwart *et al.*, 2013; Homan *et al.*, 2007).
- Consider age diversity in team composition in order to address counteractive meeting behavior (Schulte *et al.*, 2013).
- Provide age-differentiated work design and intervention strategies in the workplace (e.g. Stamov-Roßnagel and Hertel, 2010).
- Balance the different needs and expectations of younger and older workers in a fair and transparent way (Tsui *et al.*, 2002). For instance, older workers still want and need training, development, and recognition for promotion. However, younger employees can become discouraged when they think that all opportunities and promotions go to older workers.

We are aware that a multitude of practical questions remain unanswered given today's empirical findings, including the cross-cultural generalizability of research results (e.g. Bertolino *et al.*, 2013) or extreme cases of age-diverse organizations (see the 76-year age-span reported by James *et al.*, 2013). However, we still hope that the results presented in this Special Issue contribute to a better understanding of managers and human resource officers on age diversity and how to develop possible solutions in organizations.

Before closing, we want to thank all our colleagues who have contributed manuscripts to this Special Issue, as well as the anonymous reviewers who have been of enormous help to further strengthen and clarify each of the contributions. Moreover,

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