Age and Occupational Time Perspectives are Associated with Preference for Helping Others at Work

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INTRODUCTION

As people come to work longer, workforces are becoming more age diverse. In the face of assumptions that an aging workforce leads to lower productivity, presence of older people in work-teams has been positively associated with productivity (Börsch-Supan, 2013). The aim of the present study is to examine possible reasons for this, yet to be well understood, association. Our study is grounded in Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST- Carstensen, 2006). SST postulates that as people age, they perceive their future as limited- shifting motivation from preparing for the future to emotional well-being in the present. Such motivational shifts have been useful in explaining age associations with pro-social behavior and constructive conflict resolution at work (Hubbard, et al., 2016; Beiter, Scherer, & Zapf, 2018).

HYPOTHESES

A: Age is positively associated with preference for helping others at work

B: When time-horizons at work are expansive people prefer to advance their careers; when they are constrained people prefer to help others.

C: Age differences in preference for activities are moderated by occupational time-horizons

METHOD

Participants: 555 employed adults aged 20-75 (M=44.6, SD=13.2) answered a phone-assisted survey.

Procedure: Imagine having free time in their workday, and choose one of three work activities: 1. Helping a friend or colleague 2. Working on a project that may advance their careers 3. Working on a project that may lead the company in a new direction

Manipulation: random assignment to one of three conditions:

- Expanded horizons (stay with the company longer than you planned)
- Constrained horizons (contract expiring soon, life chapter is ending)
- Control (no instructions)

RESULTS

Multinomial Regression results: Likelihood of choosing ‘help’ over the alternatives by age and condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Help colleague/friend over 'Advance career'</th>
<th>Help colleague/friend over 'New direction'</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.46 (61.3%) *</td>
<td>0.79 (68.9%) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (in ctrl condition)</td>
<td>0.83 (17.1%) ***</td>
<td>0.25 (4.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded OFTP (mean age)</td>
<td>-0.76 (-18.3%) **</td>
<td>-0.73 (-17.2%) **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constrained OFTP (mean age)</td>
<td>-0.76 (-18.3%) **</td>
<td>-0.1 (-2.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age x Expanded OFTP</td>
<td>-0.54 (-13.3%) *</td>
<td>-0.32 (-8.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age x Constrained OFTP</td>
<td>-0.53 (-12.9%) *</td>
<td>0.03 (0.06%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Estimates are standardized logit coefficients. In parentheses- change in probability associated with the predictor. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

RESULTS

CONCLUSIONS

- Older employees are more interested in helping others at work than younger employees.
- When employees expect a long workplace future, they are more interested in advancing their careers and taking the company in a new direction than they are in helping others.
- When employees are faced with a shorter than expected workplace future, they prefer to work on projects that advance their careers, perhaps in preparation for their next employment.
- Our results suggest that older employees might be more sensitive to changes in time horizons at work than younger employees. This may indicate a more complex set of motives for older adults at work – some stemming from age and others from time horizons.
- Older workers may think of taking the company in a new direction as helping the company, which they are more likely to do when expecting to stay for a long time.

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