Short Research Note

Attitudes Toward Older Workers and Human Resource Practices

Annette Kluge¹ and Franciska Krings²

¹University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

²University of Lausanne, Switzerland

This study investigated attitudes towards older employees, perceived age discrimination, and HR practices (personnel development and reward) in 240 employees. Attitudes toward older employees were largely positive, thus supporting the notion that attitudes toward older employees are becoming increasingly positive. Older employees' attitudes towards older employees were more positive, but younger employees' attitudes were still favorable. Moreover, older and younger employees reported benefiting from HR measures, such as training, to a similar extent. Also, older employees did not feel more discriminated against than younger employees did, indicating that employees' attitudes were in line with HR practices. Nevertheless, some results suggested that HR practices preferred younger to older employees, indicating that in some domains of personnel development and reward, positive attitudes toward older employees do not necessarily parallel organizational practices.

Keywords: older employees, attitudes, organizational practices, age discrimination

Current demographic changes are shaping discussions on the aging workforce and on new human resource (HR) practices designed to guarantee equal opportunities for older employees. But discussion and actual practices may diverge; that is, there may be a gap between saying and doing.

For decades, research has shown that negative attitudes and stereotypes about older employees (i.e., those over 50 years of age) exist (Bird & Fischer, 1986; Lyon & Pollard, 1997; Rosen & Jerdee, 1976). Moreover, studies demonstrating discrimination against older employees (e.g., with respect to selection for employment, promotion, access to training) suggest that negative attitudes converge with common HR practices (Finkelstein, Burke, & Raju, 1995; Perry, Kulik, & Bourhis, 1996). However, there is some evidence that attitudes toward older employees may be becoming more positive and may not differ from attitudes toward younger employees (Hassell & Perrewe, 1995; Kluge, 2006), indicating that attitudes toward older employees are undergoing changes similar to those toward other minority groups (Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson, & Gaertner, 1996). Nevertheless, older employees often still feel discriminated against because of their age (e.g., Kluge, 2006), suggesting that changes in attitudes do not necessarily go hand in hand with changes in actual HR practices.

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, we wanted to examine whether further evidence for increasingly positive attitudes toward older employees could be found.

Second, findings on age discrimination led us to expect that, despite more positive attitudes, HR practices would favor young over older employees and that, consequently, older employees would feel unfairly treated as compared to younger employees.

Method

Participants

A questionnaire measuring attitudes toward older employees, common HR practices in the domains of personnel development and reward, and perceived age discrimination was sent to two organizations, a hospital (290 employees) and an insurance company (250 employees), both located in the eastern part of Switzerland. Response rates were similar in both organizations (hospital 50%, insurance 49%); 22 participants were excluded from the analysis because they did not report their age and/or hierarchical position within the organization. The final sample was comprised of 248 employees (67% female). 13% were below age 25, 32% between 26 and 35, 28% between 36 and 45, 19% between 46 and 55, and 8% between 56 and 65. 57% had completed vocational training, 12% had a university degree, and 2% had a doctoral degree. 13% were in supervisory positions.

Measures

If not stated otherwise, all ratings in the questionnaire were made on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *totally agree*, 5 = *totally disagree*).

Attitudes toward older workers

We measured attitudes toward older workers using a revised, German version of the "Beliefs About Older Workers Questionnaire," which contains 27 items (Chiu, Chan, Snape, & Redman, 2001; Hassell & Perrewé, 1995; see Table 1). Participants were told that, in the questionnaire, "older employees" meant those over 50 years of age. After recoding items 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 11, 12, 16, 17, 22, and 25, responses were summed to calculate the overall attitude, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$).

HR practices

Participants rated the frequency with which they experienced different HR practices in everyday organizational life. Participants reported, with respect to the previous 12 months, whether they had received a bonus (1 = *no*, 2 = *yes*), the number of training days they had completed that the organization had paid for (1 = *none*, 6 = *more than 7 days*), and how often they had been assigned to tasks that involved assuming more responsibility (1 = *none*, 6 = *more than 7 times*).

Perceived age discrimination

Perceived age discrimination within the organization was assessed with four items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .64$; e.g., "In our organization, I am perceived as being too old for several jobs", reverse scored).

Table 1

Response Frequencies (in Percent) to Items of the Attitudes Toward Older Workers Scale and Correlation Between Items and Respondent Age

Item description	Strongly agree/ agree	Neutral	Strongly disagree/ disagree	Correlation with age
OW have fewer accidents.	17.4	37.4	43.7	-.13*
Companies are unfair to OW.	20.7	25.2	53.0	-.11
OW are harder to train.	53.3	23.0	23.0	.15*
OW are absent more often.	5.9	15.6	78.1	.05
OW have serious accidents less often.	18.1	33.7	45.9	-.16**
If two workers had similar skills, I'd rather work with the older worker.	25.2	44.1	30.0	-.29**
Occupational diseases are less likely to occur among OW.	23.0	21.1	55.6	-.05
OW turn out work of higher quality.	26.7	38.9	33.7	-.23**
OW are groucher on the job.	14.8	23.0	61.5	.09
OW are less cooperative at work.	29.3	29.3	41.5	.10
OW are more dependable.	35.6	33.7	30.7	-.23**
Most OW can't keep pace with technology.	26.3	25.6	47.8	.00
OW are most loyal to the company.	76.3	12.2	9.3	-.21**
OW resist change and are too set in their ways.	40.4	31.9	24.4	.07
OW are less interested in challenging jobs.	51.9	21.5	24.8	.04
OW can learn new skills as easily as other workers.	43.3	18.9	35.2	-.11
OW are better workers.	10.7	43.3	41.5	-.26**
OW do not want jobs with increased responsibility.	19.6	24.1	53.0	.01
OW are not interested in learning new skills.	20.0	17.0	60.0	.05
OW should step aside (take less demanding jobs) to give younger employees advancement opportunities.	10.4	19.6	67.0	-.07
The majority of OW would quit work if they could afford it.	39.6	25.9	31.9	-.07
OW are usually outgoing and friendly at work.	39.3	39.6	18.1	-.19**
OW prefer less challenging jobs than those they held when they were younger.	27.4	34.1	35.2	.01
It is a better investment to train younger workers than OW.	28.1	25.9	43.0	-.02
In our department, OW work as hard as everyone else.	81.5	8.9	7.4	-.21**
Given a choice, I would not work with an OW on a daily basis.	9.3	17.0	70.4	.02
A person's performance declines significantly with age.	13.7	25.6	58.9	.14*

Note. OW = older worker(s). Due to occasional missing values, percentages do not always add up to 100%.

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .05$.

The following sociodemographic data were included in the analysis: organization (1 = *hospital*, 2 = *insurance*), gender (1 = *female*, 2 = *male*), age (11 categories, each spanning five years; 1 = *below 20*, 11 = *over 65*), and supervisory position (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*).

Results

To test our assumption that general attitudes toward older workers were positive, we compared the mean sum score of the attitude scale for the sample ($M = 88.87$, $SD = 10.82$) with 81 (27 items times scale midpoint of 3), the hypothetical value indicating a neither positive nor negative attitude towards older employees. As expected, the mean was significantly above 81, $t(236) = 11.21$, $p < .01$, indicating positive attitudes towards older employees. For a more detailed view of attitudes, Table 1 shows the response frequencies for each item of the attitude questionnaire and the respective correlations with age. The mean responses to most items ($> 50\%$) revealed mainly positive beliefs. For example, 61.5% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that older workers are grouchier than younger workers. 81.5% agreed that older workers work just as hard as younger workers. However, the majority believed that older workers are harder to train (53.3%) and less interested in challenging jobs (51.9%).

To further examine attitudes, HR practices, and perceived discrimination, a MANOVA was performed with organization, gender, age, and supervisory position as factors and attitudes toward older workers, training days, task assignments, and perceived discrimination as dependent variables. (Bonus was not included due to the binary nature of the variable.) Two significant main effects emerged (Hotelling's Trace), one for age, $F(4,196) = 2.54$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, and one for supervisory position, $F(4,196) = 6.74$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$. The main effect of organization and the interactions were not significant, all F s < 2.3 , *ns*. We will not report the results concerning the effect of supervisory position in further detail as they are outside the scope of this paper.

Univariate effects of age emerged for attitudes toward older workers, $F(1,199) = 6.69$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$: With increasing age, attitudes toward older employees became more positive, $r = .19$, $p < .01$. This is in line with previous findings (e.g., Hassell & Perrewe, 1995). Contrary to our expectations, respondent age had no impact on HR practices or perceived age discrimination, both F s < 2.34 , *ns*. We further explored age differences by splitting the sample into two groups: respondents above and below 50 years of age. The cut-off point of 50 was chosen because it is commonly used to distinguish between older and younger workers (e.g., Hassell & Perrewe, 1995) and because it was used in the present questionnaire to define older workers. Thus, 50 years is a salient age, marking the transition to the social category of older workers. A comparison of the attitudes of the two age groups (above and below 50) corroborated the age effect reported above: Older employees ($M = 93.55$, $SD = 11.74$) had more positive attitudes than younger employees did ($M = 88.27$, $SD = 10.59$), $t(229) = -2.55$, $p = .01$. Nevertheless, the comparison of the mean sum score of the attitude scale for the younger employees with 81 revealed that even younger employees tended to have positive attitudes toward older workers, $t(199) = 9.71$, $p < .01$. Perceived age discrimination and HR practices did not differ between the two age groups ($n_{\text{young}} = 228$, $n_{\text{older}} = 34$), all t s between -1.88 and 1.37 , *ns*. Also, both groups were equally likely to have received a bonus (70.2% for the younger and 70.0% for the older employees). Further, we investigated relations between different HR practices and perceived discrimination separately for the two age groups. For younger employees, HR practices were intercorrelated: Challenging task assignments were related to more training, $r = .35$, $p < .01$, and to having received bonuses, $r = .14$, $p = .04$. Perceived age discrimination was not related to HR practices. For older employees, HR practices were not related to each other, all r s between $.00$ and $.12$, *ns*. Moreover, perceived age discrimination was related to having received a bonus: The more older employees felt discriminated against due to their age, the less likely they were to have received a bonus, $r = -.37$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

This study replicated earlier findings (Hassell & Perrewe, 1995; Kluge, 2006) by demonstrating a positive general attitude toward older employees. Older employees were not perceived as diminishing in their capacity to adapt or as being less motivated or performing less. Furthermore, despite the fact that older employees had more positive attitudes toward older employees than younger employees did, younger employees' attitudes were still positive. Moreover, on average, older employees did not report having received less organizational support and did not feel more discriminated against, due to their age, than younger employees did. Thus, positive attitudes toward older employees corresponded to HR practices and to what older employees themselves had experienced. These positive findings may be part of a general trend of attitudes toward minorities becoming increasingly positive (Dovidio et al., 1996). Furthermore, they may be due to the fact that, in Switzerland, older employees are well integrated into the labor market, as for example particularly high employment rates among older individuals illustrate (OECD, 2003).

However, although our findings are generally encouraging, some results indicated that older employees may be treated differently than younger employees. For younger but not older employees, HR supportive measures were closely interrelated and related to successful outcome (bonus). It may be that, for younger employees, a well integrated HR system consisting of several measures exists to support them in the pursuit of their careers. For older employees, HR support measures may be accorded in a more

isolated fashion, rendering them less effective and, in turn, less related to rewards. Interestingly, responses to the attitude questionnaire showed that most respondents believed that older workers are harder to train and less interested in challenging jobs. These beliefs may also limit the effectiveness of HR measures for older employees. Also, the result that older employees who felt more discriminated against were less likely to receive a bonus indicates that when it comes to distribution of scarce resources, age discrimination may still play a role.

A clear limitation of this study is the sample. Respondents came from two organizations that may not be representative. The number of employees above 50 was considerably smaller than that below 50. Moreover, the study relied on self-report data. Those factors may have distorted our findings. Results should be replicated with a more balanced sample, including more objective indicators of HR practices.

Age discrimination in organizations can take many forms (Kluge & Krings, 2007). But HR development and learning opportunities are valuable long-term motivators for younger and older employees. Therefore, special attention should be directed towards providing equal opportunities for younger and older employees, in HR development as well, ultimately creating a win-win situation for everyone: Older employees remain motivated to deliver high-quality performance, and organizations preserve their competitive edge in light of coming demographic changes.

Author Note

Annette Kluge, Research Institute for Organizational Psychology, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland; Franciska Krings, Faculty of Business and Economics (HEC), University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

References

- Bird, C. P., & Fisher, T. D. (1986). Thirty years later: Attitudes towards the employment of older workers. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 71*, 515-517.
- Chiu, W. C. K., Chan, A. W., Snape, E., & Redman, T. (2001). Age stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards older workers: An East-West comparison. *Human Relations, 54*, 629-661.
- Dovidio, J. F., Brigham, J. C., Johnson, B. T., & Gaertner, S. L. (1996). Stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination: Another look. In C. N. Macrae, C. Stangor, & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *Stereotypes and stereotyping* (pp. 276-319). New York: Guilford.
- Finkelstein, L., Burke, M. J., & Raju, N. (1995). Age discrimination in simulated employment contexts: An integrative analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 80*, 652-663.
- Hassell, B. L., & Perrewé, P. L. (1995). An examination of beliefs about older workers: Do stereotypes still exist? *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 16*, 457-468.
- Kluge, A. (2006). Die Einstellungen zur Leistungs-, Lern- und Anpassungsfähigkeit älterer Arbeitnehmer/innen und die subjektiv erlebte Diskriminierung: Eine Untersuchung in Schweizer Unternehmen. [Older employees' attitude towards their efficiency, their capacity to learn and their adaptability and self-experienced discrimination: A study in Swiss corporations.] *Arbeit, 15*, 3-17.
- Kluge, A., & Krings, F. (2007). Altersdiskriminierung: (K)ein Thema in der deutschsprachigen Arbeits- und Organisationspsychologie? [Age discrimination: (Not) an issue in German-speaking work and organizational psychology?]. *Zeitschrift für Arbeits- und Organisationspsychologie, 51*, 186-189.
- Lyon, P., & Pollard, D. (1997). Perceptions of the older employee: Is anything really changing? *Personnel Review, 26*, 245-257.
- OECD (2003). *Ageing and Employment Policies – Switzerland*. Paris: OECD.
- Perry, E. L., Kulik, C. T., & Bourhis, A. C. (1996). Moderating effects of personal and contextual factors in age discrimination. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 81*, 628-647.
- Rosen, B., & Jerdee, T. H. (1976). The nature of job-related age stereotypes. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 61*, 180-183.

Annette Kluge

University of St. Gallen
Research Institute for Organizational Psychology
Varnbuelstraße 19
CH-9000 St. Gallen
annette.kluge@unisg.ch