

FORUM ARTICLE

# The enduring myth of endemic age discrimination in the Australian labour market

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## Abstract

It has often been stated by older people's advocates that discrimination affecting older people is commonplace and ongoing in the Australian labour market. In this article, we contrast such rhetoric with a review of evidence from recent large-scale surveys which demonstrates that low and declining numbers of Australians experience age discrimination, while highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon. We identify the emergence of a fake 'age' advocacy that is acting to the detriment of an informed public discourse concerning issues of older workers' employment. To counter this we propose five underlying principles for advocacy on ageing and work: countering myths concerning the extent and nature of age barriers in the labour market; avoiding and challenging the use of age stereotypes in making the business case for older workers' employment; recognition that age interacts in complex ways with a range of other factors in determining people's experiences of the labour market; challenging public understanding that is grounded in the notion that generational conflict is inevitable; and discarding traditional notions of the lifecourse in order to overcome disjunctions and contradictions that hamper efforts to encourage and support longer working lives.

**Keywords:** Older workers; age discrimination; age stereotypes; normative lifecourse; public discourse

## Recent advocacy concerning age discrimination and older people in the Australian labour market

The ageing of the Australian population has led to much public policy and debate focused on the need to prolong working lives in order reduce welfare costs and to respond to projected shortfalls in labour as large numbers of older workers retire (Taylor *et al.*, 2016). While issues of older people's employment have not solely been considered through an age discrimination lens, in Australia the potential importance of this issue has garnered much attention in recent years. A range of official and semi-official reports have concluded that age discrimination is commonplace, and the phenomenon has come to be primarily associated with older ages, although Australia's Age Discrimination Act identifies discrimination on the basis of age as potentially affecting people at all ages (Australian Government, 2014).

Thus, according to the Advisory Panel on the Economic Potential of Senior Australians (2011: 1), 'National strategies to realise the potential of an ageing population must overcome formidable and often longstanding barriers', including 'the persistence of outdated stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards older people'. More recently, the Access All Ages – Older Workers and Commonwealth Laws inquiry and associated report, that considered legal barriers to older persons participating in the workforce (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2013: 5), stated that the inquiry 'arose out of concerns about the implications of an ageing population and the recognition that expanding the workforce participation of older Australians may go some way to meeting such concerns'. In a similar vein, the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) noted in the foreword to its *Willing to Work. National Inquiry into Employment Discrimination Against Older Australians and Australians with Disability* report that, while people 'of all ages experience discrimination, and discrimination in employment is not exclusively experienced by older people ... the Inquiry's Terms of Reference required us to focus on employment discrimination experienced by older Australians' (AHRC, 2016: 6). The inquiry report concluded that 'age discrimination is ongoing and a common occurrence in the Australian workforce' (AHRC, 2016: 60). Meanwhile, the national Every Age Counts Campaign, launched in 2018, describes itself as

an advocacy campaign aimed at tackling ageism. It's an ambitious campaign spearheading a social movement with a challenging goal: to shift social norms (those unwritten rules of common thinking and behaviour) and positively influence the way Australia thinks about ageing and older people. (EveryAGE Counts, [nd](#))

Against this backdrop, the starting point for this article is a speech given by Emma Dawson, Executive Director of Australian social policy think tank Per Capita at an event organised by Australian older people's lobby organisation Council on the Ageing (COTA) at the National Press Club in Canberra (Dawson, 2019). Titled 'The Economic Impacts of Ageism', the speech is reflective of a long-standing advocacy stance on older workers in Australia that characterises them as vulnerable, on the one hand, and productive, on the other, both of which have been described as reductive fictions, drawing selectively and inaccurately from the evidence (Taylor and Earl, 2016a). Thus, Dawson (2019) refers to ageism as being an 'entrenched and widespread prejudice' in Australia, stating that the 'root of the problem can be found in the dominant narrative in our political and social discourse that frames ageing as almost entirely a negative experience'. She explains that 'many older people want to keep working, but are shut out of the labour market due to ageism in the workforce'. Yet, elsewhere in her speech she claims that

repeated studies, both here [in Australia] and overseas, have shown that older workers are more productive (they are less likely to spend time at work on Facebook!), more reliable, less likely to leave their jobs every two to five years, and bring experience and complex problem solving abilities to the workforce that have taken years to develop. (Dawson, 2019)

In evaluating Dawson's comments, it is instructive to consider critiques of research and advocacy concerning issues of age and work. Firstly, Duncan argues that

the very logic of equality would seem to preclude especial focus on older workers ... age prejudice differs from other forms of discrimination in that there is no single, clearly defined, oppressed group. Everyone is of an age and can be subject to age discrimination. (Duncan, 2003: 108)

Standard definitions do not consider ageism to only be experienced by older people, meaning that someone of any age could claim unfair treatment. Thus, ageism is defined as 'the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination directed towards others or oneself based on age' (World Health Organization, 2021: xix). From the standpoint of this broadened definition, the age advocacy described above might be considered overtly ageist. Secondly, while advocates often identify stereotypes of older workers as a precursor to discrimination, it has been noted that employers report both negative and positive attitudes towards older workers and it is unclear why one would have greater influence on employer behaviour than the other (Duncan, 2003). Thus, Australian research has found that employers hold both 'positive' and 'negative' views of older workers. Hiring decision makers in private companies viewed older workers as having a better work ethic, as appreciating their jobs more, as taking fewer sick days, and as being more presentable, punctual, responsible and wiser than younger workers. By contrast, it was considered that older workers had difficulties with new technology and that they were set in their ways (Gringart *et al.*, 2005).

Furthermore, disregarding experiences of age discrimination or arguing that age discrimination affecting older people is widespread may be viewed as ageist if this is contradicted by the evidence. For those experiencing ageism or age discrimination there may be important consequences. For instance, a recent global systematic review of the impacts of ageism on health, which included over 400 studies, found that, across a range of health domains, it was associated with worse outcomes (World Health Organization, 2021).

The next section of this article considers briefly arguments for the productivity of older workers. Although this position on older workers has been critiqued elsewhere (Taylor and Earl, 2016a), it is potentially useful to revisit these arguments in considering the parameters of the present advocacy framework for age discrimination. Thus, the main purpose of the article is to contrast present rhetoric concerning the extent and nature of age discrimination with Australian evidence which both indicates that the reported incidence is low overall, while highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon. The article concludes that the better linking of evidence to an advocacy that is cognisant of these complexities may result in a more informed public discourse and better outcomes for both older and younger people.

### Are older workers more productive?

The so-called business case for older workers (Duncan, 2003; Taylor and Earl, 2016b), that is often promoted by those advocating for the rights of older workers, makes reference to their supposed greater loyalty, reliability and experience

compared to younger people (e.g. Ryan, 2016). Echoing Dawson's comments noted above, online international job recruiter SEEK describes the case for employing older workers on its Australian website as follows:

Unlike their younger and sometimes fickle counterparts, older employees are known for their strong work ethic, loyalty and increased tenure. They can often be the same age as your clients, which means their ability to relate to them and deliver relevant customer service is superior. They also bring to the table a different perspective, experience and strong communication skills, meaning their contribution is valuable and can complement younger members of the team nicely. But it's their loyalty and desire to stay put that can also be a big attraction. (SEEK, 2019)

Such stances on older worker employment have drawn criticism for their apparent disjunctions and contradictions, that is, deploying ageist stereotypes in making such a case and in disregarding the experiences of 'younger' people (Taylor and Earl, 2016a). As argued by Riach (2009: 322), grounding the business case for age diversity in terms of the 'benefits' that older workers offer 'may limit the impact of the diversity message by legitimizing the use of stereotypes, be it positive or negative'.

Also, the arguments deployed by SEEK and others in making the case for older workers lack a solid foundation in evidence. Thus, the evidence points to a complex relationship between age and aspects of job performance (Ng and Feldman, 2008). Added to this, there is often greater variation, in job performance terms, between people of the same age and those of different ages (Warr, 1993). Also, research has found that age demonstrates little relationship with a person's commitment to work (Hanlon, 1986). Further, and perhaps critically from the standpoint of considering the conceptual basis and efficacy of advocacy approaches, it is considered that the very arguments for employing older workers put forward in business cases – that they are more committed, loyal and experienced – may in fact risk confirming broader societal perceptions that they are of the past and, thus, less able to meet the demands of modern workplaces (Roberts, 2006). Consequently, even disregarding the ageist overtones of some present 'age' advocacy that may, unwittingly, be contributing to prejudice against both older and younger workers, articulating a convincing case for preferencing older over younger people in employment, or *vice versa*, is likely to be problematical.

### Are Australian older workers vulnerable?

This section explores Australian studies that have examined the phenomenon of age discrimination and perceptions of discrimination by different age groups. The following questions were considered: What is the extent of discrimination experienced by age group among those generally classified as being of working age? Who is more likely to experience discrimination? What is the nature of this discrimination?

The recent evidence demonstrates that notions that age discrimination is commonplace and more associated with older workers are not strongly supported. While a survey commissioned by the AHRC found that approximately one-quarter of older Australians reported experiences of age discrimination (AHRC, 2015), the

AHRC's own statistics indicate that of the 2,307 complaints it dealt with in 2019–2020, only 7 per cent were lodged under Australia's Age Discrimination Act and, of these, under half concerned issues of employment (AHRC, 2020). Further, large-scale Australian studies have found that the incidence of perceived age discrimination against older workers is perhaps rather lower than that reported by the AHRC and declining. Thus, the Multipurpose Household Survey (MPHS) undertaken in 2014–2015 found that perceptions of age discrimination were actually in decline: 17 per cent of people aged over 55 believed that they were considered too old by employers, down from 21 per cent in the equivalent 2012–2013 survey and 30 per cent in 2004–2005 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Such findings align with those of McGann *et al.* (2016), whose analysis of the longitudinal Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey indicated that, among men aged 45–75 between 2001 and 2013, the extent of perceived age discrimination fell from 42 per cent to below 20 per cent by 2013. The situation for older women was rather different. Over the same period such perceptions among older women jobseekers declined by just 8 per cent.

The findings of the AHRC survey were also in concordance with other studies in identifying perceptions of age discrimination as being more likely to be reported by older jobseekers (Adair *et al.*, 2013). Meanwhile, the analysis by Wilkins *et al.* (2011) of data collected from the HILDA survey concerning experiences of discrimination indicates that, overall, although experiences of discrimination in terms of age when job-seeking were more common than in terms of the course of employment, both were very rare (6.0 and 4.4% respectively).

Sitting alongside the possible exaggeration of the extent of discrimination affecting older workers is the notion that age discrimination is a phenomenon only or mostly experienced by older people. Notably, experiences of discrimination appear to vary according to age group. Analysis of the HILDA survey indicated that among those aged 55 and over, 22.3 per cent experienced discrimination in terms of applying for a job, a greater proportion than any other age group, but only 7.9 per cent experienced it in the course of their employment. This contrasted with the experiences of the 15–24 age group, where 5.6 per cent reported discrimination in terms of job search, whereas 10.3 per cent had experienced it during the course of employment, a higher level than any other age group (Wilkins *et al.*, 2011). Other research that has operationalised the concept of 'everyday discrimination', defined as chronic and routine unfair treatment in everyday life, in a survey of a representative sample of working Australians was novel in that respondents were asked about the frequency of their experiences (Taylor *et al.*, 2018). Respondents reporting aspects of everyday discrimination 'frequently' or 'fairly often' were very rare. Additionally, Taylor *et al.* (2018) found that the clearest expression of everyday discrimination was evident in younger men's experiences, whereas there was a broad homogeneity of experiences across age groups of women.

Further, analysis of data collected in the 2015–2016 round of the Attitudes to Ageing in Australia (AAA) study, a component of the national Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) undertaken by O'Loughlin *et al.* (2017), indicated that similar proportions of younger and older workers reported experiences of age discrimination. Approximately a quarter of respondents aged 18–24 (23%)

and 50–64 (25%) reported being turned down for a job due to their age. O’Loughlin *et al.* (2017) also report marked differences in regards to those in the 18–24 age group compared with all other age groups, with over half (53%) of the younger age group reporting being treated with disrespect and over two-fifths (41%) reported feeling ignored because of their age. Other Australian research has demonstrated that older workers may be perpetrators of age discrimination, including against other older people (Earl and Taylor, 2016).

Notably, a recent report of analysis of Australia’s General Social Survey 2019 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020) indicates that among women of working age, perceived experiences of discrimination in the last 12 months for those aged 55–69 at a tenth of those surveyed (10.2%) were far less than that reported by women aged 40–54 (25.0%), 25–39 (22.5%) and 15–24 (23.2%). Among those aged 70 or over, less than a tenth (6.7%) reported experiencing discrimination. Somewhat differently, among men aged 55–69, at less than a fifth (16.3%), they were somewhat less likely than men aged 40–54 (18.0%) and 25–39 (22.5%) to report having experienced discrimination in the last 12 months. However, their reported level of perceived discrimination was similar to men aged 15–24 (15.6%). Past the age of 70, men’s perceptions of discrimination declined sharply, with less than a tenth (5.8%) reporting such experiences. Thus, among women and men of working age, older people are not more likely to perceive discrimination. Overall, the findings of the General Social Survey are indicative of relatively low levels of discrimination being experienced by all people of working age (17.4%). These findings are also suggestive of an interaction between gender and age in terms of perceptions of discrimination. Thus, it is more likely to be experienced by older men than older women of working age. After working age, perceptions of discrimination are much less apparent for both women and men. Overall, this recent research suggests that a significant majority of older Australians of working age have not experienced discrimination in the last 12 months.

### **Improving links between research and advocacy in Australian public discourse about ageing and work**

Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, exaggerated reports of the nature and scale of discrimination facing older people in the Australian labour market persist. This disconnect between evidence and advocacy requires consideration. This article has identified the recent emergence of what might be described as a fake advocacy concerned with ageing and work in Australia that makes unsupported claims in the face of contradictory evidence, makes partial use of empirical research in furthering its objectives and lacks sound conceptual underpinnings. Its intentions appear partly ideological rather than to inform public discourse accurately and as such might be considered to be akin to a form of propaganda. It appears that in such advocacy ageism and age discrimination are somewhat narrowly conceived, not clearly understood or accurately described. For instance, issues of ageism and the young are almost entirely disregarded. Further, advocacy itself sometimes appears to be grounded in ageist perceptions of both younger and older people. Next, we briefly set out some preliminary principles for an evidence-based advocacy on

ageing and work that could replace the advocacy currently existing in Australia and improve the quality of the public discourse.

The first concerns one of the primary roles of advocacy, namely in facilitating properly informed public debate and understanding. For instance, notably, findings of studies contrast the extent of perceptions of respondents' own experiences of age discrimination with those of their views concerning its prevalence in society. Thus, the findings of O'Loughlin *et al.* (2017) reported above concerning actual experiences of age discrimination contrast with the finding of their study that nearly half (46%) of participants across all age groups considered that age discrimination was common or very common in society. This finding is reminiscent of those of Adair *et al.* (2013) who report that perceptions of age discrimination as a labour market issue were high among older people: over four-fifths (83%) of jobseekers agreed that age discrimination was a problem during the job search process, while just over two-thirds (67%) of workers agreed that it was a problem in the workplace. Critically, Adair *et al.* (2013) reported evidence which suggests that such negative perceptions had affected workforce participation, with almost a third (31%) of retired people reporting that being considered too old by employers was an important reason for their retirement, and approximately half of discouraged workers stating that it was an important reason for their lack of job-seeking. This suggests that vociferous arguments for the high prevalence of age discrimination may be seeping into the public consciousness, and presumably unintentionally, possibly to the detriment of some older workers' continued labour force participation as they mistakenly believe they are highly likely to experience it and consequently feel that pursuing employment would not be a worthwhile activity.

Second, in performance terms, a person's age may not matter much for their ability to undertake most jobs. This suggests that instead of drawing on ageist stereotypes in making the case for older workers' employment, their advocates might avoid confirmation bias among employers by arguing that, for most practical purposes, age and performance show little useful relationship. This would overcome the problem advocates face of potentially being accused of ageism, and consequently of muddling the public discourse. For instance, following Roberts' (2006) logic, the present advocacy standpoint risks the perverse outcome of older people being mistrusted, considered irrelevant and deemed only suitable for roles requiring 'traditional' skills. A more effective approach may be constructed on a foundation of age neutrality that seeks to cast doubt on the relevance of age for most employment decisions as opposed to questionable arguments for older workers' superior performance.

Third, given that people are not one-dimensional raises questions as to the utility of an advocacy focus on age or older workers at all. Whether people are older or younger, it is how the multiple aspects of their identity – that is their age, gender, caring responsibilities, cultural background, disability, ethnicity, racial background, sexual orientation, language capabilities and socio-economic background – intersect that impacts on how they experience inclusion and exclusion at work. As argued by Phillipson (2019: 644), 'Women, men, different ethnic sub-groups, those in growing/declining cities/industries, may have the category 50+ in common, but very little else which carries sociological meaning'. A tendency to consider older workers as a homogenous group overlooks the cost–benefit balance of employer behaviour towards them that is contingent on industry, occupation and personal

factors (Duncan, 2003). Age discrimination, thus, may be experienced differently by workers of the same age depending on the circumstances. To address age-related inclusion and exclusion meaningfully, then, a range of other factors must also be considered.

Fourth is the problem of an 'age' advocacy that views younger and older workers' needs as somehow being in conflict. For instance, there remains a persistently popular view that lowering unemployment among younger people will be achieved by older people making way, even among older people's advocates. Thus, with reference to the economic crisis that followed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to advocacy organisation National Seniors Australia (2020) providing the option of early retirement 'would potentially free up some of the jobs that could go to younger workers or workers in their fifties struggling to find employment. Maybe even reduce the official unemployment figures, at a time when it's heading skyward!' However, such a standpoint has long been discredited. It has been noted that increases in rates of older people's employment are associated with higher youth employment rates or demonstrate no relationship at all. While it is sometimes assumed that in an economy there is a 'lump of labour' that must be equitably distributed, the number of available jobs is not fixed and older and younger workers are better considered as complements rather than substitutes in terms of work (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013).

Fifth, perhaps subsuming the other four, is the notion of an advocacy that is grounded in a view of a later working life that has been structured by inequalities accrued across the lifecourse, including age, gender and class intersectionalities. According to Walker and Maltby (2012), a comprehensive active ageing approach requires a paradigm shift in the way the lifecourse is conceived. Drawing from the work of Reday-Mulvey (2005), they argue that this would involve discarding the traditional three-phase notion of the lifecycle (education, work and retirement) in favour of a more horizontally distributed 'age-integrated' approach that would encourage a more diversified, flexible and dynamic life pattern, with benefits and responsibilities more evenly apportioned between women and men. A universalist framework for considering issues of age and work would overcome some of the disjunctions and contradictions in advocacy that were identified earlier. Such an approach would 'modify the traditional public policy approach, centred on certain phases of life or certain age groups, by introducing a global approach, giving individuals certain rights, resources and services enabling them to be the authors of their own lifecourses' (Erhel, 2007: 150).

This article has identified weak foundations for current Australian advocacy efforts on ageing and work but has identified potential for actions that target particular segments of the labour force, has suggested ways of engaging with industry better and has proposed an approach that does not pit young against old. In recognising that ageism is potentially experienced by people at all ages, a more-effective age advocacy might endeavour to foment a generational dialogue concerning its causes and solutions. This is perhaps particularly important during a period of unprecedented economic upheaval, when rates of youth unemployment rose dramatically in 2020, and there is considerable current public debate concerning the societal value of older people. Meanwhile, recent Australian government announcements of labour market programmes in response to current high levels of jobless,



triggered by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, have focused on those aged 35 or under (Australian Treasury, 2020). This potentially gives rise to a new definition of 'older worker', but perhaps one that renders the concept largely meaningless in both sociological and practical terms. Given the propensity of older workers to experience long-term unemployment, this *prima facie* ageist policy, one that seems to stand in contradiction to long-standing national efforts to prolong working lives (Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 2019), would appear to be another important arena for action on the part of age advocates.

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