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Ageism in the Workplace: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract: In this literature review, we examine ageism in the workplace and its influence on older adults' workplace learning. Findings have implications for employers, employees, and adult educators.

Keywords: ageism, workplace, adult learning, attribution theory

Introduction

The proportion of older adults in the global population is rapidly growing (Administration for Community Living, 2018). In the United States, the number of people aged 65 and older will rise from 46 million to over 98 million by 2060 (Zaleski et al., 2016). This gain mainly results from improvements in health care (Wheaton & Crimmins, 2012). Since adults over age 65 are more likely to be healthier, they want to remain in the workforce longer than those from previous generations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011).

Because older adults are remaining in the workforce, ageism has emerged as an area of interest in many countries (Heisler & Bandow, 2018). Prior studies have demonstrated how age-related stereotypes influenced older adults' everyday lives regarding employment, healthcare services, media, and educational opportunities (Bennett & Gaines, 2010). Ageism can be subtle because its perpetrators see their views as justified and those who are discriminated against may not see themselves as victims (Ojala, Pietilä, & Nikander, 2016). Thus, ageist issues in the workplace are necessarily articulated for both victims and the perpetrators.

Ageism includes three aspects: 1) "Prejudicial attitudes toward the aged, toward old age, and toward the aging process, including attitudes held by the older adults themselves; 2) discriminatory practices against the older adults, particularly in employment, but in other social roles as well; and 3) institutional practices and policies, which often without malice, perpetuate stereotypic beliefs about the older adults, reduce their opportunities for a satisfactory life, and undermine their personal dignity" (Butler, 1980, p.8). Thomas Nicolaj, Lars, and Per Erik, (2009) defined ageism as "negative or positive stereotypes, prejudice and/or discrimination against older adults because of their chronological age" (p.4). These definitions denote ageism as systematic stereotyping that occurs because of age. Although ageism includes discriminatory treatment against any age group (Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch, 2011), we examined age-related stereotypes against older adults in this review.

Problem Statement

Prior research has shown discriminatory practices toward older adults in organizations (Ainsworth, 2002) and educational institutions (Earle & Kulow, 2014). A typical myth about older adults is that they are inflexible and resistant to learn (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2017). In terms of the age discriminatory practice in the labor market, Palmore (1999) defined age discrimination as the "refusal to hire or promote older workers or forcing retirement at a fixed age regardless of the worker's ability to keep working" (p.119). Although literature on ageism in the workplace exists, as the workforce ages, it is important to understand the attributions of ageism in the workplace, the types of ageism in the workplace, and the effects of ageism on older workers' career development and workplace learning.

The purpose of this literature review was to examine ageism in the workplace. Therefore, the following research questions guided this literature review: 1) How do people construe ageism in the workplace? 2) How does ageism manifest in the workplace? 3) How does ageism influence older workers' opportunities for career development and workplace learning?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach that underlies this review is attribution theory which explains how people make judgments about the causes of their behavior (Weiner, 2018). Attribution theory is based on the premise that people generally desire to know why events occurred or outcomes were yielded in their lives (Weiner, 2018). For example, an individual who feels guilty may try to find an explanation for the origin of his/her guilt. In this way, throughout the individual's meaning-making process, his/her subsequent emotions, expectations, behaviors, and motivation manifest in various ways (Newall et al., 2009). Thus, when older adults attribute any psychological or physical problem to their age, they would be less likely to fix or prevent the problem (Palmore, Branch, & Harris, 2016).

Weiner (2018) argued that all perceived causes of events can be characterized as "three underlying properties of causes: locus (internal vs. external), stability (stable vs. unstable), and control (controllable vs. uncontrollable) and the relations between these properties and emotion and expectancy are definitively replicable" (p.4). First, the locus that can be found "when asked about an individual's self-perception whether a certain event or outcome" happened resulting from "me or the situation" (Weiner, 2018, p.5). Second, when people consider the causes of an event, they tend to find the attribution that is more enduring or stable as opposed to temporary or unstable. For example, if someone gets a job that he/she wished to have, that person tends to attribute his/her success of employment to the diligence or ability (enduring concept), rather than attributing it to good luck or coincidence (unstable or temporary concept). A third causal property of controllability is associated with the locus of causality based on "whether an individual perceives a cause of an event is controllable by the self versus by others" (p.6).

Methods

A literature search was conducted in the following databases: EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. We searched titles, keywords, and abstracts using combinations of several key terms related to the following three search categories: (a) ageism, (b) workplace, and (c) learning. Specifically, we used the following keywords: ageism, age discrimination, age bias, or age stereotype; organization, institution, or workplace; and learning, education, or training. The initial search yielded 563 publications.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria. To be included in this review, a publication met the following criteria: appeared in a peer-reviewed journal, written in English, and published between 2009 and 2018. The start date of 2009 was chosen because research on ageism has increased since 2009. Through the initial screening, we identified 128 studies and removed 62 duplicate studies. We screened the remaining 66 articles based on two questions: 1) Is this an empirical study focusing on age-related stereotypes? and 2) Do the age-related stereotypes occur in the workplace? The search resulted in 12 publications that satisfied the criteria for inclusion. We created a data extraction form indicating the author(s), publication year, purpose of the study, type of the study, and main findings to identify recurring themes.

Analytical Strategies. To keep track of relevant literature, we developed a matrix of the 12 selected articles indicating the publication year, journal, research methods, key findings and the countries where research was conducted (Torraco, 2016). Then, we coded and tabulated the 12 publications regarding the attributions of age-related stereotypes, types

of ageism that manifest in the workplace, and the influence of older workers' opportunities of career development and workplace learning.

In the data analysis process, we used the techniques of inductive thematic analysis, which is "a process of coding the data without fitting into a preexisting coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" to identify salient themes which seemed more appropriate for this literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The early round of coding was largely guided by the explicit definitions or descriptions of ageism in the workplace (e.g., publication year, journal, and research methods). We also coded them for the following: key themes, purpose of study, research countries, and findings. We recorded the reference number, the participants' characteristics of each study, the data collection method (e.g. survey, interview, focus group interview) and intervention. Last, we summarized the key findings of each article.

Findings

We identified four themes; (a) attributions of ageism among and against older workers, (b) two major types of ageism in the workplace, (c) decreased affective commitment, and (d) unsecured organizational opportunities related to the older workers' career development and workplace learning.

Overview of Research. Of the 12 empirical studies, 10 were quantitative, one was qualitative, and one used mixed methods. The articles were published in 11 different journals, in the field of aging, retirement, gerontology, human resource development, occupational and organizational psychology, and nursing publications. Half of the research were conducted in European countries including Germany, French, Poland, U.K. Switzerland. The remaining regions were Oceania, America, and Asia.

Attributions of Ageism Among and Against Older Workers. In the studies we reviewed, we found that people attributed ageism to being self-imposed or other-directed. Most studies in this review indicated older workers attributed their changed behavior and manners in the workplace to their age (Clendon & Walker, 2016; Rioux & Mokoukolo, 2013). For example, older employees defined their personal age as a social construct mixing with their interests, external appearance, physical body conditions, and emotional status (Rioux & Mokoukolo, 2013; Kastenbaum, Derbin, Sabatini, & Artt, 1972). Eight articles discussed that older employees mentioned that they were stereotyped or discriminated in their workplace because of their age (Clendon & Walker, 2016; Granleese & Sayer, 2006; Stypinska & Turek, 2017). In four articles, younger coworkers, HR managers, or employers said they discriminated against older workers because of their age rather than considering their job performance or productivity (Gioaba & Krings, 2017; Rego et al., 2018; Schloegel, Stegmann, van Dick, & Maedche, 2018; Zwick, 2015).

Types of Ageism in the Workplace. We identified two types of ageism in the workplace. One type of ageism appeared to be a social aspect of ageism. Assumptions that older workers are stubborn, less capable, frail, and technologically illiterate, which results in less productivity pointed to the social aspect of ageism (Bayl-Smith & Griffin 2017; Rioux, & Mokoukolo, 2013). The social aspect of ageism in the workplace was discussed in all 12 selected articles in terms of older workers' job performance, work engagement (Bayl-Smith, & Griffin, 2017), ageist language (Stypinska & Turek, 2017), job attachment, job satisfaction (Griffin, Bayl-Smith, & Hesketh, 2016), job stress, and sociability (Kim & Mo, 2014).

Another type of ageism in the workplace arose from age-stereotyped employment policies and managerial practices (Stypinska, & Turek, 2017; Unson, & Richardson, 2013). Five studies addressed the legal aspect of ageism in the workplace in relation to the older workers' employment, salary, promotion, and training (Granleese & Sayer, 2006; Gioaba & Krings, 2017; Stypinska & Turek, 2017; Unson, & Richardson, 2013). Certain ageist

behaviors in the workplace such as ageist jokes are not illegal, however, not hiring an older person based on his or her age is illegal.

Decreased Affective Commitment. Our review of the literature indicated that ageism in the workplace affected older employees' desire for career development. Older workers who experienced ageist stereotypes expressed their decreased affective commitment to their organization. Examples of affective dimensions on workplace ageism included decreased work engagement (Bayl-Smith, & Griffin, 2017; Clendon & Walker, 2016), job withdrawal cognition (Griffin et al., 2016), decreased job satisfaction (Rioux & Mokoukolo, 2013), less sociability (Kim & Mo, 2014), and a sense of guilt (Clendon & Walker, 2016). Three articles discussed that older workers who were discriminated against because of their age were more likely to end up unemployed either because they voluntarily left the job or were laid off (Clendon & Walker, 2016; Granleese & Sayer, 2006; Unson, & Richardson, 2013). However, older workers' intentions of job withdrawal were not necessarily linked with their actual decision on retirement (Griffin et al., 2016).

Unsecured Organizational Opportunities. Six of the 12 studies noted that age-related stereotypes in the workplace critically inhibited older workers' opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills, change work roles, and progress in their career (Bayl-Smith, & Griffin, 2017; Clendon & Walker, 2016; Stypinska & Turek, 2017; Unson, & Richardson, 2013). Examples of unsecured organizational opportunities included participation in workplace learning (Clendon & Walker, 2016; Kim & Mo, 2014), training (Gioaba & Krings, 2017; Zwick, 2015), promotion (Granleese & Sayer, 2006; Schloegel et al., 2018), and employment (Granleese & Sayer, 2006; Rego et al., 2018). In terms of workplace training, although generally training opportunities were equally distributed to older and younger employees, the training format and content were less interesting or useful to older employees. While older workers get higher returns from informal and directly relevant training content, organizations do not revise the training format to consider employees' age differences. (Gioaba & Krings, 2017). Thus, the improper allocation of training content, duration, and medium lowered the effectiveness of training among older employees (Zwick, 2015).

Discussion and Implications

Our findings showed that people attributed ageism to being self-imposed or other-directed. This finding added evidence on existing studies on attribution theory (Newall et al., 2009; Weiner, 2018), particularly considering the older population. We highlighted the aspects of older adults' self-imposed ageism where individuals consider themselves old because of their chronological age. The notion that being age stereotyped in the workplace is not controllable by older workers themselves may hinder fixing the problems (Palmore, Branch, & Harris, 2016).

The interconnected social and legal aspects of ageism existed in the workplace (Clendon & Walker, 2016; Kim & Mo, 2014; Stypinska & Turek, 2017). The social aspect of ageism could cause an older worker who is discriminated against to feel unstable in his/her workplace (Bayl-Smith, & Griffin, 2017; Unson, & Richardson, 2013). This instability can result in feeling demoralized at work. For example, nurses who have been labeled as old and then defined themselves as old tended to feel guilty which may negatively affect their work performance (Clendon & Walker, 2016). Feeling unsafe at work also can cause individuals to reduce social engagement (Bayl-Smith, & Griffin, 2017; Rioux & Mokoukolo, 2013). Hence, self-imposed ageism and ageist assumptions become intensified. This vicious cycle can repeat itself. In this regard, employers need to understand the interconnected dimension of ageism in the workplace and its effect on the overall organizational atmosphere. Even though a one-time occurrence of ageist practices in the workplace does not directly constitute

discrimination in the legal sense, frequent occurrences of age-related stereotyping in the workplace constitutes mobbing or harassment, and thus ultimately the discriminatory workplace atmosphere is created (Stypinska & Turek, 2017).

As most of the studies in this review have indicated, age-related stereotypes or prejudicial treatment against older workers could reinforce their limited opportunity of workplace learning (Clendon & Walker, 2016; Gioaba & Krings, 2017; Schloegel et al., 2018; Stypinska & Turek, 2017; Zwick, 2015). For example, an HR manager who has strong stereotypes that older workers do not want to learn new tasks and resists accepting younger co-workers' comments, may discriminate against older workers by ignoring them when allocating training opportunities or designing the training content (Griffin et al., 2017).

Researchers should continue to unearth how various factors (e.g. type and location of organization, job position) affect ageism in the workplace (e.g. Stypinska & Turek, 2017). Further empirical studies on how ageism intersects with gender are necessary as more older women are staying in the workforce. Consideration of social and cultural factors and their effect on workplace ageism will only strengthen this research.

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