

Ageism in Organizations: An Ecological Approach

Robert J. Griffore and Lillian A. Phenice

Michigan State University

Corresponding Author: Robert J. Griffore

Abstract

Ageism can be expressed in the form of forced retirement, stigma, ostracism, or inequitable performance assessment practices. It is demoralizing to older workers. Ageism can be understood from the perspective of specific ecological processes, defined at a microsystem level, within particular organizational contexts. Segregation is an example of a process by which ageism may be sustained in organizations. Older workers understand well that a key to success is participation in ongoing cooperative activities. Those who are invited to join cooperative groups are able to work on projects that lead to survival and advancement. Given prevailing ageism in organizations, older workers require opportunities to effectively cooperate. Another technique used to support ageism is information control. Managers attempt to maintain and disseminate organizationally prescribed reality based on stereotypes of the aging worker. When these processes become policies in organizations, valuable resources in the form of human capital are lost. Recommendations made in this paper are designed to help managers to change and eliminate conditions that support ageism in organizations by creating a workplace supportive of older workers who are able and willing to contribute to the organization.

Keywords: ageism, organizations, segregation, information control, ecology

INTRODUCTION

Theories of aging are plentiful. There are biological theories, such as wear-and-tear theory, free-radical theory, and autoimmune theory (Crandell, Crandell, & Vander Zanden, 2012; Moody, 2006). Personality theories include disengagement theory, activity theory, role-exit theory, and social exchange theory (Crandell, Crandell, & Vander Zanden, 2012). According to Butler (1975, p. 12), ageism is “a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for color and gender”. Iversen, Larsen and Solem (2009) identified Butler’s (1975) definition of ageism as a standard definition and noted that other definitions are not necessarily preferable for various reasons. Iversen et al. (2009) also provided overviews of twenty-seven definitions of ageism. For example, Kite and Wagner (2002), featured cognitive, behavioral, and affective components of attitudes. Pasupathi and Lockenhoff (2002), discussed ageist behavior and beliefs. Whitbourne and Sneed (2002), discussed ageism in terms of attitudes involving certain myths and stereotypes. In the interest of being comprehensive, conceptual approaches to understanding ageism can be brought together by combining various dimensions of theories together (Iversen, et al. (2009). Forming a metatheoretical approach that takes into account various conceptual approaches brings clarity to this social phenomenon. A metatheoretical approach based on understanding ageism within contexts will lead to a

better understanding of an aging population. We make recommendations designed to help managers to change and eliminate conditions that support ageism in organizations.

Ageism in Organizations

Human interaction within environments undergoes constant change and feedback, and ageism is a reciprocal process within contexts over time. This relationship is recognized as human ecology. Ageism takes place in human ecosystems. It is inherent in processes of human interaction within human constructed and social environments. Interaction in human ecosystems is described as proximal process (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Ageism is inherent in proximal processes in microsystems including organizations such as the workplace. In the present analysis, we suggest two examples in particular. The first is the management of cooperative behaviors of workers in organizations, and the second is the management of information about workers. In particular, stigmatization results in institutional policies and practices that segregate and discriminate against older workers. The processes that define ageism in the workplace are often covert and destructive as they thwart older adults from making use of their abilities and realizing their potentials. They render unavailable to organizations the skill, talent, and wisdom of mature workers. Processes of ageism in

organizations are obstacles to making use of the valuable human capital that is present in older adults.

Underlying processes of ageism is a belief that older adults are a drag on productivity and should step aside to make room for those who are younger and who are perceived as having more to offer. These perceptions have deep roots. For example, debates about the Affordable Care Act have incorporated discussions of limiting health care to the elderly, especially to those who are approaching the end of life. This has been a recurring theme for several years (Calahan, 1987; 2012; Persad, Wertheimer & Emanuel, 2009; Truog et al., 2006).

Concerns about the use of system resources by older adults are not unique to the health care system; they are also present in higher education (Forman, 1983). We suggest that younger faculty are less expensive when first hired and often eager to please administrators to gain tenure. While there are circumstances in which younger faculty may initially cost less, this may not always be accurate when all circumstances are considered. Not only do younger faculty command higher startup salaries, the additional costs associated with hiring, mentoring, reduced teaching research and service loads, along with risks associated with the possibility that some new hires may not be successful, all run counter to the general premise that younger faculty simply cost less.

The issues behind ageism in organizations are not simply about money. Early career workers may possess certain valued skills and knowledge that are not possessed by older workers. They may be more pliable than older workers, who may lose enthusiasm for continuously adapting to managerial dicta. Especially in organizations in which professional workers have latitude concerning what is produced and how it is produced, workers with many years of experience will not necessarily agree with management. Due to differences between early career workers and older workers in skills and capabilities, it is not realistic to judge early-career and older workers on the basis of the same generic performance criteria. Evaluation criteria should relate to products that are within the realm of a worker's repertoire, rather than on the basis of uniform expectations and uniform skills.

Mature workers have skills and knowledge which they have used to create successful products and build careers. It is unsettling when meritorious productivity that has been rewarded in the past is today met with contingencies involving extinction or punishment. If contingencies of reinforcement are abruptly changed in

ways that signal to older workers that they no longer have value, this is experienced as stress, degradation, and trauma.

Managed Segregation

Segregation is an example of a process by which ageism may be sustained in organizations. The management and outcomes of segregation in the workplace can be understood from a perspective of metacontingency theory. A metacontingency is composed of cooperative acts, or interlocking behavioral contingencies, which function to result in aggregate products for receiving systems (Glenn, 2004; 2010; Glenn & Malott, 2004; Malott & Glenn, 2006). Metacontingencies exist in a workplace when differentiated and interlocked cooperative individual efforts are combined and lead to aggregate products.

Griffore and Phenice (2014) have examined the management of metacontingencies in organizations. Analysis of metacontingencies is especially pertinent to organizations in which workers have a degree of latitude in choosing work products and shaping how work products are operationally defined. In these contexts, older workers understand well that a key to success is participation in ongoing cooperative activities. Those who are invited to join cooperative groups are able to work on projects that can lead to raises and promotions and thus to survival. Cooperation is always important. Given prevailing ageism in organizations, older workers need opportunities to effectively cooperate. Being segregated from valued cooperative activities can jeopardize their survival.

Moreover, workers gain their sense of identity and construct perceptions of self-esteem based on social interactions. For senior workers, the loss of structured opportunities for cooperative social interaction may create perceptions of having been forgotten, which can have profound effects. In one study (King & Geise, 2011), the experience of being forgotten was associated with lower meaning in life.

Management can take steps to eliminate techniques of segregation. They can avoid taking action to disassemble and destroy effective working cooperative groups. They can cease structuring boundaries and territories that are obstacles to cooperative productivity. They can avoid organizing and separating older workers in ways that make it difficult to continue engaging in successful patterns of cooperation. They can promote an environment in which mature and younger workers alike are integrated into productive cooperative endeavors.

Information Control

Information control is another process by which ageism may be sustained by organizations. Individuals who participate in cooperative production understand the contingencies and metacontingencies of their participation. They also comprehend the contingencies and metacontingencies that limit their access to cooperation. They know how their efforts interlock with the efforts of others, and the circumstances that prevent their actions from interlocking with the actions of others.

Techniques by which individuals understand their involvement in cooperative behaviors may be described in terms of Goffman's (1959) perspectives of dramaturgy and social construction. He observed that everyday behavior consists of prepared routines and is based on tacit agreements and common understandings. To realize planned routines of information control, techniques of dramatic realization can be employed to keep audiences segregated. In cooperative interaction there is mutual understanding of these processes. These processes take place in the metacontingencies of cooperative organizational behavior.

Collectively, the individuals who participate in metacontingencies create not only interlocking patterns of behavior; they create cultural systems. Zerubavel (1997) described this phenomenon as a thought community. Members of a thought community share perceptions, meanings, and perspectives (Zerubavel, 1997). The concept of a thought community can be applied in group behaviors such as professional societies and generally to aggregates of individuals who constitute inner circles within organizations. Contributors to, and readers of, a specific academic journal constitute a thought community (Griffore, Phenice & Miller, 2013).

There is no rigorous expectation that the essence of a thought community must necessarily be objectively verifiable. To some extent, it may be a fabrication based on unverified thinking of leaders and those who share social power and are able to apply techniques of deception, manipulation, and coercion. Skillful managers may command attention by using engaging and powerful information, regardless of whether it is true or false. The deceived tend to seek information that offers truth as they see it, and which they have been reinforced for accepting.

Experiencing unreality within organizations is reinforced by the common experience of being confronted with unreality in mass culture. According to Mitroff and Bennis (1989), to experience mass culture is

to be enveloped in unreality. There are differences between information management in mass society and information management in organizations. Dangers of information control in mass society include the concern that cultural survival could be jeopardized. While misinformation alone in organizations may not threaten organizational survival, the differences between information management in society and in information management in organizations are often a matter of scale rather than process. The goals of corporate information management are perception management and regulation of individual behavior.

In an organization, management can take steps to limit intervention into the social construction of meaning by setting up competing behaviors and by controlling and eliminating cooperative behaviors. They can stop intervening in ways that support ageism which, when aimed at vulnerable workers, often causes stress, trauma, diminished well-being, and, eventually, productivity.

Management can refrain from practices that promote ostracism of mature workers, involving destructive attributed stigma, which can lead to shunning, marginalizing, and what Goffman (1963) described as a spoiled identity. This is an identity that functions to cause the experience of stigma. It is well known that stigma can be experienced with regard to physical characteristics such as height, weight, racial characteristics, or aspects of one's personality. Some forms of stigma are extraordinarily difficult to counteract or accept. They are attributed to an individual by those who hold social power. When stigmatizing attributions become personal, they can be very damaging. Institutional policies based on stereotypes that equate age with diminished skill can be devastating to senior workers. Although such attributions are false, successful refutations may be impossible, due to the power of the individuals who make and perpetuate the attributions.

IMPLICATIONS

Rosenow (2015) cites examples of mature adults who have made remarkable contributions. The strength of their characters, combined with the contexts in which they lived, collaborated to produce their notable accomplishments. They had unique opportunities to experience a collaboration of their personal talent and enabling contexts. They had what Rosenow (2015) refers to as wisdom. It is significant to note that very positive values are placed on wisdom in other countries, such as China and Japan. According to Menon (2001), in these cultures, wisdom of elders is recognized and respected.

The characteristic that might be described as wisdom is the summit of a mature worker's accomplishment. It tempers technocracy and places in proper perspective the transient fads, shallow interests, and passing distractions that flood daily life, and devolution of organizational culture. In this devolution, wisdom is sacrificed on a routine assembly line punctuated by an occasional celebration in which hollow accolades are given to establish social status.

Wisdom is not a universal attainment. Not all mature workers possess a balance of skill and motivation that allows them to assume a functional place within a reasonably formulated distribution of productivity indicators in today's organizations. However, for many older workers, age is not a condition that prohibits them from being capable of clear and effective thinking, competent use of new technology, and productivity. Ageism strikes at competent older workers in tragic ways. They should be free of the tyranny of ageism. Ending their affiliations with organizations should be a mutual and voluntary act.

In the past, it was not difficult to detect ageism in organizations. It was evident in compulsory retirement practices based on age. Now ageism comes in different forms, such as techniques of segregation and information control. Whether ageism is manifested as forced retirement or as stigma, ostracism, and managed cooperative behaviors, it is demoralizing to older workers. It is time to take steps to reduce the processes of ageism in organizations. It is time for those who are in positions in which they can make a difference in organizations to become as concerned about ageism as they profess to be about sexism and racism. It is time to enable the knowledge, skill, and wisdom of older workers to emerge as intellectual products of value to this society.

LIMITATIONS

Societal norms of age is more entrenched and very resistant to change. For example, many have been influenced by the socially conditioned belief that it is appropriate to retire at age 65. They hold this belief, despite the fact that extended life expectancies make it possible to continue working and postpone retirement. Managers may favor earlier retirement based on the belief that older workers are liabilities in the workplace; that they may be more prone to diminished efficiency, and that as human capital, older workers are potentially more costly than younger workers. These issues have not been openly dealt with or adequately explored. In organizations that are open to employment of older persons, advancements can be made in studying and working through these issues.

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