

Abstract

Age and leadership are undoubtedly among the most extensively studied concepts in industrial, organizational, and personnel psychology. However, a review of the current state of research reveals that there is only a limited intersection between these two concepts in scholarly investigations. For instance, while the impact of gender stereotypes in leadership roles—particularly in selection and evaluation—has been rigorously examined and is continually evolving, the existence and influence of age-related norms in leadership roles are often overlooked and remain in the early stages of investigation.

This gap presents a growing challenge. Contemporary phenomena observed over the past two decades, particularly the dynamics between younger managers and older employees (the ‘young-leader-older-follower’ constellation), can only be meaningfully discussed and assessed within a scientifically based framework. This limitation arises not only from the lack of theoretical integration of existing and emerging approaches but also from the absence of reliable and valid measurement tools. Thus, the question arises: Is age and age diversity truly as significant to leadership research as gender?

The role of age in the workplace has been a topic of political discourse in the Western world for over 60 years (e.g., Lahey, 2010). In the realm of socio-psychological research, age serves as a variable linked to both physiological phenomena and psychological (e.g., motivation and cognition) as well as sociological concepts (e.g., societal roles). Research on age bias and discrimination in professional settings consistently demonstrates that the perception of an individual's age significantly influences evaluations related to performance appraisals (i.e., job-relevant characteristics and behaviors). Legally, the significance of age has been firmly embedded in the American legal framework since the 1960s with the enactment of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) of 1967. In contrast, the debate in Germany has resurfaced primarily since the 2000s, driven by discussions surrounding pension and labor market policies in the context of demographic change and legal initiatives at the EU level to fight age discrimination, including Germany's General Equal Treatment Act (Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz, AGG) (Federal Ministry of Justice, 2006) resulting in new support programs. While age is treated as a continuous variable influenced by various factors, including context and frame of reference, public discourse has predominantly highlighted the categorical distinction between “young” and “old”. The primary focus has been on the implications for older workers, whereas the prejudices and consequences faced by younger managers have received sporadic examination. Moreover, a systematic investigation into the interplay of age

and the leadership role within the frameworks of diversity and leadership research has been lacking.

This dissertation builds on existing research concerning norm-violating leadership constellations and seeks to achieve the following three objectives. First, addressing the scarcity of measurement tools for evaluating stereotypes in the “young-leads-old” context, this dissertation contributes to the field by developing and testing new scale-based measurement instruments to assess biases and stereotypes regarding younger leaders and older followers/subordinates.³ Second, this dissertation expands existing theoretical frameworks of leader categorization theory and implicit leadership theories (Lord et al., 2020) by examining implicit (or automatic) stereotypes about age and leadership through an innovative study design. And third, the newly developed scales for measuring biases against younger leaders and older employees were also validated and tested for their predictive power on relational and follower outcomes in real life teams. More specifically, I investigated the extent to which such biases might negatively affect relationship quality (leader-member exchange, LMX), employee burnout, and turnover intentions.

Study 1 introduces three concepts related to attitudes and stereotypes within the “young(er) leads old(er)” dynamic: negative attitudes toward younger leaders (NAYL) from the follower's perspective, negative attitudes toward older followers (NAOF) from the leader's perspective, and general leadership age stereotypes (LAS), which assesses the attributes associated with older and younger leaders. Additionally, we explore the attributes and behaviors linked to both older and younger leaders using established stereotypes (LAS). In four sub-studies ($N_{\text{total}} = 1,075$), we develop the scales to measure these constructs, investigate their psychometric properties, and establish discriminant and convergent validity by linking them to existing measures. The results indicate that all scales demonstrate adequate levels of reliability and discriminant validity, supporting their use in future research.

Study 2 further investigates stereotypical leadership characteristics by examining the strength of associations between the concepts of age and leadership roles using a purpose-developed implicit measure (Implicit Association Test; IAT). The study tests the hypothesis that leaders, relative to followers, are more strongly associated with higher age. To this end, an

³ In this dissertation, the term *follower* refers to employees who report (directly or indirectly) to a supervisor (i.e., the focal leader) within a formal organizational hierarchy. This usage aligns with the leader–follower terminology common in leadership research; in cited studies, comparable roles may be labeled *subordinates*, *direct reports*, or *employees*.

IAT was developed and administered to 49 participants. In addition, participants completed a questionnaire that included multiple scales assessing explicit expectations regarding the age of leaders and followers, as well as the Internal and External Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice Scale (IMS/EMS; Plant & Devine, 1998). The computed IAT score was significant and showed that participants indeed associated leadership roles more strongly with older than with younger individuals. Regarding the association between explicit and implicit measures, the data supported a moderating effect of participants' internal motivation to avoid bias (IMS). Specifically, a positive association between IAT scores and explicit stereotypes was observed when internal motivation was low, but not when motivation was high.

Study 3 extends the previous investigations by empirically examining the relevance of the scales developed in Study 1 (NAYL, NAOF) in an organizational context. The aim of Study 3 is to examine the relationships between leader and follower age, negative age-related attitudes, the quality of leader–member exchange (LMX), health-related and motivational outcomes. To this end, we used data from a prospective multilevel study in elderly care ($N = 424$ employees, 95 teams). The results indicate that younger leaders tend to hold more negative attitudes toward older followers (NAOF). These negative attitudes indirectly affect employees' exhaustion and turnover intentions via lower perceived LMX quality. Taken together, the findings underscore the central role of age-related attitudes and stereotypes for the quality of leadership relationships in the 'young-leader-older-follower' constellation. Overall, Study 3 highlights the practical relevance of the developed scales for research on leadership and points to the need to explicitly address age stereotypes in leadership development and human resource management.

Taken together, the three studies in this dissertation demonstrate that age is an important, yet still underestimated, factor in leadership research. The developed scales (NAYL, NAOF, LAS) provide, for the first time, valid instruments for assessing age-related attitudes and stereotypes in younger-leader–older-follower constellations, and the empirical findings show that such attitudes can have tangible effects on relationship quality, experiences of exhaustion, and employees' turnover intentions. In doing so, the studies contribute to the theoretical integration of age and leadership research and open up new avenues for the examination of age-diverse leadership constellations. From a practical standpoint, the results offer important starting points for personnel selection, leadership development, and organizational design to address the challenges of demographic change in an evidence-based manner.