Pandemic Ponderings on the Limited Lens of Our Age Stereotyping Research: Considering Privilege and Racism
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ABSTRACT
In this commentary, I observe the assumption of privilege of many of the age stereotypes that emerged to characterize both older and younger age groups at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This leads to a reflection of how much extant age stereotype research may be limited by the typical centering of a white and a middle- or upper-class perspective. I make acknowledgment of strides toward intersectional research and suggest some further research questions to move this work forward.

One of the many social consequences of the global pandemic was that it laid fertile ground for age and generation stereotypes to sprout afresh. In their timely piece, Rudolph and Zacher (2020) provide a vivid sampling of these burgeoning images of bad generational behaviors and judgments popping up in the popular press, at the start of the pandemic in March 2020. When resources are becoming scarce and tensions are high from ambiguity, loss of control, and impeding danger, intergroup blaming runs rampant. It was almost straight out of the pages of a social psychology textbook.

On the one hand, we saw images online of Boomers in Florida and stories with discussions of the early travel bans with matter-of-fact observations like “not that you’d know it from the cruise selfies your aunt Linda and the rest of the U.S.’s 50-plus population have been posting” (Cassel, 2020). But another story, posted just prior, warned of “selfish spring breakers” who “refuse to let coronavirus get in the way of their partying” (Boyle, 2020), accompanied by images of swimsuit-clad Gen-Z’ers drinking from Solo cups. Can you spot one thing these images have in common (aside from the sunshine)? Put simply: privilege. Put more lyrically in the Guardian: “glossed anecdotes drenched in unspoken class assumptions” (Lennard, 2020).

AGE AND GENERATION STEREOTYPES: A CLASS-LIMITED VIEW?
A lot of the generational stereotypes that first popped up, possibly in part due to their timing with traditional American Spring Break vacation time, depicted whatever age group they were targeting as a band of well-off, selfish people who cared more about their own enjoyment than about the safety of the country. The fact that almost identical descriptors were being used to vilify completely different age groups is noteworthy in and of itself, and could certainly be interesting to explore in age stereotype research. But it was this observation of privilege and presumption of a certain degree of wealth that really got me thinking more about the work that we traditionally do on age stereotypes in applied psychology. And, frankly, we could probably replace “age stereotypes” in that last sentence with just about anything we study in applied psychology. We have been called out in the past for an overfocus on middle- and upper-class workers (e.g., Bergman & Jean, 2015). But for this commentary, I am staying in my lane and talking about age stereotypes.

Take, for example, the common negative stereotype of younger workers (Millennials) being entitled and coddled and the (generally) positive stereotype of them being technologically savvy. In 2018, the poverty rate in America was highest among 18–24 year olds, at 18.28% of males and 23.1% of females (Duffin, 2019). The availability of technology and the level of training provided to teachers to use that technology lags behind in poorer school districts, both urban and rural, producing a digital divide that is not based on generation (as we often assume), but on SES (Herold, 2017). The stereotypical image that the media often projects of both the entitlement and tech wizardry of this age group has an unspoken assumption of privilege and a certain degree of wealth. I am not trying to argue that the commonly touted stereotypes are accurate descriptions of middle- and upper-class Millennials, but rather that the content of age stereotypes held by and toward people outside this level of privilege have not typically even been given consideration, nor has the lens of wealth been sufficiently acknowledged.
AND...WHITEWASHED?

It was around the time I was trying to flesh out this idea of class in age stereotyping that the other major historical event of 2020 began to take shape: the social justice uprising of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to continued police brutality and systemic racism in the United States. Many people have been prompted to open their eyes to what they may have ignored or not been willing or able to see, and they have begun to try to do their part toward the long journey to dismantle systemic racism in its many forms. Many academics have held a mirror up to their fields, their institutions, and their own research (Roberts, 2020). This combination of current events got me thinking about research on age and generational stereotypes in the workplace and questioning what we might be missing. Specifically, has our research inadvertently been shining a light much more brightly on the attitudes of and toward white middle-class workers and leaving others in the shadows?

Out of curiosity, I went back to my own empirical studies conducted on age stereotypes. The percentage of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) participants in those samples is certainly well below the representation of the population. I recalled one study from the 1980s (Crew, 1984) that was included in our 1995 meta-analysis (Finkelstein, Burke, & Raju, 1995; funny how when you do a meta-analysis, the citations get burned in your brain!) where the author compared the age stereotypes at a HBCU (historically black college or university) and a state university; in this case, he reported similar but stronger stereotypes. Specifically, there was a wider gap between the ratings of older and younger people, among the students at the HBCU. Interestingly, he muses that the Black students may have been visualizing the nature of typical work differently, more physical in nature, prompting stronger bias against older workers. I admit to only scanning titles and abstracts that seemed potentially promising, but I was unable to find a similar exploration across the 58 citations of Crew since.

Of course, I am not the first person to be calling attention to this issue. Goldberg (2009) wrote about this in a chapter in the Shultz and Adams’ (2007) book on aging at work, and Webster, Thoroughgood, and Sawyer (2019) provided their perspective on the topic in the 2019 edition. Webster and colleague recognize that age stereotype content may vary depending on other intersectional identities, and they call for this issue to be recognized in the development of diversity trainings and focused inclusion efforts. I concur, although even getting age included in diversity trainings has often been a challenge.

Marcus and Fritzsche (2015) have made important strides in the area of intersectionality in their theoretical work, arguing for the roles of age-based, gender-based, and tribe-based (race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion) memberships in creating archetypes representing the intersection of groups (for an empirical study example, see Marcus, Fritzsche, & Ng, 2019). Some colleagues and I have been starting to explore the intersectionality of age and gender on the specific content of stereotypes and metastereotypes (Imose, Martinez, & Finkelstein, 2016), but we have not yet begun to explore the addition of race.

RESEARCH IDEAS: SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

Given the scope of issues in our field, there are many open questions here. Admittedly, these questions are not yet fully developed and may need stronger theoretical grounding, but I name them here to provide tinder to spark research ideas in readers. As one example, do BIPOC employees activate age metastereotypes less often than white employees because the BIPOC employees may be more naturally on guard to monitor workplace interpersonal interactions in regard to race rather than age? Perhaps some of the mechanisms (e.g., metastereotype consciousness) thought to trigger age metastereotyping (e.g., Finkelstein, King, & Voyles, 2015) are superseded by race metastereotyping instead.

Or, in some circumstances (e.g., a solo young Black employee in a meeting, with young white employees and old Black employees), do specific stereotypes unique to a young Black worker become more salient? Also, could that depend on the type of job; for example, would that last example yield a different outcome if we switch “in a meeting” (hinting toward a corporate job) with “on a construction team”? And do we yet have a clear mapping of what qualities these intersectional stereotypes (like young, Black manager and young, Black construction worker) include? Moreover, researchers would want to not only clarify the characteristics of the target of stereotyping, but also pay attention to the characteristics of the stereotype holders. Some work (e.g., Finkelstein, Ryan, & King, 2015) has shown that the content of stereotypes of a particular age group may differ depending on the age of the perceiver. Introducing multiple characteristics of the perceiver (e.g., age, race, gender) may get unwieldy but perhaps better capture the complexity of the world.

In another vein, might some BIPOC employees have developed higher levels of resilience to racial stigma at work that could carry over and help them respond to age-based stereotypes and microaggressions? In contrast to the prior research question, where age metastereotype activation may not occur, this idea would suggest that resilience would come in as a downstream moderator (Poshuma & Campion, 2009) to buffer interpersonal outcomes. On the other hand, might the emotional toll of the chronic stressor of even the more subtle and very common forms of racism (Jones, Peddie, Gilrane, King, & Gray, 2017) in some cases exacerbate the negative impact of age bias? A more focused examination of (a) the factors that contribute to resilience to stereotyping and bias and, furthermore, (b) which (if any) factors benefit resilience to all stereotypes (e.g., age, race, gender) versus some but not others would be an important endeavor.

As a final example (although I am confident many readers will have more ideas), I am also interested in whether (and how) the increasingly popular and meme-worthy prototype of a “Karen”—a middle-aged, entitled, racist white woman (Young, 2020)—is affecting workplace age and race (and gender) dynamics. In Finkelstein and colleagues (2013), we concluded that both stereotypes and metastereotypes of middle-aged workers seemed to be the most consistently positive. But, with such a pervasive prototype as Karen in the current culture that is connected to middle age, would we see a history effect producing a blow to the positive valence of middle-aged stereotypes (particularly if assessed in combination with gender and race)?

Classism and racism are certainly not one in the same; thinking about them interchangeably diminishes the unique issues and challenges of each (Soto, 2008), yet ignoring the sociopolitical systems that have led to their overlap is also problematic and limiting (Kendi, 2019). We should be questioning whether our knowledge of age stereotyping is limited by the centering of the research in a middle- and upper-class white point of view. This matters from a science perspective, and it matters from a social justice perspective.
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