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Review

Discrimination in organizations on the basis of age

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This article reviews the state of the art of the literature on perceived age discrimination in organizations from 2010 to 2024. We discuss common conceptions, measurement approaches, and theoretical perspectives on age discrimination. Thereafter, we summarize key findings that differ between studies exploring antecedents of age discrimination and those considering employee and organizational consequences. In a summary, we advocate for further research on mitigating age discrimination, especially in the context of digitalization and generational differences, emphasizing the need for age-inclusive practices and interventions.

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In most industrialized societies, the general and working populations are aging. In the US, for example, the median age of the working population increased from 40 years in 2002 to an expected 41.8 in 2022 [1]. This trend has even been stronger in the European Union, with an increase from 39.5 years in 2002 to 43.5 years in 2022 [2]. Not surprisingly, this demographic shift has also made the issue of aging and related discrimination more salient in societies and organizations. For instance, the Eurobarometer Survey in 2023 found that 45 percent of all European citizens reported that age discrimination is widespread in their country and more prominent than gender-based discrimination, which only 38 percent reported [3]. Empirical studies provided further evidence of the prevalence of age discrimination. For

example, Richardson [4] found that in a hypothetical hiring decision, the age of the applicant was a predictor of hiring probability, with employees over 54 being the least likely to be hired. This finding was also replicated in an economic experiment in Sweden [5].

In the present review, we summarize how the empirical literature in the field of work and organizational psychology has addressed the issue of perceived age discrimination and potential solutions. We focus on field research studies and consider all literature that has emerged between 2010 and June 2024. To select papers, we performed a systematic literature review in the Web of Science Database by Thomson Reuters using the search terms Discrimination in Organizations AND Age/Discrimination in Organizations AND Ageism/Age Discrimination AND Work. This search was complemented by adding articles that did not appear in this search but were known by the two authors, who are established researchers in the field of age discrimination. Based on the summary of these articles, we develop recommendations on how researchers can move the field of age-based discrimination forward in the near future. [Figure 1](#) offers a visual overview of our review.

Definitions, measurement, and theories of age discrimination in the workplace

The concept of age discrimination stems from the broader notion of ageism that Butler defined as “prejudice by one age group toward other age groups” [6]. The European Commission also legally defines age discrimination as discriminatory treatment on the basis of age in employment and occupation [7]. Perceived age discrimination is thus a form of negative treatment or behavior against an age group based on age stereotypes that employees perceive. It can occur as an individual perception but also as a shared organizational perception among a group of employees (i.e., age discrimination climate), both of which are covered in this review.

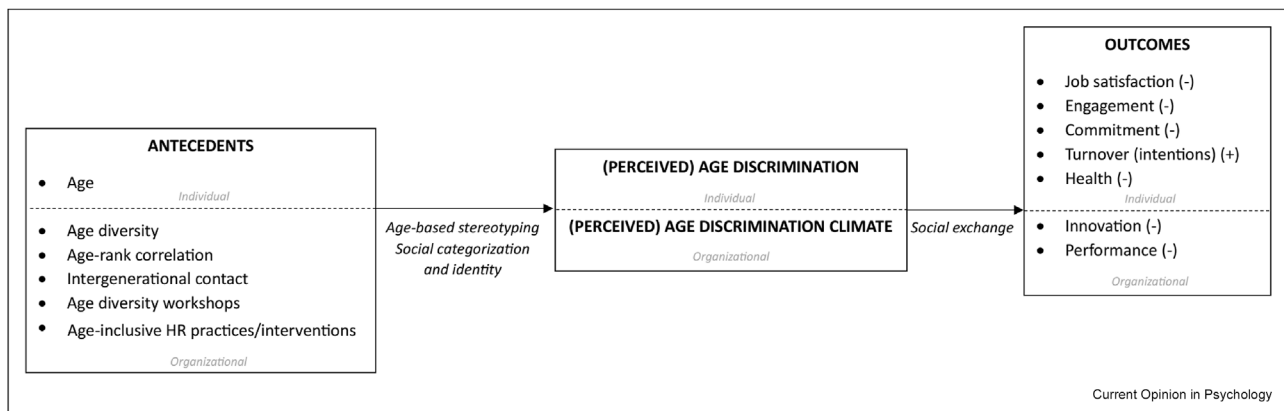
Though actual discriminatory behavior is difficult to assess, perceptions of discrimination are easier to measure, and importantly, these perceptions often drive people’s behaviors. As a result, most empirical research has studied perceived age discrimination. While age discrimination might happen against any age group in the workplace [8], most research has only considered discrimination against older employees. Consequently, the two existing and validated measures of perceived age discrimination in organizations only focus on

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Figure 1



Summary of antecedents and consequence of perceived age discrimination and perceived age discrimination climate.

perceptions of biased behaviors against older employees. First, Furunes and Mykletun [9] developed the Nordic Age Discrimination Scale in a large Scandinavian sample that captures biased treatments of elder employees in terms of promotion, training, development, development appraisal, wage increase, and change processes. Second, Marchindo, Gonzales, and Ran [10] constructed the Workplace Age Discrimination Scale, a 10-item measure that assesses broader perceptions of biased treatment due to age. On an aggregated, organizational level, Kunze, Boehm, and Bruch [11] have established a perceived age-discrimination climate measure that measures shared perceptions of institutionalized discrimination against all age groups in organizations.

From a theoretical perspective, social identity [12] and social categorization [13] can be used to explain the development of actual age discrimination and following employee perceptions. Based on these seminal concepts, individuals use group memberships to define their identity and categorize others as in- or outgroup. The value of ingroup membership is further enhanced by devaluing out-group members, which sets the stage for out-group discrimination. As age is a salient and directly visible individual attribute, it is often used for these social categorization processes, leading to mutual discrimination between different age groups, which drives perceptions of age discrimination. The development of age discrimination and its perceptions can be further clarified using the stereotype content model, which explains how people perceive and categorize demographic groups based on two primary dimensions: competence and warmth [14]. This categorization results in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral biases. Based on this model, elderly people, including older workers, are often stereotyped as warm but less competent. This influences both their individual and

institutional treatment in the workplace and heightens their perception of age discrimination [15].

Antecedents of age discrimination in the workplace

A large body of current research has focused on identifying the factors contributing to perceived age discrimination and age discrimination climate in the workplace. Age stands out as the most significant individual-level factor, with studies showing it increases perceptions of age discrimination, as demonstrated in a sample of over 1200 German employees [16]. This is unsurprising, as age stereotypes are theoretically understood to be a key driver of age discrimination. Cheung and Woo [17] further supported this through a qualitative study of 20 hotel managers, providing evidence that age stereotypes influenced their perceptions of older workers' job suitability.

Building on the idea that both actual and perceived age discrimination are driven by age-based stereotypes, research exploring ways to reduce perceived age discrimination has primarily focused on addressing these stereotypes. For example, Lagacé et al. [18] showed that both the quality and quantity of intergenerational intergroup contact (e.g., the frequency of contacts as well as the valence of the contact experience between younger and older workers) increased positive views about older workers. Increasing intergenerational contact might thus be one valuable intervention to reduce actual discriminatory behaviors and following perceptions of age discrimination in the workplace. This assumption aligns with Allport's classic intergroup contact theory [19], positing that interpersonal contact is effective in reducing stereotypical thinking, through learning about outgroups, modifying behaviors, forming affective ties, and reassessing ingroup perceptions [20].

Furthermore, beyond only focusing on intergenerational contact, Sinclair et al. [21] identified 22 studies of interventions aimed at reducing age stereotypes and the corresponding age discrimination behaviors and perceptions. These included “de-biasing interventions,” “brief attitudinal interventions,” “age diversity workshop interventions,” and “structural or contextual interventions.” The authors conclude that “age diversity workshop interventions” currently show the strongest effects. A good example is the study by Burmeister et al. [22], which, using a randomized controlled trial design, demonstrated that a 4-h workshop had immediate effects on participants’ attitudes and increased self-reported intergenerational contact quality at a 30-day follow-up, with the potential to reduce both actual and perceived age discrimination. However, the long-term effects of such interventions on perceived age discrimination have yet to be studied.

Studies have also considered how organizational factors other than interventions affect perceived age discrimination. While few have examined strategic factors, such as the finding that perceived age discrimination is lower in organizations with strong social responsibility goals [23], most research has focused on organizational age diversity as a critical antecedent.

Kunze, Boehm & Bruch [11] initiated this line of research, and found that increasing organizational age diversity increases the general perception of an age-discrimination climate. Conceptually, in-and-out-group processes between different age groups, along with resulting discriminatory behaviors, are more likely in age-diverse organizations, contributing to collective perceptions of age bias. Furthermore, traditional career norms [24] can be violated in such contexts, for example, when older employees remain until the legal retirement age, blocking others’ career progression, or when significantly younger supervisors manage older employees. Through processes of contagion [25] and socialization [26], individual perceptions of age discrimination can spread throughout the entire organization, resulting in high levels of shared perceptions of a negative age-discrimination climate.

Subsequent studies have replicated and extended the relationship between age diversity and organizational age discrimination climates by investigating moderating factors. In 2013, research suggested that perceptions of age discrimination in age-diverse companies could be mitigated by low stereotyping from top management and strong organizational efforts to support diversity [27]. A 2022 study found that the perception of age discrimination in age-diverse environments particularly affected older workers [28]. Most recently, De Meulenaere, Kunze, and Bruch [29] found that violations of traditional age structures (i.e., younger employees above older employees in the organizational hierarchy), which

are more likely in age-diverse workplaces, increased perceptions of age discrimination climates, but only in dynamic environments. These findings suggest that individual, leadership, and environmental factors all influence the development of age discrimination perceptions, highlighting the need for future research to explore other critical moderating factors.

Consequences of age discrimination in the workplace

In addition to exploring the antecedents of age discrimination perceptions in the workplace, empirical research has also examined its consequences. On the individual level, a study of 4500 US workers found that perceptions of unfair promotion decisions due to age were related to lower engagement levels across all age groups [30]. Similarly, a study involving 1255 German employees indicated that perceptions of age discrimination were linked to lower organizational commitment, with particularly strong effects for older employees [31]. McDonald and Levy [32] also found that perceptions of age discrimination reduced job satisfaction and commitment. Additionally, Griffin et al. [33], in a three-wave longitudinal study, showed that age discrimination lowers job satisfaction, which subsequently triggers employee withdrawal.

Beyond these within-organization studies, representative macro-level studies also show the negative consequences of perceived age discrimination. First, using representative employee-level data from six European countries, De Meulenaere et al. [28] report a direct correlation between perceptions of age discrimination and turnover intentions, particularly among older workers. Second, studies using representative US data from the General Social Survey (GSS) revealed strong negative health implications for full-time workers aged 40 to 70 [34,35]. For the specific sample of older women, perceptions of age discrimination throughout their lives were associated with greater depressive symptoms, partially explained by the increased financial strain caused by this discrimination [36].

These results show clear negative individual and employee-related implications of perceived age discrimination. Theoretically, social exchange theory can explain these negative behavioral outcomes, which posits that employees’ efforts are contingent on their perceived treatment. When they feel discriminated against or undervalued, their commitment and effort decrease.

At the organizational level, research shows that collective perceptions of an age-discrimination climate impact company outcomes. Social exchange processes have collective consequences, as reduced discretionary contributions at the individual level hinder collective behaviors such as collaboration, problem-solving, and knowledge sharing—essential to company performance. Additionally, collective age discrimination perceptions

can foster tensions between age groups, disrupting team dynamics that further undermine organizational success. Both studies by Kunze et al. [11,27] confirmed a strong negative relationship between an age-discrimination climate and a company's innovation potential. Similarly, De Meulenaere et al. [29] found that high collective perceptions of age discrimination endanger a company's innovation potential.

New research avenues on age discrimination in the workplace

This brief literature review highlights the growing body of research on age discrimination, revealing substantial insights into the factors contributing to it and, more importantly, the negative impact that perceived age discrimination has on employee and organizational outcomes. Still, there remain multiple avenues for both scientific and practical, relevant research on age discrimination that should be addressed in the near future. First, the increasing digitalization of the workplace has the potential to reinforce age discrimination and its negative outcomes in the workplace. As an example, Stypinska recently introduced the concept of Artificial Intelligence (AI) ageism, highlighting the adverse effects AI can have on older employees, such as excluding them from technological applications or contributing to age-based in- and out-group formations causing discrimination. As the technology industry is known for being highly age-biased, as, for example, 76 % of surveyed tech workers in the US agreed that ageism exists in their industry [37], there is a high risk that other industries may also become more ageist as AI and other digital transformations continue to expand. This underscores the critical need for research on effective prevention measures to counteract the strong negative stereotyping and following exclusion of older workers in digitalized settings.

A further area relevant to age discrimination research refers to the ongoing debate on generational differences in the workplace. This debate centers around the idea that certain age cohorts, such as Baby Boomers, Millennials, or Generation Z, develop attitudes and behaviors during their youth that remain constant over time, distinguishing these generational groups from one another. Although the existence of distinct workplace generations is critically debated and lacks substantial evidence, generational stereotypes increasingly influence social categorization processes in the workplace, for example, leading to discrimination against young professionals [38]. Therefore, we encourage further research to explore whether generational and age-based stereotypes interact and, more importantly, how team and organizational climates can be tailored to overcome the negative consequences of such stereotypes. For example, Lagacé and colleagues [39] recently showed that a positive intergenerational climate was associated

with lower perceptions of ageism of older employees in a Canadian sample.

Providing stronger evidence of how companies can foster age-based or intergenerational inclusion in increasingly age-diverse workplaces is another important area for further research. Some research has already shown that age-inclusive HR practices benefit both organizations [40] and employee engagement [41]. Extending this research by exploring how such HR practices or age-inclusive leadership behaviors can reduce ageism and related age discrimination would be valuable, both conceptually and practically. Additionally, more intervention research on specific HR measures (e.g., training and workshops) to reduce age biases could further enhance our knowledge of successfully managing organizational demographic change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this review highlights the persistent challenge of perceived age discrimination in organizations, which negatively impacts both employees and overall organizational performance, as summarized in Figure 1. While significant progress has been made in understanding its antecedents and consequences, the evolving workplace landscape—shaped by digitalization and generational shifts—requires further research on effective interventions. Promoting age-inclusive practices and fostering positive intergenerational climates will reduce discrimination and create a more equitable work environment.

Author contributions

Florian Kunze: Conceptualization and original draft of the manuscript.

Kim de Meulenaere: Conceptualization and review & editing of the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no competing or non-financial interest by both authors for this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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