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Title	Views on aging in selection: HR implications
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Publication date	2019-09-16
Original Citation	Jeske, D., Setti, A. and Gibbons, D. (2019), 'Views on aging in selection: HR implications', Strategic HR Review, 18(5), pp.227-232. https://doi.org/10.1108/SHR-04-2019-0029
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1108/SHR-04-2019-0029
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Download date	2026-11-07 09:26:18
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/8719

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Views on aging in selection: HR implications

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Draft accepted to "Strategic HR Review" on April 22, 2019.
DOI 10.1108/SHR-04-2019-0029

Abstract

Purpose: It is well-known that stereotypes on aging and perceptions about the suitability of certain jobs for certain age groups can influence performance ratings. However, it is unclear whether and how subjective views on aging are associated with judgement on someone else's performance. The current study explored the role of aging perceptions and images of aging on performance ratings for a fictitious set of male candidates with different age and job profiles. Ratings of interest were job suitability, developmental potential, interpersonal skills and performance capacity.
Design/methodology/approach: Using an online survey format, data was collected from 203 Irish and UK employees to assess how they evaluated different fictitious candidates for a local development committee. The age and mentorship status of the candidates were also manipulated.
Findings: The age or mentoring status of the candidate did not play a significant role for how they were rated. Multiple regression analyses indicated, however, that participants' aging perceptions and aging images had a significantly positive influence on how they rated the fictitious candidates (after controlling for participant variables such as age and experience). However, positive images of aging and aging perceptions on the part of the participants predicted more positive overall job suitability ratings, developmental potential, interpersonal skills and performance capacity. When the participants had more negative views on aging, they would also allocate lower ratings.
Originality/value: The results indicate that employee attitudes about aging play a role in how they will rate others. Given the importance of potential rating bias, the authors propose a number of training interventions that HR professionals may be able to carry out to positively shape the informational basis for more negative aging attitudes.

Keywords: Aging, Attitudes, Bias, Training
Paper type: Research Paper

Introduction

One of the training challenges for HR professionals is to find ways to reduce bias in selection and performance evaluation settings. This applies to bias due to gender, ethnicity, and age. Job stereotypes may further complicate matters as they also interact with gender (Doering & Thébaud, 2017) or age (Finkelstein et al., 2019; Cleveland & Landy, 1983). These job stereotypes may act as a barrier to employment or progression for older applicants. Social role theory postulates that discrimination is likely to occur when an individual's perceived stereotypic characteristics and the characteristics of the position for which they are applying do not match (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Wood & Eagly, 2011). One of the challenges for Human Resource (HR) professionals, who are tasked to educate raters about stereotypes, is to provide training that effectively addresses implicit and unconscious age (and potential job) bias in recruitment and selection processes. However, implicit aging bias continues to be an issue in HR (Rockwood, 2018). One possible explanation is that the focus of the training is on sharing knowledge and insight about stereotypes per se (knowledge and skills) rather than evaluating the effects of self-stereotyping and adherence to the stereotype. We suggest that one's attitude towards aging, including one's own experience and the aging of others, is associated with reliance on stereotypes when rating a potential candidate.

Although the results about the effect of evaluator's age on age stereotypes are mixed (Finkelstein et al., 2019), we propose that it may be helpful to heighten evaluators' self-knowledge and awareness of they view age. Attitudes capture the beliefs and opinions of employees that may both facilitate or inhibit certain behaviors (Blanchard, Thacker, & Ram, 2012). These attitudes may also bias certain evaluations. In the context of a study on the relationship between candidate age and perceived job suitability, we explored the role of self-reported age perceptions and images of aging as potential predictors of how evaluators rate younger and older candidates. These findings have implications for how HR professionals may tackle age biases – by helping those making selection decisions to first become aware of their own perspectives and views on aging overall, including their own. This is particularly important in view of HR professionals working towards offering career paths which allow older workers to maintain high levels of job satisfaction and optimal performance (Hedge & Borman, 2019). Knowing the influence of cognitive bias and personal perceptions in the interpretation of events and individuals, we proposed that more negatively skewed perceptions of aging and images associated with a more negative aging trajectory would also lead to lower ratings for fictitious candidates when the outcome measures included aspects such as developmental potential and, performance capacity. In addition, interpersonal skill evaluations and overall job suitability ratings may also be higher if the age images and perceptions of the evaluator are more positive rather than negative. Internalized negative perceptions of aging have a powerful influence on decision making and behavior (Fawsitt & Setti, 2017; Levy, 2009). Even though age stereotypes are present in the culture and everybody has some level of awareness of them (Finkelstein et al., 2019), we stress that HR training ought to raise awareness about negative (or positive) age stereotypes, particularly in the case of performance-related situations such as interviews or performance appraisals. In the next section, the study design is first outlined, followed by the discussion of the results, and a third section which summarizes the implications for HR professionals.

Study content, data collection, and sample

Selection decisions have significant impacts on individual lives and organizations. These effects mean that in some cases, it may be more advisable to study certain phenomena with

fictional, rather than actual, candidates, especially when bias may play a role in selection. The current study follows this approach. Following the approval from the local ethics committee, we produced two online surveys aimed at employees in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Each survey asked participants to evaluate eight fictitious candidates. These candidates had to be evaluated in terms of their suitability for a local committee that will focus on community development. The candidates had different jobs. Half of the participants rated candidates who were in their 20s and the other half evaluated those candidates in their 50s (both UK and Irish nationals rated the same number of younger and older candidates). For ease of comparison and to avoid gender biases, all professionals had male names, similar to the approach taken by Rosen and Jerdee (1976). Our participants measured perceived development potential, interpersonal skills, and performance capacity for the fictitious committee (using three ten-item subscales adopted from Rosen and Jerdee, 1976).

At the end of the survey, the participants were also asked to complete the measures of greatest interest to us. First, we asked them to report on their own perceptions of aging (using three questions from Barker et al., 2007) and a short ten-item measure on aging images (Levy, 2004: see also Bai et al., 2012). This meant we had a measure that indicated how positively or negatively participants evaluated their own aging process (e.g., as a process that made them wiser, promoted personal growth and led to more appreciation in life). In addition, we were able to identify how participants viewed certain images of aging (e.g., positive outlook, helpless, active) as being more or less characteristic of aging. The participants from the Irish and UK online surveys were combined and represented a sample of 203 employees. The participants included 103 males, were between 20 to 62 years old with a mean age of 36 (average was 35.67 years with a standard deviation of 7.65 years). Three quarters (150 participants) were in full-time employment.

Evaluations of fictitious candidates and role of raters' aging perspectives

Our preliminary results based on independent samples t-tests suggested that the age or job role of the fictitious candidate was not by itself the deciding factor for how they were rated by our participants, despite much research suggesting the contrary (Rosen & Jerdee, 1976; job-stereotype research by Singer, 1986). However, correlations showed that the age of participants correlated negatively with all four outcome variables (overall composite generated by combining all ratings for candidates). Older participants appeared to allocate lower ratings on the four performance outcomes, and younger participants provided higher ratings on all outcome variables. However, participant age may not be the main driver of these results. Instead, we thought their own aging images and perceptions may be key to understand their ratings. These predictions were tested in the next step.

In order to assess the effect of aging images and perceptions on how raters (our participants) viewed the fictitious candidates, we used multiple regression (stepwise method). In the analysis, control variables were entered first, followed by predictors (aging images and aging perceptions of the participants). The outcome variables were job suitability of the fictitious candidate, their developmental potential, interpersonal skills and the candidates' performance capacity. We ran several regression analyses, always controlling for the same participant characteristics (age, gender, employment, and mentoring experience), the age of the fictitious candidate, and data collection round (as we combined the Irish and UK survey). The removal of a small group of outliers and missing values reduced the sample size to 161 participants.

Our results showed that even after controlling for all these participant and candidate variables, the personal perspectives of our participants (the raters) played a significant role in how

they evaluated the fictitious candidates. Aging images positively predicted three (job suitability, developmental potential, and performance capacity) out of four outcomes (aging images did not predict interpersonal skills). Aging perceptions, however, predicted all four outcomes (particularly job suitability). The variance explained in the four outcome variables by our variables (control variables and predictors) ranged from 48% to 57%. The predictors alone explained 5% to 31% of the variance (the standardized beta coefficient ranged from .136 to .484, $p < .05$). This means that participants' ratings were significantly influenced by their own personal take on aging in relation to themselves and the aging process in general (aging images and perceptions). In order to consider multi-collinearity, we should note that the two predictors correlated positively ($r = .419$, $p < .01$). Individual regression analyses showed that both predictors were significantly positive predictors of all four outcome variables when they were included individually in the analysis.

Implications for HR professionals

Although our fictitious candidates are mere stand-ins, the results do point towards an interesting direction for training to reduce aging bias: attitudinal learning. In this case, the focus for such training is not to communicate statistics and learn about cognitive (unconscious and implicit) bias to reduce discriminatory behavior. Instead, the focus is on how raters view aging themselves – a perspective that appears to be intuitive (as we can access our own perceptions more readily) as well as promising. This approach helps individuals become aware of their own perceptions and how they connect to their own rating behavior. Employees have the potential to be sources of resistance to change in their respective organizations. Creating the motivation to change one's attitudinal biases is, in many ways, a challenge. However, it is not an insurmountable task. In this section, we propose several avenues available to HR professionals and managers wishing to tackle age-related bias by targeting employee perceptions and images of aging.

Approaches to tackle negative images of aging:

One of the first recommendations is to address attitudes head on. While the personal views of employees do not fall under the educational purview of HR, they do play a role when employees' beliefs and opinions influence their ratings of others at work during selection, performance and other evaluation tasks. Managers seeking to address explicit and implicit bias should not shy away from discussing attitudes, rather than just skills and knowledge, when they ask their employees to participate in selection and other forms of evaluation activities.

- One option here is learning by introspection. This involves employees reflecting on their own experience (or lack thereof) with different people, "gaining an insight and understanding about their own self" (Blanchard et al., 2012, pg. 95). For example, how do employees view and what do they associate with, "successful aging" (for more information here, see Olson and Shultz, 2019)? Such introspection may need to be supported by a trained professional who can help employees find means and methods that suit their own process. Exploring their basis for certain age-related biases can be helpful to understand their baseline and also inform potential experience gaps (e.g., if an employee has never worked with older generations or vice versa, they may only have generalizations to build an attitude upon).
- Experiential learning may be one approach as it can help to improve team dynamics and interpersonal relationships (Blanchard et al., 2012). Attitudes about aging (as indicated by negative images of aging) may be countered most effectively when employees get more (or alternative) information. This might be achieved by interacting with groups of different ages

in a context where interactions with other generations are practiced and attitudes are challenged. Experiential learning may work best if all participants are voluntary and ready to engage: that requires the awareness of these employees about the role of information that represents the foundation of their attitudes.

- When individual employees have a lot of decision autonomy, their age-related attitudes may play a larger role in promoting or inhibiting age diversity. This might be addressed by good practice. Keeping records on all HR-related processes, using standardized forms, training raters and monitoring statistics regularly to detect potential bias are all means by which decisions may become more comprehensible and potentially legally defensible. Decision autonomy should not go hand in hand with a lack of accountability.
- Attitudes do not exist in a vacuum. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) proposes that "events and consequences in the learning situation are cognitively processed before they are learned or influence behavior" (Blanchard et al., 2012, p. 81). The theory further suggests that motivation also influences what employees in training will pay attention to. The learning context will be important here: employees learn from others and social norms may influence which attitudes are reinforced and shared. Age diversity may be one factor in shaping social norms, and thus employee perceptions about aging and the positive or negative nature of aging images.

Concluding remarks

Our research goal was to answer the following question: do our personal views on aging matter in evaluation settings? Our results demonstrate that yes, our own perceptions and images of aging influence rating tendencies. As a result, how people view and relate to aging may be more important to their performance evaluation than the characteristics and capabilities of the candidate presented to them. This suggests that each participant generates their own baselines, which inform their decision making and potentially set the grounds for self-fulfilling prophecies (Finkelstein et al., 2019). These may then influence important workplace evaluations related to the potential developmental and perceived performance capacity of other employees. The present paper and recommendations provide starting points for HR professionals and managers wishing to address age attitudes as the multi-generational workplace is fast becoming the norm rather than the exception in most countries.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our participants for their time and Professor Benson Rosen for sending us a copy of the original measures that he and Professor Thomas H. Jerdee referenced in their 1976 article.

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