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The Gendered Face of Ageism in the Workplace

Jasmin Tahmaseb McConatha
Department of Psychology, West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Kumar, V. K.
Department of Psychology, West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Jaqueline Magnarelli
Department of Psychology, West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Georgina Hanna
Department of Psychology, West Chester University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores perceived age discrimination in the workplace. Increasing age diversity in the workplace has led to an associated increase in ageism. While a large percentage of older workers report being subjected to discriminatory treatment in the workplace, ageism also appears to be gendered. Older female workers are being victimized at a greater rate than their male counterparts. The intersection of age, gender, and other forms of discrimination results in increased stress, threatens the well-being of workers of all ages, and creates a toxic workplace climate. Analysis of 244 participants' responses to open-ended items indicated that ageism is prevalent in the workplace and threatens work and life satisfaction. In this study, both male and female participants were negatively affected by ageism in the workplace, although the female participants reported experiencing workplace discrimination more frequently. Qualitative analysis identified several important themes relating to ageism; these included threats to feelings of competence; self-doubt and helplessness; being subjected to momism; feeling isolated and lonely; and gradual disengagement from the workplace. The results are discussed in relation to workplace inclusivity and individual, organizational, and societal consequences of age discrimination.

Keywords: ageism, ageism, workplace discrimination, gendered discrimination, life satisfaction, older adults, loneliness, and isolation.

THE GENDERED FACE OF AGEISM IN THE WORKPLACE

Ageism is a widespread global reality. Described as the third great 'ism' after racism and sexism, it involves stereotyping and/or discriminating against a person or group based on age (WHO, 2021; Palmore, 2001). While not widely acknowledged, it is the most universal of the isms; it can be experienced by anyone who lives long enough. As people live longer, healthier lives, they also stay in the workforce longer (Choi-Allum, 2022). The ADEA (Age Discrimination in Employment Act) was passed in 1967 to protect older workers. However, legal protections have not been sufficient to combat age discrimination in the workplace, particularly as the number of older workers has increased. In 2020, over one-third of the workforce was over 50, and 26

% were over 65 (Urwin, 2022). Recent studies indicate that 62 % of workers over 50 have faced some form of workplace discrimination (Choi-Allum, 2022).

An increasingly diverse workforce has also been a factor in an increase in discrimination in the workplace and elsewhere (AARP, 2018). The intersection of age, gender, and other forms of discrimination results in increased stress and threats to the well-being of workers. It also creates a toxic workplace climate. Discrimination against older workers, like other forms of discrimination, has widespread negative personal and social consequences (Jackson, 2013).

The contemporary workplace is saturated with youth-focused buzz-word associations like "innovative," "energetic," and "flexible." In contrast, older workers are often described in stereotypical ways with labels such as "stubborn," "change resistant," "unhealthy," and "costly." Ageist stereotypes are deeply rooted in cultural values and norms that denigrate aging and foster a belief that older workers are less competent, less trainable, and less able to cope with technological change than younger workers (Meshi et al., 2020). Exploring the impact of age discrimination in the workplace and its consequences on life satisfaction and job engagement (cognitive, physical, and emotional engagement), one study indicated that ageism resulted in a less favorable intergenerational workplace climate (McConatha et al., 2022). The researchers found that perceived workplace discrimination was significantly related to lower life satisfaction.

By 2030, twenty percent of all adults will be over 65 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). A large percentage of these elders will remain in the workplace until well into their seventies (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021; Gurchiek, 2021). As older workers stay in the workplace longer, they also increasingly report mistreatments including not having contributions acknowledged, being left out of decision-making, training, and planning, and being treated in a disrespectful and denigrating manner (Blackstone, 2013; AARP, 2018). In one AARP survey of 3,900 employees, 12% felt they were not promoted because of their age (AARP, 2018). Restructuring and downsizing have also increased fears relating to job security resulting in competitive tensions between younger and older workers (Roscigno, 2010).

Age discrimination in the workplace and elsewhere has negative consequences for the individual, the workplace, and society. Depression, anxiety, isolation, loneliness, and a decline in overall well-being have been reported by those victimized (Shippee et al., 2019). Toxic work environments can push people to question their ability to complete work tasks, their sense of mastery, their sense of self, and their overall life satisfaction (Tahmaseb McConatha et al., 2022). As a result, older workers may struggle with increased anxiety and stress and decreased self-worth (Kang & Kim, 2022). Age discrimination can make it more difficult to view the aging experience positively, increasing aging anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Bergman & Segel-Karpas, 2021). All too often, older workers struggle silently, personalizing mistreatment (Choi-Allum, 2022; Brownell & Kelly, 2013). According to AARP surveys, very few of those who experienced age discrimination filed an official complaint, indicating that the problem is significantly more widespread than documented (Perron, 2018).

Gendered Face of Ageism

Age discrimination is not equal; ageism tends to be gendered. Women's participation in the workforce has increased steadily since the 1970s, with more women in the workforce

(Krivkovich et al., 2022). At the same time, women continue to struggle with pay inequality and discrimination in the workplace. Studies exploring the well-being of working women have indicated that women are more likely to be victimized by all forms of discrimination, including ageism (Allen et al., 2022). In one study of 6,642 women over 18, 63% of those over 50 stated that they were discriminated against (Childs & Houghton, 2022). Women, particularly women of color, are further subjected to the intersecting prejudices of age, ethnicity, and gender bias (Barrington, 2015; Childs & Houghton, 2022). For example, 70 % of African American women over 50 reported workplace discrimination (Crouch, 2022).

Older women face ageism in the workplace, they also struggle to find work and for equal pay. Ageism persistently impedes women's chances of full-time work (AARP, 2021). In a survey conducted in 2021, over half of the women seeking employment, 31% of these, believed that employers did not hire them based on their age. One in three women aged 50 and up stated concerns over financial security compared to one in four men (Crouch, 2022). Women often work as registered nurses, elementary and middle school teachers, secretaries, and administrative assistants. At the same time, in these positions, there are pay differences; for example, 2,186,697 women and 336,793 men work as full-time registered nurses; however, women make less yearly (68,509) compared to men (73,603) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019).

Age discrimination is a significant source of stress for both younger and older working adults, particularly women (Shippee et al., 2019). For younger women, the stress is linked to the need to prove themselves as competent employees. For older working women, the stress devolves from the need to combat a lack of respect from other employers and other employees. Working women report fighting against ageist assumptions about competence and skills, particularly computer skills, a conflict that leads to feelings of isolation and marginalization (Childs & Houghton, 2022). Youth-based appearance standards are also a source of stress for older female workers (Cecil, 2022).

Post-Pandemic Ageism in the Workplace

The pandemic resulted in significant changes to the workplace. It increased unemployment rates and required remote work and corporate restructuring (Coco, 2022). Older adult workers have faced even more significant challenges since the Covid-19 pandemic. From the image of older vulnerable workers susceptible to serious infection to perceptions that older workers are less technologically competent, older workers are increasingly struggling to combat negative stereotypes. Such biased images also influence employers' selection of older adults as new employees (Morrow-Howell et al., 2020). As older workers, who may have left the workplace or been laid off, struggle to return to the workforce. Many of them are facing new challenges. Although older workers have been shown to be reliable and dependable, the social framing of older workers as frail, vulnerable, and undependable has resulted in concerns about hiring older adults (Tahmaseb McConatha & Schnell, 2020). Some employers have taken advantage of biased framing and have hired older adults only if they are willing to accept lower pay (Coco, 2022). During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, social media, newspapers, and the press fictitiously labeled older adults as helpless, not of use, and weak, which, in part, bolstered this trend in hiring discrimination (Ayalon et al., 2020; Schnell et al., 2021).

Ageism is at an all-time high. As a result, there is a need to explore the ageist experiences of workers, particularly older female workers. The analysis of older workers' perceptions of their

working conditions can help raise awareness of ageism and other forms of discrimination. Such awareness can also lead to programs and services that might help to combat ageist practices. This study aims to assess perceived age discrimination in the workplace and explore the psychological and social consequences of age discrimination. More specifically, this study explores perceptions of discrimination, stress, and workplace satisfaction among faculty and staff in an academic setting.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Procedures

An email with a survey link was sent to 1,015 faculty, and 805 staff members at a mid-sized University in the U.S. Participation was voluntary, and participants were told their responses would be anonymously recorded. Seventeen percent of faculty and 12% of staff members responded to the survey. Of 244 respondents, 128 identified as female (56 identified themselves as men, and 60 did not specify). Of those who identified themselves as women, 51% (n = 65) stated that they experienced some form of age discrimination, most of whom (n = 41) were age 50 or older (see McConatha, et. al. 2022). Nine open-ended items on the survey probed overall satisfaction with work experiences, ageist experiences at work, consequences of ageist treatment in the workplace, perceptions of stress related to ageism, life satisfaction, work satisfaction, psychological effects of work experiences, career and personal goals, and plans.

The final participant pool consisted of 168 total participants, with instructional faculty making up the majority (n=111), staff (n=57), and administrators (n=8). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 80. Those over the age of 50 made up the highest age group (n=58), followed by 40 to 49 years old (n=21) and 30 to 29 (n=21). There were 116 females and 51 males, most identified as White Caucasian-Non-Hispanic (n=132) with African American/Black (n=12), Asian (n=6), Hispanic or Latino (n=3), and Middle Eastern (n=1). Education levels ranged from a High School Diploma (including some college, but no degree) (n=13), Associate Degree (n=7), Bachelor's (n=23), Master's (n=37), and Doctoral/Professional (including JD, MD) (n=94). Two participants declined to give their education level. Qualitative data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) involving identifying themes indicating ageist treatment led to several related themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis indicated that the majority of participants who reported age discrimination were over 50 and female. Of those who reported being negatively affected by perceptions of workplace discrimination, 56 were female, and 17 were male. Analysis indicated that 22.67 % (n = 17) experienced helplessness, self-doubt, powerlessness, and a lack of trust in others. Sixteen percent (n= 12) felt invisible, othered, and marginalized. Another 16 % felt self-image threats, and 11 % felt less competent and disengaged and distanced themselves from their jobs as a result of mistreatment. The following primary themes, ageist experiences, threats to feelings of competence and helplessness, self-doubt, isolation, and loneliness, are discussed in more detail below.

A greater number of women stated that they had experienced age discrimination in the workplace. Fifty-six women and seventeen men reported ageist experiences. Thematic analysis of open-ended questions identified several related themes by those who reported ageism. Recurrent themes were identified as: Feelings of helplessness; marginalization, loneliness, and

isolation; invisibility and self-silencing; concerns relating to technology; lowered life satisfaction; threats to competence; and "momism."

Helplessness: Seventeen participants explicitly stated they felt helpless, self-doubt, sadness, and growing powerlessness. Statements by those over 50 regarding helplessness included:

"I am beginning to feel that I cannot do anything. Every time I suggest something, my colleagues appear to consider it, but then they go in a different direction, ultimately completely ignoring my ideas."

"I cannot remember the exact wording, but I have overheard my colleagues saying – is she not retirement age."

"I feel that I get very little positive affirmation for the hard work I put in."

Marginalization, loneliness, and isolation: Several participants (n = 26) stated that they felt increasingly marginalized, lonely, invisible, isolated, and othered as they got older. Statements below are examples of comments by older workers:

"Last week, I was 15 minutes late to a meeting, and they had already moved on from important discussions without my input. This is the first time I was ever late; when others are not there, we make certain to wait or to hear what they have to say. I tried to express my views, but I was talked over as if I had not spoken."

"I feel like I cannot talk with anyone at work anymore. There is lots of discussion about community, but no one wants to hear anything I have to say. I have just learned to be quiet."

"I feel like I am alone at work. It is a lonely feeling."

Invisibility and self-silencing: Sixteen percent (n = 12) reported that they felt invisible, dismissed, marginalized, irrelevant, and othered. For example, one older woman said: "When you are young, you are not respected; when you pass 50, you are not respected; it seems there is only a narrow winder in the middle when age is an advantage, at least for a woman. I often feel pushed to the side."

"I often speak up in meetings, but my comments are also often not acknowledged. I feel like I may as well not be there."

Several participants (n=10), particularly the female participants, also stated that they engaged in self-silencing, avoided expressing their feelings, and felt compelled to accept mistreatment. As a result, they became increasingly disengaged, worked less, and were less enthusiastic about work.

"It is difficult to separate the discriminations, I feel. Is it because I am a Latina or an older woman? But I definitely feel I am talked down to, especially regarding technology."

A male professor of 58:
"I was hired ten years ago, and at the time, the committee who interviewed me kept asking me how long I planned to stay. They assumed I would leave soon to retire; I suppose."

Technological Competence: Competence relating to technology was mentioned as a point of discriminatory treatment by several older participants.

"I asked a colleague about his computer, and he said, oh, it is easy to use. My mother just got one. Even she finds it easy."

"When I call the help desk, they frequently ask me simplified questions such as is everything plugged in?" Or "Have you tried turning your computer on and off?"

"Whenever there is a problem with the projection in my classroom or on Zoom, I get the feeling that they assume it is my lack of competence that is the cause."

Life Satisfaction and well-being - Consequences of ageism in the workplace: Reduced work and life satisfaction were mentioned as outcomes of ageist treatment. Several women stated that because of mistreatment, they were less satisfied with their work, and as a result, their overall life satisfaction declined. The majority of those who experienced discrimination (over 80 %) said it had negatively influenced their overall well-being, increased their stress levels at work, and negatively influenced their work-life balance. Overall, older faculty women reported lowered professional expectations, disengagement from their jobs, reduced working hours, and self-silencing. They also stated that due to ageist treatment by younger colleagues, they avoided interactions with colleagues of different ages and generations. Several were even planning to quit or retire earlier than they had hoped. Additionally, the analysis revealed that those who reported age discrimination also frequently experienced high-stress levels at work, perceiving a lack of support, stressful interactions with colleagues, being the recipient of disrespectful communication, and feelings of powerlessness because of lack of input and feeling left out of decision-making processes.

Momism: Several of the female participants stated that they felt that they were being treated as someone's mother or grandmother instead of a professional, a teacher, or professor.

Discussion

This study identifies the prevalence of ageism in the workplace and sheds light on the negative social and psychological consequences of being victimized by ageism. The findings support past research indicating that older workers, especially older female workers frequently faced ageism in the workplace. The findings are consistent with past research (Blackstone, 2013; Brownell & Kelly, 2013). Given that age discrimination is a widespread and growing problem, employers need to become aware of discrimination's personal and financial costs (AARP, 2021). The findings can inform strategies for reducing ageism and promoting inclusiveness in the workplace. As this and other studies indicate, ageism continues to be deeply ingrained and systemic. It can influence well-being at multiple levels, the individual level, the organizational level, and the societal level. Ageism relegates older adults to a reduced social status. It leads to invisibility, marginalization, and social exclusion. Age discrimination in the workplace leads to inequalities in how workers are treated. Discriminatory treatment leads to reduced well-being

by older workers and the potential internalization of negative ageist stereotypes. The accumulation of ageist treatment in the workplace can have long-term devastating consequences for the individual and the workplace. As people live longer and the percentage of older adults increases, ageism may increase further. Diversity and Inclusion programs in the workplace often do not address ageism. It is important to consider that age discrimination, like other forms of discrimination, negatively influences the well-being of workers of all ages and backgrounds.

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