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Images of Older Workers. Content, Causes, and Consequences.
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SUMMARY

Older workers experience unequal treatment in the workplace, a problem that has been often

ascribed to an alleged *image problem* faced by this group. Stereotypes about older workers have

been shown to blur organizational members' ability - both managers' and colleagues'– to make fair

and just decisions regarding older workers, with detrimental consequences for individual careers,

organization's competitive advantage and society at large – an issue that has become more

prevalent as a consequence of the aging of industrialized societies. It is argued that mediated and

interpersonal communication are at the heart of older workers' image problem. Especially in

western age-segregated societies, news and organizational media are considered an important

source of information about older adults in social and organizational life. Yet, to date, research has

fallen short of providing empirical evidence regarding the causes and content of portrayals of older

workers in the news and organizational media, as well as the consequences of such portrayals for

beliefs about older workers and organizational outcomes. The central aim of this dissertation is to

provide an in-depth understanding of the media's role in reinforcing beliefs of older workers and

trace its consequences for individual and organizational outcomes.

The dissertation's first two empirical chapters address the causes and content of images of

older workers. In the *first* empirical chapter, the dissertation focuses on how organizational media

(i.e., employee magazines and annual reports) and news media (i.e., newspapers) frame the issue of

workforce aging and older workers. It is concluded that the debate about older workers is highly

contested and complex, and depends upon context and time frame. The chapter shows that while

organizations in their organizational media attempt to avoid associations with problems related to

older workers and highlight the solutions they offer, news media are relatively more inclined to

problematize the issue and victimize older workers. Equally interesting is the finding that during times of high unemployment, organizations devote less attention to the issue.

The *second* empirical chapter focuses on stereotypes of older workers that prevail in organizational and news media. Here, it is concluded that organizational and news media portray older workers in terms of a wide variety of positive and negative stereotypes. With regard to negative media stereotypes, older workers are mostly portrayed as costly, but also as unproductive, unhealthy, not able and willing to learn, and as not competent to work with new technology. Regarding positive media stereotypes, older workers are mostly portrayed as mentors – who convey knowledge and experience – followed by the positive media stereotypes that they are involved and committed, have a warm personality, and are trustworthy and reliable colleagues. Most of these stereotype elements are an indication of low levels of competence and high levels of warmth, the two core dimensions of the *Stereotype Content Model*. The chapter further shows that organizations use different – i.e., more positive – stereotypes about older workers compared to news media.

Next, the dissertation shows the implications of media stereotypes of older workers. In the *third* empirical chapter, the dissertation investigates the effects of mixed (i.e., negative and positive) media stereotypes of older workers on the individual level. By means of an experiment, the chapter shows that a news media article portraying older workers as high (vs. low) in warmth and low (vs. high) in competence simultaneously activates positive warmth and negative competence stereotypes on the implicit level. This, in turn, constrains and induces negative employability perceptions of older workers, resulting in a net negative effect on the intention to hire an older worker.

In the *fourth* chapter, the focus is on effects of older workers' media stereotypes on the aggregate level. The empirical study presented in this chapter aims to move beyond previous research, which has mainly offered individual-level and static explanations for the experience of age discrimination at work. Using time-series data, the chapter traces the relationship between the visibility and positive and negative stereotypes of older workers in Dutch newspapers and age

discrimination claims filed by this group longitudinally. Here, the dissertation finds that the visibility of older workers in news media is associated with the filing of age discrimination claims by this group. This effect can be partly explained by the presence of the negative media stereotype that older workers experience health problems.

Based on the third and fourth chapter, the dissertation concludes that mixed media stereotypes of older workers matter. Both on the individual and aggregate level, the dissertation finds that the effects of negative media stereotypes outweigh the effects of positive media stereotypes.

In the *fifth* and final empirical chapter of the dissertation, the focus shifts to managerial communication with older workers. Previous research argues that constructive managerial communication is a prerequisite for the equal promotion of sustainable employability goals across the lifespan – but falls short of providing empirical explanations for why managers often fail to accommodate older workers. This chapter maps the nature of managers' communication barriers to accommodate older workers' sustainable employability and traces their consequences for managers' perception of older workers' job performance and intention to promote an older worker. First, and based on qualitative interview data with Dutch managers, the chapter identifies both individual-level (negative stereotypes about older workers' desire and ability to learn, a lack of managerial power, legitimacy conflicts) and contextual-level (time constraints, and low levels of organizational investments in older workers' employability) communication barriers. Using survey data, the chapter further identifies the most influential barriers; negative beliefs about older workers' desire and ability to learn, a lack of managerial power and low levels of organizational investments in older workers' employability was related to lower levels of perceived job performance of older workers and a lower intention to promote an individual older worker. It is concluded that a lack of constructive communication reinforces the spiral of decreased access to employability-development opportunities.

The dissertation adds to the literature on the intersection between communication science and the study of age bias in the workplace. The empirical findings presented in this dissertation demonstrate the relevance of media portrayals and managerial communication for understanding beliefs about older workers. It is concluded that processes of age stereotyping and discrimination within organizational boundaries are the partial outcome of dynamics in the media environment. Herewith, the dissertation provides an important piece to the puzzling question of why age bias in the workplace remains a persistent phenomenon.