

# **“ONE SIZE DOESN’T FIT ALL”: TOWARD A THEORY ON THE INTERSECTIONAL SALIENCE OF AGEISM AT WORK**

JUSTIN MARCUS  
Department of Psychology  
Özyeğin University  
Istanbul, Turkey 34794

BARBARA A. FRITZSCHE  
University of Central Florida

## **ABSTRACT**

Research on workplace ageism has largely ignored the intersection of multiple-group memberships. Thus, we provide theoretical coherence regarding contextual factors determining age salience, and competing theories on consequences of multiple subordinate-group status. Our framework integrates the theories and shows when/how competing aspects of group-membership become salient.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The notion that older workers experience negative work outcomes relative to their younger peers is now well documented (Bal, Reiss, Rudolph, & Baltes, 2011; Gordon & Arvey, 2004). Much of the past research has focused on negative stereotypes and unfair evaluator consequences against older vs. younger adults (Bal et al., 2011; Finkelstein, Burke, & Raju, 1995; Gordon & Arvey, 2004; Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). However, little research examines age and age-based stereotypes alongside other group memberships such as race and sex, with their accompanying stereotypes; such research is needed in order to advance our understanding of age bias at work (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). That is, to the extent that human beings are complex beings, it makes little sense to conceptualize “older workers” as a unitary category, for no one is merely “older” nor “younger”, and everyone is an “older” or “younger” something or other (e.g., “younger male”, “older female”, “older White male”).

Although some research summarizes the extent to which evaluations of older workers differ by sex (Kite et al., 2005), to the best of our knowledge, no published research has systematically examined the tripartite relation between age, sex, and tribe as related to the consequences and outcomes of work. Finally, little research has been conducted examining alternative work contexts where age-based stereotypes may be more or less prevalent, or where age may be more or less salient (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). That is, to the best of our knowledge, no such situational differences in age salience have been studied alongside the just-noted tripartite in regards to age. This is a non-trivial issue, for age, sex, and tribe are arguably the most salient points of demographic distinction across cultures, and given that the impact of individual differences on psychological outcomes is indelibly context-bound.

The current paper brings attention to these gaps, by providing an integrative summary of research that highlights different work outcomes expected for younger and older job incumbents, male and female, White and non-White, and in situations that may make age more or less salient.

This is an especially timely topic to address as our workforce ages. As the number of older workers increase, more attention is needed to understand their workforce participation, integration in organizations, and productivity, across demographic and social categories. A theoretical framework and accompanying propositions are presented. The framework and accompanying propositions seek to integrate multiple competing theories regarding the confluence of multiple-group membership on work outcomes, including the double jeopardy hypothesis, (Barnum, Liden, & DiTomaso, 1995; Berdahl & Moore, 2006) the double advantage (Epstein, 1973; Hosoda, Stone, & Stone-Romero, 2003) hypothesis, ethnic prominence theory (Derous, Ryan, & Nguyen, 2012; Kang & Chasteen, 2009), the subordinate male hypothesis (Derous & Ryan, 2012; Derous et al., 2012), and intersectional invisibility/tokenism theory (Purdue-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Additionally, the framework also specifies when these different and competing streams of thought will alternatively receive support, by specifying the moderating role of contextual age salience on these intersections of multiple-group membership.

### **The Intersectional Salience of Ageism: A Framework**

The research literature treats “old age” as a singular category free of interacting influences of other subgroup categories. In our view, this “one-size-fits-all” approach toward the study of older workers is a lacuna, because it ignores the fact that societal and demographic memberships overlap. That is, every older worker is either an older male worker or an older female worker; every older worker is either a member of the dominant societal group or a member of a minority group. Ignoring such subgroup differences understates the complexity of relations between categorical information and outcomes (c.f., Allport, 1954/1979; Brewer, 1991; 2007; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). We propose that complex, multiple-group memberships arise from constellations of primary group memberships, including age, gender, and tribe-based memberships. The unique multiple-group categorical memberships that are created influence age-based outcomes in organizational contexts that make age a salient demographic variable. The framework proposed is displayed in Figure 1.

-----  
 Insert Figure 1 here  
 -----

As shown in Figure 1, we define age group membership to include not just objective chronological age, but also subjective age, or the extent to which one is perceived to be old (Barak & Schiffman, 1981). The latter and much understudied dimension arguably better reflects culturally conceptualized perceptions of old age (Bertolino, Steiner, & Zaniboni, 2011; Settersten & Mayer, 1997). We define gender group membership both in terms of whether an individual is biologically male or female (sex) and in terms of whether an individual self-identifies as being either male or female within the social sphere (gender). We broadly define tribe-based memberships to include major demographically derived differences that result in tribally based distinctions among members of a society (c.f., Goffman, 1971). These include race (e.g., White, Black, Hispanic), ethnicity (e.g., Italian, Irish), religion (e.g., Christian, Muslim, Jew), nationality (i.e., ethnicity within internationally mixed contexts), and nativity (local vs. foreign-born status within a particular society). Although we recognize the importance of broadly defining age, sex, and tribe, we limit our initial propositions to objective age, sex (rather than

gender), and race (Black v. White), in order to make the scope of our current paper manageable, and in the interests of theoretical coherence. Over time, we expect to expand our theoretical propositions that follow to be more inclusive of the broader definitions described previously.

Consistent with the tripartite model of ageism (Bal et al., 2011), self-based outcomes include cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes. We further suggest that outcomes derive from the individual her/himself and from relevant others. Both of these, in our view, are paramount to gaining a holistic understanding regarding the phenomenon of age bias at work, for the realm of behavior extends both to the immediate actor (the self) and to relevant interactors (others). Other-based outcomes broadly include age-prejudice (affective), age-discriminatory (behavioral), and age-stereotyping (cognitive) displayed by relevant others. Self-based outcomes include [affective] consequences of work for older workers (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment), [behavioral] consequences of work for older workers (e.g., turnover intentions), and/or [cognitive] meta-stereotypes regarding older workers. Accordingly, theoretical propositions extend to both eventualities (i.e., “experience more negative/less positive outcomes”; here, “experiences” are understood to be derived both from the self and from others).

As shown in Figure 1, situational salience of age is expected to moderate relations between work outcomes and the unique multiple-group category membership that is expected to arise as a function of age, gender, and tribe, in tandem. Thus, the focal moderator, contextual age-salience, is defined to be aspects of the job context that make the age category itself to be salient (or not). According to theory and research on the category formation process and consequent stereotype formation (Allport, 1954/1979; Brewer, 1991; 2007; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), age-salient contexts will act to make age the most dominant category among the tripartite of age-, gender-, and tribe-based memberships; in the absence of such contextual age-salience, the more visible categories of tribe, and especially, gender, will take precedence. By this definition, it is expected that the mere occurrence of age salience in a given context is key. That is, although situations may be salient for (i.e., positively age-biased toward older workers, or old-typed) or against (i.e., negatively age-biased toward older workers, or young-typed) older workers, it is not the valence of salience but its existence that is relevant. Age-salient job contexts include job age-type (e.g., “deejay” as a young-typed job or “security guard” as an old-typed job; Avolio, Waldman, & McDaniel, 1990; Reeves et al., 2013), job age-distribution (e.g., “bartender” being a job where most incumbents are younger or “taxi driver” as being a job where most incumbents are older; Reeves et al., 2013), job level (i.e., a job that is below career-graded age norms for an older worker; c.f., Lawrence, 1988), and job-experience match (i.e., a currently-held job that does not match an older worker’s previous job history; c.f., Fritzsche & Marcus, 2013).

Hence, the framework we present intertwines the role of context in making age membership salient with the unique multiple-group membership created via the intersections of age-, gender-, and tribe-based memberships, and explains their joint roles in predicting work outcomes for older workers of different stripes. Because of this focus on category membership and categorical salience, we conceptualize the focal contextual moderator as being the extent to which the category of prime interest, age, is salient; one’s unique demographic constellation with regards to these demographic variables will determine work outcomes differently depending upon whether or not one or another aspect of the self is likely salient within a given context. We acknowledge the roles of myriad other macro- (e.g., economic and political factors; Branine & Glover, 1997) and micro-organizational variables (e.g., individual differences in personality, empathy, and gratitude; Allan, Johnson, & Emerson, 2014) that may exist within the sphere of an

individual's work experience. However, within the scope of this paper, all other potential moderating factors are treated as being of secondary importance, insofar as explanation regarding the intersections of age-membership on work outcomes is concerned.

As stated earlier, the following propositions seek to reconcile the multiple competing streams of thought that exist to explain the role of multiple-group membership on work outcomes. We do so by drawing upon the intersectional perspective (Cole, 2009; Ozbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli, & Bell, 2011), which suggest that qualitatively different stereotypes arise from qualitatively different categories resulting from the conjoint effects of age, sex, and tribe. Archetypes for different categories of age membership are listed in Table 1.

-----  
 Insert Table 1 here  
 -----

The archetypes classify different categorical intersections of multiple-group membership according to their unique cognitive representations. Consistent with demographical representations among the Fortune 500 companies and among U. S. and European heads-of-state, it is logical to expect older White males to be archetyped as "leaders". Consistent with classical theories of prejudice, we may expect that those individuals who fall within the most rarefied and privileged of social groups, being furthest from natural death and who both belong to both the dominant societal tribe and the dominant societal gender (i.e., younger White males; Goffman, 1971), to be archetyped as the norm, or "Normal". Conversely, as consistent with cognitive-processing schemas identified for older vs. younger Black males (Kang and Chasteen, 2009; Shih, 2002), minority males are here archetyped to be either "rebels" if they are younger, or "sages" if they are older. Minority females, in contrast, are archetyped to be either "invisible" (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Sesko & Biernat, 2010), or, in the case of older minority females, as "matriarchs" (Dorio, Borman, & Fritzsche, 2007). Younger White females, though, and consistent with popular representations of beauty in contemporary Western media, are archetyped as being "sweethearts"; in contrast, as research on older females indicates, we may expect older females of the dominant societal group, White, to be archetyped as "grandmothers" (Hummert, 1990). Hence, as shown in Table 1, qualitatively different exemplars are representative of the various categorical memberships that arise given age, and these exemplars typify wholly different types of personalities and personal attributes. From the intersectional perspective, which posits demography as psychological process (Cole, 2009; Özbilgin et al., 2011), the qualitatively different nature of these various archetypes are expected to result in qualitatively different stereotypes and attitudes spawned toward the different archetypical personalities. Thus, for example, a sage triggers different types of reactions in others than a rebel.

*Proposition 1: Situational salience of age is not expected to impact experiences of white men. In other words, only small differences in experienced work outcomes are expected between younger and older White males, regardless of the situational salience of age.*

*Proposition 2: Smaller effect sizes of age group membership on work outcomes will be obtained when older White males are targets than when older females or older minority males are targets.*

*Proposition 3: When situational salience of age group membership is not present, older minority males will experience more negative and less positive work outcomes than younger minority males.*

*Proposition 4: When situational salience of age group membership is present, older minority males will experience less negative and more positive work outcomes than younger minority males.*

*Proposition 5: When situational salience of age group membership is not present, older white females will experience less negative and more positive work outcomes than younger white females.*

*Proposition 6: When situational salience of age group membership is present, older white females will experience more negative and less positive work outcomes than younger white females.*

*Proposition 7: When situational salience of age group membership is not present, older minority females will experience more negative and less positive work outcomes than younger minority females.*

*Proposition 8: When age is salient, older minority females will experience less negative and more positive work outcomes than younger minority females.*

## CONCLUSION

As evidenced by the abundance of competing yet equally logical theories in its purview, the intersectional view has yet but been inconsistently applied to the examination of age-based outcomes within the realm of work and organizational psychology. Such a limitation is, in our view, debilitating, for it is perhaps not possible to gain any measure of nuance in the understanding of complex beings, with but facile representations of said beings. That is, to the extent that not a one of us is merely “old”, nor “young”, and to the extent that each and every one of us is always an “old” or “young” something or other (e.g., “old”; “older female”; older White female”), it does our science little justice to continue forth as if we were but mere and unitary demographic checkboxes. To the extent that work lives are experienced within particularistic work contexts, we thus advance forth a view with regard to the ways by which these multiple and conjoint forces of demography may be experienced by individuals, across the multitudes of work settings, and that themselves call forth one or another aspect of an individual’s demography.

## ENDNOTES

1. Following general consensus that seems to exist in the psychological literature (e.g., Ashbaugh & Fay, 1987; Finkelstein, Ryan, & King, 2012), we refer to individuals advanced in chronological age as being, on average, over the age of 50.
2. By tribe, we refer to those groupings of individuals based upon communal affiliation, such as race, religion, and ethnicity.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS

Table 1. Archetypical representations of age by unique multiple-category memberships.

Category	Archetype
Younger White Male	Normal
Older White Male	Gentleman
Younger Minority Male	Rebel
Older Minority Male	Sage
Younger White Female	Sweetheart
Older White Female	Grandmother
Younger Minority Female	Invisible
Older Minority Female	Matriarch

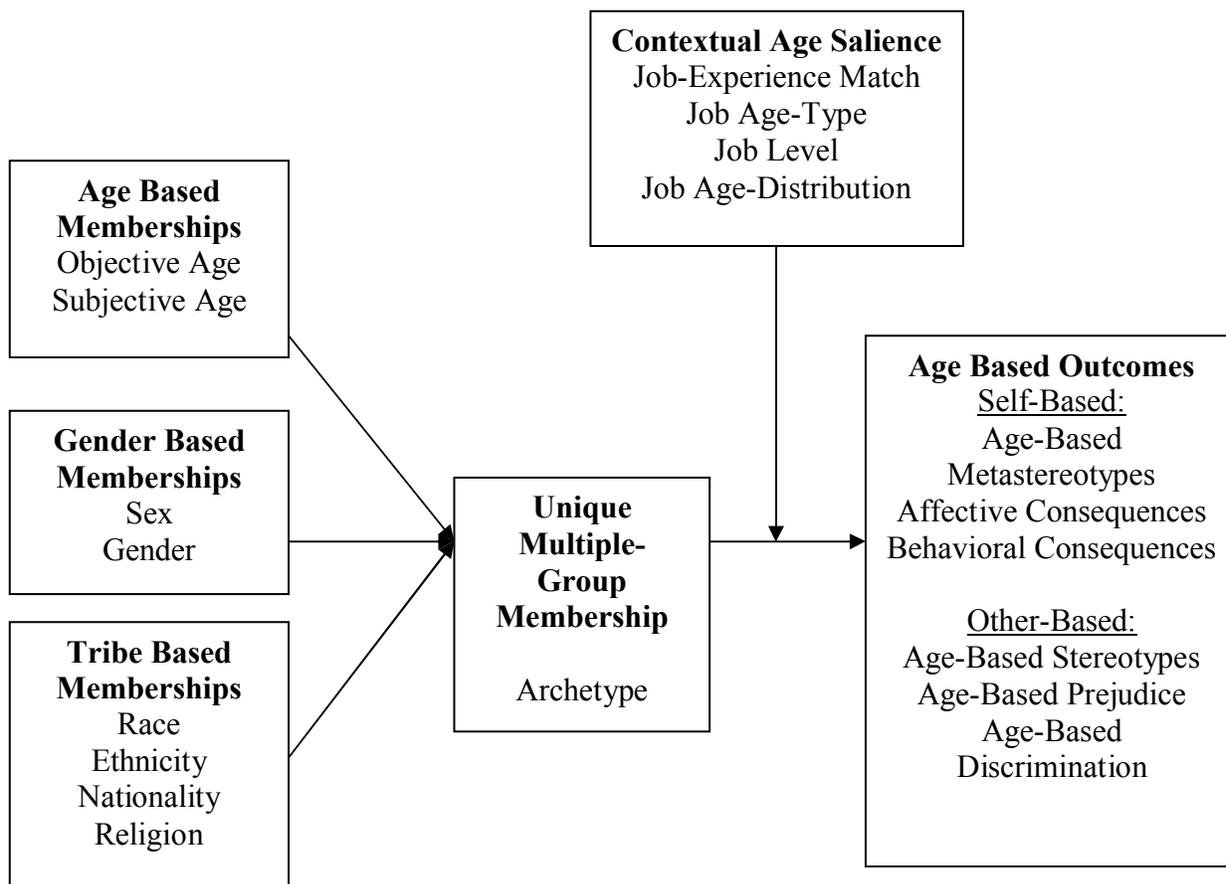


Figure 1  
Intersectional Saliency of Ageism (ISA): A Framework