

# **Stereotype Threat and Mature Age Workers**

**December 2011**

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Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

# **Stereotype Threat and Mature Age Workers**

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**Productive  
Ageing Centre**

**National Seniors  
Australia**

## Foreword

Given Australia's ageing population and growing shortage of skilled workers, the Australian Government has introduced a number of policies and programs over time to increase workforce participation by mature age Australians (aged 50 and over). These include retraining and re-skilling as well as job search support programs.

The most recent announcements include a gradual increase in the qualifying age for the Age Pension for both men and women from 65 to 67 by 2023, abolition of the superannuation guarantee age limit to allow employees aged 70 and over to receive the superannuation guarantee for the first time, and creating a separate statutory office for an Age Discrimination Commissioner.

While these initiatives are undoubtedly important, it is equally important to understand the psychological factors that may affect mature age workers' satisfaction with work and ultimately their decision to stop working. One such important factor is stereotype threat, which occurs when an individual believes that they may be the target of demeaning stereotypes. The stereotypes about mature age workers usually focus on negative and inaccurate assumptions, such as they are set in their ways, prone to health problems, only want part-time work or are inept with technology.

This study 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. The research revealed two disturbing findings about mature age workers who do experience stereotype threat regarding their age – they have more negative job attitudes, and these are associated with intentions to quit or retire. This suggests that the experience of stereotype threat at work can counteract efforts made to keep older adults in the workplace for longer.

However, the research showed that while stereotype threat can hinder the success of Australia's ageing workforce, not all mature age employees are equally vulnerable. Nonetheless, organisations need to understand and combat stereotype threat if they want to keep their mature age talent and help them reach their potential, and to ensure they themselves are not inadvertently reinforcing negative stereotypes.

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December 2011

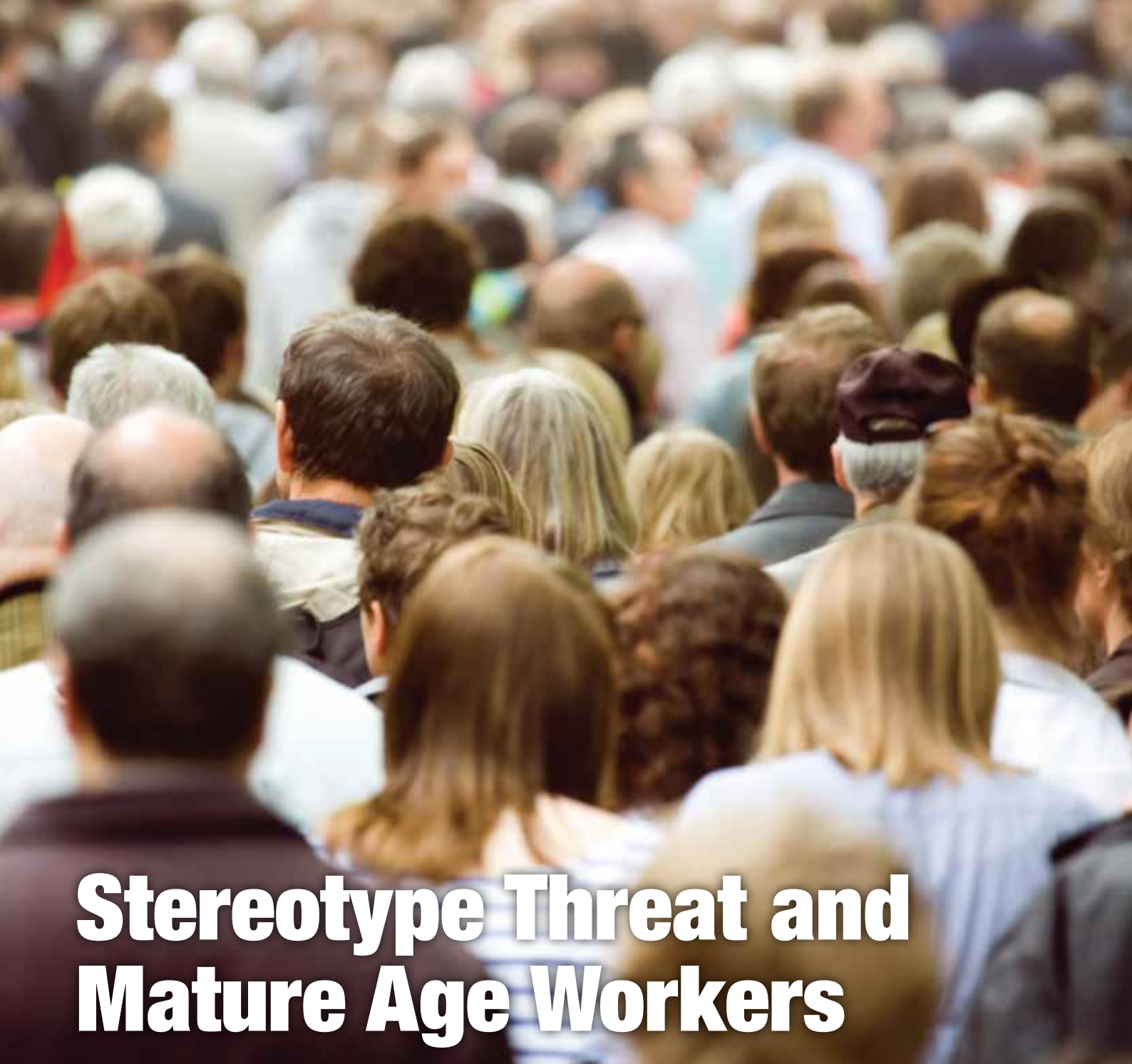
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# Stereotype Threat and Mature Age Workers

## INTRODUCTION

What are the psychological factors that keep mature age workers happy in their jobs, and less likely to press the retirement button? While there are many elements that influence work satisfaction and retirement decisions, one factor that has been little studied is *stereotype threat*. This occurs when people believe they may be the targets of demeaning stereotypes.

The purpose of this research is to examine whether Australian mature age employees experience stereotype threat, and to investigate the potential

impact that stereotype threat has on mature age employees' attitudes and behaviours at work. This study illuminates the effects of stereotype threat on mature age workers. Understanding the issue will help organisations to recognise when it occurs, and combat the problem. Given Australia's ageing population and growing shortage of skilled workers, retaining older adults in the workforce is vital. Understanding and dealing with stereotype threat can be an important part of keeping mature age workers satisfied and contributing.

### Importance of this research

It is important to understand the potentially negative experience of older adults in the workforce so that problems in the work environment can be fixed. This research is equally important for the well-being of the mature age workers themselves. Satisfaction with work is related to emotional well-being across the lifespan (Nolen-Hoeksema & Ahrens, 2002). Emotional well-being is linked with mortality (Collins, Gleib & Goldman, 2009), meaning that it is particularly important to understand the factors that contribute to well-being in older adulthood. Negative age stereotypes may also have long-term consequences for the well-being of mature age 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).

### Stereotype threat – what it means

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

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 mature age workers (e.g., they are technologically inept and have less potential for development), mature age 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 compound the stress for mature age employees.

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.

### Why stereotype threat matters

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, Auman, Colcombe & Rahhal, 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.

Other research shows that stereotype threat can lead people to disengage from domains in which they feel stereotyped, feel dejected and lower their career aspirations (Davies, Spencer & Steele, 2005).



## Stereotyping and older adults

Stereotype threat can be a significant problem for mature age 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 shown that negative stereotypes about age can affect behaviour in tangible ways. 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, et al., 2003).

## 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 (Ng & Feldman, 2008), many people continue to hold negative opinions about mature age workers. Research has demonstrated that younger workers rate mature age workers as having lower job qualifications, less potential for development, and as being less qualified for physically demanding jobs (Finkelstein, Burke & Raju, 1995). Mature age workers are also viewed as less productive, less flexible and less willing to learn than their younger counterparts (Van Dalen, Henkens & Schippers, 2010). Overall, the evidence shows that stereotypes relating to mature age workers are consistently negative, and apply across different occupations. These findings suggest that older adults are likely to be susceptible to stereotype threat in the workplace.

Even when a person does not believe such stereotyping to be true, the worry is that he or she is being judged by the stereotype. So mature age workers are likely to experience stereotype threat, with the possible results of disrupted performance and being less engaged.

## The Goal of this Research

Despite the increasing importance of mature age 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. We also examined the relationship between stereotype threat and mature age workers' intentions to quit their job, as well as their intentions to retire.

### Stereotype threat was assessed using a 6-item measure:

- Some of my colleagues feel that I'm not committed to my career because of my age
- Some of my colleagues feel that I have less to contribute because of my age
- I feel that my career options are limited because of my age
- People of my age often face biased evaluations in this workplace
- My age does not affect people's perception of my abilities at work
- Stereotypes about mature age workers have never affected me

### Life satisfaction was assessed using a 5-item measure:

- In most ways, my life is close to ideal
- The conditions of my life are excellent
- I am satisfied with my life
- So far I have gotten the important things I want in life
- If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing

### Work mental health problems was assessed using a 12-item measure:

- Tense
- Depressed
- Uneasy
- Gloomy
- Worried
- Miserable
- Calm
- Cheerful
- Contented
- Enthusiastic
- Relaxed
- Optimistic

## METHOD

In total, 1,428 mature age employees 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 measures how much employees felt they had been judged on the basis of their age (adapted from von Hippel, Issa, Ma & Stokes, 2011).

Employees were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point 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 (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985).

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 (Warr, 1990).

Participating employees rated 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 associated with performance at work and intentions to quit (Brayfield & Rothe, 1951). Employee satisfaction is important to all facets of the employee experience, and if linked with stereotype threat, could have a pervasive negative influence.

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, and perform better. As commitment is associated with a wide range of positive organisational outcomes, it is important to understand how it is linked with stereotype threat.

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, Alliger & Stone-Romero, 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 also been linked with work performance and turnover.

Job involvement was assessed by asking employees the extent to which they were involved with their work above and beyond completing the basic requirements of their job.

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 involvement.

## Job satisfaction was assessed using a 5-item measure:

- I feel satisfied with my present job
- Most days I am enthusiastic about my work
- Each day at work seems like it will never end
- I find real enjoyment in my work
- I consider my job to be rather unpleasant

## Emotional commitment to the organisation was assessed using a 6-item measure:

- I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with (company name)
- I really feel as if (company name) problems are my own
- I do not feel like “part of the family” at (company name)
- I do not feel “emotionally attached” to (company name)
- My place of work has a great deal of personal meaning for me
- I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to (company name)

## Job involvement was assessed using a 5-item measure:

- I don’t mind staying overtime to finish something I’m working on
- I usually show up for work a little early to get things ready
- I often try to think of ways of doing my job more effectively
- I am really interested in my work
- I often do extra work that isn’t required

### **Intentions to retire was measured using a 3-item measure:**

- I would like to retire in the near future
- I plan to retire in the near future
- I expect to retire in the near future

### **Intentions to quit was measured using a 2-item measure:**

- I am seriously considering quitting this job for an alternative employer.
- During the next year, I will probably look for a new job outside (company name)

### **Retirement intentions**

Retirement intentions of mature age workers are important, given that companies and governments are introducing incentives to retain skilled mature age 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).

Employee agreement or disagreement was assessed 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**

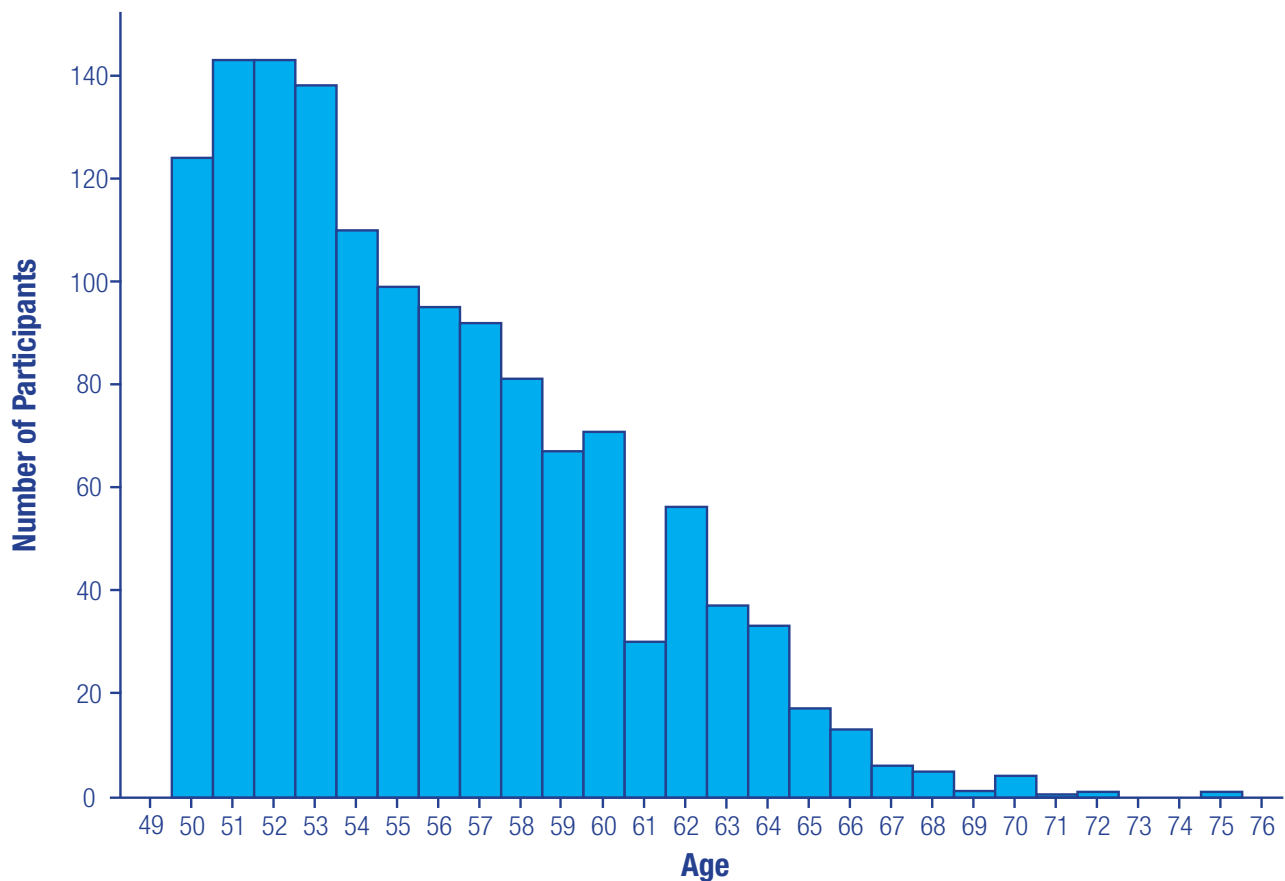
Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item on a 7-point scale where 1 was “strongly disagree” and 7 was “strongly agree”. A higher score on this measure indicated a greater intention to quit (Boroff & Lewin, 1997).

## RESULTS

### Sample demographics

In total, 1428 workers aged 50 and over completed the survey.

*Figure 1: The Age Distribution of the Sample*



#### 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.

#### Tenure

The participants had generally worked for their organisations for a long 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.

#### Age

The mean age of participants was 55.6 years, and participants ages ranged from 50 to 75 years, with 55.3% of the sample being 55 and under. There were no differences in age distribution by gender. Age was related to tenure, with mature age employees generally having worked for their organisations for significantly longer.

## Experiences of stereotype threat

The majority of mature age 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 3.3, which is around

the middle of the 7-point scale. These findings suggest that stereotype threat can be a big problem for some mature age workers. Mature age workers experienced stereotype threat in many subtle ways, as shown in the following comments:

*“ 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. ”*

*“ 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 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. ”

“ 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. ”

“ 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 idea-less? ”

“ 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.... 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. ”

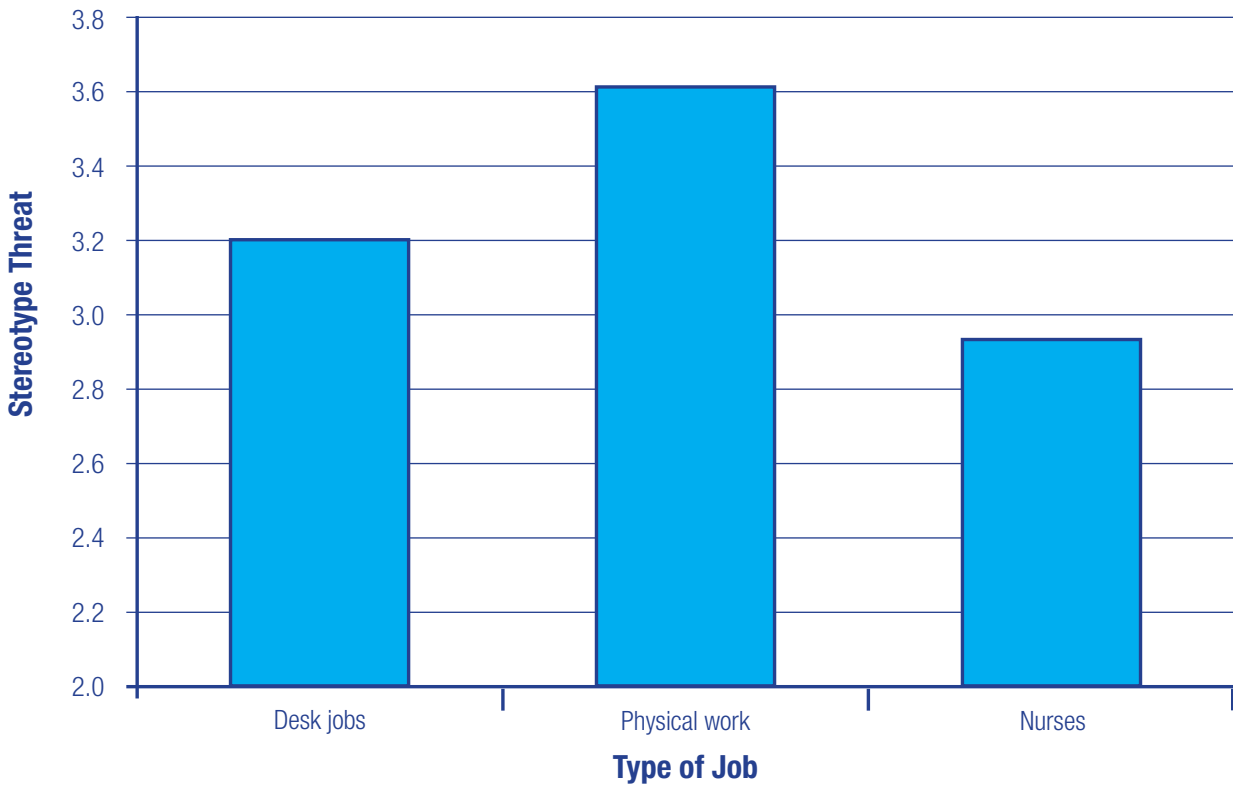
### Stereotype threat and gender

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 3.4. The mean stereotype threat reported by females was 3.2. This finding, however, seems to be driven by the types of jobs men were more likely to hold. Further analysis suggested 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

For the 865 employees (57.7% of the sample) who worked in white-collar office jobs, the mean stereotype threat was 3.2. For the 492 employees (32.8% of the sample) who worked at a more physical job, the mean stereotype threat was 3.6, which was significantly higher than the rest of the sample. 141 employees (9% of the sample) were nurses, and the mean stereotype threat experienced by this group was 2.9, which was significantly lower than the rest of the sample.

*Figure 2: The Relationship between Stereotype Threat and Type of Job*





It seems that stereotype threat is highest for mature age employees who undertake work of a more physical nature. This 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, mature age employees working in a more physical job may be more aware of the stereotypes surrounding mature age employees, and these stereotypes may be raised more systematically than the more subtle stereotypes facing mature age workers in more traditional white-collar environments. Employee comments highlighting the issues faced by mature age workers in physical jobs include:

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

*“ There is a perception that mature age 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. ”*

### Stereotype threat and age

Feelings of stereotype threat were not more pronounced amongst mature age 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.

### Stereotype threat and tenure

There was no systematic relationship between stereotype threat and tenure with the organisation.

## 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.

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. ”*

### 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.

## 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.

### 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.

### Job involvement

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

### Retirement intentions

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

Some mature age workers highlighted worries around retirement in their comments. 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:

“ 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 mature age employees to ‘move over’.”

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

### 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. Some 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 a mature age person, rather than trying to address the underlying problem.”

“ There is certainly nothing being done to encourage mature age 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 one farewell.”

## IMPLICATIONS

### Impact of stereotype threat in the workplace

This research revealed two disturbing findings about stereotype threat and work.

Firstly, the research demonstrated that mature age workers who experience stereotype threat regarding their age have more negative job attitudes. They felt less job satisfaction, less emotionally committed to the organisation and less involved in their job. Although not examined in this study, other research has shown how negative workplace attitudes can affect 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 mature age employees are true. Thus an ongoing cycle of stereotype threat could emerge. These more negative job attitudes also have the potential to lower workplace morale and to “rub off” on other employees.

Secondly, this study showed that experiences of stereotype threat are associated with increased intentions to retire or quit. Turnover and retirement are costly, 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 an exodus of experience and talent, 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. It therefore makes sense to try and neutralise stereotype threat in the workplace to avoid the unnecessary loss of mature age workers, as well as to increase workers’ satisfaction and well-being. How might this be done?

This research is the first to demonstrate that mature age workers do experience stereotype threat at work, and future research should investigate how the problem may be addressed. Some ideas to reduce stereotype threat at work are proposed below, but more research is needed to investigate whether these strategies would be effective.

### 1. Interventions

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.

### 2. Promoting positive role types

Promoting positive stereotypes of mature age workers may help to counteract the existing negative stereotypes. Positive stereotypes of mature age 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 include:

“ 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 mature age colleagues. ”

“ It would be nice to see the organisation send a message about maintaining respect for the mature age worker, especially as new employees have no idea what role or contribution may have been made by the mature age 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 and depth of experience. ”

Introducing programs that emphasise what older adults may contribute, such as mentoring, could help promote positive stereotypes of mature age workers. Many mature age 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 mature age employees retire.

### 3. 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, as the following comments show:

*“ 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 mature age 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 mature age 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. Mature age employees felt that their younger colleagues believe they're behind on new technology; they also 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. Mature age workers have great ideas and aspirations but lack the skills and opportunities to develop these. ”*

*“ I think new technologies are a big challenge for some mature age 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 mature age 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.

### 4. Discrimination policies

It is important that organisations have clear anti-discrimination policies, and that employees feel they can speak up if they experience discrimination. Several employees raised concerns about the lack of clarity in their organisations' discrimination policies. One such comment is listed here:

*“ I would like the organisation to express its appreciation for mature age 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 mature age workers, should come from upper management. 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 included:

*“ 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. ”*

## 5. Valuing mature age workers' contributions

One issue raised repeatedly by participants was the fact that the organisation made no clear attempt to recognise the important contributions of mature age employees. Some of these comments are listed:

*“ 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. ”*

*“ Mature age employees' previous work experience is not taken into account by the organisation. There needs to be an overall focus on the fact that mature age 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 mature age members. Indeed, a generational disregard is developing within a number of the executive. I would like to see a greater understanding of what mature age 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 mature age employees should be more valued. There are many mature age 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 mature age workers and utilise them. ”*

*“ Recognise length of service and age as well as rank.....Long serving (mature age) 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. ”*

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

The experience of stereotype threat was linked with more negative workplace attitudes and behaviours, including:

- lower job satisfaction
- lower emotional commitment to the organisation
- lower job involvement
- higher retirement intentions, and
- greater intentions to quit.

This last finding is particularly important, as the experience of stereotype threat can counteract current efforts to keep mature age 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 more work related mental health problems. These findings are particularly troubling, considering that psychological well-being has been linked to mortality.

## SUMMARY

With an ageing population, Australia needs to retain its mature age workers in the workforce, and various incentives have been introduced to help this happen. These incentives are important, but only in conjunction with an understanding of the potentially negative experiences faced by mature age employees at work. There are negative stereotypes surrounding mature age workers, and as long as these stereotypes continue to exist, so too will the negative 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. Taken together, the findings suggest that stereotype threat has the potential to be a significant problem for mature age workers, and that stereotype threat can lead to lower psychological well-being and poorer job attitudes.

### Concluding on a more positive note

Although this research showed that experiences of stereotype threat are linked to negative outcomes amongst mature age workers, many of the mature age participants experienced only low levels of stereotype threat or did not experience stereotype threat at all.

Some positive changes occur as we 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 may lead older adults to being less vulnerable to experiences of stereotype threat. They could do this by distancing themselves from those who lead them to feel stereotype threat in the first place, or by reappraising potentially stereotyping situations in a more neutral or positive light.

Thus, while stereotype threat can hinder the success of Australia's ageing workforce, not all mature age employees are equally vulnerable. Nonetheless, organisations that want to keep their mature age talent and help them reach their potential need to understand and combat stereotype threat.

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The National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre is an initiative of National Seniors Australia and the Department of Health and Ageing to advance research into issues of productive ageing. The Centre's aim is to advance knowledge and understanding of all aspects of productive ageing to improve the quality of life of people aged 50 and over.

The Centre's key objectives are to:

- Support quality consumer oriented research informed by the experience of people aged 50 and over;
- Inform Government, business and the community on productive ageing across the life course;
- Raise awareness of research findings which are useful for mature age people; and
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