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Exploring the workplace impact of intentional/unintentional age discrimination

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Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between employee perceptions of unfair treatment of older workers and employee engagement. **Design/methodology/approach** - In a sample of over 4,500 workers, ages 18-94, from a retail workforce across three regions of the USA, the authors examine the relationship between perceptions that older workers are less likely to be promoted and employee engagement, using multilevel mixed effects linear regression models. The authors also examine whether the relationship is different if older workers were seen as fit for promotion, and whether discrimination is: intentional (fit, but less likely to be promoted) or unintentional (unfit, and less likely to be promoted). **Findings** - Results indicate that perceived discrimination is related to lower levels of employee engagement among workers of all ages. Findings also suggest that for older workers, there is a more negative relationship between unintentional discrimination and employee engagement, [More](#)

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Facilitating age diversity in organizations - Part I: Challenging popular misbeliefs about older workers & Part II: Managing perceptions and interactions

Edited by Guido Hertel, Béatrice I.J.M. van der Heijden, Annet H. de Lange, Jürgen Deller

Introduction

Age discrimination lawsuits have risen sharply in the USA during the recession ([86] US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2010). According to an AARP survey of older workers, many of these legal actions have to do with the perception that older employees were "passed up for a promotion or chance to get ahead because of age" ([24] Groeneman, 2008, p. 83). Such perceptions

may be particularly problematic for retirement-eligible employees in today's context of extended health and longevity (and diminishing pension funds), who intend to continue work ([53] Munnell and Sunden, 2004; [74] Shultz and Wang, 2011). They may be seen as unproblematic, however, for those who have the widely held idea that older workers "should" be exiting the workplace to create opportunities for their younger co-workers ([1] Agatstein, 1973; [29] Hedge *et al.*, 2006; [67] Rowe and Kahn, 1998). While the literature is replete with research on perceptions of older workers, and even the perception that older workers are overlooked for promotion, the impact of such perceptions on employee engagement is rarely the focus of inquiry. Rarer still is the question of the extent to which age distinctions are perceived as fair or unfair, and their relation to employee engagement.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between employee perceptions of both intentional and unintentional unfair treatment of older workers and employee engagement among workers of all ages in a retail workforce. Specifically, we address the following questions:

- Is there a relationship between the perception that older workers are just as likely to be promoted as younger workers, and employee engagement?
- Is this relationship moderated by the perception that older workers are both interested in and fit for promotions?
- Do these relationships between perceptions of older worker's interest in promotion and fitness for promotion vary by participants' age?

What is age discrimination in the workplace?

Any differential treatment on the basis that an employee is "old" is considered age discrimination. It can be unintentional or deliberate, unconscious or explicit ([41] Levy and Banaji, 2004). There is wide recognition that age discrimination is real. A survey conducted by AARP revealed that 67 percent of respondents (ages 45-74) said they believe that age discrimination exists in the workplace ([51] Montenegro *et al.*, 2002). Two meta-analyses of empirical studies bear out the reality ([19] Finkelstein *et al.*, 1995; [22] Gordon and Arvey, 2004). Age discrimination is often manifested in such organizational practices as limiting older workers from substantive job responsibilities or access to job-related career development opportunities ([29] Hedge *et al.*, 2006). If age barriers to continued work are to be lessened, specific attitudes need to be isolated for study ([82] Taylor and Walker, 1998). Thus, our primary concern is with the perception that older workers are less likely to be promoted than younger workers, and the relationship between such perceptions and employees' work engagement.

The current context of aging in the workplace

Who is an older worker? The definition depends on who is asked ([56] Peeters and van Emmerik, 2008) and the context of the question ([39] Kooij *et al.*, 2008). To the 20-year-old new hire in a company, any co-workers over age 30 may be seen as older workers. To a 65-year-old, only co-workers in their late seventies may seem to be older workers. Researchers often define older as those employees 55 and over, e.g. those employees who are approaching the conventional retirement ages ([54] Munnell *et al.*,

2006; [64] Rix, 2001). Even though the ADEA protects anyone who is over 40 from age discrimination, legislators more typically view 55 as the benchmark for older workers in parameters set out in the Older Americans Act, 1965; the Job Training Partnership Act, 1982; and the Workforce Investment Act, 2000 ([29] Hedge *et al.*, 2006). Demographic changes have also meant that this key group of workers, aged 55 and over, are becoming more visible, as they are the fastest growing segment of the workforce ([14] Dohm and Shniper, 2007). Therefore, for our purposes, we follow this pattern by defining older workers as those aged 55 and over.

Perceptions of age in the workplace

To be clear, perceptions and stereotypes are not the same thing as discrimination. According to [59] Posthuma and Campion (2009, p. 160):

Stereotypes are different from prejudice, which is more affective or attitudinal, and different from discrimination, which is more behavioral (Fisk, 1998, 2004; Nelson, 2002). For example, managers can hold negative stereotypes about older workers that are subtle or unconscious, yet these may affect how they think about their workers. The result can be discrimination against older workers when they are not hired, are not selected for training, or are targeted for layoffs. Thus, although the influence may be subtle, the cause may be age stereotypes and the effect, discrimination.

While there are positive perceptions of older workers, i.e. that they have a good work ethic and attitude toward work ([38] Kite and Wagner, 2004), most employees hold more than a few negative ones, i.e. that they lack interest in training, development or promotion opportunities ([3] Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2008; [48] Maurer *et al.*, 2008). Social cognition theory (e.g. [7] Brewer and Kramer, 1985) suggests that these negative impressions about a group (i.e. older worker) develop in the context of work when employees are categorized as different from the ideal worker. These categories are then used to develop job-related expectancies about the group in question.

This attitudinal bias stands in contrast with the finding that some older female workers, who may have started their careers in midlife, are still gaining seniority, and want promotions and other advances in their careers ([30] Helson and Cate, 2007; [75] Simon, 1996), and with findings showing that older workers manifest higher job commitment, less turnover, and lower rates of absenteeism than do younger workers ([66] Roscigno *et al.*, 2007). Older workers are seldom asked whether they are interested in promotions or not. Instead, with some exceptions, they are seen as easy layoff targets, or checked out and yearning for retirement ([37] Kite *et al.*, 2005; [80] Sterns and Miklos, 1995).

In some cases, older workers are expected to retire to make room for their younger colleagues ([10] Cahill, 2011; [29] Hedge *et al.*, 2006; [44] McCann and Giles, 2004). [999] Lawrence (1988) suggests that such views represent age norms that managers respond to rather than age *per se*. Indeed, as [17] Feldman and Beehr (2011) suggest, "social-normative beliefs about the appropriate retirement age can result in age discrimination against older workers" (p. 196).

Unfortunately, there are other negative perceptions of older workers that affect their ability to continue with their careers into later life. [64] Rix (2001), for example, describing surveys with employers over 15 years, reported negative ratings for older workers on flexibility, adaptability to new technology, and technological competence. If employers view older workers as lacking such competencies, they are unlikely to consider them as candidates for promotion.

While the picture is less clear for younger workers, they are often depicted as eager to get ahead, and somewhat impatient for promotions ([16] Eisner, 2005; [76] Smola and Sutton, 2002). There are negative stereotypes about this group also ([12] Deal *et al.*, 2010; [23] Green *et al.*, 2012). However, the literature continues to focus on how to recruit, engage and retain the younger generations of employees to fill gaps left in the workforce as the Baby Boomer generation reaches traditional retirement ages ([2] Aiman-Smith *et al.*, 2006; [42] Lindquist, 2008; [45] McDonald, 2008).

Social exchange and employee engagement

Social exchange theory provides a framework for understanding the role of reciprocity in motivating employees. The basic tenets of the theory posit that when employees feel valued and are treated fairly by their organization they will respond in kind by working harder and increasing discretionary effort ([15] Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986; [73] Shore and Shore, 1995; [90] Wayne *et al.*, 1997). The flip side of this theory suggests that employees who perceive their organization to be treating them unfairly will respond by reducing effort.

Employee engagement, which is a broad measure of employee reciprocity with the organization, has become a popular concern for business leaders ([71] Schneider *et al.*, 2009). [69] Saks (2006) has asserted, however, that "more and more employees of today are 'disengaged' and costing U.S. businesses \$300 billion a year in lost productivity" (p. 600). Disengagement has become even more pronounced during the recession ([60] Pryce-Jones, 2011). Thus, understanding the barriers to and facilitators of employee engagement has become a key goal in many organizations ([43] Lockwood, 2007; [57] Pitt-Catsoupes and Matz-Costa, 2009).

While employee engagement is a relatively new construct, it is rooted in a long history of other research on work motivation from theorists such as [47] Maslow (1954) and [28] Havighurst (1954). [36] Kahn (1990) defined it as the "harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694) Generally, engaged employees are willing to go the extra mile to make the organization succeed ([20] Glaspie and Nesbitt, 2004).

Although the situation is changing, most of what employers know about employee engagement comes from consultants and practitioners, many of whom have their own way of measuring the concept ([11] Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009; [46] Macey and Schneider, 2008; [69] Saks, 2006). These measures typically assess employees' perceptions that they are valued by the organization, employee loyalty and commitment to the organization, and their intent to contribute to the good of the organization. Employee engagement is believed to lead to many positive organizational outcomes for organizations, such as reduced turnover and increased productivity ([27] Harter *et al.*, 2002; [36] Kahn, 1990, [69] Saks, 2006;

[70] Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). These measures are not without controversy and have been the subject of much debate in terms of what they measure, the extent to which they are similar to and different from other familiar concepts such as job involvement and organizational commitment, and of course, whether employee engagement as assessed by vendors/consultants does produce positive outcomes for business ([46] Macey and Schneider, 2008; [91] Wefald and Downey, 2009). As [33] James *et al.* (2011) have noted there are too few studies of employee engagement from the practitioner literature to be making strong claims one way or another. Our study aims to be one small step in filling this gap by asking the extent to which perceptions of older workers are associated with one such measure of employee engagement. Whether justified or not, many employers believe that such instruments measure aspects of the job that, if modified, will improve engagement, and with it, performance and productivity ([91] Wefald and Downey, 2009), just as social exchange theory would predict ([15] Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986).

There is little research in the area of perceptions and stereotypes of older workers that can address the question of causation (including ours); several studies, however, have shown that negative perceptions based on age are associated with lower organizational commitment, one element of employee engagement ([34] Johnson and Neumark, 1997; [77] Snape and Redman, 2003). Indeed [77] Snape and Redman (2003) found that perceived age discrimination, whether for being "too old" or "too young" has "negative consequences for affective commitment to the organization" (p. 78). Under social exchange theory, such perceptions can be interpreted as losing faith in the organization's willingness to be fair in its transactions with employees ([35] Jones *et al.*, 2009). We therefore hypothesize:

H1. There will be a negative relationship, among workers of all ages, between the perception that older workers are less likely to be promoted than younger workers and employee engagement.

Given the recent trend of older workers' continuing work when they are eligible for retirement ([72] Shattuck, 2010), it would seem that those who perceive that they might be passed over for promotion opportunities would be less engaged than those who feel that they have equal opportunities in the workplace. [49] Miller *et al.* (1993), for example, reported that older workers who perceived preferential treatment of younger employees were more likely to report a low degree of job involvement.

As [63] Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) point out, employees who perceive that the organization values and rewards their contribution and cares about their well-being are more likely to express loyalty and commitment to the organization, in the form of greater engagement. Therefore, we expect that the perception that they are being denied opportunities for development and promotion might be more urgent and threatening for older workers than for younger workers who might even profit from discrimination of their older co-workers. The second hypothesis is thus:

H2. The relationship between the perception that older workers are less likely to be promoted than younger workers and employee engagement will be more negative for older workers than younger workers.

Despite perceptions to the contrary ([37] Kite *et al.*, 2005; [80] Sterns and Miklos, 1995), there is evidence that similar job conditions predict employee engagement for employees across age groups ([33] James *et al.*, 2011) and across the decades ([50] Montana and Lenaghan, 1999). Indeed, the wide range of ages working side by side in today's workplace adds to the complexity of the link between age and employee engagement. To what extent might the perception of unfair treatment of older workers relate to younger employees' engagement? On the basis of social exchange theory, we would expect that unfair treatment of any employee to be deemed unacceptable and therefore to depress employee engagement levels for employees of any age. Unfair treatment, the theory goes, violates the "reciprocity norm" - whereby the employer rewards the employee according to his or her contributions - and is thus an indicator of the employer's lack of concern for the employee's welfare ([63] Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Under these circumstances, the issue of whether employee treatment of older workers will affect employee engagement is the extent to which such treatment is perceived as fair or unfair. Might younger employees see it as only fair that older employees exit and give younger people the chances to assume new positions of leadership? If so, the fairness element of the reciprocity norm might be inactive; this perception then would not depress employee engagement. Similarly, people who believe that older workers lack the competencies for advancements, or that older workers are no longer interested in promotions, should not be less engaged if they perceive older workers as lacking promotion opportunities. Under these circumstances, the disparity in the awarding of promotions is unlikely to be perceived as discriminatory. Since it is in fact discriminatory, we refer to this view as "unintentional discrimination". Unintentional discrimination, or the idea the older adults may not have the competencies required for advancement, may affect older workers as negatively as intentional discrimination (the perception that older workers are fit for promotion, but are less likely to be promoted), but since unintentional discrimination does not violate the reciprocity norm, it is unlikely to affect the engagement levels of those who hold this view. Thus, we expect that the relationship with employee engagement will be more negative for intentional discrimination than for unintentional discrimination. Accordingly, our third hypothesis is:

H3. The relationship between the perception that older workers are less likely to be promoted than younger workers and employee engagement will be less negative for employees who perceive that older workers are less interested in, and fit for, promotions.

The relationship between age and employee engagement

Although some studies report that older workers are higher in employee engagement than younger workers ([33] James *et al.*, 2011; [65] Robinson *et al.*, 2004), others find they are lower ([83] te Brake *et al.*, 2008). Some of these inconsistencies may be explained by the fact that age is too often used as a control variable rather than as a central focus of study or as a possible moderator of other work-related factors ([6] Barnes-Farrell and Matthews, 2009; [55] Ng and Feldman, 2010; [84] Truxillo, 2009; [89] Warr, 1997). Moreover, it is rare to see a study of these relationships among workers over the age of 65. There is, however, a large body of research examining the relationship between age and job satisfaction ([55] Ng and Feldman, 2010). While overall there is typically a positive relationship, some findings suggest that age functions as a moderator of relationships between job satisfaction and specific aspects of the work environment. If, for example, older workers experience unfair treatment on

the basis of age, they will not experience the work environment as a "supportive and welcoming place" and will be less likely to be satisfied with the work ([3] Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2008; [5] Barnes-Farrell *et al.* , 2006).

Thus, our final research question examines the relationship between age and perceptions that older workers are less likely to be promoted than younger workers and that older workers are less interested in and fit for promotions with employee engagement. It is unclear in the previous literature how the relationship between the perceptions and employee engagement will vary with age. Therefore, we use our data in an exploratory way to identify any relationships and/or interactions between age, perceptions of discrimination and engagement.

Method

Data and sample

This study was conducted as part of a larger organizational research project focused on understanding the meaning of job quality and its impact on employee engagement among different populations of workers employed by a retail organization, "CitiSales" (a pseudonym). CitiSales is a large, national *Fortune* 500 retail firm with over 6,000 stores across the USA that has recently adopted a strategic commitment to creating an organizational culture that engages older workers.

Participants

All employees ($n = 8,433$) in 377 stores in three regions of the USA, two in the Midwest and one in the Southeast, were invited to participate in this study; 6,085 employees representing all ages and occupational categories participated, yielding a 72 percent response rate. Of the surveys collected, 6,047 were usable, to yield a final sample of 6,047[1] . Surveys could not be used if they were left blank or partially completed. For the current study, we focused on employees without any supervisory responsibilities, resulting in a sample of 4,713 employees in 377 stores. Our sample was 78 percent female, with 55 percent employed full-time and 83 percent hourly employees and 17 percent salaried. Hourly employees may work full-time or part-time and are entitled to overtime pay; salaried employees may also work full-time or part-time, but are not entitled to overtime. The employees ranged in age from 18 to 94, with 12 percent aged 55 and older.

Measures

Employee engagement

Employee engagement, assessed using an eight-item scale developed for CitiSales and used to measure employee engagement at that organization for several years. As mentioned, most of what we know about employee engagement as it is understood in the workplace comes from consultants and practitioners ([33] James *et al.* , 2011). Thus, as [91] Wefald and Downey (2009) have suggested, there is "confusion between industry and academics regarding the definition of engagement" and a need for industrial-based measures to permeate academic research (p. 142). There are differences, however.

As there is a great need for a better understanding of the correlates of these industrial-based measures, we have chosen to use one such measure[2] . (A full discussion of these issues can be seen in [33] James *et al.* , 2011).

Employees were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (on a five-point Likert scale) with each statement. A few examples of items were: "It would take a lot to get me to leave CitiSales", "I would like to be working for CitiSales one year from now", and "I am always willing to give extra effort to help CitiSales succeed". Responses were averaged to form a scale with a Cronbach's α of 0.92. Confirmatory factor analyses revealed a good fit for a single employee engagement factor ($\chi^2 = 13.30$, $df=5$, $p < 0.05$, GFI=1.00, RMSEA=0.019). Higher scores indicate greater employee engagement.

Unlikelihood for promotion

This variable was measured using the single-item question "Workers 55 and over are just as likely to be promoted as younger workers". Respondents indicated their level of agreement with the statement on a five-point Likert scale. Responses were reverse scored so that a high score would indicate that the respondent believed there was discrimination against older workers in that they are less likely to be promoted than younger workers, whereas a low score would indicate that the respondent did not perceive discrimination.

Unfitness for promotion

Unfitness for promotion, assessed using a four-item scale, asked employees the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (on a five-point Likert-scale) with the statements that "Workers 55 and over: adapt well to new technology; are eager for training; are flexible; and are interested in promotion". These items form a measure of employees' beliefs that older workers are both interested in, and fit for, promotions. Responses were reverse scored and averaged so that a high score on this scale would indicate that the respondent believed older workers were unfit for promotion. The Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.79. Confirmatory factor analyses revealed a good fit for a single factor ($\chi^2 = 2.52$, $df=1$, $p = 0.11$, GFI=1.00, RMSEA=0.018).

Age

Age was measured continuously with a range of 18 to 94 years of age ($M=34.5$, $SD=14.8$). Approximately 55 percent of the sample was aged 18 to 34, 25 percent was aged 35 to 49, 15 percent was aged 50 to 64, and 5 percent was aged 65 or older.

Control variables

Several demographic and job status effects were controlled in our analyses. These included, gender (1=female, 0=male), marital status (1=married or cohabitating, 0=not married or cohabitating), caregiving status (1=provided child or elder care on a regular basis, 0=did not provide care), race/ethnicity (1=white, 0=non-white), education (five-point scale ranging from 1="less than high school degree" to 5="Bachelor's degree or higher"), income (ten-point scale ranging from 1="under \$20,000 a

year" to 10="over \$100,000 a year"), tenure (six-point scale ranging from 1="less than six months with the organization" to 6="more than ten years with the organization"), work status (1=full-time, 0=part-time), and exemption status (1=salary, 0=hourly).

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of the outcome variable and predictor variables are shown in Table I [Figure omitted. See Article Image].

Analyses

Standard regression techniques assume that observations are independent. If this assumption is violated due to groups (such as employees in stores) and not controlled for in appropriate statistical models, the results may be biased ([40] Kreft and de Leeuw, 1998; [62] Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). We calculated the proportion of the variance in employee engagement, which was dependent on the store and regional level, using the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC). The degree of dependence at the regional level (ICC=0.003) was found to be negligible. However, the degree of dependence at the store level (ICC=0.058) was found to be significant. Although this ICC is rather low (only 6 percent of the variance at level 2), experts have shown that even very low ICCs, such as 0.01 can bias estimates ([4] Barcikowski, 1981). Therefore, to account for nested data structures in our analyses, we estimated multilevel mixed effects linear regression models using a two-level random effects model in which the employee-level intercept is allowed to vary freely across higher level units, in this case stores.

Missing data

A common issue with self-report data is that the number of responses to a given item may decrease due to lack of response to all items in the survey. Using list-wise deletion for our analyses would have resulted in a loss of 1,290 cases (27 percent of the sample). To avoid this loss, we used the multivariate imputation by chained equations (MICE) method ([87] van Buuren *et al.*, 1999). As advised by [88] von Hippel (2007), values were imputed for the dependent variable, but were restored to missing before proceeding with analyses, resulting in a final *n* of 4,713 (98 percent of the original sample). The results for each of the ten imputed datasets for the analyses in this paper were combined according to the rules proposed by [68] Rubin (1987).

Analyses

The models were built in a series of steps, beginning with a null or empty Model 0, followed by the addition of the control variables (Model 1). In Model 2, age, unlikelihood for promotion, and unfitness for promotion were added, followed next by the interactions between age and unlikelihood for promotion, age and unfitness for promotion, and unlikelihood for promotion and unfitness for promotion (Model 3). Finally, the three-way interaction between age, unlikelihood for promotion, and unfitness for promotion was added (Model 4). All predictors were added at level 1 (the employee level). No predictors were added at level 2 (the store level) and all slopes at level 1 were fixed.

Increases in the proportion of variance explained at each step were determined using the multilevel mixed effect linear regression model analogue of R^2 (pseudo R^2) at the employee level ([40] Kreft and de Leeuw, 1998).

All models were estimated using full maximum likelihood methods. To reduce multicollinearity, improve interpretability, and provide consistency across models, all independent variables, with the exception of dichotomous variables, were grand mean centered for this analysis ([18] Field, 2009).

Results

The results of models are presented in Tables II and III [Figure omitted. See Article Image.]. In the first model, the control variables account for 2.6 percent of the variance in employee engagement at level 1. In the second model, the main effects for the three predictor variables, unlikelihood for promotion, unfitness for promotion, and age account for an additional 13.4 percent of the variance in employee engagement at level 1. The negative relationship between the perception that older workers are less likely to be promoted than younger workers and employee engagement ($\gamma = -0.19$, t -ratio = -14.31, $p < 0.001$) supports *H1*. Additionally, the results show that there is a positive relationship between age and employee engagement ($\gamma = 0.01$, t -ratio = 7.66, $p < 0.001$) and a negative relationship between perceptions of older workers' unfitness for promotion and employee engagement ($\gamma = -0.19$, t -ratio = -10.04, $p < 0.001$).

In the third model, the two-way interactions between the main predictor variables account for an additional 0.1 percent of the variance. The second hypothesis, that the relationship between the unlikelihood for promotion and employee engagement would be more negative for older workers than younger workers is not supported ($\gamma = 0.00$, t -ratio = 0.30, $p > 0.05$). Additionally, the third hypothesis that the relationship between the unlikelihood of promotion and employee engagement would be less negative for employees that also perceive that older workers are unfit for promotion is not supported ($\gamma = -0.00$, t -ratio = -0.96, $p > 0.05$).

In the final model, the three-way interaction between the main predictors account for an additional 0.2 percent of the variance in employee engagement. The interaction between unlikelihood for promotion, unfitness for promotion, and age is a significant predictor of employee engagement ($\gamma = -0.003$, t -ratio = -3.23, $p < 0.001$), lending support for our exploratory question. This interaction is plotted in Figure 1 [Figure omitted. See Article Image.].

Figure 1 [Figure omitted. See Article Image.] shows that the negative relationship between perceiving that older workers are less likely to be promoted than younger workers and employee engagement is more negative for younger workers (age 35) than older workers (age 55) when the respondents also perceive that older workers are fit for promotion. This suggests that when discrimination is intentional, specifically older workers are seen as fit for promotion but less likely to receive that promotion; there is a stronger negative relationship for younger workers than for older workers. In contrast, the relationship between perceiving older workers are less likely to be promoted and employee engagement is more negative for older workers (age 55) than younger workers (age 35) when the respondents also perceive that older workers are unfit for promotion. This finding suggests that when the perceived discrimination

is unintentional, specifically older workers are less likely to be promoted but they are perceived as unfit for promotion, there is a stronger negative relationship with employee engagement for older workers than younger workers.

Discussion

On the basis of social exchange theory, we predicted that the perception of discrimination against older employees would be negatively related to the willingness on the part of all employees to reward the organization with discretionary effort. Thus, we asked: is the perception that older workers are discriminated against related to the employee engagement levels of both older and younger workers? Our study of over 4,500 employees in a retail setting suggests that it is.

Moreover, engagement levels tend to vary on the basis of whether employees view older workers as unfit for promotion. Included in our definition of unfitness for promotion is also the extent to which older workers are perceived as being interested in promotions. Even though it is clearly unfair and unjustified to judge employee competencies on the basis of age, we reasoned that if employees view older workers as unfit for promotions, they may not see disparate treatment as an intentional slight on the part of the employer. If disparate treatment is not perceived as unjust, or is perceived as unintentional, such disparities may be unlikely to depress employee engagement levels among employees who hold this view. Thus, we examined differences in employee engagement among employees who perceive intentional versus unintentional discrimination.

Our results show that overall employee engagement seems to be higher for older workers than younger workers which is consistent with previous research ([33] James *et al.* , 2011; [57] Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa, 2009). A key finding is that employee engagement among workers of all ages appears to be lower when employees perceive unfair discrimination in promotion decisions against older workers.

Age differences emerge however in the relationship between intentional and unintentional discrimination and employee engagement. When younger workers have the view that the discrimination is intentional, the relationship to employee engagement is more negative than it is for older workers. In contrast, the relationship is more negative for older workers than younger workers when employees view the discrimination to be unintentional. We will return to this issue in the "Summary and conclusions" section.

Intentional versus unintentional discrimination

We must underscore the reality that legal action is justified when older workers are deemed unfit for promotion on the basis of age. We have seen, however, that age discrimination can be perpetrated without the intention to do harm, but as a result of the belief that older workers are somehow different ([81] Stone *et al.* , 1992) and also not interested in training or promotion ([3] Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2008; [48] Maurer *et al.* , 2008). Indeed, ageism can operate outside of our awareness and without any ill-intent ([41] Levy and Banaji, 2004). We found that unintentional discrimination was more strongly related to employee engagement for older workers compared to younger workers, suggesting that we cannot overlook the harm to the organization perpetrated by managers who do not consider

older workers for advancement based on the belief that they do not qualify. Our study was unusual in that we asked older workers about their interest in promotions and their perceived developmental opportunities (see also [48] Maurer *et al.* , 2008). Thus, our study provides new insights about older worker perceptions of the current workplace culture.

Although other studies examine perceptions and stereotypes, as far as we know, we are the first to use such perceptions to construe the notion of unfitness for promotion. Thus our study is exploratory. That said, unfitness for promotion appears to play a key role in whether or not employees perceive discrimination against older workers. We know, too that stereotypes survive even the most deliberate attempts to disconfirm them ([31] Hilton and von Hippel, 1996). Until such time that stereotypes are less common than they are today, research that tests our model in different organizations and with more diverse samples might provide new angles on the relationships between employee perceptions and engagement, or on the relationships between these variables and other outcome measures such as employee relationships or employee assessments of their ability to continue working past conventional retirement years ([32] Ilmarinen, 2006).

In the current study, we could not examine perceptions that older workers should move out of the workplace to allow younger employees the opportunity to advance. We do, however, see it as adding to our argument for the importance of the fairness element of the reciprocity norm. That is, if some employees actually think it only fair that older workers move on so that younger workers can move up, they will not be less engaged due to disparate treatment. This notion that younger workers benefit from older workers' exit is another myth regarding older workers that refuses to go away despite evidence to the contrary. [25] Gruber *et al.* (2009), for example, found no evidence that inducing older persons to leave the labor force frees up jobs for the young. If anything, the opposite is true; paying for older persons to leave the labor force reduces the employment rate and increases the unemployment rate of youth and of persons in their prime age working years (see also [10] Cahill, 2011).

Our findings suggest that employers who intentionally discriminate against older workers may receive less involvement and commitment from all their employees. In some cases the employer may lose valued employees. Employers of today must recognize that current cohorts of older workers may be less likely than previous cohorts to follow the old pattern of slow withdrawal from work and may indeed still be interested in further development in their current role and even climbing the organizational ladder ([61] Quinn *et al.* , 2011).

Managers should be aware that negative attitudes and stereotypes are pervasive and unavoidable in today's workplace. [59] Posthuma and Campion (2009) suggest several recommendations for human resource practices that will help to eliminate age bias, including:

- develop the ability to recognize stereotyping when it happens;
- avoid thinking of age as the basis for layoff decisions;
- provide diversity training with age in the mix; and

- use older workers to their competitive advantage.

As [79] Stark (2009) asserts, evidence is starting to mount that older workers are becoming more aware of age bias and willing to take legal action.

Limitations

There are of course limitations to our study. We studied one age-friendly company, albeit with a sample encompassing three different regions, with a largely female workforce; therefore, we do not know whether our results would extend to other types of organizations or workers. We know that female older workers are more likely to be perceived negatively than male older workers ([21] Goldman *et al.* , 2006). We also know that age stereotypes are more prevalent in certain industries such as finance, insurance, technology, and retail ([59] Posthuma and Campion, 2009). Retail, in particular, is thought to be an industry for the young, with fewer growth opportunities for older workers ([8] Broadbridge, 2001).

Another limitation of this study is that it relies on cross-sectional data. For organizational research, survey designs have their appeal as a result of their cost and time efficiency, however there is limited ability to apply causation in these types of studies, thus, it is unclear whether perceptions of discrimination caused changes in the level of employee engagement or whether disengaged employees might see all manner of discrimination at play. We could only examine the relationship between the two.

Finally, our study examined employees' stereotypical perceptions; we have no data regarding the actual disparate treatment of older workers, nor any data regarding their competencies and productivity. In addition, our measure of unfitness for promotion is, as far as we know, unique. We cannot be sure that some employees might have answered the question negatively because they had the perception that older workers are more likely to get promoted. We leave it to future research to assess the strengths and weakness of this construct.

Summary and conclusions

The changing employment environment along with the forecast of an increase in the numbers of older employees in the workforce ([9] Brown *et al.* , 2007; [52] Munnell and Soto, 2011; [53] Munnell and Sunden, 2004; [78] Sorensen, 2007) compels further study. Our results indicate that perceived discrimination is related to lower levels of employee engagement (cf. [77] Snape and Redman, 2003). Further, we found that the perception of discrimination against older workers was negatively related to the levels of engagement of all employees, regardless of age. Findings such as these highlight the need to further examine attitudes towards older employees at all levels and in different types of organizations to identify the extent to which different perceptions are associated with individual differences among workers, i.e. the status of their job, the type of work they do, their level of seniority, their job tenure, or some combination of these factors.

Age discrimination has been described as "a pressing social and sociological issue as well as a fundamental ethical question of fairness and justice" ([66] Roscigno *et al.* , 2007, p. 314). Our finding of a stronger negative relationship with engagement and perceptions of intentional discrimination for younger employees may show that these employees are reacting to the basic unfairness of the situation, that age bias may be only part of the picture. The picture is more complex for older workers, who show a stronger relationship between engagement and perceptions of unintentional discrimination. Older workers may be more affected by the reality of their everyday work experiences in which they are perceived to be unfit for promotion. In fact, older workers may have begun to see themselves in a new category (i.e. older worker), and therefore vulnerable to perceptions and discriminatory behaviors in new ways. Such perceptions may be considered in one sense a "destruction of the self" and therefore likely to be harmful to the organization ([13] Dipboye and Colella, 2005).

In practical terms, the perception of discrimination, whether intentional or unintentional, against older workers across age groups and types of employees add up to a very difficult environment for managers. They have the complex balancing act of meeting the expectations and needs of a multi-generational workforce ([85] Twenge and Campbell, 2008). Many employees in the older cohorts still want and need training, development, and recognition for their work in terms of promotion. However, employees from the youngest cohort can become discouraged if they see all the opportunities and promotions going to workers from the older generations; indeed, younger workers are also given disparate treatment on the basis of age ([77] Snape and Redman, 2003). Determining which staff will be developed and promoted will have to be based on some transparent standard unrelated to age. This aspect of the manager's role will require nuanced training and development for both new and seasoned managers. They will need to be aware of the differences within their workforce and manage carefully to ensure retention and engagement from employees of all generations. An increase in more fine-grained research into this growing area will provide findings and recommendations that can help to support managers in their new environment.

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Footnote

1. Since all the data for this study were collected using self-reports, common method bias may present a problem. To assess this possibility, we used Harman's one-factor test ([58] Podsakoff *et al.* , 2003), where all of the study variables are entered into a factor analysis to assess whether a single factor emerges that accounts for all or the majority of the variance. If this occurs, then the threat of common method bias increases. We conducted two confirmatory factors analyses. In the first model, the common-factor model, all of the items were loaded onto a single factor resulting in a poor model fit ($\chi^2 = 9,488.96$, $df=77$, $p < 0.001$, $GFI=0.73$, $RMSEA=0.18$). In the second model, the hypothesized latent

variable model, the items were set to load on their hypothesized latent variables resulting in an improved model fit ($\chi^2 = 167.14$, $df = 36$, $p < 0.001$, $GFI = 0.99$, $RMSEA = 0.027$). If common method bias were a problem, we would expect that the common-factor model would show a better fit than would the hypothesized latent variable model.

2. While it would have been valuable to this research to have included both practitioner and academic measures, we were restricted both in terms of the length of the survey and the employer's explicit interest in this measure for comparison to internal data collections.

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Illustration

Figure 1: Three-way interaction between older workers' unlikelihood for promotion, older workers' (OW) unfitness for promotion, and age predicting employee engagement

Table I: Summary of intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations

Table II: Summary of multilevel mixed effects linear regression models for the unlikelihood of promotion and unfitness for promotion predicting employee engagement by age

Table III: Summary of multilevel mixed effects linear regression models for the unlikelihood of promotion and unfitness for promotion predicting employee engagement by age

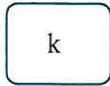
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