



# STEREOTYPE THREAT AND MATURE AGE WORKERS

The **University  
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in partnership  
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## Introduction

As the Australian population ages, retaining older adults in the workforce has become a national priority. To address the shortage of skilled workers caused by the ageing population, the Australian Government has introduced a number of incentives to keep mature-age workers employed for longer (Australian Government, 2001). While government inducements are undoubtedly important in keeping older employees in the workforce, it is equally important to examine the psychological factors that may affect mature-age workers satisfaction with work and ultimately, their decision to retire. One potentially important factor is *stereotype threat*, which occurs when individuals believe they may be the target of demeaning stereotypes. The purpose of this research is to examine whether Australian mature-age employees experience stereotype threat, and to investigate the potential negative impact that stereotype threat has on older employees' attitudes and behaviours at work. It is hoped that this research will provide an understanding of the effects of stereotype threat on older workers, which will help organisations to both recognise and combat this problem.

### Stereotype threat

Stereotype threat is the psychological threat of confirming or being reduced to a negative stereotype held about one's group (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). A wide variety of studies have now shown that stereotype threat results in performance deficits when people attempt to perform difficult tasks in domains in which they are negatively stereotyped (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008). For example, when women are reminded of the stereotype that men are better in math, they perform considerably worse on a difficult math test compared to women who do not receive this reminder (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999).

The performance-impairing effects of stereotype threat have been replicated over hundreds of studies, across numerous populations and tasks. For example, African Americans' academic pursuits (Steele & Aronson, 1995), poor people's language skills (Croizet & Claire, 1998), older adults' memory performance (Hess et al., 2003), and women's driving performance (Yeung & von Hippel, 2008) all suffer when they are reminded about the stereotypes of their group. Importantly, it is not necessary for people to believe that the stereotype is true of their group for stereotype threat to occur, nor is it necessary that they believe that the stereotype describes themselves. Stereotype threat effects emerge when people simply worry that others *might* evaluate them on the basis of the stereotype, regardless of whether they think the stereotype is true.

Although the majority of stereotype threat research has examined performance decrements in the laboratory, a smaller body of research demonstrates how stereotype threat can also lead people to disengage from domains in which they feel stereotyped. For example, targets of stereotype threat experience feelings of dejection (Keller & Dauenheimer, 2003) and report lowered career aspirations (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005).

In the workplace, every job involves being judged by other people, yet employees from negatively stereotyped groups have the added concern of being judged on the basis of their group membership. It is the awareness that others may evaluate you through the lens of negative stereotypes that triggers stereotype threat. Given the negative



stereotypes about older workers (e.g., they are technologically inept and have less potential for development), older employees are likely to experience stereotype threat in the workplace. Thus, while it is commonplace to experience evaluation apprehension when being judged, stereotype threat can result in additional concerns for older employees.

Stereotype threat is something that most people have experienced. For example, when a female driver makes a mistake and another driver beeps his horn at her, she may have a niggling feeling that the other driver attributed her driving mistake to the fact that she is a woman.

These same feelings can arise for groups that are negatively stereotyped in the workplace. For example,

- If a female employee's voice cracks when receiving negative feedback, she might worry that this behaviour will fuel the stereotype that women are overly emotional.
- If an older employee's recommendation is passed over in favour of a suggestion put forward by a younger colleague, he may worry that his idea was discounted due to his age.

These examples illustrate that overt discrimination is not necessary for employees to feel stereotype threat. Rather, subtle things can happen in the workplace that can make people wonder whether they *might* be being evaluated on the basis of stereotypes about their group.

This research investigates how stereotype threat influences work-related attitudes and behaviours of mature-age employees, a group about which negative stereotypes are prevalent.

### **Stereotyping and older adults**

Stereotype threat has the potential to be a significant problem for older workers. There are several negative stereotypes about older adults, with stereotypes of ageing generally acknowledging some gains in 'wisdom', but primarily emphasising reductions in 'wit' (Lockenhoff et al., 2009). Older adults are often stereotyped as inflexible, frail, incompetent and slow.

Recent experiments have provided evidence that negative stereotypes about age can negatively impact behaviour. For example, older adults who were reminded of negative stereotypes of ageing (e.g., with words like confused and decrepit) showed poorer memory and even slower walking than older adults who were reminded of positive stereotypes of ageing (e.g., with words like wisdom and guide; Levy, 1996). Similarly, when older adults were told that age leads to poorer memory performance, they did worse on a memory test than when they were told that older adults often perform just as well as younger adults (Hess, Auman, Colcombe, & Rahhal, 2003).

These age stereotypes may have long-term consequences. Longitudinal research indicates that across time periods as great as twenty years and more, older adults who had previously endorsed negative stereotypes of ageing became less healthy and even died younger than older adults who had endorsed more positive views of ageing (Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002).



### **Stereotype threat and mature-age workers**

These negative stereotypes of older adults also surface in the workplace. Although research has consistently demonstrated that workers' age is generally unrelated to job performance (e.g. Ng & Feldman, 2008), many people continue to hold negative opinions about older workers (Ostroff & Atwater, 2003). Research has demonstrated that younger workers rate older workers as having lower job qualifications, less potential for development, and as being less qualified for physically demanding jobs (Finkelstein, Burke, & Raju, 1995). Older workers are also viewed as less productive, less flexible and less willing to learn than their younger counterparts (Van Dalen, Henkens & Schippers, 2010). These negative stereotypes are present in Australia, with a Commonwealth of Australia publication (2000) concluding that; "A common stereotype of older workers is that they are less productive in the Workplace". Overall evidence therefore indicates that stereotypes relating to mature age workers are consistently negative, and generalise across different occupational settings. These findings suggest that older adults are likely to be susceptible to stereotype threat in the workplace.

It is important to remember that it is not necessary to believe that the stereotype is true of the group for stereotype threat to disrupt performance and engagement, nor is it necessary to believe that the stereotype describes oneself. Rather, stereotype threat effects emerge when individuals worry that others might evaluate them on the basis of the stereotype. Thus, older workers are likely to experience stereotype threat, as they have good reason to worry that their colleagues are evaluating them on the basis of the 'older worker' stereotype.

### **The importance of this research**

Research examining older workers is particularly important in light of the current demographic composition of the Australian workforce. As the number of workers nearing retirement age continues to grow, concerns have arisen regarding a shortage of skilled and experienced employees in Australia (Australian Government, 2001). To address this problem, the Australian Government has introduced a number of incentives to keep mature-age workers employed for longer (Australian Government, 2001). These incentives may prove useless if older adults are disengaging from the workplace because of the negative experiences arising from stereotype threat. It is important to understand the potentially negative experience of older adults in the workforce so that steps may be taken to address these issues.

This research is also important for the wellbeing of the older workers themselves. Satisfaction with work is related to emotional wellbeing across the lifespan (Nolen-Hoeksema & Ahrens, 2002). Emotional wellbeing is linked with mortality (Collins, Gleib, & Goldman, 2009), meaning that it is particularly important to understand the factors that contribute to wellbeing in older adulthood. It is also important to note that negative age stereotypes may have long-term consequences for the wellbeing of older workers. Longitudinal research indicates that older adults who had previously endorsed negative stereotypes of ageing became less healthy and died earlier than those who had endorsed more positive views of ageing (Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002).



### **The goal of this research**

Despite the increasing importance of older workers, no previous studies have examined the consequences of stereotype threat for this group. The objective of this research is to examine experiences of stereotype threat amongst mature age workers (i.e., employees aged 50 years and older) to investigate how these experiences relate to their job attitudes and psychological well-being. Theory surrounding stereotype threat suggests that it can lead to disengagement (Steele, 1997). Disengagement from work is associated with a variety of negative outcomes, such as lowered job satisfaction and commitment (Brown, 1996; Brown & Leigh, 1996; Saks, 2006). Furthermore, stereotype threat can lead to stress and anxiety (Blascovich, Spencer, Quinn, & Steele, 2001; Bosson, Haymovitz, & Pinel, 2004), which provides an additional route to more negative job attitudes and reduced mental health at work (Glazer & Beehr, 2005; Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007). Although this previous research has not investigated stereotype threat in the workplace, we predicted that experiences of stereotype threat would be associated with more negative workplace attitudes and lowered psychological well-being.

Employees may also withdraw from the organisation when confronted with stereotype threat. Because employees may be unable to eliminate feelings of stereotype threat in the workplace, they may rely on withdrawal to find relief from a stressful situation or to escape from a threatening work environment. Thus, distancing oneself from the threatening context of work could be one way that older employees cope with exposure to stereotype threat. Retirement is emerging as a significant organisational issue, with an ageing population leading to a large increase in the percentage of the workforce nearing the transition to retirement (Toossi, 2007). The ageing population has also led to concerns regarding a shortage of skilled employees in many developed countries (United Nations, 2007). It is important to understand factors that may lead to early retirement in an effort to keep older adults in the workforce for longer. Therefore, we examined the relationship between stereotype threat and mature-age workers' intentions to quit their job, as well as their intentions to retire.

### **Method**

In total, 1429 mature-age employees (i.e., 50 and older) from several organisations in Australia participated in this research by completing an on-line survey. Broadly speaking, employees worked either at desk jobs, jobs with a more physical component (e.g., police officers), or in the nursing sector. The different components of the survey are described in detail below.

### **Stereotype threat**

Stereotype threat was assessed using a 7-item measure that assessed how much employees felt they had been evaluated on the basis of their age. The measure included items like "Some of my colleagues feel that I'm not as committed to my career because of my age". Employees were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-item scale, where 1 was "strongly disagree" and 7 was "strongly agree". The higher the score on the stereotype threat scale, the more employees felt they were being negatively evaluated on the basis of their age.



### **Life satisfaction**

Life satisfaction is a measure of well-being, and refers to how satisfied participants are with their life as a whole. Life satisfaction was assessed in this research using a 5-item measure. An example item is “In most ways my life is close to my ideal.” Participating employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point scale where 1 was “strongly disagree” and 7 was “strongly agree”. A higher score on this measure indicates greater satisfaction with life.

### **Work mental health problems**

Poor mental health has negative outcomes for both the employee and the organisation, and is a variable that is likely to be affected by stereotype threat. Work mental health was assessed using a 12-item measure. The measure listed 12 mood states and asked participating employees to rate how much their job caused them to experience these mood states over the last two weeks. Examples of the moods listed were tense, optimistic, enthusiastic and depressed. Participating employees were asked to rate how often their job had caused them to experience these moods on a 6-point scale where 1 was “never” and 6 was “all of the time”. A higher score on this measure indicates more work mental health problems.

### **Job satisfaction**

Job satisfaction is an important job attitude, and is associated with important outcomes such as performance at work (Judge et al., 2001) and intentions to quit (Porter & Steers, 1973). Employee satisfaction is important to all facets of the employee experience, and if linked with stereotype threat, could have a pervasive negative influence.

Job satisfaction was assessed using a 5-item measure. An example item is “Most days I feel enthusiastic about work”. Participating employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point scale where 1 was “strongly disagree” and 7 was “strongly agree”. This measure was coded such that a higher score indicated a higher level of job satisfaction.

### **Emotional commitment to the organisation**

This scale measured the employees’ emotional attachment to, and affinity with, the organisation (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Employees with high emotional commitment tend to remain with an organisation because of this bond. Research has demonstrated that this type of commitment is positively related to job performance, attendance at work and organisational citizenship behaviours, and negatively related to stress and work-family conflict (Meyer et al., 2002). As commitment is associated with a wide range of positive organisational outcomes, it is important to understand how it is linked with stereotype threat.

Emotional commitment to the organisation was assessed using a 6-item measure. An example item is “I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with [the organisation]”. Participating employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point scale where 1 was “strongly disagree” and 7 was “strongly agree”. This measure was coded such that a higher score indicated a higher level of emotional commitment to the organisation.



### **Job involvement**

Job involvement is the degree to which a person is concerned with, and engaged in, their job (Paullay et al., 1994). People who are highly involved in their jobs are more likely to do things like work overtime and take on work not explicitly required of them. Job involvement has been linked with many important outcome variables, including job performance (Diefendorff et al., 2002), turnover (Huselid & Day, 1991) and organisational citizenship behaviours (Diefendorff et al., 2002).

Job involvement was assessed by asking employees the extent to which they were involved with their job above and beyond completing the basic requirements of their job. This concept was assessed using a 6-item measure. An example item is “I don’t mind staying over time to finish something that I’m working on”. Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point scale where 1 was “strongly disagree” and 7 was “strongly agree”. A higher score on this measure indicated a higher level of job engagement.

### **Retirement intentions**

Retirement intentions are important to examine with a sample of older workers, particularly when considering that both organisations and the government are increasingly introducing incentives to retain skilled older workers for longer by delaying retirement. Although intentions to retire, rather than actual retirement behaviour, were measured, retirement intentions are an excellent predictor of actual retirement (Prothero & Beach, 1984).

Intentions to retire were measured using a 3-item measure. An example item is “I plan to retire in the near future”. Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point scale where 1 was “strongly disagree” and 7 was “strongly agree”. A higher score on this measure indicated a greater intention to retire.

### **Intentions to quit**

Older employees’ intentions to quit their job to find employment elsewhere were also examined. Participating employees’ intentions to quit their job were assessed using a 2-item measure. An example item is “I am seriously considering quitting this job for an alternative employer”. Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point scale where 1 was “strongly disagree” and 7 was “strongly agree”. A higher score on this measure indicated a greater intention to quit.

## **Results**

### **Sample Demographics**

In total, 1428 mature-age workers completed the survey.

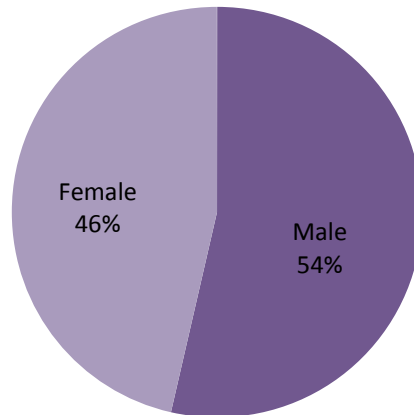
#### ***Gender***

There were roughly equal numbers of men and women who participated in this research; 52.4% of the sample was male and 45.4% of the sample was female. 2.2% of the sample did not specify their gender.





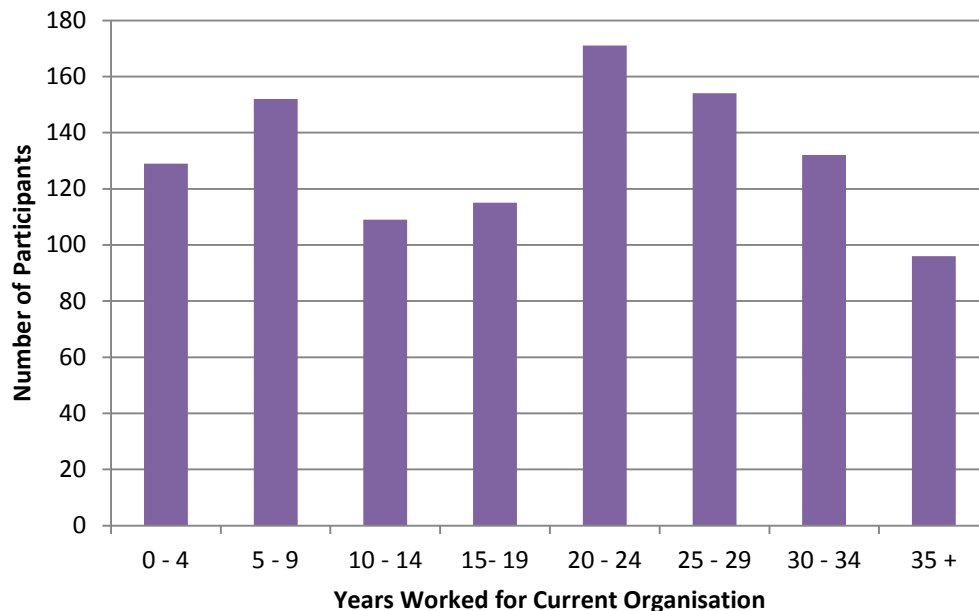
**Figure 1:** Gender distribution of the sample



### ***Tenure***

The participants had generally worked for their organisations for a long period of time, with 66.5% of employees having worked at their organisation for longer than 9 years. Only 9.1% of the sample had worked at their organisation for less than 3 years.

**Figure 2:** Years worked for the current organisation across the sample



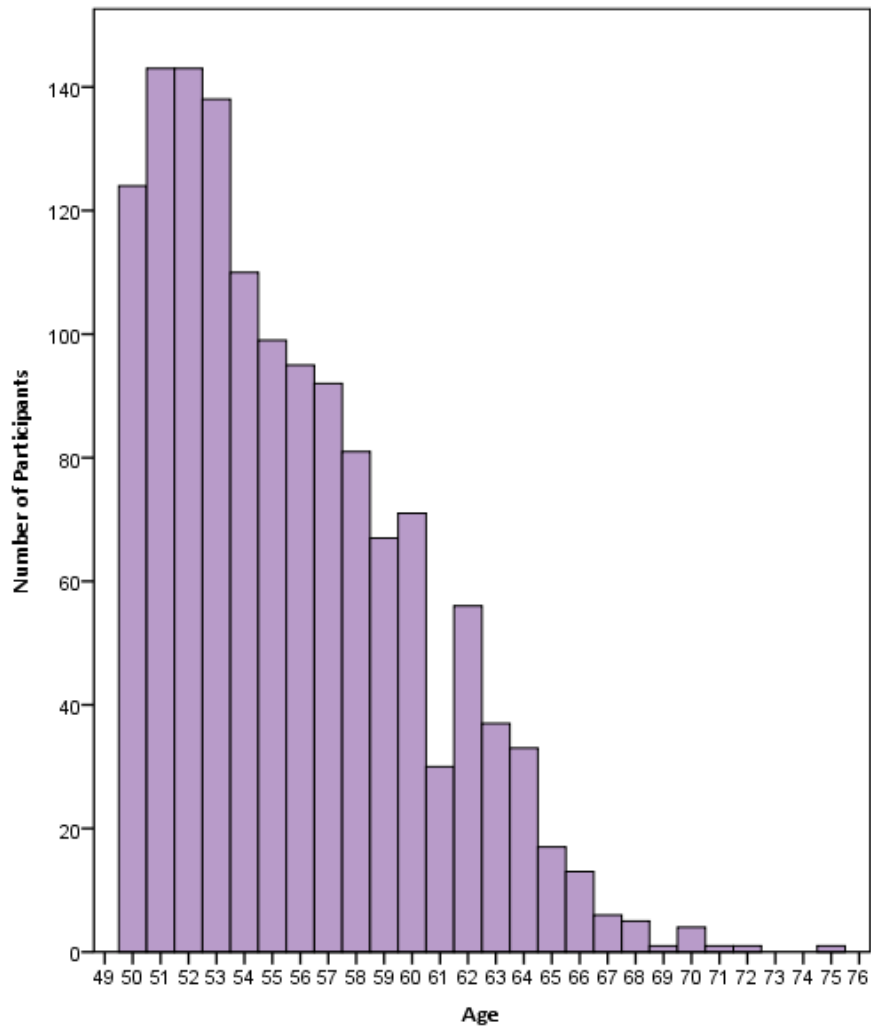
### ***Age***

The mean age of participants was 55.64 years, and participants ages ranged from 50 to 75 years. 55.3% of the sample were 55 and under. There were no differences in age



distribution by gender, with the average age for men being 55.6 and the average age for women being 55.7. Age was related to tenure, with older employees generally having worked for their organisations for significantly longer.

**Figure 3:** The age distribution of the sample



### **Experiences of stereotype threat**

The majority of older workers experienced medium (44%) or low (42%) levels of stereotype threat. A significant minority (14% of workers) experienced high levels of stereotype threat. The mean for stereotype threat was 3.32, which is around the middle of the 7-point scale. These findings suggest that stereotype threat has the potential to be a considerable problem for some mature-age workers.



Older workers experienced stereotype threat in many subtle ways. Below are some comments from participants that highlight the ways and situations in which older adults experienced stereotype threat.

“I have noted an increased tendency over the past 12-18 months for there to be verbal wisecracks about the ages and capabilities of employees that are 50 years old or older. I have been in this field for almost 34 years and have a pretty thick skin but sometimes smart remarks, always stated in a humorous form (and I believe without any malice) about age and people being 'dinosaurs' can be demoralising. Experience is essential in my line of work and we should value rather than denigrate those who have 20+ years of experience.”

“I sometimes feel that I am invisible because of my age. I have difficulty at times with getting people to include me and listen to me.”

“I believe that perceptions around my age tend to exclude me from the mentoring program and leadership development. Due to now being an 'empty nester' I have more than ample time to commit to my work – but I think that because of my age, I am not utilised enough.”

“I feel very comfortable in my position but I think that people sometimes view my age as a burden, especially young people that think you are too old to be working and that they should have all the opportunities over older workers.”

“Although I have a generally positive attitude to my organisation (I love the work), I feel that opportunities for promotion have been grabbed by younger less qualified individuals and that has caused a great deal of frustration for me. Astonishingly, I still enjoy working for them. I am sure others feel the same way as me. Perhaps some questions probing that perception would be handy to 'inform' the way workforce planners think in relation to older workers and how they are treated.”

“I strongly believe that my age has been a barrier when it comes to promotions and my co-workers perception of how long I can still contribute to my organisation in a useful capacity.”

“I feel my age might be impacting on how I'm treated at work. For example a previous supervisor avoided initiating any pleasantries or conversation with me, even though I worked efficiently and diligently and made attempts to foster a cordial and productive relationship with him. As he treated his young (18-32 years) subordinates like best friends I suspect that he disliked having me in his team as I was so much (10 years) older than he was.”

“While I feel I am quite effective in my job, and this is acknowledged by management & my clients, I am aware that opportunities for advancement have been shut off to me because of my age and an unspoken expectation of my intention to retire.”



“I now have a younger understudy to help with my work. Sometimes I feel that my contract manager tends to ask the understudy questions that I feel he should be asking me.”

“I sometimes think my organisation shows bias against older employees in favour of giving younger less experienced staff ‘a go.’”

“My co-workers seem to think that because I’m over 50, I am inept with computers. This isn’t true. My job deals constantly with computers and their breakdowns, and ten years ago, wouldn’t have known how to turn one on!”

“I’m on long service leave because the organisation literally did not have a job for me. I felt I did not have any other option (aside from turning up each day and having my soul destroyed, doing nothing). I am employed full-time, have enormous experience in my field, and I’m incredibly disappointed this organisation does not have the will to find a position which suits my experience and knowledge. In the past I’ve always loved my work, I’ve told everyone that my employer was marvellous to me (and acknowledged that I worked hard and was good to the organisation too), but that all seems to be overlooked and disregarded now that I’m older. After arranging a meeting to discuss my future recently, my boss STARTED the conversation by asking if I’d checked my superannuation entitlements! I was in shock. Now that I’m constantly overlooked in favour of younger people, I’m starting to think I’m hopeless and useless.”

“Mature-age workers should be treated with more respect, considering that the levels of experience that they have that are valuable to the organisation. I constantly hear about the need for “Young” employees as if age is the key requisite for innovation or value.”

“Although I have only positive interactions with younger colleagues, I sometimes feel that management at more senior levels does not value older workers as they should. They also seem to forget that the over 50’s are the fastest growing demographic in our society.”

“Because I am now older than many of our clients, I get the impression it is felt that I no longer am “in touch” with the clients, despite the fact my specialist knowledge means I have a good understanding of my area. Because my organisation is “innovative”, “cutting edge” and encouraging of new ideas, it is sometimes assumed anyone over 40 won’t have any ideas worth listening to. Or am I just old and paranoid and idealess?”

“As you get older you get more and more ‘painted into a corner’ and ignored. I would prefer to be given more and more challenging work/projects that constantly push me to look for new ways of applying the skills and abilities I currently possess, and even acquiring a few new skills. Sometimes feel that mature-aged employees are put in an ‘inferior’ working environment (e.g. missing out on jobs, career advancement, poor office conditions) to facilitate their departure and replacement with younger employees. Younger employees are sometimes seen as sole custodians of



technical ability and fresh ideas. Attitudes like these can lead to self-fulfilling prophecy, as mature-aged employees develop more cynical attitudes or become apathetic to change. Some resistance to change can also be a consequence of having seen ideas or systems before (because we have been working in the field for long time), and realising they will not work, not because mature-aged employees are resistant to change per se. Unfortunately, the latter is often how the situation is interpreted by employers & leads to the view that older people do not like change. Any subsequent criticism of proposals/ideas by mature-aged employees can be interpreted as 'negative' and not taken seriously.”

### ***Stereotype threat and gender***

There was a small but significant difference in levels of stereotype threat experienced by male and female employees. Males experienced slightly more stereotype threat, with a mean of 3.41. The mean stereotype threat reported by females was 3.22. This finding, however, seems to be driven by the types of jobs men were more likely to hold. One of the participating organisations undertook work of a more physical nature, and this organisation was male-dominated (63% of the employees completing the survey from this organisation were male). Once this organisation was removed from the sample, there was no significant difference in the levels of stereotype threat experienced by men and women. The overall mean for stereotype threat also dropped when this sample was removed, suggesting that stereotype threat is more prevalent in jobs of a physical nature. This issue will be discussed in more depth below.

### ***Stereotype threat and type of job***

865 employees, or 57.7% of our sample, worked in white-collar office jobs. The mean stereotype threat experienced by this group was 3.20. 492 employees, or 32.8% of our sample, worked at a more physical job. The mean stereotype threat experienced by this group was 3.62, which was significantly higher than the rest of the sample. 141 employees, or 9% of our sample, were nurses. The mean stereotype threat experienced by this group was 2.91, which was significantly lower than the rest of the sample.

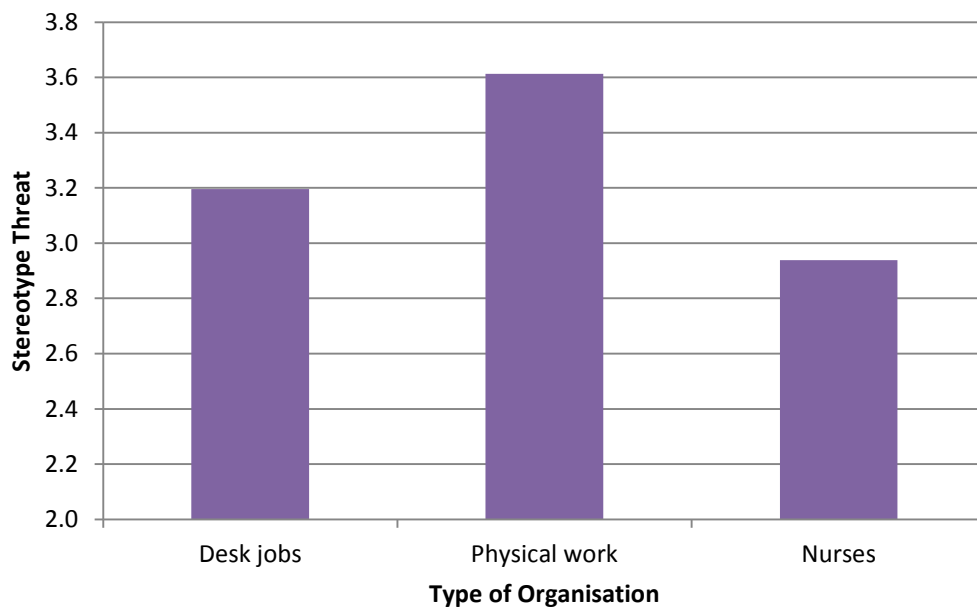
It seems that stereotype threat is highest for older employees who undertake work of a more physical nature. This finding may be due to stereotypes surrounding older adults suggesting that they are not as fit and not as capable of undertaking difficult physical work. Thus, older employees working in a more physical job may be more aware of the stereotypes surrounding mature-age employees. They may also have these stereotypes brought to their attention more systematically than the more subtle stereotypes facing older workers in more traditional white-collar environments. Some employee comments highlighting the issues faced by older workers in physical jobs are below:

“I think the impact of physical decline with age does affect ones sense of competence / confidence. I also think this is a significant element of the bias that is sometimes held against older workers in my organisation (younger workers may feel that they have to shoulder more of the workload). “



“There is a perception that older workers are unable to keep working past a certain age because of the physical nature of our work. I feel like I’m viewed more as a liability than an asset because of this.”

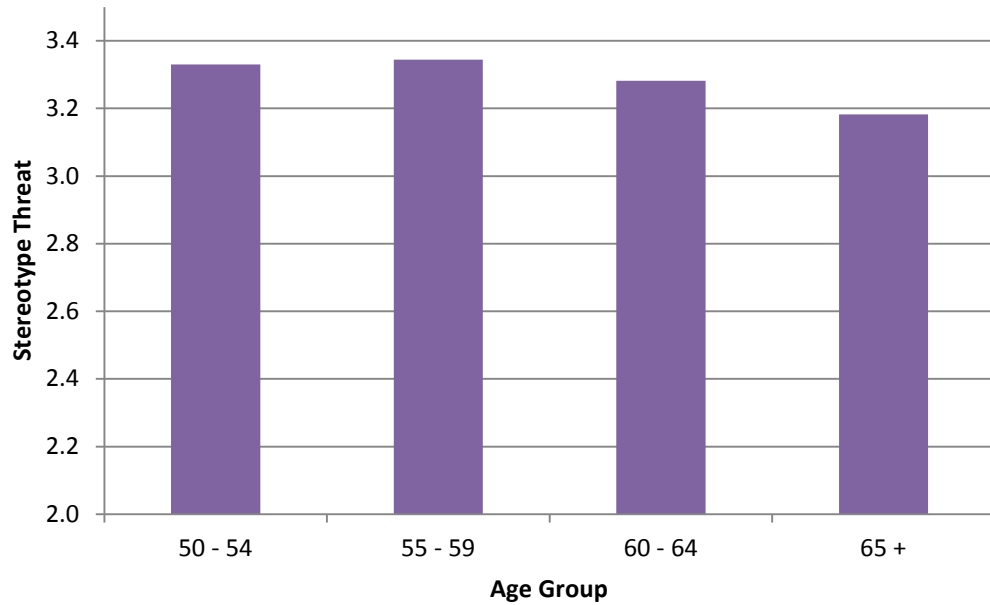
**Figure 4:** The relationship between stereotype threat and type of job



### ***Stereotype threat and age***

As can be seen in the graph below, feelings of stereotype threat were not more pronounced amongst older employees. That is, employees at the older end of the age spectrum do not experience more stereotype threat than mature-age employees who are relatively younger. Although it may seem intuitively compelling that feelings of stereotype threat regarding age might be stronger amongst employees who are older, the small number of employees over 60 makes it impossible to provide a strong test of this possibility.

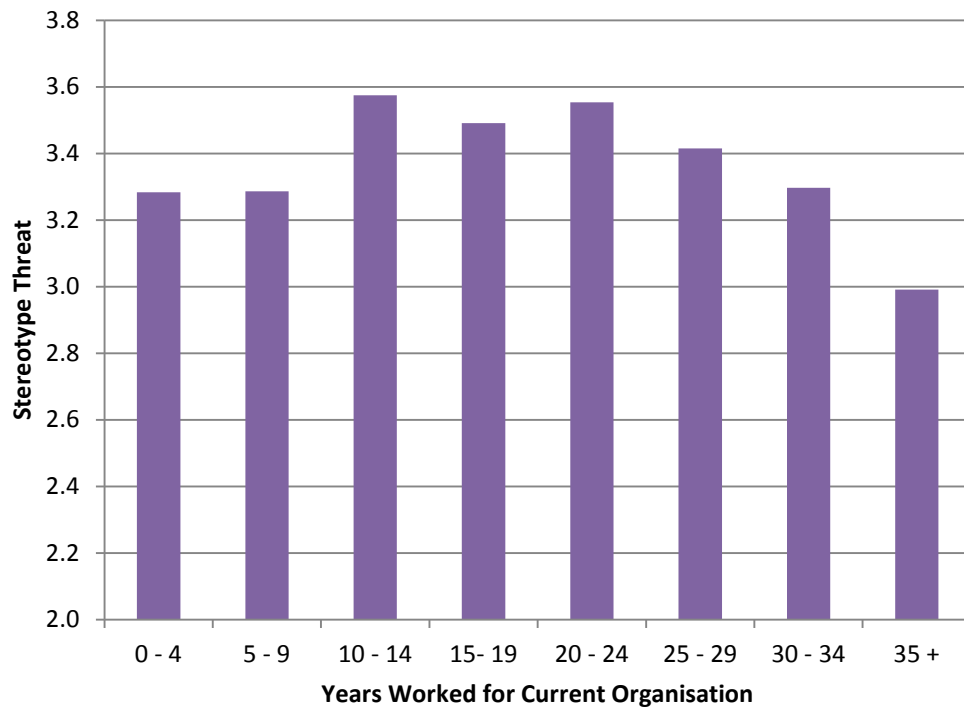
**Figure 5:** The relationship between stereotype threat and age



### ***Stereotype threat and tenure***

As demonstrated in Figure 6, there was no systematic relationship between stereotype threat and tenure with the organisation.

**Figure 6:** The relationship between stereotype threat and tenure





### **Stereotype threat and psychological well-being**

Participants completed two scales assessing psychological well-being; a life satisfaction scale and a scale assessing work mental health problems.

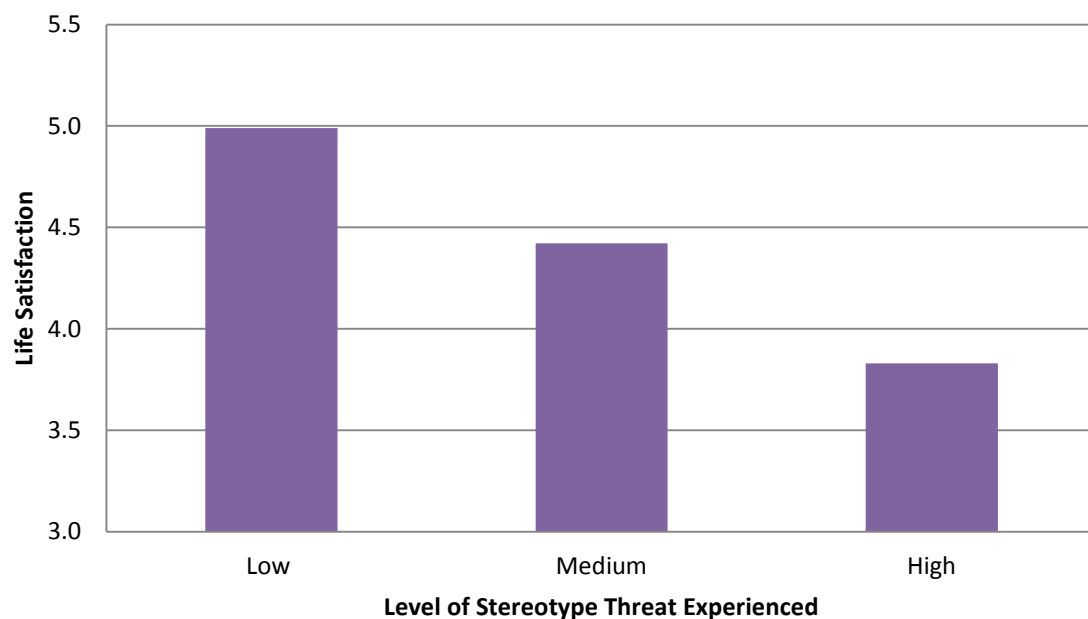
#### ***Life satisfaction***

Stereotype threat was associated with life satisfaction, such that those experiencing higher levels of stereotype threat tended to report lower levels of life satisfaction [Figure 7].

Workers seemed to recognise the impact of their experiences of stereotype threat at work on their home lives. For example:

“My experience at work has an overwhelming influence not only on my working life, but also on my private life. I take the negativity I face at work home, and I feel like it impacts my overall health and well-being.”

**Figure 7:** The relationship between stereotype threat and life satisfaction



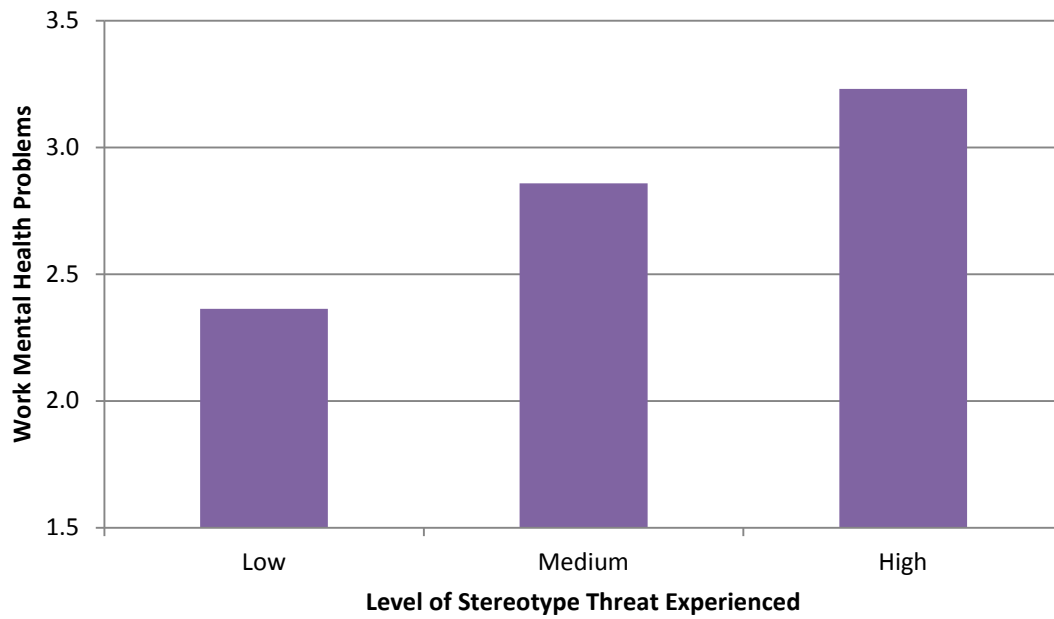




### ***Work mental health problems***

Stereotype threat was associated with work mental health problems, such that those experiencing a high level of stereotype threat also reported a high level of work mental health problems [Figure 8].

**Figure 8:** The relationship between stereotype threat and work mental health problems





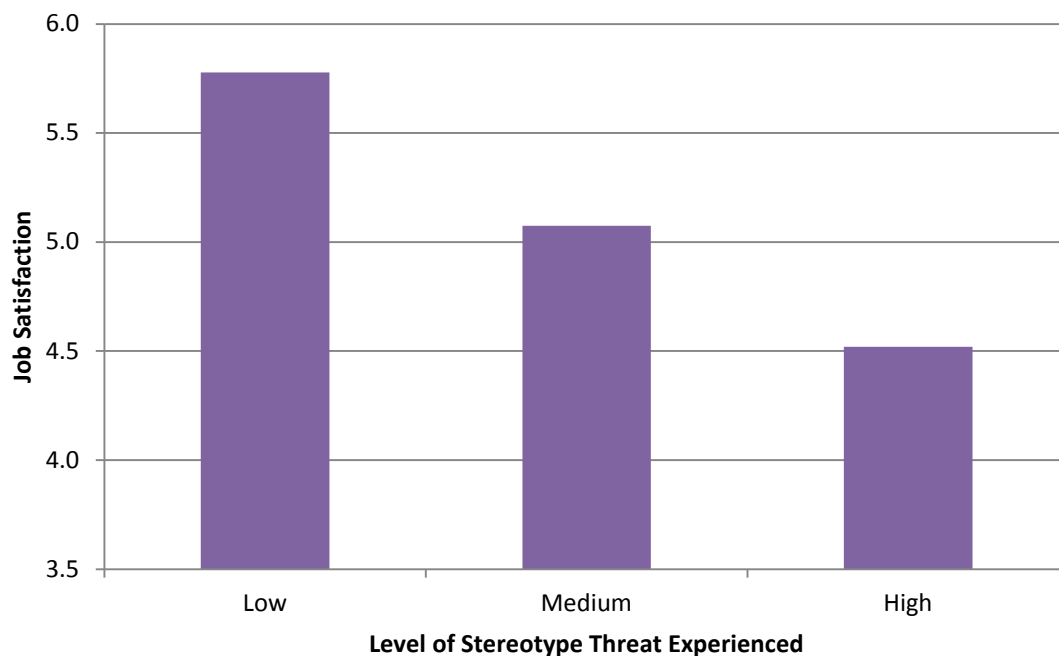
### **Stereotype threat and workplace attitudes and behaviours**

The workplace attitudes and behaviours assessed include job satisfaction, emotional commitment to the organisation, job engagement, retirement intentions, and intentions to quit.

#### ***Job satisfaction***

Stereotype threat was associated with job satisfaction, such that those who experienced high levels of stereotype threat tended to have lower job satisfaction [Figure 9]

**Figure 9:** The relationship between stereotype threat and job satisfaction

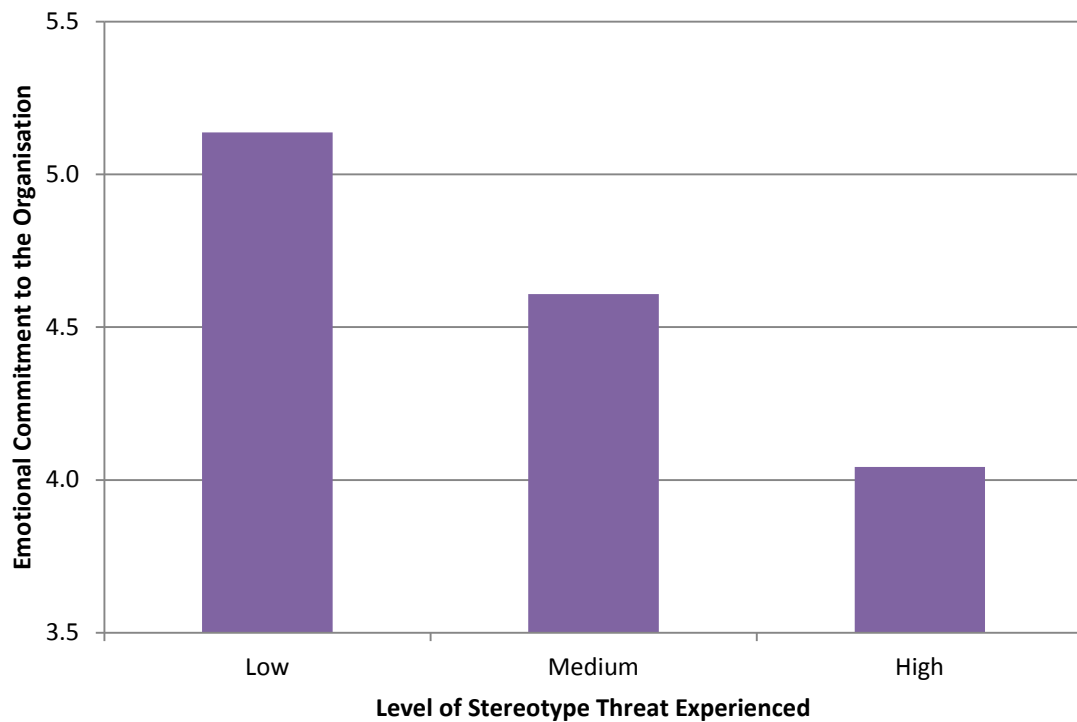




### ***Emotional commitment to the organisation***

Stereotype threat was associated with emotional commitment, such that those who experienced high levels of stereotype threat were less emotionally committed to the organisation [Figure 10].

**Figure 10:** The relationship between stereotype threat and emotional commitment to the organisation

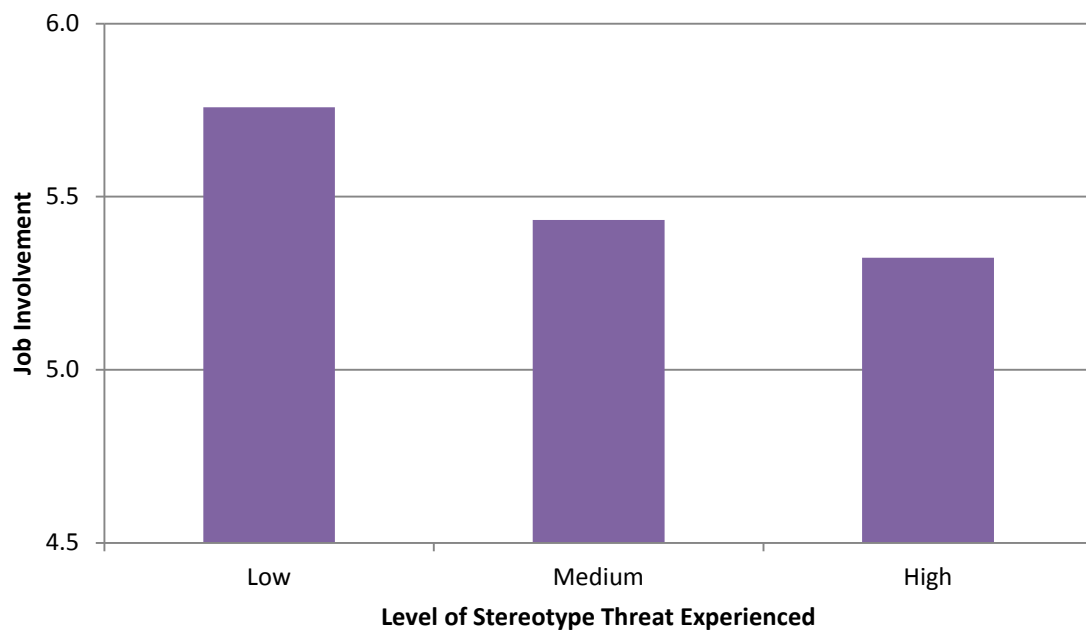




### ***Job involvement***

Stereotype threat was associated with job involvement, such that those who experienced greater stereotype threat reported being less involved with their job [Figure 11].

**Figure 11:** The relationship between stereotype threat and job involvement.





### ***Retirement intentions***

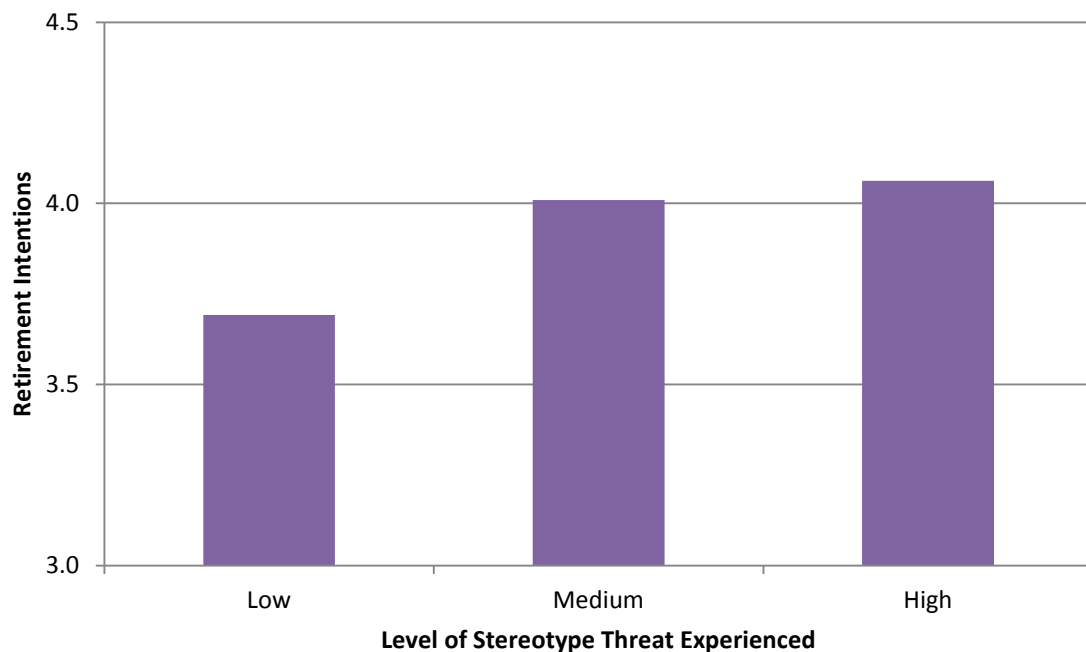
Stereotype threat was associated with intentions to retire, such that those who experienced greater stereotype threat intended to retire sooner [Figure 12].

Some older workers highlighted worries in their comments around retirement. Some workers were concerned that the discussion of retirement was being used as a strategy to edge them out of the workforce, and were inclined to “leap before they were pushed”. Others didn’t want to leave work just yet, but felt like their negative experiences at work were no longer manageable. A few comments are highlighted below:

“Retirement is often used as a rejection of the "mature" by the new management style. Many older people retire out of despair, not out of desire.”

“Sometimes I feel like senior managers cannot wait for me to retire and there's a feeling of latent pressure as each year passes. Several 'passing' comments have been made about 'winding down', 'having nothing left to contribute' and a 'lack of ambition', which all add to this sense of wanting older employees to 'move over'.”

**Figure 12:** The relationship between stereotype threat and retirement intentions





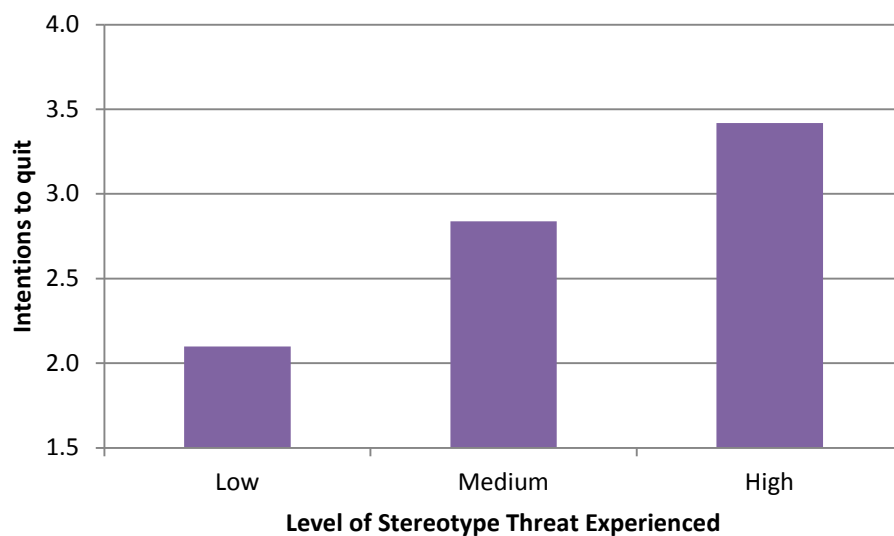
### ***Intentions to quit***

Stereotype threat was associated with intentions to quit, such that those who experienced greater stereotype threat reported greater intentions to leave their current organisation [Figure 13]. Some of the comments made by workers about their intentions to quit are reported below.

“Quitting work and seeking part-time employment can signal a desire to achieve a better work-life balance, but often it signals a mature-aged person’s dissatisfaction with the workplace. Again, however, there is a tendency to interpret this as a disinterest in work per se due to being an older person, rather than trying to address the underlying problem.”

“There is certainly nothing being done to encourage older workers to stay. Three people have left recently to work in less rewarding jobs, with nearly 50 years of experience walking out the door. Our management was only present for 1 farewell.”

**Figure 13:** The relationship between stereotype threat and intentions to quit.





## **Implications**

### **Issues at work**

In total, this research demonstrates that mature age workers who experience stereotype threat regarding their age have more negative job attitudes. Although not examined in this study, other research has shown how negative workplace attitudes can impact performance, causing people to be less productive. If this pattern were to emerge amongst mature-age employees who experience stereotype threat it could lead colleagues to believe that stereotypes about older employees are true. Thus leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy, which could result in an ongoing cycle of stereotype threat. These more negative job attitudes also have the potential to lower workplace morale and to “rub off” on other employees.

This study also demonstrates that experiences of stereotype threat are associated with increased intentions to retire or quit. Turnover and retirement are costly to HR, as these lead to the loss of employees the organisation has invested in, as well as a more frequent need to hire new employees. It could also lead to a lack of diversity in organisations, as those who are worried that they are being stereotyped are more likely to quit.

### **What can be done?**

This research suggests that the experience of stereotype threat at work can counteract efforts made to keep older adults in the workforce for longer. As a consequence, it is important that steps are taken to neutralise stereotype threat in the workplace to avoid the unnecessary loss of older workers, as well as to increase workers’ satisfaction and well-being.

This research is the first to demonstrate that older workers experience stereotype threat at work, and future research needs to investigate how stereotype threat may be addressed. Some ideas to address stereotype threat at work are proposed below, but it is important to conduct research to investigate whether these strategies would be effective.

### ***Interventions***

Current research in other domains suggests that there may be interventions that can help to reduce the experience of stereotype threat. Recent research suggests that self-affirmation may help diminish the negative consequences of stereotype threat (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006). Self-affirmation involves reflecting on one’s important achievements, values or traits. This kind of intervention would be easy to implement on both a personal and an organisational level, and would not be resource-intensive.

### ***Promoting positive stereotypes***

Another way in which stereotype threat may be addressed is by attempting to promote positive stereotypes of older workers, which may help to counteract the existing negative stereotypes. Positive stereotypes of older employees focus on their experience, wisdom, dependability, and conscientiousness, and have had demonstrable positive effects on older adults’ performance in previous research (Levy, 1996; Levy & Leifheit-Limson, 2009). In the comments section of the survey, employees often suggested that organisations make a more concerted effort to promote positive stereotypes of mature age employees. Some of these comments are highlighted below:



“I would like to see some positive messages for mature age workers. The loyalty and longevity of mature age staff could be publicly appreciated by the organisation, and the younger workers may then show more appreciation for their older colleagues.”

“It would be nice to see the organisation send a message about maintaining respect for the older worker, especially as new employees have no idea what role or contribution may have been made by the older worker before they started.”

“Perhaps management could contribute to changing the staff’s perception of mature age workers by recommending their expertise to younger workers, and giving mature age workers opportunities to change their current roles in order to draw their diverse skills together and fully utilise their wisdom & depth of experience.”

Programs that emphasise what older adults may contribute, such as mentoring, could also be introduced to help promote positive stereotypes of older workers. Many older workers in our surveys commented that they were really interested in being involved in mentoring programs, and these programs have the added benefit of passing on knowledge that may otherwise be lost when older employees retire.

### ***Increasing training and development***

Offering training to older adults makes them feel more valued, and less like they’re getting left behind by the organisation. In the comments sections of our surveys, older workers consistently reported feeling that they missed out on training that younger workers received, despite feeling that the training was important to doing their job. Some of these many comments are below:

“My organisation needs to realise that people don’t necessarily stop wanting to learn, to grow, to advance their skills just because they are getting older.”

“I feel like the organisation has missed an enormous potential to fully utilise the experience, expertise and knowledge of older employees. We have so much to contribute and yet are continually passed over for any training or advancement. Any leadership courses or conferences feature ‘younger’ staff. I think there needs to be a serious commitment to older workers with a range of training options clearly laid out.”

“The organisation needs to remove the attitude ‘Well, you have to accept that you aren’t getting any younger, so we’re not going to want to invest resources in training you.’”

“I feel that perhaps the organisation is focusing more on the new starters than those who have been with the organisation for some time, especially when it comes to training.”

Offering training in technology appears to be particularly important. Comments from older employees indicate that they feel their younger colleagues believe they’re behind on new technology. Mature age workers themselves felt they weren’t receiving enough training to keep up with the rapidly advancing technology in their field.





"I'm concerned that over the next few years, I may fall more behind with digital and technological shifts. In my current job, there's so little training offered, and so little time to fit in any training."

"Training in new technologies is a huge need. Older workers have great ideas and aspirations but lack the skills and opportunities to develop these. Regrettably, training and systems capacity have lagged well behind the embracing of the online platform and there is a big gulf between expectations and staff and the public and our capacity to deliver. This impacts on older workers who can feel less up-to-date with technology yet they are keen to learn and do."

"I think new technologies are a big challenge for some older workers and as much training, support and balance as possible are helpful in this regard. Not all new technologies have to be mastered, necessarily, by all workers and some variations of older and newer technologies to ease the training demands on older staff might make sense in some sectors of the organisation."

"Training is absolutely woeful now. The new technology the organisation has installed is extremely complicated but there is not enough training provided. Maybe because of my age, they look to give training to others. I have absolutely no idea about some of the equipment, and rely on crossed fingers and hope nothing goes wrong. Not a good way to operate I think. My total training for the new equipment was 3 half days of informal training - An absolute joke."

Offering training in technology could be one way to make sure that older adults are confident with newer developments, and don't feel as if they're falling behind. It may also help combat the existing stereotypes that suggest that older adults are technology phobic.

### ***Discrimination policies***

It is important that organisations have clear anti-discrimination policies, and that employees feel they can come to HR if they experience discrimination. Several employees raised concerns about the lack of clarity in their organisations discrimination policies in their comments. One such comment is below:

"I would like the organisation to express its appreciation for older workers in very specific terms; to make it unacceptable for people to develop a discriminatory attitude. The current policies around age simply aren't clear enough. The concept of the corporation's elders or seniors is unheard of at my organisation - they are rarely acknowledged or held up as role models except for the presentation of medals to long serving staff members. It's not clear to me what our current policy really achieves."

Messages about the unacceptability of age discrimination, and the importance of older workers, should come from upper management. They should be conveyed in such a way that employees can see that messages condemning ageism have full organisational support. Employees should feel that the organisation truly supports the message, not that they are just promoting it to avoid appearing discriminatory. Many employees were



cynical about what really lay behind their organisation's discrimination policies. Some comments include:

"My organisation is very interested in "ticking the boxes" and paying lip service to "values". You can't make people behave well, you can only lead by example and until management do lead by example - and this includes people at the executive level as well as the tier below - not much will change. The organisation spouting fatuous nonsense about "values", when such values are not in evidence in management, just increases the cynicism on the ground."

"It is my firm belief that the top levels of management make all the right noises concerning ageism, but it is only lip service. It would be nice if they would do something more"

### ***Valuing older workers contributions***

One issue raised repeatedly by participants in their comments was the fact that the organisation made no clear attempt to recognise the important contributions by the older employees. Some comments suggest that their organisation institutes awards that recognise their length of service and experience. Some of these comments are listed below:

"I guess the major issue I feel many mature workers face in my organisation is that of feeling valued, of feeling as if we matter. I have loved the job I've done for many years but now I feel there is no place for me or what I believe in or am passionate about. I think they would like to get rid of me, and others like me, but I do not understand why they have to trash and rubbish our commitment and valuable input over many years in the process."

"Older employees previous work experience is not taken into account by the organisation. There needs to be an overall focus on the fact that older employees have something of value to bring to the organisation."

"We have younger executives who are not aware of the history or achievements of their older members. Indeed, a generational disregard is developing within a number of the executive. I would like to see a greater understanding of what older workers bring to the workplace."

"I've always 'been there' for my organisation but don't feel that I'm getting rewarded for my career-long effort (which is a pity). There should be more rewards for those who have given their entire working lives to the organisation, but only if they have performed exceptionally well over their entire career. Look after the 'great greys'."

"The skills of older employees should be more valued. There are many older employees that have skills you cannot possibly have as a young inexperienced worker. There is no evidence that these skills are at all valued by the organisation. The organisation needs to acknowledge the value of older workers and utilise them."

"Recognise length of service and age as well as rank. Having spoken to other workers who are of a similar age and length of service, a number of



points are common to me and others in my position. Firstly, our organisation values rank higher than experience. Long serving (older) members are made to feel redundant because we receive no financial or positional advancement based on the level of experience we carry, yet we are often sought out when difficult issues or knowledge is required. A 25 year serving worker is seen by the organisation as of no more 'value' than a person in the same position with only 5 years experience."

## Summary

As Australia tackles an ageing population, much consideration has been given to what incentives may be offered to mature-age workers to keep them in the workforce. These incentives are important, but only when introduced in conjunction with an understanding of the potentially negative experiences faced by older employees at work. There are negative stereotypes surrounding mature-age workers, and as long as these stereotypes continue to exist, so too will the aversive experience of *stereotype threat*. This research investigated whether Australian mature-age workers experienced stereotype threat, and whether the experience of stereotype threat was associated with more negative workplace attitudes and behaviours. A brief summary of the findings is provided below. Taken together, these findings suggest that stereotype threat has the potential to be a significant problem for mature-age workers, and that stereotype threat can lead to lowered psychological well-being and poorer job attitudes.

### **The impact of stereotype threat on workplace attitudes and behaviours**

The experience of stereotype threat was linked with more negative workplace attitudes and behaviours. Higher levels of stereotype threat were linked with lower job satisfaction, lower emotional commitment to the organisation and lower job involvement. Higher levels of stereotype threat were also linked with higher retirement intentions and greater intentions to quit. This finding is particularly important, as it seems the experience of stereotype threat can counteract the current efforts to keep older employees in the workforce for longer.

### **The impact of stereotype threat on psychological well-being**

The experience of stereotype threat was linked with poorer psychological well-being. Higher levels of stereotype threat were associated with lower levels of life satisfaction and elevated work mental health problems. These findings are particularly troubling, considering that psychological well-being has been linked to mortality (Collins, Gleib, & Goldman, 2009).

### **Concluding on a more positive note**

Although this research demonstrates that experiences of stereotype threat are linked to a variety of negative outcomes amongst mature-age workers, it is important to note that many of the older participants experienced only low levels of stereotype threat or did not experience stereotype threat at all. There is considerable evidence that there are some positive changes that occur in age. In particular, the ability to regulate emotions appears



to improve as people age (Phillips, Henry, Hosie & Milne, 2008). Emotion regulation refers to the processes by which we exert control over the emotions we experience and outwardly display. It has been shown that relative to younger adults, older adults are better at using strategies to improve their subjective experience - for instance, by distancing themselves from unpleasant memories or by positively reappraising negative situations. These age-related gains in the capacity for emotion regulation have been linked to specific benefits in other domains, including social functioning and mental health (Gross et al., 1997; Gross & Munoz, 1995). In combination, this prior research suggests that an enhanced capacity to regulate affective states may lead older adults to being less vulnerable to experiences of stereotype threat, such as by distancing themselves from others who are lead them to feel stereotype threat in the first place, or by reappraising potentially stereotype threatening information or situations in a more neutral or positive light. Thus, while stereotype threat has the potential to hinder the success of Australia's ageing workforce, not all mature age employees are equally vulnerable. Nonetheless, it seems that stereotype threat is a pressing concern for organisations that desire to retain their mature-age talent and help them reach their potential.



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