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Commentary

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Multifaceted, Nuanced Personnel Decisions Necessitate Multifaceted, Nuanced Age Research Approaches

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Age stereotypes are beliefs and expectations about individuals based on their age group membership (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). In their focal commentary, Murphy and DeNisi (2021) make a strong case encouraging greater research on the nature and impact of age stereotypes in the workplace. We concur with this general view: a stronger research emphasis on age stereotypes and age bias will advance understanding of how age stereotypes affect older individuals' experiences and outcomes in the workplace, and hopefully provide answers to many unsettled questions.

Nevertheless, we diverge from Murphy and DeNisi's perspective in two key ways. First, we disagree with their argument that age stereotypes' effects are overstated in experimental work; rather, we argue that methodological and conceptual shortcomings underlie the lack of consistency in current findings. We support our claims with evidence from correspondence field studies carried out in economics research, which may offer a more accurate and reliable documentation of age bias on the labor market (Bendick, et al., 1999; Lahey, 2008; Neumark et al., 2019; Riach & Rich, 2006, 2007, 2010).

Second, albeit somewhat in line with Murphy and Denisi's argument that "the content of age stereotypes is complex," (Murphy & DeNisi, 2021), we argue that a departure from one-size-fits-all approaches to studying age would further advance our field. Integrating a *multidimensional* framework of conceptualizing age, where other age-related factors are considered (e.g., generation, life stage, tenure, experience) coupled with an *intersectional* approach exploring the interplay of age and other social categories, will clarify and advance current age scholarship. Relatedly, we believe that a focus on more precise methodology will help advance research and paint a more realistic, multifaceted picture of the older worker experiences.

correspondence studies underscore the gravity of age bias

Although the vast majority of management and organizational psychology scholarship relies almost exclusively on survey and experimental approaches, labor economists predominantly utilize correspondence field studies. Such studies—also known as experimental audit studies—involve sending out pairs of fictitious resumes matched on all job-related characteristics except for age, and track job interview callbacks (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Unlike laboratory experiments that are often criticized for relying on "paper people" (Murphy & DeNisi, 2021), and hypothetical hiring decisions made by experimental participants (e.g., Zaniboni et al., 2019), correspondence studies garner actual employer responses in the field. Moreover, employer callbacks tend to be predictive of hiring outcomes (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Lahey, 2008: Nunley et al., 2015) and thus considered evidence of discrimination. Correspondence studies are designed to utilize the strength of experimental control studies by having identical profiles apply for real jobs, but present several advantages over laboratory experiments, such as collecting substantially larger samples and reducing experimenter effects (Neumark et al., 2017). Moreover, because correspondence studies measure real-world job outcomes, they are typically regarded as the most reliable means of measuring labor market discrimination (Baert, 2017; Neumark, 2012).

Several correspondence studies report significant age discrepancies in employment outcomes. Among the first such studies, Bendick et al. (1999) reported a discrepancy of 41% in positive response rates between older and younger job applicants displaying the same qualifications. Investigating entry-level or close-to-entry labor market options for women ages 35–62, Lahey (2008) uncovered a similar age discrepancy rate, such that younger applicants are 42% more likely to be invited for a job interview compared with their older counterparts. Buttressing both of these formative studies, Neumark et al. (2019) sent out a total of 40,000 job applications across 11 U.S. states, finding robust evidence of age discrimination against older individuals, in particular women close to retirement age. Specifically, older applicants across the two genders received on average 35% fewer callbacks than younger and middle-aged applicants. This is noteworthy, as these studies involved sending out resumes matched all on characteristics, except for age which was indicated via year of high school or college graduation, a common practice among job applicants in the U.S. Comparable findings were reported in field studies conducted in Europe, where older applicants faced significantly higher rates of discrimination compared with younger applicants (Riach & Rich, 2006, 2007, 2010). Thus, these trends do not appear to be U.S. specific. Overall, the evidence from these large-scale correspondence studies, spanning multiple occupations and job levels, supports experimental laboratory studies claiming that age indeed predicts reduced hiring opportunities for older individuals.

Audit findings might suggest that age bias effects are not necessarily magnified in experimental research, but instead, that variance in observed effects might be attributed to methodological inconsistencies in existing research. Much of previous empirical work involved between-subject designs where decisions are made based on a single candidate evaluation, in reduced-information, low-stakes environments. Complicating matters further, wide discrepancies in older age operationalization, or lack thereof—loosely using the term "older age"—coupled with an overreliance on prototypical male targets might yield a higher degree of inconclusiveness (Bal et al., 2011; North, 2019). To rectify these varying results, we suggest examining age from a broader, more comprehensive perspective, moving beyond chronological age alone. For instance, taking into consideration additional age-related dimensions, such as generation, age-implied life stage, tenure, and experience (GATE; North, 2019), would help solve some of the existing ambiguities. Larger-scale correspondence studies assessing profiles of individuals of different older ages (old-old vs. young-old), with different levels of experience and organizational tenure (e.g., 5 vs. 25 years), or belonging to different generations (Boomers vs. GenXers) might provide a more accurate measure of the extent of discrimination experienced by the older workforce, and the causes thereof. Such a multidimensional approach may clarify how seemingly overstated "age" effects are due to age's status as an ambiguous proxy for several, more predictive factors, such as tenure or experience.

the need to unpack the complexity of age and related intersectionalities in organizational studies

In addition to methodological improvements and multidimensional approaches, we contend that future research would benefit from adopting intersectional perspectives of age. By examining the interplay of age and other social categories (Kulik et al., 2007). Murphy and DeNisi (2021) accurately remark that the effects of age stereotypes may vary depending on other intersectional identities (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) and call for more attention to the issue of prototypicality. This view dovetails with the apt critique that the age space offers predominantly White, male, middle-to-upper-class male perspectives (Finkelstein, 2020). Such homogeneous approaches fail to acknowledge how all older workers belong to more than one social group simultaneously. By treating "older workers" as a monolithic group (Marcus & Fritzsche, 2015), current research yields an incomplete and potentially distorted picture of the organizational challenges faced by the older workforce.

A handful of studies do explore the intersection of age with gender, albeit with mixed results. Some find that older women experience higher rates of hiring discrimination and other negative workplace outcomes compared to younger women and older men (Duncan & Loretto, 2004; Marcus et al., 2019; Neumark et al., 2019). Nevertheless, others argue that older women, viewed as nonprototypical group members, are able to evade the discriminatory treatment faced by older men (Martin et al., 2019; Ruggs et al., 2014). Furthermore, recent experimental evidence examining the intersectionality of age and race reveals that whereas no differences emerged for applicants in their 50s, as age increases to 60 and above, White applicants seem to be preferred to Black applicants (Lahey & Oxley, 2021). Clearly, more consistent conclusions will become apparent as this area grows from its nascent phase. More broadly, such intersectional approaches to age will best unpack where and when older workers are most susceptible to discrimination, or how age-related dimensions (such as tenure or experience; North & Shakeri, 2019) potentially combine with other social categories to foster disparate outcomes among different-aged workers.

A final, critical area of future research should explore how age bias potentially affects workers across the entire age spectrum, not just older workers (Li et al., 2021). Whereas Murphy and Denisi (2021) appear to emphasize the impact (or apparent lack thereof) of older age stereotypes only, it is commonly known that younger adults and workers face their own obstacles (i.e., youngism; Francioli & North, 2021). From this perspective, lack of documented age discrepancies might simply be an artifact of researchers overlooking ageism at any age, so to speak. Exploring how age bias potentially affects the entire age spectrum remains a critical future area to better understand whether or not age stereotypes translate into organizational discrepancies as much as researchers assert.

conclusion

Although we contradict some of Murphy and DeNisi's (2021) arguments that scholars overclaim the impact of negative age stereotypes on organizational outcomes, we agree with their general suggestion that research in this area must clarify noted ambiguities. Greater diversity in this space—both methodologically (via correspondence studies) and theoretically (via more nuanced views of age and its related intersectionalities)—promises to rectify these very valid concerns.

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