BRIEF REPORT

Ageism and Abuse in the Workplace: A New Frontier

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The economic crisis in the United States has led to increased media coverage of older workers being laid off, forced to retire, or working longer than planned. Embedded in these reports are the intimations of workplace abuse. Social workers need to start taking into account ageism and abuse in the workplace as possible cooccurring issues to effectively implement policy, and organizational change that will address both issues. This brief article discusses ageism and abuse in the workplace using a human rights framework, the current state of the literature, and directions for future research.

KEYWORDS Ageism, workplace abuse, bullying, human rights

There is movement within social work to recognize social problems as human rights issues. In doing so, the overarching Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, becomes the guiding document for examination of the issue of ageism and abuse in the workplace (Wronka, 2008), as it is noted in Article 23, “Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Furthermore, ageism and abuse in the workplace certainly violates the notion of “just and favourable conditions of work” in Article 23. However, to understand the current magnitude of
these two social problems, it is first important to understand the current and projected demographics.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

As scholars, professionals, advocates, and students are well aware, the adult population, aged 60 and older, by the year 2030 will represent close to 20% or one-fifth of the population, a significant increase from the 10% of the population this age group represented in 2007 (Administration on Aging, 2008). Similar increases are also occurring in the workplace. Labor force participation of men aged 65 and older increased between 2002 and 2007, from 17.7% to 20.5% (3.2 million men; Administration on Aging, 2008). Likewise, labor force participation of women has been increasing since 2000 from 9.4% to the current 2007 rate of 12.6% (2.6 million women; Administration on Aging, 2008). By 2007, 5.8 million (16.0%) Americans aged 65 and older who were in the labor force (working or actively seeking work) constituted 3.8% of the labor force (Administration on Aging, 2008), compared to 12% of Americans aged 65 and older who were in the workforce in 2000. Current projections by the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that, by 2016, workers 65 and older are “expected to account for 6.1 percent of the total labor force” (Older Workers, 2008, p. 9). The increase in labor force participation of individuals 65 and older can be attributed to changes in economic conditions and retirement policies.

Research by the National Bureau of Economic Research indicates that “wealthier workers will be forced to delay retirement, but a larger number of workers with fewer economic resources will be forced into retirement because of their inability to find new jobs” (Coile & Levine, 2009, p. 29). At the same time, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 6.9% decrease in the number of individuals aged 16–24 entering, or on the verge of entering, the workforce from 2006–2016; and therefore the need to retain older workers may also start to occur. Thus, one would expect that, with more individuals forced into retirement along with workforce retention of older works, a projected increase in labor force participation is not surprising.

AGEISM

Ageism is a term coined by Dr. Robert Butler in 1968 to describe the “systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against older people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplished this with skin color and gender” (Butler, 1989, p. 139). Research has shown that ageism is “pervasive in media, healthcare, education and advertising” (Dennis & Thomas, 2007), and is often seen as cooccurring with sexism (Barnet, 2005; Hatch, 2005), and technological change (Cutler, 2005). Ageism in the workplace
was recognized and addressed by Congress through enactment of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) in 1967.

Although the ADEA acknowledged ageism as a social problem that disproportionately affects employees 40 years of age or older, it did not address ageism as a human rights issue. Rather, the ADEA is an employment law that addresses ageism from an economic standpoint in that back pay and future loss may be awarded, but there is no recovery for emotional distress or punitive damages, as is the case with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Dennis & Thomas, 2007). Although there has been progress in recognizing that Americans are working beyond the age of 65, and the age limit of 70 for protection under the ADEA was lifted in 1987, there has been little movement to reframe age discrimination from an economic issue to a human rights issue in the United States.

**ABUSE IN THE WORKPLACE**

Workplace abuse is defined in various ways by diverse disciplines, including public health, substance abuse, nursing, legal, and educational (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). In 2007, a nationally representative study conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute defined workplace abuse as experiencing “any or all of the following types of repeated mistreatment: sabotage by others that prevented work from getting done, verbal abuse, threatening conduct, intimidation, humiliation” and found that current workplace abuse for those aged 50–64 was lower than any other age group (10% vs. 19% aged 18–29). However, 30% of the oldest age group reported a lifetime incidence of bullying that was unacceptably higher than any other age group (26% aged 30–49; 19% aged 18–29; Namie, 2007).

Other definitions of workplace abuse include Brodsky’s 1976 (cited in Keashly & Jagatic, 2003, p. 33) definition of “repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate or get a reaction from another. It is treatment which persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates or otherwise discomforts another person” (p. 2). From a more organizational perspective, Robinson and Bennett in 1995 (cited in Keashly & Jagatic, 2003, p. 33) used the definition of “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and, in so doing, threatens the well-being of the organization or its members, or both” (p. 555).

Keashly and Jagatic (2003), in their review of recent studies, noted that due to the overlapping nature of the definitions of abuse, that one could state, based on a 1993 insurance study of 600 full-time workers, that the incidence of workplace abuse in the United States is 25% (one in four individuals). The authors also noted a more recent 2000 statewide Michigan study that found 59% of individuals in the workplace reported experiencing some form of emotionally abusive behavior. Thus, the various definitions of workplace abuse, some with greater overlap than others when used to
conduct research, indicate that this is an issue occurring at an unacceptable rate and perhaps something that is on the rise.

AGEISM AND ABUSE IN THE WORKPLACE

What is known about ageism AND abuse in the workplace? To shed some light on this issue, a multidatabase search was conducted using Fordham University’s multidatabase search option on November 11, 2009. Using the search terms “ageism and workplace abuse,” “ageism and abuse,” “ageism and bullying,” “ageism and workplace bullying,” “workplace abuse and older adults,” “bullying and older adults” and “workplace harassment and older adults,” we found that, although many articles address the issue of abuse or ageism, very few articles address the relevant topic of the cooccurrence of ageism and abuse in the workplace in the Unites States, suggesting a strong need to start investigating the cooccurrence of these two issues.

Research on this topic should strive to achieve, first and foremost, a clear and concise definition of abuse that draws, at least in part, on workers’ own definitions. This would allow researchers and organizations to address the issue and to measure the impact of policy implementation and outcomes. A concise, agreed-upon definition, achieved perhaps through consensus by a panel of experts, would also allow the field to move forward toward creation of a measure to capture the impact of abuse and ageism in the workplace.

To what extent Article 23 has been enforced and/or violated in the United States among those 60 and older is a question that should be explored as it is evident that ageism and abuse in the workplace, together, serve as a way to deny basic human rights to older individuals through the use of negative stereotypes, bullying and economic oppression.

Conceptual models are also needed to help guide researchers in developing measurement tools. Conceptual models of abuse in the workplace, elder abuse, and domestic violence do exist and have several factors in common: power and control, dependency, and negative outcomes. Perhaps it is time to start revisiting these conceptual models to help create a new conceptual model for ageism and abuse in the workplace. This would allow for a more comprehensive framework for investigating ageism and abuse in the workplace. Furthermore, the exploration of a conceptual model should include research to explore whether certain organizational structures that promote or prevent abuse and ageism from occurring.

I believe raising this issue and having discussions about the overlap of ageism and abuse will raise awareness and sensitize social workers, human resource administrations, and other workers to this issue. Only through an ongoing and open discussion will scholars, professionals, advocates, and
students arrive at a concise and agreed-upon definition for workplace abuse, a conceptual model that integrates ageism and abuse in the workplace, and research that explores the combined impacts of ageism and abuse. Only through these steps can scholars, professionals, advocates, and students create effective workplace policy and practice that promotes the human rights of all workers.

REFERENCES


