Understanding Older Canadian Workers' Perspectives on Aging in the Context of Communication and Knowledge Transfer

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ABSTRACT

Background The Canadian population is aging, as is the Canadian workforce, resulting in an increase in different generations working with one another. The current study aims at understanding, from the older worker's point of view, generational perceptions in the workplace, and further how such perceptions are linked with communication patterns as well as knowledge transfer.

Analysis This study collected 167 responses from a survey of older workers. The questionnaire addressed variables under study such as intergenerational perceptions, and workplace communication and collaboration patterns.

Conclusion and implications Results suggest that older workers perceived that their younger peers view them positively. Furthermore, older workers rely on accommodative communication patterns and favor knowledge transfer when interacting with younger colleagues.

Keywords Communication patterns; Knowledge transfer; Ageism; Workplace communication; Communication accommodation theory

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte La main-d'œuvre canadiennes c'est vieillissantes et différentes générations de travaillent se côtoient désormais les unes les autres. La présente étude vise à comprendre, du point du vue du travailleur vieillissant, comment les générations se perçoivent l'une l'autre; en outre, comment ces perceptions sont en lien avec la communication et le transfert des connaissances au travail.

Analyse Un sondage par questionnaire a été effectué auprès de 167 travailleurs canadiens. Le questionnaire incluait des énoncés en lien avec les variables à l'étude, soit les perceptions intergénérationnelles, la communication et le transfert des connaissances au travail.

Conclusions et implications Les résultats suggèrent que les travailleurs vieillissants sont d'avis que leurs plus jeunes collègues les perçoivent de manière positive. En outre, ces

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résultats montrent que les travailleurs vieillissants favorisent un mode de communication accommodant envers leurs jeunes collègues et valorisent le transfert de leurs connaissances.

Mots clés: *modes de communication, transfert des connaissances, âgisme, communication au travail, théorie de l'accommodation communicative*

Introduction

There is a substantial increase in the aging population and workforce in almost every nation, including Canada (Bélanger, Carrière, & Sabourin, 2016; Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Schuetze, 2015; United Nations, 2013). In fact, Bélanger et al., (2016) predict that within the next 40 years, Canada's aging population and workforce may be growing the fastest in the recorded history of economically developed countries. The greying of the workforce not only translates into increased participation of older workers (Statistics Canada, 2016) but also into major organizational changes (Deller, Pundt, Shultz, & Wöhrmann, 2015), such as multiple generations of workers now cohabiting.

According to Kupperschmidt (2000), a generation is defined as "an identifiable group that shares birth years, age location, and significant life events at critical development stages" (p. 66). Moreover, Lester, Schultz, Standifer, & Windsor (2012) argue that generational cohorts are social constructs, and as such, are dualistically influenced by the social and historical contexts that differentially influence their lives. Four generations are currently working in tandem: *the Builders, the Baby Boomers, Generation X, and the Millennials* (De Kerpel, Dries, & Pepermans, 2008; Espinoza, Rusch, & Ukleja, 2010; Lester et al., 2012). Although there are some inconsistencies in the literature defining these four generations, Zabel, Baltes, Early, Shepard, and Biermeier-Hanson (2016) argue that the values and personalities cultivated by each cohort are unique and based on lived experiences. Each cohort is briefly defined in the following paragraph.[1]

The Builders, also referred to as *the Silent Generation*, were born between 1925 and 1945. This generation comprises of the oldest workers in the current workforce, known for their loyalty and obedience. *The Baby Boomers* are often applauded for their creativity and dedication to their work; they were born between 1946 and 1964. *Generation X* encompasses those workers born between 1965 and 1980. This group is known for their individualism and quick-learning tactics. Finally, *the Millennials*, born between 1981 and 2001, are the youngest generation in the current workplace, known for their technologically inclined tendencies and independent working strategies (De Kerpel et al., 2008).

Researchers argue that managing the intergenerational workplace can be a challenge, taking into account the different work values stemming from each generations' lived experience, which may, in turn, influence communication patterns (Le Beau, 2010; Lester et al., 2012). Confirming this finding, Giles and McCann (2006) find that workplace intergenerational communication is often influenced by age (among other social criteria). In the same vein, Haserot (2001) suggests that differences in workplace communication can be ascribed to age as generational backgrounds build on distinctive ideas of how work should be delegated and accounted for, which can influence communication practices. In this regard, Boehm and Kunze (2016) argue that growing

diversity of age groups in the workplace can indeed be correlated with "communication and coordination problems" (p. 34). Consequently, it is important to understand how multiple generations work together and communicate with one-another within the workforce. Moreover, it is essential to explore how perceptions around age and generations (including generational group belonging) may influence communication dynamics at work. The goal of this study is precisely to explore generational perceptions from the perspective of older workers and determine how these, in turn, influence workplace communication dynamics as well as knowledge transfer; the latter as argued by Burmeister and Deller (2016), has been scarcely examined to date. According to Espinoza et al. (2010), understanding intergenerational communication in an increasingly intergenerational workforce is important, in order to implement productive communication practices at work and to ensure the future vitality of the workforce.

Conceptual framework

In the following section, postulates of the two theories on which the current study rely are described: social identity theory and communication accommodation theory. Furthermore, key concepts such as knowledge transfer and ageist stereotypes are presented.

Social Identity Theory

According to Finkelstein (2015), there is a strong correlation between beliefs, emotions, and behaviours, as is there a great deal of room for future studies to examine this correlation, which largely stems from an exploration of human perception. To understand how perceptions may be strong drivers of behaviour, and to precisely understand how different generations of workers perceive themselves and other generations, as well as how these perceptions can influence communication, we now turn to social identity theory (SIT). This theory postulates that individuals develop their self-concept partly based on their group membership; not only the degree to which they identify with their group(s), but also the sense of pride stemming from such membership (Harwood & Williams, 2004; Tajfel, 1974).

Self-categorization and self-comparison are two important processes within SIT, and these processes lead one to identify with a particular social group or in-group, where other persons who are perceived as different from that group are considered out-group members (Burke & Stets, 2000). Moreover, one of the important postulates of SIT is that generally, people tend to favour their own group over other groups (Burke & Stets, 2000; Nussbaum & Williams, 2001).

In their work, Tajfel and Turner (1986) elaborate upon the concept of in-group preference. They find that in-group favouring is a type of defense mechanism for in-group members to establish and maintain a positive self-esteem, which is a universal human need. Nakashima, Isobe, and Ura (2012) further this point and find that individuals work to boost their self-esteem by buffering threats against groups that they value and identify with. They do this by esteeming higher value upon the specific factors that they consider formulate their identity and the identity of their collectives within their in-group, and by simultaneously devaluing the identification factors that they perceive differ from those that construct their social identity (Nakashima et al.,

2012). However, it is important to remember that groups are not equal in terms of social and historical position. Some have less power and fewer resources than others, who moreover benefit from high social status and prestige. Interestingly, higher-status groups are more likely to exhibit in-group bias than members of lower-status groups (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992), while low-status groups often tend to hold a positive bias toward high status groups. The combination of in-group bias and social/historical inequality between groups forms the basis of stereotypes. Stereotypes are overgeneralized beliefs about the personal attributes of groups of people, as either positive or negative sentiments, more often than not discriminatory in nature (Palmore, 1990).

AGEIST STEREOTYPES

In discussion of stereotypes as they specifically relate to older workers, Cuddy, Fiske, Glick and Xu (2002) have found that older adults are often perceived as belonging to a low-status group and are stereotypically perceived as warm but not very competent. Other researchers have also documented the negative stereotypes surrounding aging and older adults, depicting them as dependent, helpless, and resistant to change (Bourbonnais & Ducharme, 2010; Palmore, 2001). The negative stereotypes surrounding aging and the elderly are particularly prevalent within Western cultures, which are youth-oriented and highly value autonomy and productivity (Bourbonnais & Ducharme, 2010; North & Fiske, 2012). As the workplace is a microcosm of society, unsurprisingly, it mirrors such stereotypes.

    In continuity with the results of previous studies, a meta-analysis by Campion and Posthuma (2009) suggests that older workers are perceived as having declining cognitive skills, as are they perceived as being reliant on the younger generation. Further, older workers are perceived as being unwilling to follow training and inflexible as well as unable to adapt well to technology (Chan, Chiu, Redman, & Snape, 2001). As earlier studies have shown, ageist stereotypes trigger dissatisfaction and disengagement on the part of the older worker (Iweins, Desmette, Yzerbyt, & Stinglhamber, 2013; Lagacé, Tougas, Laplante, Neveu, 2008; 2010), plausibly influencing communication patterns. However, as underlined by Bal, Kooij, and Rousseau (2015), the impact of meta-stereotypes, which are stereotypes that in-group members perceive out-group members hold against them, have seldom been studied in the context of the workplace. This is particularly vexing, as Finkelstein (2015) argues that people are often more concerned with how people view them than their own perception of others. For example, do older workers think that younger workers perceive them as being inflexible and not capable of adapting to technology? How does this impact communication patterns between younger and older generations of workers?

Communication Accommodation Theory

When considering communication patterns, Gallois, Giles, Palomares, and Soliz (2016) argue that perceptions are of central concern. In line with this, communication accommodation theory (CAT) suggest that human communicative behaviours shift and are modified ("accommodated"/"not accommodated") according to how individuals perceive themselves and their groups, as well as how they perceive other individuals' social identity, encompassing factors such as age, culture, and gender (Giles & Maass,

2016; Nussbaum & Williams, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to CAT, two main mechanisms underlie communication: accommodative and non-accommodative patterns of communication (Giles, 2008). When *the other* is perceived as belonging to a differing social group than one's own group, a non-accommodative pattern of communication is put in place, which emphasizes dissimilarity and divergence. Conversely, when the interlocutor is perceived as a member of one's own social group, communication is adjusted (accommodated) toward stronger convergence, emphasizing the similarity in terms of social identity (Dragojevic, Gasiorek, & Giles, 2016). In short, CAT is "concerned with how we can reduce and magnify communicative differences between people in interaction" (Giles, 2008, p. 162-163). In the context of the workplace for example, when older workers perceive that younger colleagues hold ageist stereotypes against them, they could magnify communicative differences with their younger peers and emphasize divergence. Plausibly, such divergence could also negatively impact knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer in the workplace.

Knowledge transfer

Burmeister and Deller (2016) conceptualize knowledge transfer in the workplace as a complex process of sharing information amongst and between colleagues. The process encompasses four elements: 1) the type of knowledge being shared, 2) the characteristics and personality of the individual sharing the knowledge, 3) the relationship between the knowledge sharer and knowledge receiver; and 4) other contextual factors, such as organizational support, managerial support, and leadership style. Knowledge transfer, as argued by many researchers, is essential to the survival and prosperity of organizations (Ayyavoo, Carran, Liebowitz, Nguyn, & Simien, 2007; Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Tempest, 2003), in that there is powerful value in the sharing of organizational knowledge (Argote, 2013; Beazley, Boenisch, & Harden, 2002). In the context of an increasingly intergenerational and aging workplace where the transfer of knowledge most commonly takes place from more experienced to less experienced workers (Fleig-Palmer & Schoorman, 2011), it is essential to better understand factors that facilitate or counter such transfer. This study argues that generational group meta-stereotypes and communication patterns are among these factors. Ayyavoo et al. (2007) support this argument and posit that cross-generational biases in addition to perceived intergenerational differences influence the practice of knowledge transfer in the workplace.

In summary, in a workplace where several generations now work alongside each another, it is important to understand how workers perceive one another. Precisely understanding the relationship between older workers and other employees should, according to Burmeister and Deller (2016), be a priority. The perspective of older workers is particularly important due to the increased participation of such workers and the pervasiveness of ageist stereotypes and meta-stereotypes, which can impede the process of communication and knowledge transfer in the workplace. As such, the current study attempts to answer the following research questions: *How do older workers perceive that younger colleagues view them? In turn, to what extent are such perceptions linked with communication patterns and knowledge transfer processes in the workplace?*

Method

Participants

Workers aged 50 years old and above from six Canadian organizations were approached to take part in this study.[2] One organization comprised of consultants doing work for the federal government, two contributed to work for the provincial government, and one was self-governed as a municipal office. The final two organizations were privately owned and operated. A cover letter informed the participants of the objectives of the study and guaranteed the confidentiality of responses. Questionnaires were returned anonymously via a secure questionnaire forum (Survey Monkey). All data was collected between the months of October 2012 and January 2013. A total of 300 participants were invited to take part in the study and 167 questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of 55.6 percent. Twenty-nine questionnaires were discarded due to more than 5 percent missing data; consequently, the final sample comprised of 138 participants.[3] Socio-demographic statistics were collected to delineate participants' gender, chronological age, and cultural self-identification. These statistics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographic statistics

	Percent (%)	Frequency (# of participants)	Missing data (frequency)
Gender: Male	63.5	87	1
Gender: Female	36.5	50	
Age: 50–60 years	89.8	123	1
Age: 61+ years	10.2	14	
Culture: North American	80.5	99	15
Culture: Other	19.5	24	

Questionnaire

Participants were invited to fill out a questionnaire, structured in four sections (the first section being socio-demographic statistics). English and French versions of the questionnaire were distributed to allow respondents to answer in the language of their choice. Sections 2 to 4 relied on a seven point Likert-type continuum where participants were asked to respond to statements where 1 signified "completely agree," 7 signified "completly disagree," and 4 signified "neither agree/disagree." In the following, each section is detailed.

HOW OLDER WORKERS PERCEIVE THAT YOUNGER WORKERS VIEW THEM (THINK ABOUT YOU)

A series of twenty-two statements were created in reference to ageist stereotypes targeting older workers, as found in literature by Campion and Posthuma (2009), Nussbaum and Williams (2001), Buyens, De Vos, Dewilde, and van Dijk (2009), Chan et al. (2001), and Sargeant (2010). The scale was comprised of ten positive stereo-

types and twelve negative stereotypes. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements starting with the following: *"I think younger adults in the workforce aged 18–24 years think that as an older worker, I am*: skilled, miserable, old-fashioned, etc." Internal reliability of the scale was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .88). A computed score was created for all statements, and a high score indicated that older workers thought they were positively perceived by younger workers.

OLDER WORKERS' COMMUNICATION PATTERNS WITH YOUNGER WORKERS (ACCOMMODATION/NON-ACCOMMODATION)

This section included twenty-one statements, nine of which were positive (accommodative communication) and the remaining twelve, negative (non-accommodative communication). Statements in this section were based upon the work of Giles and McCann (2006) that measured levels of accommodation and non-accommodation of older workers in their communication with younger workers. A computed score was created, and a high score reflected a tendency on the part of older workers to accommodate rather than not accommodate. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed to statements starting with the following: "*When communicating with younger adults in the workforce aged 18–24 years, I*: am supportive, am complimentary, avoid certain topics, etc." Internal reliability of the scale was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .80).

OLDER WORKERS' WILLINGNESS AND USE OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER (KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER)

This section was comprised of eight statements, inspired by the work of Song and Teng (2011). The scale included six positive stereotypes and two negative stereotypes. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements starting with the following, *"In respect to younger adults in the workforce aged 18–24 years"*: I voluntarily transfer knowledge without being asked; I transfer knowledge because I have to (it is my job), etc." A computed score was created, and a high score indicated willingness, on the part of the older worker, to transfer knowledge. Internal reliability of the scale was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .71).

Data analysis and results

Following a preliminary step of data cleaning, descriptive analyses were conducted with respect to each variable under study, including measures of central tendencies as well as correlations. Socio-demographic data (age, gender, and culture) were also analyzed to determine their potential influence on generational perceptions, communication patterns, and knowledge transfer.

Older workers' computed score is above the median point of the scale with respect to how they think younger workers perceive them (mean = 5.03), which suggests low levels of aged-based meta-stereotypes. Older workers' score is also above the median point of the scale with respect to their use of accommodation when communicating with younger workers (mean = 5.76). On the other hand, their score is slightly below the median point of the scale with respect to their use of non-accommodative communication patterns with younger workers (mean = 3.27), which strengthens the idea

that older workers perceive themselves to be accommodative when communicating with their younger colleagues. Finally, older workers' score is substantially above the median point of the scale with respect to their willing practice of knowledge transfer to their younger colleagues (mean = 5.31). Table 2 summarizes these results.

Table 2: All respondents' mean and standard deviation (SD) scores

Variables	All respondents' mean	All respondents' SD
Think about you	5.03	.779
Accommodation	5.76	.704
Non-accommodation	3.27	1.20
Knowledge transfer	5.31	.766

Correlation tests were run to determine the extent to which older workers' perception of how they think younger peers view them is linked to patterns of communication and knowledge transfer. Results (summarized in Table 3) show that the more older workers perceive that younger workers hold a positive view of themselves, the more they are inclined to be accommodative in their communication with these younger workers (r =.443) and conversely, the more they avoid non-accommodative communication (r = -.386); finally the more older workers think that younger workers hold a positive view of themselves, the more they are willing to transfer their knowledge (r = .413).

Not surprisingly, results also reveal that a non-accommodative type of communication is negatively linked with knowledge transfer (r = -.263) and inversely, a willingness to accommodate is positively correlated with the process of knowledge transfer on the part of older workers (r = .341).

**Table 3: Correlation matrix of observed variables –
significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)**

Variables	Think about young	Think about you	Accommodation	Non-accommodation	Knowledge transfer
Think about you	–	–	.443	-.386	.413
Accommodation	–	–	–	-.338	.341
Non-accommodation	–	–	–	–	-.263
Knowledge transfer	–	–	–	–	–

The impact of socio-demographic variables such as gender, chronological age, and cultural self-identification on older workers' age-based meta-stereotypes, communication patterns, and knowledge transfer were analyzed through a series of *t*-tests. *T*-test results reveal that older female workers and older males significantly

differ as to their communication patterns with younger peers; specifically, women tend to rely more than older men on communication patterns that focus on accommodation:

$$(\bar{x}_{\text{male}} = 5.65 \mid; \bar{x}_{\text{female}} = 5.95; t = \text{-}2.32; p < .05)$$

Regarding cultural self-identification, t-test results suggest that older workers who identify with North American culture and older workers who identify with cultures other than North American are also significantly different in terms of accommodation patterns. Specifically, older workers who identify with cultures other than North American tend to rely more than older workers who identify with North American culture on non-accommodative communication:

$$(\bar{x}_{\text{North American}} = 3.13 \mid; \bar{x}_{\text{other cultures}} = 3.72; t = \text{-}2.02; p < .05)$$

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to explore older workers' perceptions of how younger colleagues view them and, in turn, to determine whether such perceptions influenced communication patterns and knowledge transfer patterns.

Older workers perceive that younger workers view them more positively than negatively. Further, older workers perceive that they are accommodative in their communication with younger workers, and they are willing to transfer their knowledge to younger workers. Socio-demographic factors including gender, chronological age, and the culture with which older workers identify also impact communication patterns and knowledge transfer. In the following paragraphs, each of these findings will be discussed.

The fact that older workers think that younger workers view them rather positively falls in continuity with the main postulates of social identity theory. Indeed, such results suggest that older workers rely on in-group bias reflected through positive age-based stereotypes. In light of the pervasiveness of ageist stereotypes in the workplace, this is a particularly interesting result: it can be hypothesized that the threat of being the target of ageist stereotypes may have influenced older workers to rely on positive meta-stereotypes, when thinking about how younger workers view them, i.e., rather positively. Such positive meta-stereotypes could actually act as buffers against the threat of ageism. The above also falls in line with Finkelstein's (2015) argument that meta-stereotypes affect how older workers view themselves as a social group.

Moreover, older workers perceive themselves as being accommodative in the way they communicate with younger peers, as do they also perceive themselves as willing to transfer their knowledge to their younger peers. Here again, it is plausible to suggest that in response to ageist sentiments that circulate so pervasively on a larger societal scale, older workers, relying on a defense mechanism, feel the need to make sure that their younger colleagues positively perceive them. In order to ensure such positive perception, older workers may self-describe as more willing to be accommodative and to transfer knowledge to their younger colleagues, as it is plausible that these actions may make younger workers like them more, in response to their accommodative na-

ture. This perceived positivity might make older workers feel valued by their younger colleagues and thus more respected in the workplace environment. Keeping this positive perception of their social group intact could ensure that older workers, as a social group, are able to maintain a positive social identity—in a social group that is threatened by ageism.

The hypothesis that older workers are aware of the ageist stereotypes that surround them and may rely on buffers to counter these stereotypes could also explain why older workers are quite willing to transfer their knowledge to their younger colleagues. Feeling the need to defend the reputation of their "threatened" social group as older workers, they rely on accommodative communication patterns and transfer their knowledge to their younger peers. If older workers feel a positive sense of self, they may believe that as workers, they have an abundance of knowledge. As some of the more positive stereotypes commonly associated with older workers include that they are reliable, effective on the job (Buyens et al., 2009), and committed to their employment (Campion & Posthuma, 2009), older workers may feel responsible to pass on their knowledge to their younger peers. They may perceive that their knowledge can be beneficial to their younger colleagues, and their reliability and commitment to their job may push them to willingly transfer to their younger colleagues this knowledge that they have built and maintained over many years.

Socio-demographic factors, such as age, gender, and self-identified culture, also played a role in relation to variables under study. Specifically, the finding that women are more accommodative in their communication patterns may coincide with earlier work by Henzl and Turner (1987), which suggests that often, women are more accommodative than men, as reflected in their higher willing engagement in utilizing creativity to solve problems, their tendencies to vocalize their concerns more willingly than men, and their keen interest in playing supportive roles in society. On a similar spectrum, Bredow, Huston, and Schoenfeld (2012), who examined expressions of love in marriages, found that women exert less antagonistic behaviours than do men, which consequently leads to their use of more accommodative communication.

This study also found differences in communication patterns according to self-identified culture. Minor differences in communication patterns as reflective of the variable culture could be understood, as Matsumoto (2005) argues that an individual's culture indeed has the potential to guide behaviours. Lahey, Trant, Verderber, and Verderber (2005) also conclude that culture can guide perceptions and by extension can influence such components as values, attitudes, and beliefs. Other important defining features of culture, including a culture's concept of power, level of individualism or collectivism, and level of uncertainty avoidance, according to Hickson, Moore, and Stacks (2010), also stand as influential markers of cultural behaviour and communication.

Conclusion

Although the current study relied on a rather small and non-random sample, it has allowed for a better understanding of older workers' perceptions on intergenerational dynamics in the workplace, including communication patterns and knowledge transfer. The main findings reveal that older workers rely on positive meta-stereotypes in regards to younger workers, perceiving that the latter view them rather positively.

Moreover, older workers rely on accommodative communication patterns with younger workers and are willing to transfer their knowledge to their younger peers. Such findings are rather intriguing, taking into account the prevalence of ageism in the workplace. They suggest that older workers may actually counteract ageism through accommodative communication and knowledge transfer processes; by doing so, older workers can protect the reputation of their threatened social group, if not restore its collective self-esteem. From a practical perspective, results suggest that older workers' contribution to the workplace should be highly valued by managers and supervisors, more than is currently the case.

Notes

1. The authors acknowledge that age ranges used to define generation may vary depending on the study.

2. Older workers were defined as 50 years old and above in this study, in continuity with previous studies; Henkens, Schippers, and Van Dalen (2010) explain that most government programs catered to older workers, and most human resource policies within organizations use the age of 50 years old and above to define older workers. Further, other studies, including those by Cook, Hersch, Leaf, and Schlossberg (2015), Chan et al. (2001), Henkens (2010), and Morisette, Schellenberg and Silver (2004), used the age of 50 as the cutoff criteria to describe older workers.

3. Of the 138 older workers included in the sample, only one participant did not provide information about gender or age. Fifteen participants did not provide information about their cultural background.

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