

60s 40s ageism

in the american workplace

by vincent j. roscigno

When I wrote an article on age discrimination last year, I couldn't believe the response: countless emails and at least five phone calls a week for several months. These communications weren't coming from researchers in the field but from workers across the country, male and female, semi-skilled, skilled, and professional. They shared stories of age discrimination that they, a spouse, or a parent had experienced or were currently living through, asked for information about their rights and what could be done, and thanked me for bringing light to an issue that "nobody talks about."

They were and are correct about the neglect of age discrimination in public dialogue. There is remarkably little coverage in the popular press and, with a few exceptions, social scientists who study employment inequality often overlook ageism—a problem that Equal Employment Opportunity Commission statistics show is on the rise.

The increase in workplace ageism is due to a host of cultural, demographic, and structural factors: a society increasingly consumed by “youth,” be it in culture, mass media or medicine; a large and aging baby boomer population, many of whom will remain in the workforce well into their 70s and 80s; and current corporate downsizing and globalization pressures that heighten worker insecurities and vulnerabilities. Social researchers are now documenting trends in aging workers’ employment prospects and employer stereotyping and discrimination. Using both survey research and first-hand accounts by victims, they are uncovering the real social and human costs of age discrimination.

talking with victims

Almost all victims with whom I spoke related tangible costs to them or a loved one. Many conveyed fear of defaulting on mortgages or being unable to pay for their children’s college after being pushed out of their current jobs. Others expressed anger and insecurity over the loss of affordable health insurance or pension benefits—benefits that they felt were both earned and owed. Just as prevalent and somewhat surprising to me in these discussions were the less-tangible, yet deeper social-psychological and emotional costs that social science research has established for racial discrimination or sexual harassment, for instance, but are only now being considered in relation to older workers.

The first-hand experiences of victims aligned closely with my own research on the topic. Karen, for instance, told me about her mother who, several months prior, was pushed out of her job of 20 years and replaced with a 25 year old. Her mother felt isolated and helpless. She continues to cry at night, months later, due to the loss of a job, loss of friends she loved, and an overarching violation of trust by her employer. “She thought of her colleagues as her family,” Karen noted, “but now it is her family that abandoned her like... like she just doesn’t matter. It killed her inside... It’s still killing her inside.”

Violations of trust, despite a history of hard, dedicated work and good citizenship, seemed especially poignant. Joe, a committed maintenance worker, talked with me just as he was “being pushed out” after 23 years of work. He expressed anger—anger triggered by violations of a “normative social contract,” wherein employee dedication and hard work are met with employer obligation and “making good” on past promises. “They now don’t want to pay me my pension. I was a good worker for them and always did everything they asked. I went out of my way to help train people and make every-



Photo by Bernard Pollack via Creative Commons

Skilled and dedicated workers, older people may be one asset employers overlook.

thing run smoothly, so everybody was happy and it was a good place to work. And now this is what I get, like I never really mattered to them. It’s just not right.”

age stereotypes at work

Stereotypes—negative generalizations about entire groups of people—indicate status and inequality that can spur discriminatory behaviors and actions. Although employers may say they want long-term, experienced, dedicated workers, survey research tells us they tend to view older workers like Joe and Karen’s mother as expensive, inflexible, possibly stubborn or forgetful, and bad for the company image. We also know from reports and surveys from organizations like the AARP that more than half of aging workers have either experienced age discrimination on their jobs or witnessed such discrimination toward others.

Erdman Palmore of the Duke University Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development reports that 84 percent of Americans over 60 years old report one or more incidents of ageism, including insulting jokes, disrespect, patronizing behavior, and assumptions about frailty or ailments. Such patterns are manifested by a culture consumed with “youth”—a culture passed to young people through socialization and then reproduced in institutions and organizations like the workplace.

Surveys, interviews, and experimental research all uncover ageism in employment. Classic work by Benson Rosen and Thomas Jerdee, for example, revealed perceptions of older workers as less responsive, if not resistant, to workplace changes. A more recent book by social psychologist Todd Nelson confirms this point, revealing how managers and younger coworkers tend to view older workers as inflexible, slow, unorganized, difficult, and expensive to train. Such stereotypes, which sometimes take a gender-specific character, are notable given that older workers often exhibit greater job commitment, less turnover, and lower rates of absenteeism than do younger workers.

No doubt some employers try to protect older workers from discriminatory treatment in an effort to maintain a well-trained, highly skilled labor force. Yet an emerging body of research is finding that employers invoke age stereotypes and discrimination to help justify cost-savings for the business. This may be especially true for skilled workers, such as those in manufacturing, given recent trends in globalization, downsizing, and corporate restructuring. Indeed, such economic trends and employers' responses to them have created a structurally vulnerable, aging workforce or, as Arne Kalleberg described in his 2009 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association, "precarious work" and "insecure workers."

economics and vulnerability

There is solid evidence of growing insecurity among all workers, but perhaps especially among aging workers, beginning in the 1990s and continuing to the present. The United States has witnessed mass layoffs, declining relative wages, the growth of part-time and temporary work, and what Robert Valletta of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco describes as an "employer breach of implicit employment arrangements." Here, Valletta is referring to the "normative social contract" described earlier—the expectation that good workplace citizenship and tenure will be rewarded with security and job benefits.

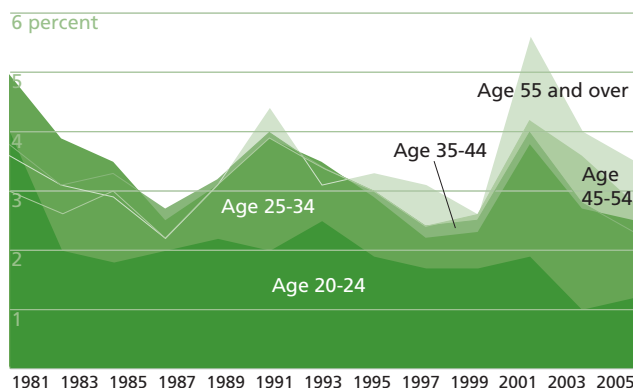
In the face of corporate restructuring and downsizing, replacing older with younger workers may be seen by some employers as a cost-savings technique, inasmuch as pension payouts can be circumvented and wages decreased. Moreover, health benefit payouts can be held in check, and promotions and on-the-job training opportunities can be reserved for younger workers who are often seen as cheaper and more worth the long-term investment. The consequences, particu-

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larly for higher skilled older workers, have included significant job displacement over the past twenty years, involuntary exit from the labor market, and downward mobility upon re-employment.

Research on long-term employment by Princeton economist Henry Farber corroborates such findings, reporting deterioration of jobs in the private sector from 1990 to 2006, with tenure declining substantially for workers over 40 years of age. What this means is that older workers are being "displaced" or pushed out of long-term employment at an even higher rate than younger workers. This occurs largely through plant closings and job elimination. Employers have some discretion in deciding which plants to close and jobs to eliminate, which

Displacement rates of long-tenured workers



Source: Displaced worker supplement, Current Population Survey, Bureau of Labor Statistics

can disadvantage older workers who may have higher earnings and more expensive benefits packages.

Though this sort of vulnerability to economic pressure is not the same as discrimination, there are important overlaps that suggest they are, in fact, closely related. First, as I found in my study of age discrimination suits, the very justifications employers use to discriminate against and push out aging workers are often "age-neutral" in tone, incorporating rhetoric about "cost-savings," "downsizing," and "restructuring." This is true even when no such formal restructuring occurs. Second, the pattern of age discrimination suits nationally closely mirrors more general worker displacement trends.

Age discrimination complaints to the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission are increasing rapidly in proportion to complaints on the basis of race, sex, disability, and religion. Although formal complaints only capture a sliver of the discriminatory acts occurring in the real world, the data point to

an absolute as well as a relative increase in age discrimination. The raw number of case filings, monetary awards for damages, and percentage of cases settled in the employee's favor also show that age discrimination charges and their seriousness are on the rise, paralleling the broader

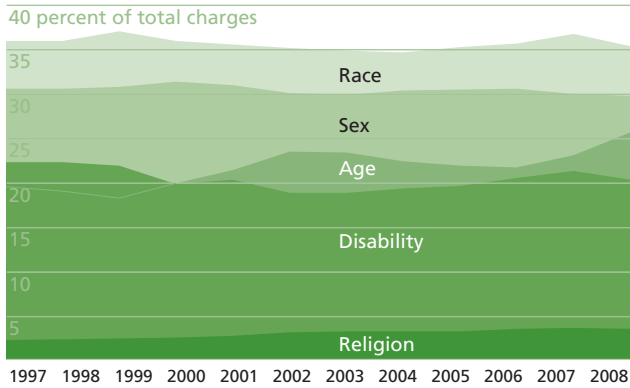
trends in worker displacement. The costs are multi-dimensional and serious.

tangible costs, emotional scarring, and injustice

Much age discrimination in the American economy is linked to being fired, let go, or laid off, often preceded by a period of outright harassment or unequal terms and conditions of employment (such as being asked to perform tasks other employees are not asked to do). The consequences can be numerous and wide-ranging.

There are immediate costs surrounding wage and benefits losses and the need to find new employment. With Sherry Mong, Reginald Byron, and Griff Tester, I studied both the age

Basis of equal employment opportunity charges



Source: EEOC

discrimination process and the resulting job security and financial hardships, based on 120 discrimination cases verified by state Civil Rights investigators. Consider, for example, the case of Jim Terry, a shift foreman who was terminated and replaced by a younger employee just 23 days prior to his 30-year anniversary with the company. Jim was cross-trained in several areas and could have easily performed any of the duties in his department. Yet he was terminated for minor “infractions” when other foremen were not. Consequently, his pension benefits were cut by about \$300 per month, and his medical and life insurance were immediately shut off. Sarah Ray, an African American executive secretary for a government agency, was pushed into involuntary retirement after 21 years with her employer and, like Jim, received only a portion of her pension as a result: “At 59 years of age I felt desperate because of the financial situation in our home that I had to do something to keep money coming. So, at that choice—at that time, I retired even though that’s not what I wanted to do...”

The push to create and maintain a young workforce due to stereotypes of aging workers and their assumed higher costs means that companies may feel pressure to both purge older workers from their ranks and hire younger rather than older workers. This two-pronged pressure—in employer biases about who to purge and who to hire—makes older workers vulnerable in both the hiring and firing process. They are susceptible to being pushed out or laid off, to be sure. But once they are out, they will also expend disproportionate time and energy seeking re-employment elsewhere.

According to recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 65 percent of all displaced workers find gainful employment within two years of the initial job loss. Workers 55 and older, however, encounter the greatest obstacles and worst prospects for re-employment. For them, re-employment often occurs in part-time or temporary work with lower wages and job benefits. And, as time passes, many give up job searches

and take themselves out of the labor market altogether. As Sarah Rix of the AARP wrote in *Aging and Work: A View from the United States*, labor analysts and advocates for older workers have long been concerned with the extent to which older workers become discouraged.

Beyond the employment and wage toll, then, age discrimination also brings psychological, social, and emotional costs—costs that deserve attention. Aging research on employment disruptions, such as that by Victor Marshall and colleagues, shows how unplanned job losses bring adverse health effects for both men and women. My own conversations with victims also brought out such impacts, especially for social psychological well-being and depression. It began with 56 year old Margaret, an administrative assistant, who was terminated without just cause several months earlier. She described herself as forever “emotionally scarred.” Catching me somewhat off-guard by that phrase, I asked what she meant, to which she replied, “I am drained. Besides having to start over and find a new job, I no longer know who to trust. I lost most of my friends. And

A two-pronged pressure makes older workers vulnerable in both the hiring and firing process.

I have little faith left to believe anything an employer might tell me.”

After our talk, I couldn’t help but revisit the other phone conversations and email communications I had been having, recognizing similar emotional currents running well beyond concerns about lost wages, benefits, and newly encountered economic insecurity. Like Margaret, Joe, and Karen’s mother quoted earlier, many of those encountering age discrimination



Photo by Bill Alkofer

An architect by trade, John Cunningham hopes to keep working—and contributing—for as long as possible.

were clearly injured by the unexpected nature of what unfolded and what it meant for their friendships, sense of identity, and overall sense of fairness. Of course, some sought justice through the legal system. Many became even more cynical, however, about what had occurred and about the overarching power

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of employers. In an e-mail, Michael, an electrical engineer who recently went through litigation, wrote:

“That experience has taught me that the legal system is no deterrent to the workplace age discrimination that you have described in your paper. Litigation takes 4-7 years, the laws regarding age discrimination are weak, the state and federal agencies set up to protect older workers are effected [sic] by politics and the same cultural influences you describe, the legal process ‘rules’ regarding permissible age discrimination ‘damages’ claims do not provide adequate deterrence, and older workers making under \$75k (median household income is ~\$55k) do not have access to the legal system (on a ‘contingency fee’ basis) because the possible returns to an attorney are not worth the time (‘the business of law’).”

Importantly, the people making these comments considered themselves good, hard-working people and long-term dedicated employees. They believed, at some earlier point, what culture tells us about employment and effort: namely, that hard work, commitment, and dedication are reciprocated. And according to them, this is precisely what their employers claimed to have wanted in employees. Many were terminated, regardless. Others were harassed by supervisors and co-workers. And some were isolated or relegated to less-desirable, sometimes lower-paid positions.

That victims of age discrimination experience psychological stress and emotional scarring should not come as a surprise given what we know about the

impact of race and sex discrimination on well-being and how harassment and bullying affect social and emotional health. What is unique about age discrimination, however, is the lack of attention to the psychological and emotional damage it may cause and the long-term sense of injustice and emotional turmoil, if not

outrage, that victims experience when the “normative social contract” that bound them to employers is abridged.

To the extent that such a contract still exists, it is being fundamentally altered if not altogether dismantled via globalization, restructuring, and corporate down-

sizing. This seems to be bolstered by employers’ willingness to discriminate despite formal federal protections. Aging workers—all of us, eventually—are a major casualty.

fighting ageism

Current trends—in downsizing, in the aging baby boomer generation, and in rates of discrimination complaints—certainly suggest a growing problem. Yet, growing recognition of the causes, costs, and legal status of age discrimination could alter this trajectory.

Understanding and appreciating the attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of ageism could well provide the knowledge base needed to sensitize public and human resource audiences to aging workers’ true capabilities and their legal right to equitable treatment. Social science can play an important role in this regard by distilling the causes in digestible form and laying bare the human toll of age discrimination. Employers, for their part, need not only be held accountable for unfair treatment, but must also become better informed about the business costs of



Photo by Bill Alkofer

Employers of older workers benefit from the talent and experience of a stable workforce.

engaging in unfair treatment of older employees. Although employers may see the purging of older workers as a cost saving technique, in the process they are losing talent, experience, and a stable and predictable workforce.

Workplace age discrimination is ultimately illegal, and perhaps that is where the greatest challenge lies. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act provides aging workers with federal legal protection against much of the conduct described in this article, yet age discrimination persists and is likely intensifying. Lack of knowledge about legal protections and avenues for recourse is partly to blame. More prominent, however, is limited corporate accountability and disparities in resources and power in the legal-judicial process. Such disparities make it difficult for victims to mount challenges, allowing age discrimination to go, for the most part, unchecked. Some recent and proposed changes to discrimination law and practice include time extensions to charge filing, greater resources and investigative oversight powers for the EEOC and state civil rights commissions, and the removal of damage caps for companies found guilty of violations. Such reforms would help bring older workers the protections already guaranteed in law—and bring to light the discrimination that “nobody talks about.”

recommended resources

Arne L. Kallenberg. “Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition.” *American Sociological Review* (2007), 74:1-22. Addresses the implications of recent economic shifts for worker vulnerabilities and insecurities.

Todd Nelson. *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice Against Older Persons* (MIT Press, 2004). An examination of the manifestations of age stereotypes in our culture.

Erdman B. Palmore. “Research Note: Ageism in Canada and the United States.” *Journal of Cross Cultural Gerontology* (2004), 19:41-46. Gives generalizable statistical data, for both the U.S. and Canada, on attitudes toward older citizens and the experiences of older persons.

Vincent J. Roscigno, Sherry Mong, Reginald Byron, and Griff Tester. “Age Discrimination, Social Closure, and Employment.” *Social Forces* (2007), 86:313-334. Looks at the dynamics of age discrimination in employment drawing on qualitative content from verified case files.

Robert G. Valetta. “Declining Job Security.” *Journal of Labor Economics* (1999), 17:S170-197. Provides an overview of increasing worker insecurity and the changing nature of the employer-employee relationship.

Vincent J. Roscigno is in the department of sociology at The Ohio State University. He is the author of *The Face of Discrimination: How Race and Gender Impact Home and Work Lives*.

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