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A Self-Regulatory Perspective on Associations Between Age Attitudes, Self-Categorization and Emotional Exhaustion

Introduction.
In view of the world-wide graying of the workforce (De Lange, Taris, Jansen, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2010), we are facing a scenario that presents critical challenges for numerous stakeholders (e.g., politicians, employers, managers, career counselors, and employees) across countries and industries (Alley & Crimmins, 2007). One of these challenges is preventing possible mental health effects of negative age attitudes held by managers and employees themselves (Van der Heijden, De Lange, Demerouti, & Van der Heijde, 2009). Based on earlier social psychological theories [e.g., self-categorization theory of Tajfel (1978)], and life span developmental theory [e.g., Selection Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model of Baltes, Staudinger and Lindenberger (1999)], we want to address the effects of different age-related variables (age attitudes, self-categorization, and regulatory focus) in relation to emotional exhaustion.

More specifically, we want to test whether:

1a. Negative self-reported and supervisor-rated age attitudes, self-categorization with older workers, and a prevention focus are positively related to emotional exhaustion; and

1b. A prevention focus plays a moderating role in the aforementioned associations, such that the negative impact of age attitudes and self-categorization is reduced in case of a higher prevention focus.

Method. 217 Dutch blue- and white collar employees and their 23 managers participated in a study on the attitudes of older workers. 67.3 percent was male, and their calendar age ranged from 21 to 70 years (M = 53.6 years, SD = 9.8). All included scales revealed good psychometric qualities. In the preliminary analyses we controlled for age, gender, level of education and job tenure.

Results. The results of multiple hierarchical regression analyses revealed positive significant main effects of negative self-reported as well as supervisor-rated age attitudes and prevention focus in relation to emotional exhaustion, but no significant effects of self-categorization were found. Furthermore, prevention focus appeared to play a moderating role in the relationship between age attitudes and emotional exhaustion (reducing the negative impact of age attitudes), yet did not have an effect in case self-categorization was included as the predictor variable.
Discussion. Our results underline the need to incorporate age attitudes, and to add self-regulatory processes into occupational health models. Given the moderating effect of prevention focus, a factor that, in general, appears to increase with age (Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999), it is important to hypothesize relationships for distinguished age groups. During the presentation we will further discuss theoretical as well as practical implications of the results found.

References


