Age and Coworkers’ Acceptance of Workplace Accommodations:
The Role of Workgroup Composition

Suggestion for a short running title:
Age and Accommodation Acceptance
ABSTRACT

In most developed countries, the workforce is aging. With increasing age, there is a higher chance for individuals to experience health restrictions. Organizations typically react to these circumstances by providing workplace accommodations. Prior research has indicated that the effectiveness of workplace accommodations strongly relies upon stakeholders, such as coworkers and their levels of acceptance. With regard to coworkers’ fairness assessments of accommodations, recipients’ characteristics play a major role. However, little is known about the effect of recipients’ chronological age and its boundary conditions. In this study, I drew upon the literature on disability, age, and similarity attraction to propose a model of the relationship between recipient’s age and coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations. I then tested this model using multisource data on 144 accommodation recipients working for a large German manufacturing company. As hypothesized, I found that the relationship between a recipient’s age and coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations is conditioned by the social context. Age was positively related to coworkers’ acceptance when an individual is similar in age to the other members of his or her workgroup and when the workgroup does not comprise accommodated peers.

Keywords: disability, age, workplace accommodation, workgroup composition, relational demography, similarity attraction, social identity approach
INTRODUCTION

The average age of the workforce is increasing in many countries around the globe (Posthuma & Campion, 2008; Truxillo & Fracaroli, 2013). This demographic change in age challenges organizations (Dychtwald, Erickson, & Morison, 2004; Ng & Feldman, 2008). One of these challenges is related to the negative correlation between age and health (WHO, 2011). Many older workers develop health problems and functional limitations, which restrict their performance and endanger their continued employment (Brault, 2009).

Organizations typically respond by providing workplace accommodations, defined as “modifications in the workplace, work environment, work process, or conditions of work that reduce physical and social barriers so that people with disabilities experience equal opportunity in a competitive work environment” (Colella & Bruyère, 2011: 478).

Despite the potential of workplace accommodations to increase productivity and integration of affected employees (Solovieva, Dowler, & Walls, 2011; Solovieva & Walls, 2013), several factors are known to influence the acceptance of people with disabilities (PWDs) at work (Vornholt, Uitdewilligen, & Nijhuis, 2013) and thus the effectiveness of workplace accommodations. Two central elements are individual-level attributes of the accommodation recipient and attributes of other stakeholders, such as coworkers and supervisors (Stone & Colella, 1996).

In particular, research has suggested that PWDs’ characteristics, such as the visibility of disability, should play a major role in coworkers’ fairness assessments of accommodations (Colella, Paetzold, & Belliveau, 2004). Furthermore, the work context of PWDs, such as environmental diversity climate, was hypothesized to influence accommodation perceptions (Colella, 2001). However, empirical field studies that investigate these relationships are limited. For instance, Baldridge and Swift (2015) have found that PWD’s age can affect their perception of whether it is appropriate to ask the employer for a desired accommodation (i.e., “normative appropriateness favorability”). Thus, the authors looked at accommodation requests chronologically before accommodations were actually implemented. Indeed, a review of the literature revealed that
no empirical study has investigated the effect of PWDs’ age on their coworkers’ acceptance (of workplace accommodations).

In this study, I followed the call by Vornholt and colleagues who concluded from their recent literature review on disability that “what remains is to fill in the gaps to fully understand the concept of acceptance and how it is related to sustainable employment of people with disabilities” (Vornholt et al., 2013, p. 473). In particular, I target the relationship between a recipient’s age and his or her perception of coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations. This is a significant gap in the literature for several reasons. As already mentioned above, older employees represent a growing portion of the workforce (i.e., demographic change in age; Ng & Feldman, 2008), and age is positively associated with disability (WHO, 2011). Moreover, social and economic pressures force people in many countries around the globe to retire at a higher age (Müller-Camen, Croucher, Flynn, & Schröder, 2011). Interestingly, as I explain in this article, older employees with health restrictions may receive more acceptance for their workplace accommodations than younger employees do. Consequently, younger employees with health restrictions, as a minority within the group of accommodated employees, may stick out and therefore become disadvantaged. Toward that end, researchers need to understand better the mechanisms behind coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations.

To fill this gap, this study contributes mainly to research on PWD. Since no clear consensus exists on the concept of disability¹, I focus on the important subgroup of employees with health restrictions that are of particular interest for nations and organizations with aging workforces. In doing so, I first review related disability accommodation literature (e.g., Colella, 2001; Colella et al., 2004) and age stereotypes literature (Gilbert & Fiske, 1998) to explore how age and health restrictions influence PWDs’ perception of their coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations. Further, I utilize the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1987), the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), and relational demography arguments (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989) to

¹ According to the WHO (2011: 4), disability is an “umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions, referring to the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and that individual’s contextual factors (environmental and personal factors)”.

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examine the potential moderating influence of workgroup composition. I propose and test a model using a sample of 3301 manufacturing workers (thereof, 144 workplace accommodation recipients) of a large German automotive company.

I extend prior research in at least four ways. First, I point to the importance of PWDs’ perception of workplace accommodation by coworkers. This outcome variable is relevant because research has indicated that coworkers’ perception of and behavior towards PWDs is critical for their full integration (Stone & Colella, 1996) and thus the effectiveness of workplace accommodations. Furthermore, I argue that accommodation recipients’ perceptions really matters in this regard because it is the part of coworkers’ acceptance that gets transmitted to the affected employees and may motivate future behavior, such as accommodation requests (Baldridge & Swift, 2015; Baldridge & Veiga, 2001, 2006). Second, I explore the role of chronological age of accommodation recipients. The relationship between a recipient’s age and his or her acceptance of coworkers’ accommodation is interesting and important to study because health restrictions and accommodations in the workplace are expected to increase further due to the demographic change in age and related companies’ responses (Ng & Feldman, 2008). Third, I extend the work by Colella and colleagues (Colella, 2001; Colella et al., 2004; Paetzold et al., 2008) by examining the influence of the social context on the strength of the relation between recipients’ age and perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance. In particular, I examine two workgroup attributes, workgroup older workers ratio (i.e., the ratio of older workers in a workgroup), and workgroup accommodated peers (i.e., the effect of having or not having an accommodated coworker within one’s workgroup). These variables are relevant not only because the number of older workers is rising, but also because employees with health restrictions are likely to be members of workgroups that include others with similar restrictions (Ali, Schur, & Blanck, 2011; Ryan, 2000). Finally, I contribute to disability accommodation research by integrating relational demography arguments (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989) to explore the interaction effect between a recipient’s age and coworkers’ age. This cross-level interaction is important, considering researchers’ calls to go beyond simple individual age when making predictions about employee behavior and attitudes (Schwall, Hedge, & Borman, 2012; Shore, Cleveland, & Goldberg, 2003). Overall, this
paper emphasizes the role of workgroup social context in the relationship of an accommodation recipient’s age and his or her coworkers’ accommodation acceptance. As I explain further in this paper, my central argument is that recipient’s chronological age relates to the perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance when there are mostly older coworkers or no further accommodation recipients in the workgroup.

THEORY

Managerial research on workplace accommodations for PWDs is concerned with three major issues: (A) willingness to request accommodation (e.g., Baldridge & Swift, 2015; Baldridge & Veiga, 2001, 2006), (B) granting of accommodation requests (e.g., Baldridge & Swift, 2013; Florey & Harrison, 2000), and (C) coworkers’ perception of accommodations (e.g., Colella, 2001; Colella et al., 2004; Paetzold et al., 2008). Therefore, research on the first two issues (A and B) has focused on situations chronologically prior to the actual implementation of workplace accommodations. Furthermore, issue A focuses on the perspective of PWDs and issue B on the perspective of supervisors or employers. By contrast, the last issue (C) focuses on the phase during and after the implementation of workplace accommodations and on the perspective of coworkers. The present study centers on two of the introduced issues. It mainly builds upon the knowledge from the third issue in which coworkers’ accommodation acceptance can be thought of as an outcome of coworkers’ accommodation perception. By investigating the perspective of accommodation recipients, I also draw upon knowledge from issue A on the willingness of accommodation requests.

In a prior research, Colella (2001) identified coworkers as critical stakeholders in the workplace accommodation process because they may be directly affected by the change (García, Paetzold, & Colella, 2005). Arising interpersonal problems may stem from distributive justice perceptions, which refer to the differential treatment of a single person in a workgroup when receiving an accommodation. This can elicit negative reactions and
perceptions of unfairness in coworkers (Colella, 2001). As Paetzold and colleagues (2008) pointed out, an accommodation may be perceived as unfair by coworkers in several circumstances. First, coworkers may perceive that the accommodation recipient’s job becomes easier, especially when recipients excel in performance. Second, coworkers may feel that their own workload increases due to the colleague’s accommodation. Third, coworkers may view workplace accommodations as desirable for them as well while being granted to another person. Fourth, coworkers may think that scarce resources, such as money, which are needed elsewhere, were spent on accommodations. Fifth, accommodations for employees with invisible health restrictions are more likely to be perceived as unfair to coworkers. Coworkers may think that there is no reason that justifies an accommodation and the recipient is only “faking” his or her health restriction. Furthermore, as other researchers have pointed out, the anticipated origin of a health restriction may also influence accommodation judgments of PWDs’ coworkers (Baldridge & Veiga, 2001; Florey & Harrison, 2000). For instance, accommodations for congenital diseases or disabilities have no onset controllability; therefore, they should be viewed as more fair compared to accommodations for potentially self-inflicted restrictions (e.g., due to not wearing a helmet riding a motorcycle).

Building on this prior research, I shed light on coworkers’ accommodation acceptance, which I define as the affective coworkers’ judgment of the appropriateness to accommodate a particular health-restricted individual at a given point in time. Thereby, I concentrate on the perspective of the most affected individuals – accommodation recipients – and their perceived coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations. Because, as Vornholt and colleagues (2013, p. 473) have pointed out, “[…] there are several personal gains of feeling accepted as for example the development of a positive self-perception and general life satisfaction. Acceptance with all its facets seems to be a cornerstone for the long-term integration of people with disabilities at work.” I, therefore, argue that accommodation recipients’ feeling of being accepted by coworkers may influence their work experience and well-being. Feeling accepted may also affect future behavior, such as accommodation requests (Baldridge & Swift, 2015; Baldridge & Veiga, 2001, 2006), rather than coworkers’ actual acceptance that might not be publically disclosed.
To predict *perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance*, I focus on recipient’s chronological age in my model. As further illustrated below, recipients’ age is an understudied but highly relevant individual factor in the accommodation research mainly because of workforce aging and the association between age and health restrictions. Furthermore, the social context was included as a boundary condition in my model, as it was thought to influence whether workplace accommodations are perceived as fair and accepted (Colella, 2001; Colella et al., 2004). In particular, I investigate the influence of two workgroup composition variables: *workgroup older workers ratio* and *workgroup accommodated peers*. The ratio of older workers in a recipient’s workgroup is notable, considering relational demography arguments (e.g., Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). Further, accommodated coworkers in a recipient’s workgroup are interesting to consider because PWDs often work together in organizations (Bruyere, 2000), which may influence work norms and employee perceptions. Overall, as shown in Figure 1, my model proposed that recipients’ age directly influences the coworkers’ accommodation acceptance while the social context moderates this relationship. More specifically, workgroup ratio of older workers is posited to moderate the association between age and coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations as well as presence of accommodated coworkers in the workgroup.

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Recipient’s Age

Several studies have provided evidence that PWDs’ experiences in organizations are affected by their individual characteristics, such as their performance level, visibility of the disability, or anticipated origin of the disability (Colella, 2001; Paetzold et al., 2008). Yet, very few authors have looked at the effect of the chronological age on the experiences of PWDs (e.g., Baldridge & Swift, 2015), despite the strong correlation of disability with age (Brault, 2009; WHO, 2011). In a sample of hearing-impaired employees, Baldridge and Swift (2015) investigated the association between chronological age and PWDs’ assessment of the “normative appropriateness favorability” to request a disability
accommodation from their employer. Thereby, normative appropriateness favorability occurs, “[…] when an employee believes that others at work (including supervisors, coworkers, and subordinates) would […] approve of that employee making a particular disability accommodation request at a particular point in time” (Baldridge & Swift, 2015, p. 3). The authors found a negative association with requester’s age, suggesting that older PWDs should be less likely to request an accommodation (Baldridge & Swift, 2013). They looked at accommodation requests chronologically before accommodations were implemented, and they sampled a very specific group of PWDs (namely hearing-impaired individuals with childhood disability onset). Other scholars investigated PWDs’ chronological age and its relation to coworkers’ perceptions. For instance, older PWDs were differently stereotyped compared to younger PWDs (Duncan, White, & Loretto, 2000). However, to my knowledge, no study has investigated the relationship of an accommodation recipient’s age and coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations.

Focusing on this relevant gap in literature, I argue that age is another important yet understudied antecedent of the acceptance of workplace accommodations. Based on the statistically proven negative relationship between age and health as well as potential own experiences, coworkers are likely to expect functional limitations and the need for accommodations from older rather than from younger workers. In addition, wide-spread age stereotypes depict older people as ill and helpless (Gilbert & Fiske, 1998), having lower productivity, higher resistance to change, and reduced ability to learn (Posthuma & Campion, 2008). Older workers may even evoke pity (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007) or paternalistic behavior (Fineman, 2014). Thus, accommodation of older employees fits the existing societal beliefs; therefore, colleagues should be inclined to apply the need-based justice rule (i.e., to focus more on individual needs compared to equal treatment of employees; Colella, 2001; Leventhal, 1976). Consequently, coworkers should judge health-related accommodations as more reasonable and appropriate for older than for younger workers. In contrast, accommodating younger employees should stick out more, appear less expected and more salient, and, therefore, be judged as less appropriate by coworkers. For these reasons I expect that:
**H1:** A recipient’s age is positively related to perceived coworkers’ acceptance of his or her workplace accommodation.

**Social Context**

While coworkers’ accommodation acceptance can generally be expected to increase with recipients’ age, beyond individual differences in age, it is also important to consider the influence of the social context on this relationship (Colella, 2001; Colella et al., 2004). The social context captures some of the real-world complexities that influence whether an accommodation is perceived as appropriate. In this study, I examined two social context attributes on the team-level: workgroup older workers ratio and workgroup accommodated peers. As described below, these social context attributes are theoretically interesting because they can affect workgroup norms, attitudes, and judgments (Cameron & Quinn, 2005) and, in turn, the extent to which age affects coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations.

**Workgroup Older Workers Ratio**

As detailed earlier, coworkers of older accommodation recipients can generally be expected to show higher acceptance of workplace accommodations compared to coworkers of younger accommodation recipients. However, in line with prior research on relational demography (e.g., Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989), I expect the positive effect of recipients’ age on accommodation acceptance to be stronger in workgroups with a high ratio of older workers. Tsui and O’Reilly (1989) found that similarity between two individuals, or individuals and groups, is often associated with higher levels of liking and trust based on similarity attraction processes (Byrne, 1971). Just recently, Dwertmann and Boehm (in press) found that incongruence in the disability status of subordinate-supervisor dyads is related to negative outcomes, such as lower leader-member-exchange quality and lower performance. In addition, according to the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1987), individuals’ demographics, such as age, are crucial for in-group and out-group formation (Finkelstein, Burke, & Raju, 1995; Kunze, Böhm, & Bruch, 2011).
Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect older workers to have more experience with health issues with increasing age based on the negative correlation between age and health (WHO, 2011). Therefore, older employees should be more sensitive to older coworkers’ health restrictions, which should increase the understanding and levels of acceptance of older rather than younger coworkers with health restrictions.

In this study, I connect the literatures on workplace accommodation and relational demography and argue that the chronological age of the accommodated employee and the ratio of older workers in the respective workgroup interact with each other. Coworkers who are more similar to their health-restricted colleagues in terms of age will be more likely to accept their colleagues’ workplace accommodations mainly due to own aging experiences and higher levels of trust, which is an important factor of acceptance (Paetzold et al., 2008). In contrast, coworkers who are less similar to their health-restricted colleagues in terms of age will be less likely to accept their colleagues’ workplace accommodations. Formally stated:

\[ H2: \text{Workgroup older workers ratio moderates the positive relationship between recipient’s age and perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance such that this positive relationship will be stronger when the ratio of older workers in a workgroup is high.} \]

**Workgroup Accommodated Peers**

The disability literature also indicates that PWDs often work together in the same organizations, departments, and workgroups and that their integration is more often successful when there are already other PWDs (Bruyere, 2000; Chadsey, Shelden, Horn De Bardeleben, & Cimera, 1999; Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). Based on these findings, Baldridge and Swift (2015) integrated workgroup disability peers as a mediator variable for the postulated moderation of organizational type (i.e., for-profit vs. non-profit organization) when exploring the relationship between PWDs’ age and their beliefs about whether it is appropriate to ask for accommodations (referred to as normative appropriateness favorability). The authors found confirmation for their hypothesized mediated moderation effect. Following these insights, I consider the possibility that workgroup accommodated
peers may moderate the relationship between a recipient’s age and perceived coworkers’ acceptance of workplace accommodations. In particular, I expect this relationship to be weaker when there are further accommodation recipients in the workgroup. This is expected because the quantity of accommodated individuals should affect workgroup climate, norms, and attitudes toward health restriction and accommodation (Bruyere, 2000; Cameron & Quinn, 2005). When there are accommodated peers in a workgroup, the focal accommodation recipient should appear less unique and salient (Colella, 2001), and his or her individual attributes, such as age, should appear ordinary and less relevant for coworkers’ accommodation acceptance. In contrast, when there is only one accommodated employee in the workgroup, coworkers should perceive this individual as unique, salient, and highly uncommon (Colella, 2001). Consequently, an accommodation recipient and his or her individual attributes, such as age, stick out more when coworkers make judgments about acceptance of workplace accommodations. Hence, since accommodating older employees should better fit societal beliefs (see also Hypothesis 1), the positive relationship of recipient’s age and coworkers’ accommodation acceptance should be stronger in workgroups with only one accommodation recipient. For these reasons, I formally state:

\[ H3: \text{Workgroup accommodated peers moderate the positive relationship between recipient’s chronological age and coworkers’ accommodation acceptance such that this positive relationship will be stronger when there is only one accommodation recipient in the workgroup.} \]

METHOD

Data Collection and Sample

The data for this study was collected in the production department of a large German automotive company. The data collection was a part of a large research project on inclusion
of people with health restrictions and disabilities (Stone & Colella, 1996) in the context of demographic change in age (Posthuma & Campion, 2008; Truxillo & Fraccaroli, 2013). For their participation, the company received a sub-department benchmarking report about their employees’ perceptions and attitudes towards coworkers with health restrictions as well as overall recommendations to improve related HR processes.

To avoid common source bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012), I used two independent data sources, objective HR data and an employee survey. First, the company provided objective HR data on individual-level demographic variables (age, tenure, health-restrictions, sick days, etc.) for all production employees. Subsequently, supervisors in group meetings informed all production employees about an upcoming survey. Supervisors used a standardized document from their HR department, explaining the study’s purpose, properties, and participation instructions. All employees could participate voluntarily during their working hours via the corporate intranet. Based on the objective HR data and individual login information, different questionnaires were administered to employees with health restrictions, their coworkers, and supervisors.

In this study, I focus exclusively on employees with health restrictions. Of the 579 employees who received health-related workplace accommodations in the last four years prior to the study, 179 responded to our survey (30.9 percent response rate). After listwise deletion based on study variables, 144 usable cases remained. Average employee age was 42.37 years (SD = 10.93), ranging from 21 to 64 years. Mean organizational tenure was 22.55 years (SD = 8.66), and 17 percent of the respondents were female. The participants were clustered in 114 workgroups (total of 3,301 employees) with a mean of 14.21 members per group (SD = 8.68). When comparing the study variable means (for a list see Table 1), I did not find significant differences between accommodated employees who responded and those who did not.

**Measures**

The study variables were calculated based on either objective HR data or an employee survey. Overall, only *coworkers’ accommodation acceptance* (dependent variable) was operationalized using the questionnaire. All further study variables were calculated based
on objective HR data collected from all employees (even those who did not fill out the questionnaire).

**Perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance.** The dependent variable in my model presented a perceptual measure, as assessed by the recipients of accommodation in the employee survey. Despite the fact that coworkers’ fairness judgments of workplace accommodations were previously identified as critical for the effectiveness of accommodation (e.g., Colella, 2001; Colella et al., 2004), I was not able to identify any empirical study that would operationalize a measure for coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations. Thus, I asked participants to respond to one self-created item: “My colleagues accept my workplace accommodations”. The item was measured on a Likert response scale ranging from “1” was “strongly disagree” and “5” was “strongly agree”. As lined out in the survey, workplace accommodations were defined as either (a) ergonomic adjustment of the original workplace, (b) transfer to another workplace, or (c) other changes in working conditions (e.g., no workplace rotation, no alternating shifts).

**Age similarity: recipient’s age and workgroup older workers ratio.** To account for the influence of age similarity between accommodation recipients and their workgroup on **perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance**, I referred to Riordan and Wayne (2007). After analyzing prior research studies on relational demography within groups, these authors compared three most common approaches to measure demographic similarity (Euclidean D-scores, interaction terms, and perceptual measures) in an empirical study. They concluded that the interaction term approach was the least biased and most accurate but had some limitations in terms of statistical power. Following the authors’ conclusions, I applied the recommended approach which involved creating cutoff values for continuous variables. To ensure correct calculation of age similarity, it was necessary to use an identical cutoff value for recipients’ age as well as their workgroup coworkers’ age. Therefore, I used a cutoff of 50 years\(^2\) since the surveyed company as well as the German Institute for Employment Research IAB considers people 50 years and above as older workers (Dietz & Walwei, 2011). Following Riordan and Wayne’s recommendation, I created a binary

\(^2\) To test for robustness, I also replaced the measure of the recipient’s chronological age with a continuous value as well as alternative cutoff values of 45 years and 55 years. Please refer to the results section.
measure for the chronological age of accommodation recipients. The resulting binary variable *recipient’s age* was coded such that “0” indicated an accommodation recipient younger than 50 years of age and “1” indicated an accommodation recipient of age 50 and above. Accordingly, I applied the same logic for *workgroup older workers ratio*, indicating the proportion of workers age 50 years or above in the recipient workgroup. Therefore, I assigned ratio values between 0 and 1, for instance, an accommodation recipient working in a group containing only employees younger than 50 would receive the ratio value 0, and a recipient working in a group consisting of 7 younger employees and 3 employees of age 50 and above would receive the ratio value 0.3. To test for age similarity between accommodation recipients and their coworkers, I finally computed an interaction term (product) of both variables.

**Workgroup accommodated peers.** The second social context moderator was calculated following the example of Baldridge and Swift (2015). Likewise, I aggregated the number of accommodation recipients within each workgroup and coded it the following way: “0” indicated that the accommodation recipient had no accommodated coworkers in his or her workgroup (no *workgroup accommodated peers*), and “1” indicated at least one accommodated coworker in his or her workgroup (presence of *workgroup accommodated peers*).

**Controls.** To rule out alternative explanations, I included three individual-level (*sex*, *organizational tenure*, and *disability status*) as well as two group-level control variables (*muscular strain of the workplace* and *workgroup size*), as previous studies have shown that these controls may be related to the vocal study variables. All five variables were obtained from objective HR data.

*Sex* was coded such that “1” indicated male and “2” indicated female accommodation recipients. *Organizational tenure* indicated the years that an employee was affiliated with the company. *Disability status* was based on the official German document for severe disability and was coded such that “0” indicated no disability and “1” indicated a disability. *Muscular strain of the workplace* was based on an organizational ergonomic assessment of the individual workplaces. Since workers typically rotated over all workgroup’s
workstations, I assigned each workgroup’s average muscular strain to the respective accommodation recipient. The ergonomic measure could theoretically rank from “0” indicating no muscular strain to “70” indicating maximum muscular strain. Workgroup size indicated the number of workers in an accommodation recipient’s workgroup (including the accommodation recipient).

Data Analysis

I used hierarchical regression analysis, as proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), to test my hypotheses. All continuous predictor variables were z-standardized (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004). The control variables were entered first, followed by the independent variables in the second step and the interaction terms in the final step. To further inspect the moderation effects, I plotted the results and performed simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991).

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the study variables are displayed in Table 1. Mean perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance was 3.88 ($SD = 1.12$). The mean of the binary predictor variable recipient’s age was .51 ($SD = .50$), indicating that 51 percent of accommodation recipients were 50 years of age or above. The mean of the binary social context moderator workgroup older workers ratio was .40 ($SD = .29$), indicating that on average 40 percent of recipient’s coworkers in the respective workgroup were 50 years of age or above. The mean of the second binary moderator workgroup accommodated peers was .58 ($SD = .50$), indicating that on average 58 percent of accommodation recipients had one or more colleagues in their workgroup who also received workplace accommodation.

Although not study variables and only used to calculate our measure of recipient’s age, mean chronological age was 47.97 years ($SD = 7.91$). Chronological age was not significantly correlated to perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance ($r = .03, p > .1$) It correlated with recipient’s age ($r = .76, p < .01$), workgroup older workers ratio ($r = .40, p < .01$), and organizational tenure ($r = .67, p < .01$).
With respect to Hypothesis 1, I found marginal evidence for the positive relationship between recipient’s age and perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance based on a marginally significant correlation \((r = .14, p < .10)\). As shown in Table 2, I also found a marginally significant main effect of recipient’s age on perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance using the regression analysis \((\beta = .48, p < .10, t = 1.96)\). Thus, the support for Hypothesis 1 was not clear.

As predicted in Hypothesis 2, the positive relationship between recipient’s age and perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance was stronger when workgroup older workers ratio was high \((\beta = .8, p < .01)\). To further inspect this relation, I plotted the simple slopes (Aiken & West, 1991) for low workgroup older workers ratio (one SD below the mean; on average 11 percent of workers 50 years of age or above) and high workgroup older workers ratio (one SD above the mean; on average 68 percent of workers 50 years of age or above). The results can be seen in Figure 2. As predicted, the positive relationship is stronger for high than for low workgroup older workers ratio, indicating that the relation between recipient’s age and perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance is stronger in workgroups with many older workers. The simple slope analysis revealed that the effect is only significant for high workgroup older workers ratio \((\beta = 1.00, p < .01)\) but non-significant for low workgroup older workers ratio \((\beta = .04, p > .05)\).

In line with Hypothesis 3, the regression analysis showed a significant moderation effect of workgroup accommodated peers on the relationship between recipient’s age and coworkers’ accommodation acceptance \((\beta = -1.21, p < .01)\). The results were plotted for not having and for having workgroup accommodated peers, as can be seen in Figure 3. As predicted, the positive relationship was stronger when an accommodation recipient did not have accommodated coworkers in his or her workgroup. Accordingly, the simple slope analysis revealed that the effect is only significant for not having workgroup accommodated
peers ($\beta = 1.24$, $p < .001$) but non-significant for having workgroup accommodated peers ($\beta = .03$, $p > .05$).

In order to test the robustness of the results, I replaced the binary measure of recipient’s age with alternative cutoff values of 45 or 55 years of age as well as a continuous measure of chronological age. The main effect of recipient’s age was not significant in all three cases. The new interaction effect of recipient’s age x workgroup older workers ratio remained significant in all cases. This interaction stayed also stable when additionally replacing the workgroup older workers ratio by the product of workgroup age mean and workgroup age standard deviation.

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**DISCUSSION**

As employees age, do they receive more or less acceptance for workplace accommodation from their coworkers? To test this question, I drew on research on workplace disability, age, demographic similarity, and social identity to propose a conceptual and empirical model. The model captures some of the complex interplay between an accommodation recipient’s attributes (recipient’s age) and the social context (workgroup older workers ratio and workgroup accommodated peers) using the data from
It is important to examine these issues because of the current demographic change in age (Truxillo & Fraccaroli, 2013) and its workforce consequences that increase the need for workplace accommodations in many companies around the world. Prior research has indicated that accommodation effectiveness depends on coworkers’ attitudes, which, in turn, rely on accommodation recipients’ attributes, coworkers’ attributes, and the social context. Yet, little is known about the effect of chronological age on workplace acceptance of accommodation by coworkers.

The current study adds to the literature on workplace accommodation for PWDs in important ways. First, it extends the work of Colella and colleagues (Colella, 2001; Colella et al., 2004; Paetzold et al., 2008) by shedding light on the importance of PWDs perception of coworkers’ acceptance of their workplace accommodation and looking beyond coworkers’ perceptions of accommodation fairness. Perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance is interesting and important to study because accommodation recipients’ feeling of being accepted by coworkers may influence their work experience and well-being (Vornholt et al., 2013) as well as their future work behavior (Baldridge & Swift, 2015; Baldridge & Veiga, 2001, 2006). Furthermore, coworkers’ behaviors and perceptions towards PWDs have been theorized to be critical for PWDs’ full integration (Stone & Colella, 1996) and consequently for a better use of PWDs’ talents and abilities.

Second, I explored the role of a recipients’ individual attribute – chronological age – on their perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance. By doing so, I extended the work of Baldridge and Swift (2015) who looked at PWDs’ age and its role in accommodation requests. Consistent with my expectations, I found marginal evidence that accommodation recipient’s age is positively associated with perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance, which may reflect the effect of age stereotypes, personal life experiences, and common societal beliefs about older people. Despite the unclear results due to a marginal significance level, I argue that this finding is important because the hypothesis predicted a positive direction, which may legitimize one-tailed hypothesis
testing. One-tailed test yielded a significant effect at $p < .05$ (equivalent to a $p$-value of .10 for two-tailed testing). Apart from that, on average 60 percent of the recipients’ coworkers in the respective workgroups were younger than 50 years of age and 58 percent had further accommodated peers in their workgroup. These properties of the sample increase the probability of not finding a significant main effect, as both moderating effects in my findings suggest (main effect only significant for high workgroup older workers ratio and no workgroup accommodated peers). Yet, my results suggest that older workplace accommodation recipients tend to receive higher acceptance of accommodation from their coworkers. In contrast, younger accommodation recipients tend to receive lower coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations because accommodating younger workers may appear less appropriate (minority within accommodation recipients).

Third, this study adds to the literature on workplace accommodation for PWDs by integrating relational demography arguments (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989), which have been largely overlooked in the research stream to date. As expected, I found evidence that the social context variable workgroup older workers ratio (i.e., the ratio of older workers in a workgroup) moderates the positive relationship between the individual factor recipient’s age and perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance such that this positive relationship is stronger for high older workers ratio in a workgroup. This cross-level interaction suggests that groups seem to favor individuals belonging to the same age group (in-group) as compared to individuals from a different age group (out-group) when it comes to workplace accommodations. While the difference between both workgroup age categories in perceived acceptance of accommodation of older accommodation recipients (50 years of age and above) is rather small, the results suggest that younger accommodations recipients (below 50 years of age) experience significant disadvantages in terms of perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance in workgroups with a high proportion of older workers. In other words, older coworkers who have no health issues may find it particularly difficult to accept health-related workplace accommodations for younger employees. Following my argumentation for Hypotheses 1 and 2, a reasonable explanation may be that accommodating younger workers may appear counterintuitive and
less appropriate because older rather than younger individuals are expected to experience a greater number of health issues.

Finally, this study contributes to disability accommodation literature by examining the influence of a second workgroup attribute – workgroup accommodated peers – on the strength between recipient’s age and perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance. Thereby, I again extend the work by Colella and colleagues (Colella, 2001; Colella et al., 2004; Paetzold et al., 2008) by providing empirical evidence for the importance of the social context. As expected, I found evidence that workgroup accommodated peers (i.e., the impact of having or not having an accommodated coworker within one’s workgroup) moderates the positive relationship between recipient’s age and perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance. This positive relationship is stronger when an accommodation recipient does not have other workgroup accommodated peers. My result suggests that recipient’s age matters only for perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance when there are no other accommodated coworkers in the workgroup. In groups with no other accommodated peers, a younger accommodation recipient seems to experience the lowest level of coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations, whereas older recipients experience the highest level of coworkers’ acceptance of accommodations in groups with no other accommodated peers. A reasonable explanation may be that accommodation recipients’ attributes, such as age, are more salient and important for their acceptance of accommodation when there is only a single case in the workgroup. Under these circumstances, age-based societal beliefs seem to play a role in perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance. I encourage future research to further investigate these effects and explore other attributes of the workgroup social context.

**Practical Implications**

The general discussion on demographic change in age typically deals with topics such as later retirement (i.e., Muller-Camen et al., 2011), age discrimination (i.e., Finkelstein et al., 1995), and age-related limitations and accommodations (i.e., WHO, 2011). Thus, the focus is on older workers. However, regarding workplace accommodations, my findings highlight the need for HR professionals and managers to pay attention to younger
accommodation recipients as well. Younger recipients of health-related workplace accommodations may be disadvantaged compared to older recipients who present the majority within the group of accommodation recipients. Therefore, I suggest that companies should try to increase the awareness of the risk of neglecting younger employees with health restrictions, since they might struggle more with acceptance of workplace accommodation by coworkers compared to older employees. In particular, companies should inform supervisors and employees about health restrictions and disabilities, affected groups, and the benefits of workplace accommodations. Supervisors should encourage employees to appreciate all coworkers for their strengths and abilities rather than focus on their weaknesses and disabilities.

Age diverse work environments present further challenges. Since my results suggest that workgroups with mostly older workers seem to be more reluctant to accept younger accommodation recipients, these trainings should address particularly older employees.

Furthermore, my results suggest that PWDs might profit from having peers with workplace accommodations within their workgroups, as coworkers’ acceptance may increase and, beyond that, having peers in similar circumstances may encourage mutual support, togetherness, and well-being based on relational demography arguments (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). When composing workgroups, it may be advisable to group several accommodation recipients in the same workgroup. However, when doing so, management and HR should refrain from creating PWD-only workgroups. Reducing versatility in this way may inhibit known benefits of diversity, such as increased problem solving or creativity (e.g., Van Knippenberg, 2007) and additionally create the impression of discrimination of PWDs, which may lead to further undesirable outcomes.

**Limitation and Future Research**

Despite the contributions of this study to both research and practice, some potential limitations should be noted. First, since there were no existing measures of *perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance*, I used a self-developed single item measure. Building on this study, I encourage future studies to further investigate this construct and its conceptual foundation and to develop a more sophisticated measure.
Second, perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance was assessed by accommodation recipients. While perceived coworkers’ acceptance of workplace accommodations is interesting and important to study, future research should also assess the perspectives of coworkers and their effect on recipients’ perceptions.

Finally, this study recruited participants from a single German organization in the automotive industry. Furthermore, all participants worked in the manufacturing department. Thus, the results may not generalize beyond Germany to other industries and job tasks. Therefore, I encourage future research to test our findings across different work settings. While with this study, I shed some light on two social context attributes of accommodation acceptance, i.e., workgroup older workers ratio and workgroup accommodated peers, further contextual factors, such as climate for inclusion (e.g., Dwertmann & Boehm, in press), should be investigated. Moreover, subsequent studies should extend this line of research on relational demography and further examine the interplay between individual and group-level factors in the context of PWDs workplace accommodations.

CONCLUSION

This study provides new insights regarding the interplay between age and workplace acceptance of accommodation in disability research. My findings highlight the role of the demographic similarity between individuals and groups in the workgroup composition. I hope my findings will stimulate additional research on older and health-restricted employees as well as the antecedents of workplace acceptance of accommodation. The final goal should be to further develop organizational practices that help incorporate employees’ diverse strengths and abilities.
REFERENCES


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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>-.19</td>
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**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Results**

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<th>Variables</th>
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<td>$b$</td>
<td>$t$</td>
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<td>-0.67**</td>
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<td>0.74**</td>
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Note: $N = 144$. Unstandardized beta coefficients ($b$) and $t$-values are reported. Two-tailed testing. †$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$
Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Data Source: (1) Objective HR Data  (2) Employee Survey
Figure 2: Interaction Plots Referring to Hypothesis 2. Perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance for a recipient younger than 50 years of age and a recipient’s age 50 years or above depends on the workgroup older workers ratio.
Figure 3: Interaction Plots Referring to Hypothesis 3. Perceived coworkers’ accommodation acceptance for a recipient younger than 50 years of age and a recipient’s age 50 years and above depends on the presence of workgroup accommodated peers.