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Age effects in Work & Organisational Psychology: Young and older workers

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Paper 1:

Hindrances, Challenges, and Resources at Work in Relation to Psychological Well-being: Does Age Play a Significant Role?

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Introduction: Despite a growing managerial and scholarly awareness of an increasing age diversity in the workforce (De Lange, Taris, Jansen, Kompier, Houtman & Bongers, in press), few studies have examined whether inter-individual age differences may alter how workers perceive and respond to their work environment. For example, within the job characteristics literature, age has seldom been taken into consideration (Griffiths, 1997), and has often been treated as a control variable (De Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2003). The aim of the current study was therefore to investigate potential age differences in the realm of the Job Demands-Resources model in relation to worker well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; De Lange et al., in press; Matthews, Bulger, & Branes-Farell, in press) In particular, we build upon a recent expansion of this well-established model (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Cuyper, & De Witte, in press) wherein job hindrances (e.g., role conflict and emotional demands), job challenges (e.g., workload and cognitive demands), and job resources (e.g., task autonomy and social support) yield health-impairing, mixed and health-enhancing relationships, respectively with workers' well-being in terms of exhaustion and vigour as outcomes.

As it is important to take a life-stage perspective in examining workers' age (Levinson, 1978) we tested this model in three separate age groups: (1) workers aged between 18-35 years (younger), (2) workers between 36-45 years (mid-career), and (3) workers of 46 years and older (older) (Schultz & Adams, 2007). We expected to find the three factor structure among the job characteristics in each of the age groups, which would attest to the validity of the model. However, based on life-span theory (Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999), differences in mean levels and strengths of the structural relationships between the job characteristics' categories and workers' functioning were hypothesized.

Method: To test our hypothesis, we applied Multiple-Group analysis (Lisrel 8.80) using a sample of police officers, a vital group of employees in society which may represent the growing group of service workers (N = 3446).

Results: CFAs confirmed the three-factor structure of the distinguished job characteristics in each of the three age groups. MANOVAs indicated that older workers experienced more job

hindrances compared with mid-career and younger workers, whereas the younger workers experienced less job challenges and exhaustion compared to the other age groups. Finally, multiple group SEM analysis indicated that a variant model showed the best fit to the data, which points out important age differences.

Conclusions: Our results confirm the validity of the extended JD-R model for different age groups. They also highlight particular age differences in the experience of job characteristics and the importance of using a life span perspective in studying and applying job design.

Paper 2:

The forgotten Potential of Older Employees: Attitudes, Strategies and Well-being of Older Employees in Service Interactions

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In the past, research on the elderly has focused on their increasing deficiencies in basic cognitive and sensori-motor skills. In contrast, only limited research exists on the development of socio-emotional competences of the elderly despite these competences being required in every workplace, particularly in the service sector. In the ongoing study our central question being: compared to younger employees, which advantages and disadvantages do older employees have in service interactions regarding social and emotional work demands?

Based on theoretical concepts and empirical findings from areas such as stress research, emotion regulation and the psychology of wisdom we hypothesise that older employees are better at the intra-psychological regulation of emotions and use conflict avoidance and cognitive change strategies such as deep acting more often than younger employees. Therefore they can master social and emotional demands in service interactions as well as, or even better than, their younger colleagues. In addition, we expect that older employees show higher job satisfaction, higher affective commitment and higher customer orientation, which supposedly has positive effects on service work. The better regulation strategies should lead to better well-being of older employees compared to younger.

The hypotheses will be tested in a sample of 300 service employees from different service occupations using self-ratings. Antecedents of the organisation, antecedents of the individual, attitudes and strategies of the individual, and well-being are assessed using established instruments.

Preliminary results based on a sample of 82 service employees reveal that older employees report higher affective commitment and less role-conflict. They more often use anticipative deep acting, a subscale of deep acting, and more often avoid conflicts than the younger. Older employees also report less emotional exhaustion. These results so far support our hypotheses. We conclude that older employees show the same or better social and emotional competences in service interactions, especially with regard to emotion regulation.

Limitations of the study and implications for research and practice will be discussed.