

Employee Perceptions of Older Workers' Motivation in Business, Academia, and Government¹

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Abstract

Stereotypes concerning older workers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were examined in three types of organizations. Questionnaires were completed by employees of the governments of a county in the U.S.A. and a city located within the county, a university in the city, and a privately-held business headquartered in the county. Workers in the private business displayed the least age stereotyping overall, whereas those in local government displayed the strongest age stereotypes. Although older respondents rated older workers more favorably than did younger respondents on all scales, older government employees did not rate older workers any higher on motivation for Task Enjoyment and Compensation than did younger government employees. The implications for motivating employees and managing organizational culture are discussed.

Keywords: Age Stereotypes, Age Discrimination, Older Workers, Work Motivation

1. Introduction

Older workers who choose to continue to work do so for a variety of financial, personal and social reasons (e.g., Feldman & Turnley, 1995; Loi & Shultz, 2007; Pienta & Hayward, 2002). Furthermore, various societal trends, including increasing life expectancy and economic challenges, have contributed to a recent increased participation of older workers (55+) in the work force (Perry, 2010; Purcell, 2009). These workers are persisting in the work force despite the prevalence of continuing age discrimination (Maurer, Barbeite, Weiss, & Lippstreu, 2008; Roscigno, Mong, Byron, & Tester, 2007; Wood, Wilkinson, & Harcourt, 2008). Although they face negative stereotypes, they generally have more favorable attitudes toward their jobs, including higher levels of organizational commitment than younger workers (Brosi & Kleiner, 1999; Kallenberg & Loscocco, 1983; Ng & Feldman, 2010) and they usually perform at least as well as younger workers (McEvoy & Cascio, 1989; Wood et al., 2008). Though older workers may decline in some areas such as vision and reaction speed, such losses are compensated for by gains in areas such as experience, wisdom and leadership skills (Wood et al., 2008).

Age stereotypes are especially common in certain industries such as finance, retailing, and information technology, but are found in most every industry investigated (Posthuma & Campion, 2009).

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The gravity of the issue is exemplified by the fact that the occurrence of age discrimination can have an extremely detrimental effect upon an organization, as it has been shown to negatively affect the psychological states of workers of all ages (Hassell & Perrewe, 1993). Also, firms tolerating age discrimination are vulnerable to lawsuits, and age-related lawsuits have increased in recent years (Mujtaba, Cavico, Hinds, & Oskal, 2006). Average awards for age discrimination verdicts are higher than for other forms of discrimination (Jodjana & Kleiner, 2001). To minimize the risk of such losses as the workforce continues to age, organizations must become more vigilant concerning age discrimination practices.

Most research on age stereotyping has found more negative attitudes toward older adults than younger ones (Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991; Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005). Although some negative age stereotyping is seen among adults of all ages, older adults generally have a more positive view of aging than younger adults (Kite et al., 2005; Lyon & Pollard, 1997; Wentura & Brändstadter, 2003). This is consistent with Social Identity Theory which proposes that people tend to maintain positive self-images by evaluating their in-groups positively (Kite et al., 2005). However, some studies have shown both younger and older respondents to display positive biases toward older adults with respect to some characteristics such as perceived warmth and willingness to help (Chasteen, Schwartz, & Park, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, Click, & Xu, 2002; Hummert, 1999; Kite et al., 2005).

Some of the discrepancies in the findings regarding age stereotypes may be due to studies differing in the amount of information provided concerning the persons rated. Generally, age-stereotyping effects vary inversely with the information amount (Kite et al., 2005). For example, older persons identified as to profession were rated less negatively than those whose profession was not given (Decker, 1983), an effect accounted for by Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987). Based on the theory, it is assumed that older persons filling roles more typically held by younger ones will be perceived to be less like the typical older person, i.e., the role will outweigh age as a determinant of evaluations (Hummert, 1999). However, negative age stereotypes tend to persist to some extent even when persons' occupations are known (Decker, 1983).

The current study examined age stereotypes with respect to older workers' motivation. One purpose was to assess stereotyping as a function of respondent age. Another goal of the study was to determine whether stereotyping varied across three distinct types of organizations (private business, academia, and government), as it was assumed that social roles and job demands would vary. Finally, we sought to determine if the extent of stereotyping differed among various types of motives.

1.1 Perceptions of Older Workers' Performance

As is the case with age-stereotype research in general, studies concerning stereotypes of older people in the workplace have yielded a mix of positive and negative stereotypes. Older workers are perceived as having better interpersonal skills (Rosen & Jerdee, 1977), as more reliable (Metcalf & Thompson, 1990) and as more experienced (Finkelstein, Higgins, & Clancy, 2000) than younger workers. However, older adults are also thought of as less trainable, slower at information processing, resistant to new technology (Rosen & Jerdee, 1976; Taylor & Walker, 1994) and less creative and flexible (Metcalf & Thompson, 1990; Vrugt & Schabracq, 1996) when compared to younger workers. Also, older workers tend to be perceived as less flexible, less alert, less productive, and more resistant to change than other workers (Wood et al., 2008). In addition, older workers are frequently perceived as more accident prone, less intelligent, and less able to make decisions than are younger workers (Brosi & Kleiner, 1999).

In an early study of age stereotypes Kirchner and Dunnette (1954) found that older production workers had more positive attitudes toward older workers with respect to such traits as competence, performance, and demeanor than did their younger counterparts. However, supervisors' ratings of older workers did not vary as a function of supervisor age. Supervisors generally had more negative views of older workers than did the production workers. Hassell and Perrewe (1995) and Chiu, Chan, Snape, and Redman (2001) also found attitudes toward older workers to be increasingly more favorable as respondents' age increased. However, in contrast to Kirchner and Dunnette (1954), Hassell and Perrewe (1995) and Chiu et al. (2001) found supervisors' attitudes toward older workers to become increasingly negative as the supervisor's age increased. On the other hand, Shore, Cleveland, and Goldberg (2003) obtained mixed results regarding the relationship between supervisor age and attitudes toward older workers. They found older managers rated older workers' performance lower than did younger managers, but older managers rated older workers' potential higher than did younger managers.

Age stereotypes can influence both how younger workers and managers treat their older colleagues and the actual performance of the older workers. People's fear of being judged on the basis of a negative stereotype, a phenomenon known as stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), can lead to anxiety, which negatively affects performance. Negative stereotypes have been found to impact older adults' performance memory tasks (Hess, Hinson, & Statham, 2004; Levy & Leifheit-Limson, 2009), balance performance (Levy & Leifheit-Limson, 2009), and on measures of stress (Levy, Hausdorff, Hencke, & Wei, 2000). In describing the Pygmalion Effect, or self-fulfilling prophesy phenomenon, Livingston (1969) noted that managers who have high expectations of older workers are likely to foster higher motivation and work productivity than those managers with low expectations.

1.2 Age and Perceived Work Motivation

Age stereotypes often not only reflect negative attitudes toward older workers' abilities, but also their motivations (Maurer et al., 2008; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Perceptions of workers' motivations are important in that supervisors' perceptions have been found to be positively associated with the employees' work efforts (Pelletier & Vallerand, 1996). Negative attitudes towards older workers' motivation seem contrary to reality as, after an extensive review, Kanfer and Ackerman (2004) concluded that there is insufficient evidence to assume that there is an inevitable decline in work motivation associated with age. Perhaps, negative views of older workers' motivation stem from older workers performing below their potential because supervisors have not properly motivated them. Older workers may also be motivated by different incentives than younger workers seek (Paul & Townsend, 1993). After reviewing numerous studies, Rhodes (1983) concluded that security and affiliation needs (extrinsic motives) increase with age, while need for self-actualization and growth (intrinsic motives) decrease. Nevertheless, more recently there have been mixed results as to the relative importance of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards to older workers (Kooij, de Lange, Jansen, & Dikkers, 2008). While there is some evidence that these discrepancies can be partially accounted for by differences in respondents' financial comfort, it also may be that classifying motives as either extrinsic or intrinsic is an oversimplification. Perhaps, there are multiple motives within each category that do not change in the same degree and/or direction with age.

In an effort to disentangle discrepancies in the motivation literature, Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, and Tighe (1994) developed the Work Preference Inventory (WPI), a series of rating scales in which extrinsic motivation is subdivided into "Outward Scale" (Recognition) and a "Compensation Scale," while intrinsic motivation is comprised of an "Enjoyment Scale" and a "Challenge Scale." Several studies have determined that this four-factor model fit data better than the traditional two-factor model (e.g., Amabile et al., 1994; Loo, 2001; Miao & Evans, 2007). Contrary to the assumptions of some, results have shown that extrinsic and intrinsic motives do not represent opposite ends of a continuum, but, rather, are independent. The four scales have only zero to moderate correlations with one another. Furthermore, the two extrinsic scales are not significantly correlated with the two intrinsic scales (Amabile et al., 1994).

Miao, Lund, and Evans (2009), while controlling for worker age, found that challenge seeking and compensation seeking motives declined as workers progressed toward later career stages, but task enjoyment and recognition seeking motives did not. Therefore, neither all extrinsic motives nor all intrinsic motives change at the same points in one's work life. Since age and career stage are normally correlated, i.e., older workers are disproportionately represented in the later career stages, it can be assumed that as workers age the decline in task enjoyment motivation and recognition motivation would generally be less than the decline in the motive for challenging work and compensation motivation. In the current study, it was expected that stereotypes of older workers would be such that younger respondents would assume that all work motivation declines with age while older respondents, as a result of their own experience, would recognize that desire for task enjoyment and recognition remain high as workers age.

Hypothesis 1: Perceptions of older workers' task enjoyment motivation will be positively associated with the age of the respondent.

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of older workers' recognition motivation will be positively associated with the age of the respondent.

Hypothesis 3: Perceptions of older workers' motivation for challenge will not be associated with the age of the respondent.

Hypothesis 4: Perceptions of older workers' compensation motivation will not be associated with the age of the respondent.

1.3 Organization Type and Age Stereotypes

While some stereotypes held by organizational employees originate in the general culture or society-at-large (Loretto & White, 2006), age stereotypes also appear to be influenced by organizational characteristics (Perry & Finkelstein, 1999). Factors that promote less age stereotyping within organizations include being subject to close external scrutiny, and placing value on egalitarianism and diversity. Variables that promote more age stereotyping include valuing creativity and flexibility and being in a high tech organization. The present study included respondents from three different sectors (local government, a state university and a private business). Based on the propositions of Perry and Finkelstein (1999), we expected local government agencies to exhibit less evidence of age stereotyping than a state university or a private business. It seems likely that government agencies may be subject to a high level of scrutiny and to value egalitarianism and diversity while placing little emphasis on creativity and being relatively low tech. The university was expected to exhibit more age stereotyping than the government agencies and less than the private business, as the university is also subject to a high level of scrutiny and appears to value egalitarianism and diversity. However, unlike the government agencies, the university would seem to place a higher value on creativity and technology. Therefore, the private business, with its lower subjectivity to scrutiny and lower emphasis of egalitarianism, along with a moderate stress on creativity and technology, was expected to exhibit the greatest age stereotyping.

Hypothesis 5: Negative stereotyping of older workers would be less prevalent among local government employees than among university and private business employees.

Hypothesis 6: Negative stereotyping of older workers would be more prevalent among private business employees than among local government and university employees.

In summary, it was expected that across all organizations older workers would have more favorable views of themselves than younger workers would have of them. It was expected that this trend would be more pronounced with respect to some motives than others and that employees of different types of organizations would exhibit different degrees of stereotyping.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Questionnaires were distributed to 3,098 employees of four organizations: the city and county of a mid-Atlantic city in the U.S. A. and its county seat (the results of which were combined and designated "Local Government"), a mid-sized university located in the city, and a multi-billion dollar global business headquartered in the county. 725 completed questionnaires were returned (23%). Respondents' ages ranged from 21 to 83 years (mean = 49.61) and 58.3% were male.

The data analyses included only the respondents who had checked either "male" or "female." This action resulted in 716 respondents (423 males and 293 females) being included. The university yielded 276 respondents (101 males and 175 females), while 217 respondents (137 males and 80 females) were local government employees, and 223 (185 males and 38 females), were employed by the private firm.

2.2 Materials and Procedure

Thirteen demographic questions were followed by a 26-item survey. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement on Likert scales (strongly agree to strongly disagree). The items relevant to this report were 12 items comprising a shortened version of the WPI adapted from Miao and Evans (2007). Our version consisted of 3 items each measuring perceived challenge, task enjoyment, compensation, and recognition motivation. These were 7-point scales that were slightly modified to yield an evaluation of older workers rather than oneself and to have the instrument apply to all jobs, not just sales jobs.

3. Results

Initially, one scale (Task Enjoyment) did not yield an acceptable reliability level as Cronbach's alpha for that scale was .55. Therefore, the scale was reduced from 3 to 2 items, resulting in an alpha of .69.

As shown in Table 1, all scales used in this study met the standard of a minimum Cronbach’s alpha of .60 for exploratory research (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998), while all but one were above the more commonly accepted standard of .70. The means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of all variables are also shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Scale Reliabilities, Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations

| Variable | Cronbach’s | | | Correlations | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|------------|-------|-------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | α | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 1. Gender | | 1.59 | .49 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Formal Education | | 4.93 | 2.07 | -.19‡ | | | | | | | | |
| 3. University | | .39 | .49 | -.39‡ | .52‡ | | | | | | | |
| 4. Local Government | | .30 | .46 | .05 | -.14‡ | -.51‡ | | | | | | |
| 5. Position | | .36 | .48 | .14‡ | .13‡ | -.05 | .04 | | | | | |
| 6. Age | | 49.62 | 11.23 | .16‡ | -.16‡ | -.03 | -.04 | .02 | | | | |
| 7. Challenge Orientation | .89 | 4.45 | 1.36 | .07 | -.10† | -.08* | -.05 | -.04 | .41‡ | | | |
| 8. Task Enjoyment | .69 | 5.24 | 1.24 | .11† | -.16‡ | -.08* | -.05 | -.05 | .35‡ | .47‡ | | |
| 9. Compensation Orientation | .73 | 4.57 | 1.19 | .08* | -.16‡ | -.10† | -.04 | -.07 | .17‡ | .39‡ | .42‡ | |
| 10. Recognition Orientation | .77 | 4.33 | 1.28 | .12† | -.15‡ | -.06 | -.09* | -.01 | .24‡ | .34‡ | .40‡ | .54‡ |

* $p < .05$, † $p < .01$, ‡ $p < .001$; $n=716$; Gender: Female = 1, Male = 2; Position: Manager = 1, Non-manager = 0

Independent variables used in hierarchical regression analyses included respondent age, position (manager or non-manager), and workplace. Workplace was treated as two dummy variables with University and Local Government each used as variables. The interactions of age with position and the two workplace dummy variables were also assessed. One control variable in the regression analyses was gender. Although under some conditions gender and ageism have been found to be unrelated (Lin, Bryant, & Boldero, 2011), several studies have found small differences in the direction of males holding slightly stronger age stereotypes than females (e.g., Bodner, Bergman, & Cohen-Fridel, 2012; Chiu et al., 2001; Kalavar, 2001; Rupp, Vodanovich, & Credé, 2005). Another control variable was formal education level. It is likely that age and formal education are significantly related due to differences in time available to access education or to societal changes over time. Age, the only continuous variable included in the analyses, was centered to reduce the likelihood of multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). The regression results appear in Table 2.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analyses with Standardized Beta Coefficients and Variance Accounted for (R^2)

| Dependent Variable: | Challenge Orientation | | | Task Enjoyment | | | Compensation Orientation | | | Recognition Orientation | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|-------|-------|----------------|------|-------|--------------------------|-------|-------|-------------------------|-------|-------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Step 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Gender | .05 | -.02 | -.02 | .08* | .04 | .04 | .05 | .02 | .02 | .09* | .06 | .06 |
| Formal Education | -.09* | .01 | .01 | -.14‡ | -.07 | -.08 | -.15‡ | -.09* | -.09* | -.13‡ | -.10* | -.10* |
| Step 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| University | | -.13† | -.13† | | -.07 | -.06 | | -.09 | -.08 | | -.04 | -.04 |
| Local Government | | -.10* | -.10* | | -.08 | -.08 | | -.09* | -.08 | | -.12† | -.12† |
| Position | | -.04 | -.04 | | -.06 | -.05 | | -.06 | -.06 | | -.01 | -.01 |
| Age | | .39‡ | .44‡ | | .31‡ | .39‡ | | .14‡ | .26‡ | | .20‡ | .29‡ |
| Step 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Age X Position | | | .06 | | | .01 | | | .02 | | | -.03 |
| Age X Local Govt. | | | -.07 | | | -.13* | | | -.13* | | | -.08 |
| Age X University | | | -.07 | | | -.01 | | | -.09 | | | -.06 |
| R^2 | .01 | .16 | .17 | .03 | .13 | .14 | .03 | .05 | .06 | .03 | .08 | .08 |
| ΔR^2 | .01† | .15‡ | .01 | .03‡ | .10‡ | .01 | .03‡ | .02‡ | .01 | .03‡ | .05‡ | .00 |

* $p < .05$, † $p < .01$, ‡ $p < .001$

On those scales for which gender was a significant predictor (Task Enjoyment, and Recognition Orientation), males rated older workers higher than did females. This is in contrast to several past studies that, as noted above, have found small differences in the opposite direction. Respondents with higher formal education rated older workers lower than did the less educated on all scales. Managers and non-managers did not rate older workers differently.

Analyses in which the University and Local Government dummy variables were significant revealed that employees of these organizations rated older workers lower than respondents from the private business did. The University variable was a significant negative predictor of Challenge Orientation. The Local Government variable was a significant negative predictor of Challenge Orientation, Compensation Orientation, and Recognition Orientation. Also, with Task Enjoyment marginal significance occurred at the .055 level. For the most part, the results for organization type were in the opposite directions from the predictions of Hypotheses 5 and 6 since it had been expected that the private business respondents would rate older workers lowest and that government workers would rate them the highest.

Overall, older respondents rated older workers higher than did younger respondents on all scales, not just the two for which this result was predicted (supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2, not supporting Hypotheses 3 and 4). The interaction of Age and Local Government was significant for the Task Enjoyment and Compensation scales. Both interactions reflected the fact that among older respondents, the local government employees rated older workers lower than did the others. On these two dimensions older government employees did not rate older workers any higher than did younger government employees. Among younger respondents, local government employees and other respondents rated older workers similarly.

4. Discussion

Negative perceptions of older workers were expressed across all age groups, but it is noteworthy that such perceptions lessened with age. In other words, the older the respondent, the higher they rated older workers' motivation for challenge, task enjoyment, compensation, and recognition. These findings strongly support Social Identity Theory, which contends that people tend to maintain positive self-images by evaluating their in-groups positively (Kite et al., 2005). Suggesting cause for particular concern in organizations is that the same pattern was detected for respondents who were managers as well as non-managers. Therefore, we see that those charged with evaluating talent appear to be biased in making assessments.

We found stereotypes of older workers to vary in prevalence as a function of organization type. Contrary to our expectation that the private business employees would hold more negative views of older workers than would the local government and university employees, private business employees exhibited the least stereotyping. Perhaps the private business is able to hold employees more accountable for performance, and as a result, is more successful in "weeding out" those older employees who have declined significantly in performance and motivation. Therefore, the government and university employees may have experience with a greater number of older workers who actually do fit the stereotypes. This may be especially true in government, as we found older government employees to have similar attitudes to those of younger ones with respect to with respect to older workers' motivation for Task Enjoyment and Compensation.

4.1 Practical Implications

4.1.1 Older Worker Stereotypes

Our study results offer practical implications for our understanding of older workers and for the effective utilization of older workers in a number of specific areas of importance to organizations. The age stereotypes that often exist in organizations are largely unsupported by findings in research on work performance and motivation (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Kooij et al., 2008; Rhodes, 1983). Important questions concern the reasons why, despite such evidence that age and declining performance tend to be generally unrelated do negative stereotypes of older workers persist, and the potential consequences for organizations and older workers. Since attitudes and perceptions often lead to behaviors, such negative stereotypes directed at older workers are likely to have a direct impact on actual organizational and managerial behavior toward older workers, and ultimately on older workers themselves.

Since older workers are the most rapidly growing segment of the workforce, the question must be asked as to whether the perception of older workers may improve from greater concentrations of and contact with older workers in the workplace, or whether younger managers will perhaps change their attitudes toward older workers as they themselves grow older. However, organizations will continue to have some managers who are relatively young. Given that numerous studies, including the current one, have found younger persons to hold greater age stereotypes, we believe that a passive approach will be ineffective in dealing with ageism and that proactive measures by organizations will be required to change attitudes and subsequent behavior toward older workers.

Rosen and Jerdee (1977) suggested that concern for older workers has been overshadowed by concern for minority and female employees, while Loretto and White (2006) asserted that one of the reasons the issue of age discrimination is not of great concern in many organizations is that "age equality is not sexy" (p. 326). We do not suggest that the social and organizational effects of age discrimination are identical to those of race and gender discrimination. However, based upon our findings of the disparity in perception between older and younger workers, and the existing evidence concerning older worker job performance, we suggest that organizations can and must take specific steps toward changing negative stereotypes of older workers. We suggest that the primary source of age stereotyping in organizations is the absence of awareness of the needs and motives of older workers. Loretto and White (2006) argued that in order to change practice, attention must be focused on changing attitudes. There is evidence that positive attitudes toward older workers can be successfully promoted by means of attitude-change interventions (Gringart, Helmes, & Speelman, 2008). Organizational experiences with race and gender discrimination may help to illustrate the challenges associated with overcoming age discrimination. As with racism and sexism, discrimination based solely on chronological age (ageism) is illegal, unwarranted, and ultimately detrimental to organizations and to older workers. While legal compliance has provided the basis for the establishment of formal non-discrimination policies in organizations, such policy proclamations alone are a necessary but insufficient precursor to changing attitudes and behaviors toward older workers.

4.1.2 Motivation and Organizational Culture

Older workers have different motivations and needs as they age. We, therefore, propose that organizations train managers on psychosocial development throughout the life cycle to provide perspective and understanding of the changing needs and sources of job satisfaction of workers as they age. Such training, similar to cultural awareness training used to foster better understanding of the unique needs of female and culturally diverse workers, will be important to managers' understanding of and willingness to consider differing motivational needs of older workers. Moreover, a change in managers' expectations may also lead to the desired changes in performance, i.e., the Pygmalion Effect (Livingston, 1969).

With the profound demographic and workplace changes that are occurring, age discrimination will become an increasing concern for organizations. Eradicating discriminatory attitudes and practices against older workers will ultimately require change to organizational cultures. Many organizations and managers, for instance, have an embedded retirement culture concerning older workers. Prevailing practice, fostered by government policy, union contracts, corporate pension plans, and downsizing has led to the expectation that older workers should retire, often before they desire to do so. Though older workers may continue to be motivated, the nature of that motivation often changes with age. Restructuring organizational practices and redesigning jobs to accommodate these changes will more effectively utilize the aging workforce to the best interests of the workforce and the organizations in which they work.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the present study include the fact that the study was conducted within a limited geographical area. Also, there were many different job categories or social roles of respondents represented within each organization surveyed. It is highly possible, for example, that a university maintenance worker and a professor would have different attitudes. Future research could sample and contrast larger concentrations of specific occupations. Contrasting the attitudes of persons as function of occupation would likely be helpful in further exploring the relationship of gender and age stereotypes. While prior studies did not obtain totally consistent findings, the present study is unusual in observing greater ageism on the part of females than males. Perhaps the females in the present study were more critical of the performance of older workers than were males because they feel they must be better than other workers to succeed in their professions and it is easy to suspect older workers of being inferior.

A future extension of the current research would be having respondents rate themselves as well as older workers. Of particular interest is whether older workers rate themselves differently than the “typical” older worker. While some studies have found that older persons view themselves more positively than they view “typical” older persons, there is also evidence that older persons’ self-perceptions are influenced in the direction of negative age stereotypes (Bennett & Gaines, 2010; Pinguart, 2002; Rothermund & Brandtstädter, 2003). It is possible that work-related stereotypes, such as assumptions regarding performance and sources of motivation, vary to the extent they impact workers’ self-perceptions. Comparisons of self-ratings with ratings of older workers in general could potentially yield additional insight into age stereotypes.

4.3 Conclusion

There is a growing prevalence of older workers in the workforce and an increasing need for organizations to rely upon older workers. Despite a substantial body of evidence that chronological age is not uniformly related to declining work performance, age stereotypes persist in the workplace (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Our findings confirm that important differences exist in the workplace between the perceptions people hold of older workers and younger workers. Not surprisingly, older respondents in all three types of organizations surveyed reported a distinctly more positive perception of older worker motivation than did younger ones. This finding strongly supports Social Identity Theory (Kite et al., 2005). The differences in age stereotyping across organizations suggests the need for additional research on the extent to which organizational human resource policies and practices contribute to, or fail to prevent, unintended discriminatory actions based solely on chronological age.

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