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Paper 3:

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

¹De Lange, A.H., & ^{2,3,4}Van der Heijden, B.I.J.M.

¹University of Groningen, the Netherlands; ²Maastricht School of Management, the Netherlands; ³Open University of the Netherlands, the Netherlands; ⁴University of Twente, the Netherlands

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 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 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 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.