Adding Gender to the Age Factor

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Introduction

The importance of socio-demographic factors in the workplace has long been well recognised. Among these factors, gender and age are the most salient individual characteristics in terms of demographic and social identity. Moreover, both gender and age are constructs rooted in social contexts, culturally defined and subject to social changes.

The workforce is aging and the employment rate of workers aged between 55 and 64 continues to expand in Europe (Eurostat, 2014) and similar trends have been reported in other countries (e.g., Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009).

Although in the past employment rates were lower among women, this pattern has been changing and there is a noticeable increase in the proportion of women in employment. However, in spite of directives to ban discrimination on the grounds of individual characteristics and to promote equality opportunity (e.g., European Court of Human Rights, 2010), surveys indicate that age and gender discrimination are seen to be worsen in most Europeans countries (Ayalon, 2013). A substantial body of research also reports age discrimination in the workplace (e.g., Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Posthuma & Campion, 2009).

Beliefs and attitudes towards employees impact on all Human Resources (HR) practices. Although few job advertisements nowadays specify age limits, preferences for a certain age group affect the decision as to which group is chosen for selection or redundancy. Moreover, various studies indicate that older employees (i.e., 50 years old and above) receive lower job performance ratings than their younger colleagues (see Jyrkinen & Mckie, 2012; Snape & Redman, 2003), although other studies show a more complex picture (Loretto & White, 2006).

There is also extensive evidence that ageism affects all age groups,

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though women are more likely than men to experience ageist attitudes (e.g., Duncan & Loretto, 2004; Lyness & Heilman, 2006).

Understanding gendered ageism in the workplace is thus both critical and well-timed, if only because of the increasing numbers of older employees and the increasing participation of women in the workforce. However, while perceived age discrimination in the workplace has been attracting attention (e.g., Dennis & Thomas, 2007; Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012), less attention has been paid to gendered ageism (e.g., Duncan & Loretto, 2004; Granleese & Sayer, 2006; Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012; Wilks & Neto, 2013), and even 'less is known [about] how ageism is gendered or how sexism is age(ed)' (McMullin & Berger, 2006, p. 219). Gendered ageism poses a challenge for managers negotiating demographic changes in the contemporary workplace. Furthermore, a key challenge over the next decade is to attract and retain talent (Evans, 2013), which can only be achieved through a good management of diversity.

This chapter addresses the above gap in the literature by analysing the combined effect of age and gender in the workplace. It begins with an overview of the literature on the subject and concludes by arguing that age and gender should be tackled as a diversity issue.

Age Matters

Ageism is a worldwide phenomenon (Bodner, Bergman, & Cohen-Fridel, 2012). The concept of ageism, broadly speaking, refers to stereotyping and discrimination against categories of people on the basis of their age.

There is extensive evidence that age discrimination is widespread in the workplace, often in subtle ways such as by defining what is suitable and unsuitable (see Dennis & Thomas, 2007; Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012). In spite of anti-discrimination legislation, studies over the last fifty years indicate little improvement concerning age stereotypes (DeArmond et al., 2006). Prevalent beliefs regarding older employees are usually associated with declining intellectual and physical abilities. Often they are perceived as being less open-minded and less sociable when compared to their younger colleagues, reluctant to accept change and adapt to technology, inflexible and self-satisfied. Conversely, younger employees are perceived as being open-minded, sociable and more culturally sensitive than their older colleagues (see DeArmond et al., 2006; Posthuma & Campion, 2009).

It should be noted that not all studies show the existence of discriminatory attitudes based on age. Research carried out by Weiss and Maurer (2004), replicating a classic study conducted in the 1970s, did not find empirical evidence for discriminatory attitudes based on age for promotion, training, and hiring practices. However, the authors do not rule out the existence of stereotypes and discrimination.

Although age discrimination is more often associated with older people, younger people may also be discriminated against on the grounds of being too young. Snape and Redman (2003) report that younger undergraduate business students were seen as untrustworthy, and were thus accorded less responsibility. Therefore one employee may be considered too young to have the experience that the job requires, while another may be thought too old to be able to adapt to new work technologies. As a result, young employees are not afforded the opportunities, and older employees are deprived of new skills, as Snape and Redman (2003) point out.

As mentioned above, various studies confirm differences between the perception of older and younger employees, and although ageism is often associated with negative stereotypes, this is not always the case. Older employees are considered to be reliable and loyal (Loretto & White, 2006), and according to Dennis and Thomas (2007), managers tend to perceive workers aged 50 and over as having good work habits, being committed to quality and being punctual. As for young people, according to the same source, they tend to be considered less loyal and have a lower level of organisational identification. However, they are perceived as being dynamic and able to master technology, which is a big plus in a world increasingly based on this.

Ageist attitudes vary according to age and gender: they are more common among men than women, and young people tend to hold negative attitudes towards older people. Middle-aged participants were found to be more ageist than younger and older individuals, whereas the older people are, the more positive their attitudes towards older people tend to be. In any case, for both younger and older individuals, the process of aging is viewed negatively (Bodner, Bergman, & Cohen-Fridel, 2012).

Experiencing discrimination has negative consequences for both the individual and the organisation, and the impact of age discrimination on the levels of organisational affective identification has been reported (Snape & Redman, 2003). Furthermore, self-categorization as

an 'older worker' was found to be related to negative attitudes towards work, stronger desire to retire early and inclination towards intergenerational competition (Donatienne & Gaillard, 2008).

Ageism is based on age relations (Calasanti, 2005) and differences in generational cohorts in the workplace suggest that individuals of more recent generations, such as Generation X and Y, have different work values (see Hansen & Leuty, 2012).

While having a diversity of ages in organisations can be very positive, differences in the way in which generations function in the workplace may create some difficulties. The latter view is endorsed by Segal (2013), who argues that the contemporary mood is of 'intergenerational warfare' due to an increase in suspicion and anger between generations, exacerbated by the postponement of retirement. Old employees are seen as driving young people into unemployment. Young employees resent the privileges that their older colleagues enjoy. Thus, the possibility of intergenerational tensions cannot be excluded.

Ageing Is Gendered

'Older people are not just old, they are either men or women' (McMullin, 1995, quoted by Ainsworth, 2002, p. 581), so age impacts differently on both genders, as we shall see in what follows. Organisations are not gender-neutral (Granleese & Sayer, 2006), gender is built into the workplace through gendering processes and practices (see Benshop, Mills, Mills, & Tienari, 2012; Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012).

Research has repeatedly shown that gender stereotypes are alive and well (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). Admittedly, the question of gender in organisational life is in the process of changing (Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012), as it is in the larger social context, but while overt discrimination (where women are simply treated less favourably than men) tends to be less obvious, women are still over-represented in lower-paid jobs and under-represented in decision-making positions despite the high number of female graduates in EU (European Commission, 2012; Eurostat, 2014).

There is a strong business case for gender balance in management positions. Nevertheless, attempts to improve gender equilibrium in top managerial positions have so far failed. Some countries impose gender quotas in big firms' boardrooms, and although the number of women in top managerial positions has been rising, it does not in any way match that of men (*The Economist*, 2013).

Data collected by the European Commission in 2012 show that, although women constitute 60% of new graduates, the average proportion of women on the top-level boards of the largest publicly listed companies around in the EU stands at just 15.8%. Women are also scarcely visible among the top business leaders of these companies. Ninety seven per cent are men.

Gender inequalities in terms of pay have been well documented. Although the gender gap has been narrowing since 2008, it increases the older one is, due to career breaks on the part of the women, particularly older women who have been unable to benefit from equality measures. This is confirmed by a slightly lower gender pay gap for employees below the age of 25 and an increasingly higher gap as one advances in age (European Commission, 2012).

The term 'glass ceiling' has been used to refer to the informal barrier that prevents women from reaching the upper management positions in organisations. However, as Ryan and Haslam (2005) have found, when organisations face a crisis, women have more opportunities to break the ceiling and are over-represented in leadership positions which are more exposed to risk of failing.

Traditionally, women have been more affected by unemployment than men, and this is still the case, in particular for older women, who experience more difficulties in the labour market than men (see Eurostat, 2014).

Age and gender are mutually reinforcing. However, being 'too young' or 'too old' impacts more on women than on men (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). Literature reviews on gender in organisations indicate that age discrimination is most frequent between 16 and 24 years old, and from 45 upwards. Women aged 30–40 are discriminated against for being too old as well as being too young, while men in their 30s reported negative treatment only on the grounds of being too young. The preferred age range seems to be from 25 to 35 (Granleese & Sayer, 2006). However, as Jyrkinen and McKie (2012) remark, when it comes to young women, there is a paradox: they are interesting because of their talent, but on the other hand they have the 'disadvantage' of the possibility of childbearing and other caring responsibilities. Nevertheless, they can be found in better job positions than older women as a result of the changes that have taken place in society at large and in organisations.

Extensive research on gender in organisations has found that gen-

der stereotypes still impact on how women are perceived in the workplace (e.g., Heilman & Eagly, 2008). Walker, Grant, Meadows and Cook (2007) examined the experiences and perceptions of women aged 50 or over regarding ageism in employment, and their findings indicate stereotypes about mental competence and intellectual decline. Their results also show that, while most women have faced both gender and age discrimination, their experiences and interpretations were embedded in the cultural and social contexts in which they have lived. It seems therefore that gender ageism impacts on women in different ways.

According to Sabelis and Schilling (2013), women around the age of 30 struggle to meet conflicting expectations: to become dedicated professionals and caring mothers, and supportive spouses, among other social roles. Often they experience career 'failures,' which are attributed to their own personality or incapacity. Women older than 50 face different contradictory expectations: they are expected to be at the top of their professional careers and at the same time in decline.

A review of forty years of managerial gender stereotype research conducted in several countries led to the conclusion that, despite all the changes that have taken place during that period of time, men are still perceived as being emotionally stable and strong, while women are viewed as emotionally unstable and weak. Stereotypes regarding women are in line with the traditional idea of women: they are seen as caring and attentive to others, and working well in teams, but having a lack of leadership skills (DeArmond et al., 2006). Curiously enough, surveys in 2008 report that overall, young women neither wanted nor trusted female bosses (Segal, 2013).

Studies also show that women and men experience age in different ways, albeit not in all sectors. In high status professions such as those of senior judges and politicians, being male and older is perceived as positive (Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012). Furthermore, women are frequently perceived as being old at an earlier stage than men, mainly by men (Granleese & Sayer, 2006).

The social worth of women has been more associated with their physical appearance when compared to men (e.g., Russell, 2005), and for Segal (2013), an ageing female has long been associated with frightening figures and 'few adjectives combine faster than ugly-old-woman' (p. 96).

Research has been carried out on the importance of physical ap-

pearance. According to research findings, looking old is viewed more harshly in relation to women than to men across different cultures (Russell, 2005). For instance, a study regarding the experiences of women managers in two northern European countries shows that 'lookism' is prevalent (Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012). Another study suggests that job candidates are discriminated against in relation to 'their gendered and age(ed) bodies,' while older women are denigrated compared to their younger counterparts (McMullin & Berger, 2006, p. 219). In the same vein, a study conducted by Granleese and Sayaer (2005) on women working in academia indicates that they are discriminated against on the basis of their age, gender and looks, and have thus, experienced a 'triple jeopardy.' Clarke and Griffin (2008) examined how older women experience and respond to employment-related ageism in relation to changing physical appearance and concluded that women engage in beauty therapy to fight against their 'invisibility' (see also Ainsworth, 2002).

Age is a key factor defining the experience of women in the workplace, but there are other bases of inequality such as race/ethnicity and class. In a recent study (see Moore, 2009), older women described how all the three social categories had structured their working lives, with discrimination supporting unfavourable conditions.

It seems, therefore, that while progress in gender equality has improved the overall status of women, this trend may have been counterbalanced by a tendency to undervalue older women.

From the research literature we can conclude that gender and age relations go hand in hand through ageism and sexism (McMullin & Berger, 2006). Furthermore, women are not only discriminated against on the grounds of their age and gender, but also on the basis of their looks.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

The current chapter has examined age and gender and their combined effect, still an under- researched subject, despite its increasing relevance to managers (Granleese & Sayaer, 2005).

This chapter provides a brief literature review on gendered ageism. Two main conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, age and gender remain crucial factors in organisations; stereotypes and discrimination are still in place, although overt discrimination is less prevalent (Weiss & Maurer, 2004), and has been replaced by more subtle forms.

The prevalence of common assumptions regarding age and gender influences HR practices, and discriminating on the basis of any particular characteristic has negative outcomes, costly to organisations: higher turnover, absenteeism, lower performance and productivity, low well-being and higher health care costs (DeArmond et al., 2006).

The current financial crisis may have amplified social antipathy towards the elderly in general and the trend towards generational scapegoating, as Segal (2013) claims. Furthermore, new technologies and rapid changes undoubtedly favour young people. Managers are thus faced with the complexity of integrating different ages, and their task is certainly made more difficult by adding gender to the equation. It is therefore necessary to take into account the significant gender dimension of ageing in the workplace, and the different ways in which it impacts on women (Walker et al., 2007).

The discourse on equality policies and affirmative actions has not produced the intended results. Consequently, more legislation is not likely to tackle discriminatory attitudes and practices.

To achieve workplace equality requires a change in organisational practices (Benshop et al., 2012), and first of all, we must 'challenge the current rules of the corporate game,' as Evans (2013, p. 876) puts it. What is at issue is the dominant culture. Organisations should move away from the male-young-dominant culture rather than expecting older women to adjust to it (or run from it).

Age and gender should be tackled as a diversity issue. Gender and age are salient social and identity categories, but to achieve a more equitable and better workplace, other categories must be taken into account. Ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities, and social class must be considered among other 'differences' if we are to create inclusive organisations.

Organisations will comprise greater diversity and will need to accommodate different points of view and different attitudes. Diversity managing is about understanding 'difference' and promoting workplace equality. It is a cause of misunderstanding, suspicion and potential conflict, but is also a source of creativity and innovation. By failing to value and promote diversity, organisations do not take full advantages of what their employees can offer.

Ultimately, how to manage increasing diversity is the question that managers need to answer. Long term demographic changes are very likely to make the issue of diversity even more relevant in the future.

Managing diversity is a complex task and various strategies have been proposed (see e.g., Stockdale & Crosby, 2004), but to cover literature on that subject lies outside of the scope of the current study. Here we can only suggest that HR policies and practices should include flexible work schedules and flexible incentives in order to accommodate different interests.

We would like to conclude on a reflexive note by pointing out that older employees may be viewed as valuable, but also as more expensive to hire and keep (Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009). The current economic context may aggravate the tendency to replace older employees by younger people. Ageism and gendered ageism may in some cases be a managerial strategy for a mode of governance organised around cost-cutting, financial viability and even profitability (Deem, Morley, & Tlili, 2005). Nonetheless, it is in the best interests of employees and organisations to improve opportunities for the recruitment, development and retention of good employees whatever their individual characteristics might be.

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