The status value of age

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ABSTRACT

A controlled experiment and three replications examined the relationship between a person's age as a status characteristic and the value placed on that person as a potential group member. The experiments used computer-generated avatars to isolate the effects of age on the status value of partners being chosen for a work-related task. The design allowed us to compare the effect of age on status for members of three distinct groups: younger adults, middle-aged adults, and much older adults. Results showed that under-graduate participants rated middle-aged adult avatars higher on status indicators and chose to work with middle-aged adult avatars significantly more often than younger adult or much older adult avatars. The participants rated the much older avatar higher on most indicators of status than the younger adult avatar. They also chose to work with a much older adult more often than a person closer to their own age. This sample of undergraduate students placed the most value on the potential contributions of a middle-aged adult compared to a younger adult and also to a much older adult, suggesting that age as a status characteristic has more than two relevant categories, younger versus older. Further research is needed to determine whether the status value of age rises to a peak in middle age and declines thereafter.

1. Introduction

Age operates as a primary social category structuring social interactions. Age-related laws, norms, and expectations affect people's opportunities across the life course (Marshall, 2007; Schneider, 2005). It remains unclear how opportunities vary for adults at different ages. Much of the sociological research on how age affects opportunity is focused on the negative impact of ageism in later life— prejudice and discrimination on the basis of age stereotypes (Butler, 1969; North and Fiske, 2015). However, research on how age affects status independently, controlling for income and other status characteristics, is limited. Early research on age and status conducted by Freese and Cohen (1973) found that an adult had greater influence than did a child in a sample of undergraduate students, which established age as a status characteristic for that sample in a controlled experiment.

Isolating the status value conferred on adults due to their age at various life stages (i.e. younger, middle-aged or older adult) is difficult. While ageism is well documented, cultural norms continue to promote beliefs about older people as experienced and wise (Thompson, 2006). It is also unclear how much the increased status of some older people results from other attributes, such as occupational prestige and wealth, that confer status and that also tend to increase with age (Henretta

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and Campbell, 1976). While U.S. culture appears to put a premium on youth (Featherstone, 2003), it is also true that many of our most influential public figures are well past sixty years old. Examples include Warren Buffet, John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump.

Understanding how advancing age contributes to differing opportunities is useful given the aging U.S. population. For example, twenty percent of the U.S. population is projected to be over age 65 by the year 2030 (Ortman et al., 2014). Similarly the workforce is also aging. As of 2011, over sixteen percent of the U.S. labor force was over age 65 (Kromer and Howard, 2013; Lassus et al., 2015). Labor force participation by people age 65 and older increased 101% from 1977 to 2007 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, (2008).

Research on the sociology of the life course defines three broad categories of adult age—younger adult, middle-aged adult, and older adult—with different norms and expectations attached to each (Laditka et al., 2004). The results of several studies in the sociology of the life course suggest that opportunities peak in middle age before declining through later life (Neugarten et al., 1965; Perry and Varney, 1978; Kite et al., 2005; Hendricks, 1994; Mirowsky, 1995; Settersten and Mayer, 1997).

Sections that follow describe the development of a controlled experiment to determine whether an individual's opportunities vary at three different life stages when evaluated by a sample of undergraduate students. Results supported the hypothesis that a middle-aged avatar would be rated more highly and would be more often chosen for inclusion in a task group than either a younger or much older adult.

2. Age-related discrimination

While the status-value of age has yet to be confirmed by systematic research, there is considerable tangential evidence that people perceive that others use age in evaluations and that older workers expect to be negatively stereotyped because of their age.

Research on age discrimination suggests that the *perceived* value of workers begins to decline years before the nominal retirement age of 65. Gee et al., (2007) found that between 1972 and 1989, self-reported age discrimination was high for employed people in their twenties, dropped for those in their thirties, and peaked when workers reached their fifties. Roscigno et al, (2007) found a mean age of 54 years for individuals charging illegal discrimination between 1988 and 2003, and the distribution of ages in their data was relatively normal in shape for complainants between ages 40 and 65.

High-status managerial workers between the ages of 40 and 60 who have lost their jobs worry that their age will be held against them as they re-enter the job market (Mendenhall et al., 2008). Competence and market-based justifications for discriminating against older workers sometimes mask unconscious stereotypes of older workers as inflexible, slow or difficult (Roscigno et al., 2007). Evidence for the expected value of workers can be found by studying those workers who obtain jobs without having to search for them. McDonald and Elder (2006) found that the benefits of social capital accruing to "non-searchers" occur primarily for highly experienced men during mid-career.

Research has found little evidence that reduced competence explains negative stereotypes of older workers. McEvoy and Cascio's (1989) meta-analysis found that age was generally uncorrelated with job performance. In a large sample of workers in the U.K., Inceoglu et al. (2011) found no differences in the motivation or general performance of younger and older workers. However, they did find that older workers were more helpful, acted in a safer manner, were less aggressive toward fellow workers, and engaged in fewer counterproductive behaviors than younger workers. Allen et al. (2002) found that older adults in their sample were as efficient as younger adults in terms of cognitive processing of complex information. Crawford and Channon (2002) found no differences between the performance of older and younger adults when completing a problem-solving task.

Another common stereotype of older adults is that they are less creative than younger workers. In 2013, Ng and Feldman conducted a meta-analysis of 98 studies that demonstrate that older workers are just as capable of innovation and creativity as younger workers. Rodriguez et al, (2006) found that increasing the retention of older, more experienced truck drivers reduced crashes. On complex tasks typical of clerical and higher-level occupations, the experience of older workers mitigates the effects of reduced information processing speed on performance (Charness et al., 2001; Czaja et al., 2001; Morrow et al., 2001; Nunes and Kramer, 2009). Additionally, recent research has found that older workers are as good if not better at managing stress as younger workers (Rauschenbach et al 2012; Hertel et al., 2013; Hertel, van der Heijden, de Lange, and Deller, 2013). Ng and Feldman's (2012) meta-analysis assessing the empirical basis of stereotypes about older workers found older workers to be just as healthy, trusting, and capable of flexibility as younger workers, though less willing than younger workers to participate in training and career development activities and less concerned with advancement and extrinsic rewards. In sum, the accumulated research seems to contradict the conclusion that negative expectations of the value of older workers stem from observations of poor performance rather than from age-based cultural stereotypes.

The correlation of power and status within occupations also blurs the picture (Rogalin et al., 2007). Accumulated resources also increase an individual's prestige and influence (Harrod, 1980; Stewart and Moore, 1992; Thye, 2000). High-status individuals may age into networks of wealth and power that sustain their prestige late in life. If so, then the high prestige of some older people may be due to their accumulated social capital and material resources rather than to a direct effect of age on status (Henretta and Campbell, 1976).

Two studies directly measure the prestige and influence resulting from an age difference in a task group. Berger et al. (1966) described research by Ziller and Exline (1958) suggesting that age functions as a status characteristic. In an experiment using 12 groups with 24 participants ranging in age from 20 to 49, Ziller and Exline examined the relationship between