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COMMENTARY

How bias thwarts successful aging at work

Abby Corrington[1], Linnea C. Ng[2], Cassandra N. Phetmisy[2,*], Ivy Watson[2], Felix Y. Wu[2], and Mikki Hebl[2]

[1]Providence College and [2]Rice University
*Corresponding author. Email: cp38@rice.edu

Kooij et al.'s (2020) new motivational process model focuses on the within-person (what we will call "endogenous") factors of older workers. In this commentary, we extend consideration of outside-person (what we will call "exogenous") factors and address age-related bias, which ultimately limit the extent to which successful aging at work is even possible. Specifically, we posit that the motivational approach the authors articulate focuses too heavily on endogenous factors (such as adaptation), suggesting that the extent to which workers successfully age is determined almost solely by the workers themselves. This assumption may lead to the false idea that workers who are aging unsuccessfully may simply need to try harder (e.g., show greater ability) and/or become more motivated. On the contrary, exogenous factors greatly influence the extent to which successful aging is possible by decreasing, or altogether paralyzing, both the abilities and motivations of older workers. Indeed, 48–91% of older workers worldwide report experiencing discrimination (Wilson et al., 2019)—a prevalence that demands greater attention in any model of successful aging in the workplace.

In this commentary, we argue that a greater focus on age-related bias is critical. In other words, we describe how age-related bias is a central determinant of whether and how one successfully ages at work, delving more deeply into the effects of age-related bias on older workers' abilities, motivations, and self-regulation strategies.

How age-related bias influences ability

There are many consequences of age-related bias on older workers' abilities. For instance, research has shown that prolonged age-based discrimination creates cognitive strains that inhibit older workers' ability to regulate their emotions and cope with daily stressors (Marchiondo et al., 2017). These cognitive strains lead to a diminished ability to learn (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Relatedly, stereotype threat, or the fear of being evaluated based on a negative stereotype, can lead to anxiety, which negatively affects work performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Indeed, for older adults, stereotype threat results in worse memory task performance (Hess et al., 2004; Levy & Leifheit-Limson, 2009) and increased stress (Levy et al., 2000).

In addition to its effects on self-regulatory and mental abilities, age-related discrimination also negatively affects older workers' physical health. For example, Johnson and Neumark (1997) found that older adults reported more negative health outcomes (i.e., frequent illness and depression) when they experienced high levels of age-related bias. Additionally, older adults who report not feeling useful are three times more likely to develop a disability and four times more likely to die prematurely, compared with those who do feel useful, controlling for demographic, health

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status, behavioral, and psychosocial factors (Gruenewald et al., 2007). Needless to say, the effect of the devaluation of decades of professional experiences on older workers' psychological and physical health is self-evident.

In addition to causing cognitive and physical strains, many biases prevent older adults from *demonstrating* the abilities they possess. For example, if older individuals are not hired or promoted because of their age, they do not have the chance to enact their abilities. Taken together, the impact of age-related bias is far reaching and negatively affects older workers' opportunities to showcase those abilities.

How age-related bias influences motivation

There are a number of reasons that older people are motivated to work in their 50s, 60s, and well beyond. For example, they may need the financial security and stability of a paycheck, benefits, and insurance. Moreover, older adults may work because it fulfills their desire for purpose or provides a necessary cognitive, physical, or emotional outlet. Others may work because they enjoy contributing to their colleagues, their communities, or their craft. Unfortunately, however, age-related bias can have a detrimental effect on many of these motivating factors (de Paula Couto & Rothermund, 2019).

In its most severe form, age-related bias can entirely eliminate older adults' motivation on the job. That is, age-related bias can result in not hiring, not developing, not promoting, or terminating an employee. In these cases, workplace success is stifled regardless of one's level of motivation. Furthermore, individuals who experience these and even more subtle forms of discrimination may endure emotional harm, decreased workplace self-efficacy and self-esteem, learned helplessness, and negative effects of metastereotypes and stereotype internalization (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2019; Kornadt & Rothermund, 2012; Lipnic, 2018). One consequence of stereotype internalization is the Pygmalion effect (or self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). Specifically, older workers whose supervisors have low expectations of them are more likely to have lower motivation than older workers whose supervisors have high expectations of them (Livingston, 1969).

How age-related bias influences self-regulation strategies

Kooij et al. (2020) describe the four self-regulation strategies of proactive goal engagement, proactive goal disengagement, adaptive goal engagement, and adaptive goal disengagement. For older adults, the presence of age-related bias can substantially influence self-regulatory, goal-directed behaviors. First, employees may engage in *proactive* goal-directed behaviors: proactive goal engagement and proactive goal disengagement. Proactive goal engagement can be especially useful if older employees suspect that they might experience disadvantages in the workplace in the future. These employees, for example, might engage in behaviors to show that they are still motivated and committed to the workplace in order to thwart potential negative stereotypes. Proactive goal disengagement may also be valuable to older workers facing age-related bias. For instance, to avoid age-related bias, an employee might decide to pursue a job in a different organization that values older workers.

Second, in addition to proactive strategies, employees may engage in *adaptive* strategies: adaptive goal engagement and adaptive goal disengagement. These strategies would be difficult to implement if age-related bias makes individuals feel that they are forced to leave the workforce (see Griffin et al., 2016). For example, if employees faced age-related discrimination before making the decision to retrain themselves, they might decide to leave the workforce before taking any

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adaptive actions. As a result, they would not be able to adaptively engage in new goals (e.g., seeking a manager position) nor would they be able to adaptively disengage from difficult goals (e.g., heavy lifting). Taken together, these examples demonstrate that age-related bias clearly influences whether, how, and when older workers engage in self-regulation strategies at work.

Conclusion

Kooij et al.'s (2020) motivational process model is limited to the extent that it neglects a full consideration of the ways in which exogenous influences can alter or altogether prevent successful aging in the workplace. In this commentary, we have provided an extended discussion of the limiting aspects of age-related bias by describing how it can stifle older workers' abilities and motivations to continue working. Suggesting that older individuals should merely restructure their endogenous factors (i.e., change their own actions or better self-regulate) is an incomplete conceptualization of successful aging at work. A motivational theory of aging is limited when it is defined primarily by the variables within but not also *outside* a person's control. Indeed, deeper and broader examinations of many of the other exogenous variables of the model are also worth considering as long as bias and discrimination loom large.

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