Applying psychological lifespan development theory and research to interventions targeting older workers

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Overview

• Demographic changes in most industrialized countries

• Aging issues related to work:
  – Cognitive and personality changes
  – Job attitude and performance differences

• Theories of lifespan development
Why is this important?

• People living longer; need to work longer to sustain retirement systems (Vaupel, 2010).

• A large number of people are working longer not because they want to but because they must (AARP report, 2013).

• As a result...
  ▪ Average age of the workforce is increasing

• Workers must stay engaged to continue working successfully.
U.S.: Rate of employment among older workers continues to increase.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

www.bls.gov
U.S. Workers Over 65: More Full-Time Work

![Graph showing workers 65 and over by work schedule, 1977-2007](image)

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

www.bls.gov
Aged dependency ratio = \[
\frac{\text{number of people aged 65 and over}}{\text{number of people aged 15 – 64}} \times 100
\]
But very few workplace interventions focused on differences between older and younger workers.

Very few (no?) published interventions that use what we know about the psychology of aging.
Age-Related Changes Relevant to the Workplace
Age, Physical Health, & Disabilities

Figure 1. Growth in Disability Prevalence by Age

Source: NIDRR Demographics and Statistics RRTC at Cornell University’s Employment and Disability Institute, calculations from 2003 ACS PUMS file performed by Robert Weathers, 2005.
Chronological Age: Cognitive Changes

Youth (Teens)  ← Age →  Old Age (70s and above)

- **Crystallized Intelligence** (e.g., wisdom; job skills)
- **Fluid Intelligence** (e.g., working memory, processing speed)
Age and Personality

• Increases in:
  • Conscientiousness
  • Agreeableness

• Decreases in:
  • Neuroticism (Roberts et al., 2006; Soto & John, 2012; Soto et al., 2011)
Age and Work Attitudes and Performance

• Age is associated with improvements in nearly all job attitudes (Ng & Feldman, 2010).

• Very few changes in performance; a slight improvement in organizational citizenship and safety performance (Ng & Feldman, 2008).
Age and Work Motivation

- Kanfer & Ackerman (2004)
  - Changes in motivation as people gain and lose abilities, skills, and knowledge
  - Generativity motives begin in middle age
    - Giving back to the next generation and to the profession

- Increased intrinsic motives, decreased extrinsic motives (Kooij, de Lange, Jansen, Kanfer, & Dikkers, 2011)
Lifespan Development Theories: Aging as an Adaptive Process

1. Socioemotional Selectivity Theory

2. Selection, Optimization, and Compensation Theory
Lifespan Development Theories I: Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) (Carstensen, 1999)

- Focus on time remaining
- “Future time perspective”
  - Younger workers: Time is open-ended
  - Older workers: Time is limited.
Lifespan Development Theories I: Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) (Carstensen, 1999)

• Younger workers: Performing a range of tasks to gain the skills they need.
  – *Example*: Younger worker chooses to do a variety of tasks to increase job-related skills
Lifespan Development Theories I: Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) (Carstensen, 1999)

• Older workers: Emotion-related goals; relationships at work.
  – Example: Older worker selects to focus on the interpersonal aspects of work, e.g., being a good citizen, supporting others.

  ▪ Support in terms of increased satisfaction, reduced stress and turnover (e.g., Hertel & colleagues, 2013; Zaniboni, Truxillo, & Fraccaroli, 2013)

  ▪ But no published workplace intervention research
Lifespan Development Theories II
Selection, Optimization, and Compensation Theory (SOC) (Baltes & Baltes, 1991)

- Select: What goals/outcomes to pursue
- Optimize efforts and resources
- Compensate to offset age-related declines
Lifespan Development Theories II
Selection, Optimization, and Compensation Theory (SOC) (Baltes & Baltes, 1991)

Example: Older worker selects to focus on job tasks that compensate for changes in abilities.

Support: Effects on health and on work ability (Weigl, Muller, & colleagues)

But no published workplace intervention research
– Work ongoing in Netherlands, Germany.
Suggestions Moving Forward

• Focus on the mediating and explanatory psychological mechanisms.
  – We need to know how and why age interventions work to improve and to increase dissemination

• Consider within-person analyses to examine intervention effects over time: Longitudinal research
  – What can be done for workers at different life stages
Suggestions Moving Forward

• Manage, measure, and describe contextual factors, e.g., supervisor support, participant “readiness”, communication with participants.

• Look to other psychological research that is relevant to older workers
  – Age stereotyping
  – Age diversity climate

• Let’s not forget younger workers.
Conclusions

• There’s a gap in terms of interventions for older workers that are based on psychology of aging.

• Use knowledge of age-related psychological changes to develop age-related work interventions.

• Develop based on lifespan development theory.
Thank you!
New Journal on Age Research

• *Work, Aging and Retirement* (Oxford)

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