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Stereotype Threat and Aging in the Workplace

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Synonyms

Aging workforce; Employee retention; Job attitudes; Mature age workers; Social identity threat; Stereotyping

Definition

Stereotype threat is the concern that others are evaluating you through the lens of negative group-based stereotypes (Steele 1997). Over the past two decades, hundreds of laboratory studies have demonstrated that stereotype threat disrupts performance when people attempt difficult tasks in domains in which they are negatively stereotyped, such as women in math and African Americans in academics (Nguyen and Ryan 2008). It has been over a decade since this research was extended to older adults. Here too the accumulated research evidence demonstrates that older adults are susceptible to the performance-impairing effects of stereotype threat (Abrams et al. 2006). Although the majority of stereotype threat research has examined performance decrements, a smaller body of research demonstrates stereotype threat can lead people to disengage from domains in which they feel stereotyped. Although every job involves being judged by other people, employees from negatively stereotyped groups such as older workers have the added concern of being judged on the basis of stereotypes about their group. Importantly, it is not necessary for people to believe the stereotype is true of their group to experience stereotype threat, nor is it necessary that they believe that the stereotype describes themselves. Stereotype threat effects emerge when people worry that others *might* evaluate them on the basis of the stereotype. This entry discusses the concept of stereotype threat and its relevance for older employees and the organizations who employ them.

Stereotyping and the Aging Workforce

Over the next few decades, the aging demographic will pose major challenges in the workforce in most industrialized nations. These developments have led policy makers and organizations to try to retain older employees for as long as possible. For example, in Australia the predicted labor shortage and pension burden have prompted the government to introduce financial incentives to delay retirement, with the pension age increasing to 70 years by 2035. While government inducements are undoubtedly important in helping to retain older employees, it is equally important to examine the psychological factors that may affect well-being in the workplace and, ultimately, retirement decisions.

There are numerous stereotypes about older employees, and thus stereotype threat is a psychological factor that seems likely to be of particular importance. While some of these stereotypes are positive perceptions that reflect perceived gains in "wisdom," more common are negative perceptions that

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emphasize reductions in "wit." Older adults are often stereotyped as inflexible, frail, incompetent, out of touch, and slow, and consequently it comes as no surprise that older employees are susceptible to stereotype threat.

In the first demonstration of stereotype threat in late adulthood, older adults who were told that age leads to poorer memory performance did worse on a memory test than those who were told that older adults often perform just as well as younger adults (Hess et al. 2003). One reason stereotype threat disrupts older adults' performance is that it consumes their working memory resources (Mazerolle et al. 2012). Interestingly, performance deficits under conditions of stereotype threat are more pronounced among the young-old (i.e., 60–70 years) than the old-old (71–82 years) and among those with higher levels of education (Hess et al. 2009). There is now more than a decade of accumulated research on aging and stereotype threat, and a recent meta-analysis revealed that these performance decrements emerged across a range of cognitive domains (e.g., memory and arithmetic) as well as physical tasks (e.g., flexibility and driving performance) (Abrams et al. 2006).

Stereotype Threat and Mature-Age Workers

Age-related stereotypes also exist about older workers: Although research has consistently demonstrated that workers' age is generally unrelated to job performance (Ng and Feldman 2008), many people continue to hold negative opinions about older workers. Research has demonstrated that younger workers rate older workers as having lower job qualifications and less potential for development. Older workers are also viewed as less productive, less flexible, and less willing to learn than their younger counterparts (Posthuma and Campion 2009). In short, stereotypes relating to older employees are consistently negative and generalize across most occupational settings. Although industries such as law and academia tend to value older employees for their experience and connections, in most vocational settings older employees report feeling that they have been put out to pasture and believe that their younger counterparts are given more training opportunities and are more likely to be assigned to high visibility projects. For all of these reasons, older workers are likely to experience stereotype threat, as they have good reason to worry that their colleagues are evaluating them on the basis of the "older worker" stereotype.

Beyond Performance Decrements

In the original theoretical description of stereotype threat, Steele (1997) described two types of consequences. First, he proposed that acute experiences of stereotype threat would lead to performance deficits, and this consequence is now well documented in laboratory studies (although this line of research has not been extended into the workplace yet). In contrast, the other consequence proposed by Steele has received much less attention. Specifically, Steele also suggested that chronic experiences of stereotype threat should lead people to disengage from the stereotyped domain over time. This possibility is of great potential importance for both organizations and older employees, as disengagement from work and the organization is associated with a variety of negative job attitudes (e.g., lowered job satisfaction) and greater to intentions to quit.

To examine the relationship between stereotype threat and disengagement, job attitudes and turnover intentions were assessed among employees aged 50 or older in Australia and the USA (von Hippel et al. 2013). Across three diverse samples (i.e., traditional office environment, law enforcement, and a general internet survey), older employees who experienced stereotype threat at work were less satisfied with their jobs, were less committed to their employer, and reported more work-related mental health

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problems. Negative job attitudes are important variables in their own right, but reduced job satisfaction and commitment are also associated with increased intentions to resign and retire. And thus it is not surprising that negative job attitudes were related to an increased interest in resigning and retiring among older employees. Interestingly, older employees who occupied higher status positions within their organizational hierarchy experienced less stereotype threat than their lower status counterparts, suggesting that not all older employees are equally susceptible to stereotype threat.

Negative workplace attitudes have been shown to impact performance, leading people to be less productive. If older employees who experience stereotype threat also show performance decrements (as seems likely given the robust effects of stereotype threat on cognitive performance in controlled lab-based studies), it could lead their colleagues to believe that stereotypes about older employees are true. Poignantly, the end result is a self-fulfilling prophecy and a self-perpetuating cycle of stereotype threat which has negative consequences both for the older worker and the organizations who employ them.

The Ubiquity and Subtlety of Stereotype Threat in Everyday Life

Stereotype threat is something that nearly everyone will experience at one time or another. For example, when a female driver makes a mistake and another driver beeps his horn, she may have a niggling feeling that the male driver attributed her driving mistake to the fact that she is a woman. These same feelings can arise for older employees in the workplace. For example, if older employees' recommendations are passed over in favor of suggestions put forward by younger colleagues, they may worry that age was a factor in this decision. It is these types of subtle experiences in the workplace that can make people wonder whether they *might* be being evaluated on the basis of stereotypes about their group. Consider these comments made by older employees who reported sometimes feeling stereotyped at work based on their age:

> Because I am now older than many of our clients, I get the impression it is felt that I no longer am 'in touch' with the clients, despite the fact my specialist knowledge means I have a good understanding of my area. Because my organisation is 'innovative', 'cutting edge' and encouraging of new ideas, it is sometimes assumed anyone over 40 won't have any ideas worth listening to. Or am I just old and paranoid and idealess?
>
> I sometimes feel that I am invisible because of my age (at work). I have difficulty at times with getting people to include me and listen to me.
>
> I believe that perceptions around my age tend to exclude me from the mentoring program and leadership development. Due to now being an 'empty nester' I have more than ample time to commit to my work – but I think that because of my age, I am not utilised enough.
>
> I feel very comfortable in my position but I think that people sometimes view my age as a burden, especially young people that think you are too old to be working and that they should have all the opportunities over older workers.

In none of these examples is it clear that the subjective experiences these employees described reflect actual stereotyping on the part of their colleagues. Rather, it is their concern of being stereotyped that constitutes stereotype threat. These examples illustrate that overt discrimination is not necessary for older employees to feel stereotype threat. Rather, subtle events can occur in the workplace that make people wonder whether they *might* be being evaluated on the basis of stereotypes about their group. For example, a technologically capable older employee may worry that his preference for a paper diary will confirm the stereotype that older employees are less willing to learn new technologies, and that he will be judged as less technically skilled or valuable as a result. It is also important to note that the accuracy of the stereotype (about oneself or the target group in general) is irrelevant to whether people experience stereotype threat. Indeed laboratory research often reveals that it is the exceptionally talented members of the stereotyped group (e.g., female math majors at top ranked universities) who are most susceptible to stereotype threat.

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Many workplaces are replete with reminders that certain groups are devalued, such as a small proportion of minorities or women in the upper echelons of the organization. For older employees, these reminders may even be well intentioned. For example, offers of help by younger employees to their older counterparts (e.g., to carry a heavy or unwieldy object or to help unjam the photocopier) may be interpreted as a sign of being stereotyped. Other cues may not be as well intentioned, such as patronizing tones or social exclusion – cues that appear in the earlier quotes from older employees who experienced stereotype threat. Regardless of the specific reminders, workplaces that contain many such cues are likely to lead to chronic feelings of stereotype threat for older employees. Under situations such as these, employees may experience stereotype threat from the moment they walk in the office door each morning until they leave at the end of the day. The end result would be the stringing together of a series of acute events into a chronically aversive state. It is easy to imagine how a situation such as this could lead to work-related mental health problems and ultimately premature retirement.

What Can Be Done?

The experience of stereotype threat at work may counteract efforts to retain older employees in the workforce. As a consequence, it is important to take action to neutralize stereotype threat in the workplace to avoid the unnecessary loss of older workers as well as to increase workers' satisfaction and well-being. Unfortunately, despite hundreds of studies documenting the negative effects of stereotype threat, there is far less known about the best ways to counteract the negative consequences and minimize experiences of stereotype threat. Although research will be necessary to determine the best approach, suggestions are provided based on previous research.

Organizations may be well served by making a concerted effort to promote *positive stereotypes of older employees*, which may help to counteract the existing negative stereotypes. Positive stereotypes of older employees focus on their experience, wisdom, dependability, and conscientiousness and have had demonstrable positive effects on older adults' performance in previous research (Levy and Leifheit-Limson 2009). It may also be possible to address stereotype threat by *increasing positive intergenerational contact.* Laboratory research demonstrates that declines in cognitive performance after stereotype threat disappear when older adults experience positive intergenerational contact (e.g., quality of contact with people 35 years or younger during the week before the testing session) (Abrams et al. 2006). O*ffering training and development* to older adults can make them feel more valued and less like they are being left behind by the organization. Older workers often feel they are missing out on training that younger workers receive, which is particularly problematic when the training is viewed as important to job performance. Finally, research suggests that *self-affirmation* may help diminish the negative consequences of stereotype threat (Cohen et al. 2006). Self-affirmation involves reflecting on one's important achievements, values, or traits. This kind of intervention would be easy to implement on both a personal and an organizational level and would not be resource intensive.

Conclusions

Most jobs involve being judged by peers, supervisors, or customers, yet older employees have the added concern of being judged on the basis of their age. It is the awareness that others may evaluate you through the lens of negative stereotypes that triggers stereotype threat, regardless of whether people believe the stereotype to be true of themselves. Given the prevalence of age-based stereotypes, it is likely that many older employees experience stereotype threat at least occasionally. Thus, although it is commonplace to

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experience evaluation apprehension when being judged, stereotype threat can result in additional concerns for older employees. It is therefore important for stereotype threat research to be extended into organizational settings more broadly, as the existing data suggest that stereotype threat is a concern for organizations who desire to retain their older talent and help them reach their potential.

Cross-References

- ▶ Age Discrimination
- ▶ Age Diversity at Work
- ▶ Age Stereotypes in the Workplace
- ▶ Job Attitudes and Age
- ▶ Stress and Well-being: It's Relationship to Work and Retirement for Older Workers

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