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When a “worker” becomes an “older worker”

The effects of age-related social identity on attitudes towards retirement and work

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between perceived social identity as an “older worker” and attitudes towards early retirement and commitment to work.

Design/methodology/approach – Survey data were obtained from 352 workers aged 50-59. Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to test the influence of social identity after controlling for demographics, organizational variables and work-to-family conflict.

Findings – The results show that self-categorization as an “older worker” is related to negative attitudes towards work (stronger desire to retire early, stronger inclination towards intergenerational competition) while the perception that the organization does not use age as a criterion for distinguishing between workers supports positive attitudes towards work (e.g. higher value placed on work).

Research limitations/implications – This study is cross-sectional and does not allow conclusions about causality between intergroup processes and attitudes towards work. Future research should develop longitudinal designs to verify that social identity as an “older worker” does induce elders’ attitudes at work.

Originality/value – Retirement is usually considered as an individual and opportunistic decision. This research highlights its social dimensions and suggests that managers should pay attention to ageism at work and its potential effects not only on the withdrawal process but also on the quality of life in the workplace.

Keywords Age discrimination, Retirement, Employee attitudes, Older workers, Work identity

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent years, older workers have become a target category for employment policies in many European countries. Under pressure from the EU in particular, employment policies promoting early retirement from the workforce are losing their legitimacy and are being replaced by measures that encourage older workers to remain in the labor force for longer (Jespénet al., 2002). These new policies force organizations to deal with the consequences of longer careers for both the workers and the organizations themselves.

Until recently, research on the career end has mainly focused on the process of (early) withdrawal from the labor force. These studies have not investigated the attitudes as well as the behaviors of individuals who want, or are required, to continue...
to work. The consequences of longer careers for the efficiency of companies have been neglected in research. Moreover, most studies have paid more attention to personal and organizational variables that influence early retirement decisions than to social factors such as the social representation of ageing. In other words, the decision to retire early was considered as an individual and opportunist strategy while the potential effects of the stigmatization of ageing in the workplace were neglected. However, from the moment they are categorized as “older workers”, individuals become potential targets for prejudice and discrimination related to ageing (Duncan, 2001; McCann and Giles, 2002). Both research on social stigmatization (e.g. Crocker et al., 1998) and social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) suggest relevant explanations for the attitudes adopted by workers over the age of 50. The assumption is that older workers, like other stigmatized groups, are harmed by their devalued social identity and that they try to cope with their predicament, for instance by retiring early from the labor force.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate factors that are usually not studied in research on early retirement processes, i.e. those that are related to ageism in the workplace. We want to analyze how the stigmatized social identity as an “older worker” plays a role in the early retirement decision-making process and other withdrawal attitudes of the older employees from work. Besides, because recent EU employment policies promote keeping the older workers in the labor force rather than evicting them from it, the present study also aims to investigate how social identity processes related to ageing influence attitudes of older workers who continue to work.

**Personal and organizational predictors of the early retirement decision**

Literature on the decision to retire early has mainly focused on variables related to the worker and his/her job and organization (e.g. Barnes-Farrell, 2003). At the organizational level, high physical job strain, low autonomy in the task, and low commitment to the organization consistently appear to be associated with early retirement intentions and/or behavior (Adams et al., 2002; Blekesaume and Solem, 2005). At the personal level, health and wealth have been shown to be powerful and reliable predictors of the decision to retire early (e.g. Beehr, 1986). Early retirement has consistently been shown to be more likely when the older worker is in poor health and/or less well-off. The effects of personal characteristics such as age and gender are more mixed: some studies have shown that the proximity of retirement reinforces the worker’s interest in it (Adams et al., 2002; Schultz and Taylor, 2001) while others have found the opposite pattern of results (Desmette et al., 2005; Joulain et al., 2000). As for gender, the family status of the worker plays a role. For example, the social role of “care giver” may lead women (but not men) to retire early to cope with family needs (e.g. Talaga and Beehr, 1995). Raymo and Sweeney (2006) studied the effects of work-family conflict on early retirement preferences. Work-family conflict refers to the difficulty to reconcile work role with family role (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Raymo and Sweeney (2006) established that conflict from work to family (e.g. long working hours that interfere with family life) is associated with stronger preferences for both partial and full retirement, while family-to-work conflict (e.g. spouse’s poor health that requires reducing working hours) is significantly associated with a preference for partial retirement only.
All these studies help understand (early) retirement behavior because they highlight personal and/or organizational factors that influence the decision to retire. But research so far has neglected the influence of social processes, in particular the social representation of ageing, on early retirement decisions. Nevertheless, according to studies on social stigmatization (e.g. Crocker and Major, 1989), withdrawal attitudes held by older workers can be seen as coping responses to age-related stigmatization. Indeed, like race and gender, age is a major criterion to categorize human beings, and it can be used as a basis for prejudice and discrimination (Allison, 1998). The process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are older has been called “ageism” (Butler, 1987). The workplace does not escape ageism (Perry et al., 1996; Redman and Snape, 2002). For example, although a systematic relationship between ageing and decline in productivity has not been established (Shepard, 1995; Volkoff et al., 2000), numerous studies have shown that older workers are perceived as less competent and less motivated than their younger colleagues (Chiu et al., 2001; Hummert, 1999).

In other words, to be an “older worker” means being a member of a stigmatized group in the workplace, and the negative social identity related to that group membership may lead some older workers to cope with the threat to their social self by leaving the labor force in order to avoid the stigmatization.

Coping with stigma-related stress
Since several years, prejudice and discrimination have been conceptualized as stressors in the lives of stigmatized people (Allison, 1998; Miller and Major, 1998). One advantage of putting stigma in the domain of stress and coping is that it draws attention both to the effects of stigma upon the stigmatized people and to the various responses that are possible (e.g. Miller and Kaiser, 2001). Indeed, stigmatized people often perceive the stigma as a stressor and are aware of its potential negative effects (e.g. Miller and Major, 1998). Research has shown that this concern affects their attitudes and behaviors. In particular, Steele and Aronson (1995) carried out studies that revealed the deleterious effects of negative stereotypes on the performance of people stigmatized on the basis of their ethnic membership. Similar findings have been shown for other stigmatized groups such as women (e.g. Steele and Ambady, 2006), unemployed people (e.g. Desmette et al., 2001) and the elderly (e.g. Hess et al., 2003).

Stress theories assume that individuals can try to cope with the stress they are experiencing (e.g. Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) proposes a framework to understand coping strategies when stress is due to stigmatization. The added value of social identity theory for studying the effects of stigmatization is that it specifies the conditions related to relations between social groups for the adoption of specific coping strategies.

Social identity theory has two fundamental assumptions (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). First, social (i.e. group) membership is a part of an individual’s self-definition. Second, individuals need to achieve a positive self-image. When their group membership is devalued, people suffer from a negative social identity. Therefore, in order to achieve a more positive identity, they can adopt a range of cognitive and behavioral strategies. Social identity theory distinguishes between individual strategies, which aim to improve the status of the individual him/herself (e.g. the transition from a stigmatized group to a more privileged group), and group strategies that aim at improving the
status of the group as a whole (e.g. an involvement in a collective action). Preferences for either individual or collective strategies are assumed to depend mainly on the appraisal people make of the socio-structural characteristics of the intergroup relation and on the strength of their identification with their own group (Ellemers et al., 1999; Mummendey et al., 1999). Regarding the socio-structural characteristics of the intergroup relation, the perception of the degree of openness of the privileged group towards the stigmatized group (i.e. the “intergroup permeability”) has been shown to be the most important variable in predicting either an individual or a collective coping strategy (e.g. Ellemers et al., 1990). The intergroup permeability for older workers refers to the extent to which the younger workers’ group is open to an older worker. Of course, an objective or physical transition from the older workers’ group to the younger workers’ group is not possible. However, following Mummendey et al. (1999) and Ellemers (1993), we suggest that the permeability of boundaries between older and younger workers’ groups refers to the possibility that an older worker will be valued regardless of his/her age. As for social identification, both its cognitive dimension (the self-categorization as a member of a particular group) and its emotional dimension (the affective involvement with a group) are assumed to play a significant role in the strategy an individual can develop to cope with a threatening identity.

Both intergroup permeability and identification with older workers as a group may help to understand why some elder employees disengage from work (e.g. by early retirement) and why some others pursue their career – and what kind of attitudes they are likely to adopt in the workplace.

**Older workers’ attitudes as coping strategies**

Early retirement intentions are probably the most obvious indication of withdrawal from work for older workers. But disengagement may operate at a more psychological level: the decline of older workers’ interest in their job may be understood as coping by devaluing the domain where they are stigmatized. Indeed, because it decreases the value an individual puts on a domain in which his/her group fares poorly, disengagement by devaluing reduces the stress related to the potential failure in this domain (e.g. Crocker and Major, 1989).

Individuals can also try to escape the stigma-related stress by acting on their group membership either by the adoption of a social mobility strategy to really change their group membership (e.g. by joining a more privileged group) or by the development of some compensatory strategies (e.g. by behaving in a counter-stereotypical fashion to contradict the stigma-based expectations) (Crocker and Major, 1989). Concerning older employees, objective social mobility in the workplace seems to be impossible – an older worker cannot become a younger worker. However, older workers may increase their commitment to their career to contradict the stereotype of age-related decline in motivation at work.

Besides, individuals can try to improve not only their own status but the fate of their group as a whole. For older workers, a collective strategy may be pragmatic competition with younger workers to gain benefits for the in-group (older workers) over the out-group (younger workers) (e.g. Mummendey et al., 1999). For example, older workers might demand higher wages based on their longer careers, or new advantages because of their greater job-related knowledge. Collective strategies may also take the form of cognitive restructuring, called “social creativity”. In this case, stigmatized
people do not try to cope with their predicament by reducing the prejudice itself: they protect their collective self-image by highlighting some specific dimensions where intergroup comparison is favorable to them. For example, older workers might emphasize their expertise in passing on professional knowledge.

Social identity theory assumes that an individual strategy is adopted when identification with the group is low (i.e. the fate of the group is not important for the individual). In this case, when intergroup permeability is high, people can try to escape their devalued social group by social mobility or by compensatory strategies. When this kind of strategy seems to be impossible because the envied group is closed (intergroup impermeability), stigmatized people who identified less with their group can cope with the stigma-related stress by disengaging from the threatening domain. On the other hand, people who identify highly with their group are expected to try to cope with their predicament by collective strategies.

Previous research has shown that social identity theory helps to explain early retirement intentions (Desmette et al., 2005). This study aims at extending the analysis to other strategies that older workers are likely to adopt to cope with age-related stigmatization in the workplace. We suppose that coping strategies can take the way of either disengagement from work or commitment to work, depending on older workers’ perception of the relationships between younger and older workers’ groups (i.e. intergroup permeability) and on their identification with older workers as a group (social identity).

**Hypotheses**

For the relationships between on the one hand intergroup permeability, group identification and preferences for coping strategies which have been theoretically derived from social identity theory (e.g. Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and empirically demonstrated (e.g. Mummendey et al., 1999), and on the other hand withdrawal from work, commitment, and intergenerational competition, we suggest three hypotheses:

**H1.** Withdrawal from work will be negatively related to intergroup permeability and to identification with older workers. In other words, when neither the work nor the older workers’ group are considered by the individual as potential domains for self-involvement, leaving the threatening domain (by early retirement) or reducing its importance (by the devaluation of the work domain) might be a way to cope with the stigmatization of ageing in the workplace.

**H2.** Commitment to work will be positively related to intergroup permeability and negatively related to identification with older workers. Therefore, the desire to develop a career might be considered as a strategy of coping by engagement that aims to refute ageist stereotypes.

**H3.** Intergenerational competition and the redefinition of ageing. Collective strategies will be used when work permeability is low (allowing no change at the personal level) and identification with older workers is high. Older workers may either try to improve the actual status of their in-group by competing with the privileged out-group (i.e. the group of younger workers) or to increase their collective self-esteem through social creativity (i.e. by changing the image of the older workers’ group).
Each hypothesis will be tested controlling for individual variables, organizational variables and work-family conflict.

**Method**

**Sample**
A total of 352 questionnaires were collected from workers aged from 50 to 59. All the participants were French-speakers working in private organizations with no financial difficulties (i.e. no downsizing or other organizational reason for supporting early retirement) and with a working convention allowing for early exit opportunities (e.g. early retirement or reduction in working hours). Most of the participants (88 percent) were Belgian (12 percent were non Belgian members of the EU), males (58 percent), 50-54 years old (60 percent; 40 percent were 55-59 years old), had completed maximum high school (57 percent; 40 percent had a higher education level; 3 percent had no diploma) and lived with a partner (77 percent).

**Measures**
All items of each scale and, when appropriate, estimates of the internal consistency are presented in Table I. Some items were adapted from other studies, i.e. they were translated in French and formulated to be relevant for the sample (older workers).

**Criterion variables**
Early retirement intentions, bridge employment intentions and the devaluation of the work domain were measures of withdrawal from work. Career development intentions were measures of work commitment. Intergroup competition and aging redefinition were measures of collective strategies.

“Early retirement intentions”: intentions to early retire were analyzed because retirement intentions have been shown to be strong predictors of actual retirement behavior (Henkens and Tazelaar, 1994; Schultz and Taylor, 2001). Two items from Desmette et al. (2005) formed the early retirement scale that assessed the strength of workers’ desire to retire completely.

“Bridge employment intentions”: retirement can take various forms, for example a planned reduction in working hours (Ekerdt et al., 2000; Hansson et al., 1997). We examined older workers’ intentions to reduce their working hours (i.e. a kind of bridging period between employment and retirement) with three items from Desmette et al. (2005).

“Devaluation of the work domain”: psychological disengagement from the work domain was measured by two items adapted from Major and Schmader (1998).

“Career development”: commitment to work was measured as the workers’ desire to develop professional competencies and responsibilities. The four-item scale was specially formulated for this study.

“Intergenerational competition”: interest in pragmatic competition with younger colleagues was measured by four items adapted from Mummendey et al. (1999).

“Redefinition of ageing”: the strength of the revaluation of older workers as a group was measured by four items adapted from Mummendey et al. (1999).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>Items and coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criterion variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early retirement</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>“You would like to retire early if you can afford to”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“You will stop working as soon as possible”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge employment</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>“You would like to reduce your working hours if you can afford to”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“You wish to have more working hours” (to be reversed in coding)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“You would refuse to reduce your working hours even if you could” (to be reversed in coding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devaluing work domain</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>“Doing your job well is very (not) important to you” (to be reversed in coding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“To have successful working life is very (not) important to you” (to be reversed in coding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded from 1 (very not important) to 7 (very important)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>“You would like to have more responsibilities in you organization”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“You are very interested in vocational training for yourself in next years”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“You would like counseling new workers”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“To learn new work-related things seems useless to you” (to be reversed in coding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergenerational competition</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>“Older workers should be given some advantages (financial or otherwise) over younger workers”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Older workers should be given priority for promotions”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Older workers” goal is not to be taught by younger workers, but to teach them themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redefinition of ageing</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>“To be older is good at work because of the greater experience you have”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Older workers are the best people to train or counsel youngsters”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Some professional competences are only acquired with ageing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded 1 if 50-54 years old; 2 if 55-59 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded 1 if male; 2 if female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded 1 if living with a spouse; 2 if living without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived health</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>“Lately, you have been feeling very healthy”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Lately, you have been feeling ill” (to be reversed in coding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Lately, you have been feeling in a depressive mood” (to be reversed in coding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived wealth</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>“You can financially afford to reduce your working hours”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“You can financially afford to retire”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“If you were to reduce my working hours, you would have enough income”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table I.*

List of variables, Cronbach’s coefficients, items and coding of responses

(continued)
Demographics
Gender, age, and marital status were each measured using single items. Perceived health was measured by three items, and perceived wealth by two items adapted from Adams and Beehr (1998). Because the subjective assessment of wealth has been shown to have more impact than objective data on retirement decisions in countries (such as Belgium and the Netherlands) where incomes are high at the end of careers and where pension plans exist (Henkens and Tazelaar, 1994), wealth was measured by items reflecting satisfaction with expected financial resources during retirement:

- **Job characteristics.** Physical strain of the job and the worker's autonomy at work were each measured by two items adapted from Blekesaume and Solem (2005).
- **Work-to-private conflict.** Because research on work-family conflict has shown that participants generally report more conflict from work to family than from family to work (e.g. Frone, 2002), we only investigated the conflict from work to family sphere. Moreover, to take into account not only the family’s strains but also the worker's personal desires, we examined the conflict between the work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical job strain</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>“Your job requires a lot of physical effort”                                                                                           “You have to work in uncomfortable or tiring positions every day”  Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>“You can usually plan your tasks during the day”                                                                                             “You feel free to decide how to do your job”  Coded from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-to-private conflict</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>“You often have difficulties in your private life because of the time spent at work”                                                         “You often have difficulties in your private life because of tension at work”  “Your professional obligations often lead you to change your personal projects”  Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intergroup variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergroup permeability</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>“In your organization, it is not difficult for an older worker to be considered as a younger work”                                              “In your organization, for an older worker it is possible to be regarded as a younger worker”  “In your organization, no matter what effort one makes, an older worker will never be thought of in the same way as a younger worker”  (to be reversed in coding)  Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive identification</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>“You see yourself as an older worker”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective identification</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>“Generally, you are glad that you are an older worker”                                                                                           “You do not mind being thought of as an older worker”  Coded from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.

When a “worker” becomes an “older worker”
domain and the private domain (i.e. a wider sphere than just the family). We used self-assessments of work-to-private conflict by means of three items specially formulated for this study.

- **Intergroup variables.** Intergroup permeability was measured by three items adapted from Kessler and Mummendey (2002). Individuals’ self-perception as older workers (cognitive identification) and their affective involvement with this group (affective identification) were each measured by two items from Desmette et al. (2005).

Table I lists the variables used in this study and their reliability (Cronbach’s alpha).

**Procedure**

Questionnaires were distributed to participants by specialized researchers. Participants completed the questionnaires either by themselves or, when they had reading difficulty, with the help of the researcher who read aloud the questions. The answering modalities (lonely versus helped) did not affect the findings. Questionnaires were accompanied by a covering letter which indicated that the purpose of the study was to examine “people’s assessment of the relationships between work, age, and quality of life”. The questionnaire addressed demographics first, followed by the organizational variables, the assessment of work-to-private conflict, the intergroup variables and finally attitudes towards work and retirement (i.e. criterion variables).

Before responding to the intergroup variables, participants read the following text on the meaning of the expression “older workers”: “In recent years, some workers, both men and women, who are 50 or more have been called ‘older workers’. In the following sections of the questionnaire, the expression ‘older workers’ is used to refer to workers who will soon be 50 years old or who are already 50 or more.”

**Results**

Correlation coefficients were computed for a first exploration of the relationships between variables. Means, standards deviations and Pearson’s coefficients are presented in Table II. Then, hierarchical regressions were computed to test a four-step model for each dependent variable. Demographics were entered first, followed by the job characteristics, work-to-private conflict and, in the final step, the intergroup variables. Table III presents the standardized coefficients ($\beta$) and the proportion of the variance explained ($R^2$) for each step. The results of the tests of the hypotheses are presented below.

**Early retirement intention**

The first hypothesis regarding early retirement intentions was not supported. Indeed, although early retirement intentions were significantly predicted by cognitive identification with older workers, the relationship was not negative as expected but positive: participants were more likely to retire early when they categorized themselves as older workers ($\beta = 0.169, p < 0.001$). Contrary to our expectations, neither intergroup permeability nor affective identification with older workers were significantly related to early retirement intentions. Consistent with previous research, early retirement intentions were negatively associated with perceived health ($\beta = -0.262, p < 0.001$) and positively related to satisfaction with expected
| Variable                      | Mean | SD  | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6     | 7     | 8     | 9     | 10    | 11    | 12    | 13    | 14    | 15    | 16    |
|-------------------------------|------|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| (1) Age<sup>1</sup>          | 1.40 | 0.49 | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (2) Gender<sup>2</sup>        | 1.42 | 0.49 | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (3) Marital status<sup>3</sup> | 1.55 | 0.50 | 0.07  | 0.24  | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (4) Perceived health          | 5.07 | 1.40 | 0.08  | –0.17 | –0.14 | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (5) Perceived wealth          | 3.24 | 1.52 | 0.03  | –0.18 | –0.24 | 0.11  | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (6) Physical job strain       | 4.69 | 1.67 | 0.12  | –0.17 | 0.03  | 0.25  | 0.06  | –0.29 | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (7) Autonomy                  | 3.78 | 1.66 | 0.00  | –0.13 | –0.00 | –0.24 | –0.04 | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (8) Work-to-private conflict  | 5.09 | 1.77 | 0.04  | 0.11  | 0.13  | 0.11  | 0.22  | 0.43  | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (9) Intergroup permeability   | 4.39 | 1.50 | 0.09  | –0.10 | –0.11 | –0.08 | 0.13  | 0.05  | 0.01  | 0.00  | 0.03  | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (10) Cognitive identification | 4.89 | 1.26 | 0.11  | –0.12 | 0.13  | 0.10  | 0.00  | 0.00  | 0.11  | 0.22  | 0.43  | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (11) Affective identification | 5.00 | 1.77 | 0.04  | –0.07 | 0.01  | 0.10  | 0.02  | 0.03  | 0.19  | 0.24  | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (12) Early retirement         | 4.78 | 1.32 | 0.02  | –0.12 | 0.01  | 0.10  | 0.25  | 0.16  | 0.03  | 0.05  | 0.27  | 0.11  | 0.04  | 0.00  | 0.42  | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (13) Bridge employment        | 4.53 | 1.10 | 0.10  | –0.10 | 0.01  | 0.01  | 0.02  | 0.17  | 0.02  | 0.11  | 0.03  | 0.12  | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (14) Devaluing work domain    | 2.47 | 1.08 | 0.02  | –0.16 | 0.03  | 0.08  | 0.10  | 0.26  | 0.02  | 0.06  | 0.14  | 0.08  | 0.19  | 0.19  | 0.26  | –     | –     | –     | –     |
| (15) Career development       | 3.81 | 1.13 | 0.04  | –0.00 | 0.00  | 0.13  | 0.06  | 0.21  | 0.06  | 0.03  | 0.22  | 0.12  | 0.00  | 0.15  | 0.01  | 0.03  | –0.08 | –     | –     |
| (16) Intergenerational competition | 5.53 | 0.79 | 0.11  | 0.16  | 0.03  | 0.12  | 0.09  | 0.04  | 0.18  | 0.01  | 0.12  | 0.16  | 0.26  | 0.02  | 0.01  | 0.25  | 0.10  | 0.19  |

Notes: n = 352; <sup>1</sup> = 50-54 years old; <sup>2</sup> = 55-59 years old; <sup>3</sup> = male; <sup>2</sup> = female; <sup>1</sup> = living with a spouse; <sup>2</sup> = living without spouse; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01

Table II. Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations among the study variables.

When a “worker” becomes an “older worker”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>A. Early retirement</th>
<th>B. Bridge employment</th>
<th>C. Devaluing work domain</th>
<th>D. Career development</th>
<th>E. Intergenerational competition</th>
<th>F. Redefinition of ageing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beta at each step</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>Final $R^2$</td>
<td>Beta at each step</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>Final $R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Individual variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.022</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>-0.110</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.070</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.110</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-0.083</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.131**</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived health</td>
<td>-0.032</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived wealth</td>
<td>0.307**</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Job characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical job strain</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-0.060</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-0.141**</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Work-to-private conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-to-private conflict</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>0.04**</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4: Intergroup variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergroup permeability</td>
<td>-0.067</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.159**</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive identification</td>
<td>0.169**</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective identification</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-0.101</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1=50-54 years old; 2=55-59 years old; 3=male; 4=female; 5=living with a spouse; 6=living without spouse; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01
incomes in retirement ($\beta = 0.307, \ p < 0.001$). Despite the significant correlations between organizational variables and early retirement intentions (see Table II), neither physical job strain nor autonomy were significant predictors of early retirement intentions after controlling for personal variables. Work-to-private conflict did not predict early retirement intentions when personal and organizational variables were held constant.

**Bridge employment intentions**
Regarding bridge employment, the results failed to support the first hypothesis: bridge employment intentions were not predicted by intergroup variables. At the personal level, interest in bridge employment was predicted by perceived health and wealth: bridge employment was more desired by workers who felt themselves to be in poor health ($\beta = -0.264, \ p < 0.001$) and/or by those who perceived their future incomes as sufficient for their needs ($\beta = 0.217, \ p < 0.001$). Moreover, when the other personal variables were held constant, age and marital status became significant predictors of bridge employment intentions, which were stronger for the 50-54 year-old workers ($\beta = -0.110, \ p < 0.05$) and for those who were not living with a partner ($\beta = -0.131, \ p < 0.01$). Organizational variables failed to predict bridge employment intentions. Work-to-private conflict was a significant predictor of bridge employment intentions. Data showed that older workers who were suffering from a strong encroachment of work on their private lives were more likely to reduce their working hours ($\beta = 0.215, \ p < 0.001$).

**Devaluation of the work domain**
Consistent with the first hypothesis, data showed that the work domain was more likely to be devalued when older workers perceived low intergroup permeability ($\beta = -0.159, \ p < 0.001$) and/or by those who were less involved (affective identification) in the older workers’ group ($\beta = -0.101, \ p < 0.10$). No personal variable significantly predicted psychological disengagement. At the organizational level, participants who were lacking autonomy in their job showed greater psychological disengagement from work ($\beta = -0.141, \ p < 0.01$). The conflict from work to private life was not a significant predictor of psychological disengagement.

**Career development**
The second hypothesis was partially supported by the data: only cognitive identification was significantly related to commitment to work. The less participants thought of themselves as “older workers”, the more they intended to develop their career ($\beta = -0.130, \ p < 0.05$). At the personal and organizational levels, the desire for career development was lower for females ($\beta = -0.163, \ p < 0.01$) and for participants who had less autonomy in their job tasks ($\beta = 0.246, \ p < 0.001$). Work-to-private conflict did not predict the desire for career development.

**Intergenerational competition**
Consistent with the third hypothesis, intergenerational competition was positively related to cognitive identification ($\beta = 0.150, \ p < 0.01$) and negatively related to intergroup permeability ($\beta = -0.232, \ p < 0.001$). In other words, the more participants thought of themselves as “older worker” and/or the more they perceived that this group membership was locking them in, the more they were
likely to demand some specific age benefits. Moreover, intergenerational competition was more likely to be adopted by participants who were in poor health ($\beta = -0.137$, $p < 0.01$) and by those who were under physical strain in their job ($\beta = 0.196$, $p < 0.001$). The work-to-private conflict did not predict intergenerational competition.

Redefinition of ageing

Redefinition of ageing was significantly predicted by affective identification with older workers: the more participants were emotionally involved with their in-group, the more likely they were to positively redefine the occupational role of its members ($\beta = 0.192$, $p < 0.05$). Despite age, gender, and perceived health significantly correlated with redefinition of ageing (see Table II), only gender significantly predicted this collective attitude after the other variables had been controlled for: males were more likely than females to engage themselves in a redefinition of ageing ($\beta = -0.142$, $p < 0.05$). Ageing redefinition was also positively related to autonomy in job tasks ($\beta = 0.164$, $p < 0.01$) and, despite this predictor did not correlated with ageing redefinition (see Table II), to physical job strain ($\beta = 0.120$, $p < 0.05$). The work-to-private conflict did not predict the redefinition of ageing.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate ageing at work in the light of intergroup processes based on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The research has shown how intergroup processes are related to older workers’ objective withdrawal (i.e. early retirement and bridge employment) as well as their subjective disengagement (the devaluation of the work domain) from the labor force. Therefore, this study extends traditional research on early retirement, which has focused on individual and/or organizational predictors of the early retirement decision-making process, to the social representation of ageing. Besides, in a context where individuals are required to work longer, this study provides interesting perspectives on processes that are likely to improve older workers’ quality of life in the workplace.

Our results on early retirement intentions revealed that cognitive identification with age-related peers increased the wish to retire as soon as possible. This finding is in line with predictions of self-categorization theory (Turner, 1999) rather than those of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Indeed, social identity theory predicts that individuals tend to leave a group they do not feel to belong to (low identification). But findings of this study showed the reverse relationship: early retirement intentions were higher when individuals strongly identified with older workers as a group. In other words, total early retirement seems to be a prototypical behavior that reflects the retirement norms associated with the fact of being an “older worker” in countries such as Belgium (Guillemard, 2003).

Nevertheless, only complete retirement was predicted by cognitive identification with older workers as a group. The intention to reduce working hours (i.e. bridge employment) seems to result from a different process that is the need or the wish to reduce the incompatibility between the work role and private life. It be noted that, unlike Raymo and Sweeney (2006), we failed to find a significant relationship between work-private conflict and total retirement. The fact that our study measured conflict between work and the private domain (and not the conflict between work and the family area as in Raymo and Sweeney’s study) could perhaps explain this
inconsistency. Indeed, it is possible that private aspirations are better fulfilled in the
time released by the reduction in working hours than by total retirement.

Devaluing the work domain was shown to be more likely when the boundaries
between the younger and older workers’ groups were impermeable and/or when older
workers were not affectively involved in their in-group. In other words, psychological
disengagement from work is more likely when the social identity of “older workers”
does not provide any benefit for the members of this group (e.g. social relationships
with peers) and when age-related impermeability in the workplace prevents older
workers from engaging themselves in the work domain.

However, because recent employment policies are sustaining longer careers rather
than early retirement routes, it is crucial to also investigate processes having to do with
the continuation of working life. By analyzing the intergroup processes, our study has
shown that social identity processes are important conditions that are likely to increase
positive intergenerational attitudes at work. Individuals who categorized themselves
as “older workers” (cognitive identification) and who perceived their workplace makes
use of age for distinguishing between workers (intergroup impermeability) were more
likely to engage in conflict with younger workers to gain age-related benefits. At the
same time, however, affective involvement with the older workers’ group was
positively associated with a redefinition of ageing (i.e. with an appeal for social
recognition of the positive role of older workers in the labor force).

Implications for research and practice
A question to further investigate is how affective identification with age-related peers
can be reinforced (for its positive effects) while the deleterious effects of
self-categorization as an “older worker” can be avoided.

Research that has used a social categorization approach to diversity management
suggests some measures to reduce the negative effects of diversity. In particular,
following van Knippenberg et al. (2001) (in Haslam et al., 2003) categorization-elaboration
model, van Knippenberg and Haslam (2003) predict that diversity will have negative
effects to the extent that it engenders separatism in the workplace (i.e. subgroup
division). The finding in our study that cognitive identification with the age-based
subgroup (i.e. the older workers’ group) is positively associated with negative
work-related attitudes that older workers are likely to adopt (e.g. early retirement
intentions or intergenerational competition) supports this assumption.

Nevertheless, the categorization-elaboration model also predicts that diversity can
contribute to deeper processing of task-relevant information because of divergent
perspectives on this task. However, such positive effect of diversity is only expected to
emerge when group members believe they share a common group membership at
higher level. To achieve the common group identity, van Knippenberg and Haslam
(2003) promote interventions focused on making shared group membership salient so
that subgroup members see each other as members of the same superordinate group
(i.e. recategorization strategies) rather than as either subgroup members (i.e.
separatism) or particular individuals (i.e. decategorization strategies). With respect
to ageing at work, management strategies that develop a common organizational
identity rather than age-based identities (older workers versus younger workers)
would be likely to reduce the potentially negative effects of age-related diversity in the
workplace.
Limitations and future direction

The present study has several potential limitations. First, because it was conducted in Belgium, where social norms towards ageing at work include an “early exit culture” (Guillemard, 2003), care should be taken in generalizing our results. Some relationships between predictors and older workers’ attitudes might be different in countries characterized by other age cultures. For example, in countries such as Sweden where public policies and organizations provide more incentives to keep older workers in the workforce (Guillemard, 2003), early retirement intentions are probably less likely to typify older workers.

Second, the nature of our data does not allow conclusions on causality. This limitation could be overcome in future research by the use of longitudinal designs or by the use of experimental designs which manipulate the activation of particular social identities to influence individuals’ attitudes and behaviors.

Third, both stress models and social identity theory assume that coping strategies aim to protect stigmatized people’s well-being. It would be interesting to include a measure of well-being to test both the relationships between age-related social identity and stress and the mediational hypothesis that identity management strategies do protect older workers’ well-being when they are victims of stigmatization in the workplace.

Conclusion

To summarize, the findings of this research support the need to develop a multidimensional picture of older workers’ attitudes towards their work. Such attitudes depend not only on personal and organizational variables but also on processes related to the social representation of ageing in the workplace. Indeed, both the intentions to retire early and to take bridge employment mainly depend on personal variables (in particular health and wealth). On the other hand the attitudes adopted by individuals who are likely to remain at work for longer seem to depend more on social psychological variables than on personal and organizational ones (cfr. the explained variance ratio for the various sets of variables in Table III). In particular, both psychological disengagement from the work domain and intergenerational conflict are more likely when age is used to differentiate between workers. Thus intergroup processes should be taken into account by human resource managers to ensure both the efficiency of their companies and their workers’ quality of life.

References


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