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What's Their Expiration Date? Age Discrimination in the Workplace

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What's their Expiration Date? Age Discrimination in the Workplace

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Bianca L. Tomlin

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What’s their Expiration Date? Age Discrimination in the Workplace
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Abstract
Age discrimination, although illegal, continues to have a presence within organizations against older individuals. Previous research on age discrimination has determined that the social identity of those older workers discriminated against are affected. This project examines how older workers are being discriminated against, how age discrimination affects the dignity of an older worker, and how age discrimination affects the professional identity of older workers. This study focuses on eleven white-collar workers, age 45-65 who have experienced age discrimination in the workplace. Analysis revealed that older workers found themselves being fired from organizations, barred from entry into organizations, and denied training opportunities because they were an expense to the organization. The analysis also revealed participants felt a lack of dignity where they felt worthless and their knowledge was unvalued in the organization and their professional identity suffered as they felt insecure for their future and began to question their abilities as a worker during and after being discriminated against.

Theoretical and practical implications are offered for those organizations that overtly and/or covertly participate in age discrimination and how to create a more inclusive environment for their older workers. Recommendations for future research are presented and a practical application for inclusivity of older workers in organizations is presented.

Keywords: Age discrimination, social identity, dignity, professional identity.
Dedication

This is dedicated to my father for bringing to light this issue and being strong enough to stand up to it and let his voice be heard. Thank you for being my inspiration for this project. This is also dedicated to my family. Mom and Dad – Thank you will never be said enough for your guidance. I can confidently say that there is no way I would have gotten through graduate school without the support and love from my loved ones. A special dedication to my Grandma B. Thank you for watching over me.
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My Thesis Participants: Thank you for letting your story be told. Continue to stand up for what you believe in and never doubt your ability to do anything, “just because of a few gray hairs”. This project is because of you!
Table of Contents

Contents
Abstract 3
Dedication 4
Acknowledgements 5
Chapter I: Introduction 7
Chapter II: Literature Review 13
Chapter III: Methodology 45
Chapter IV: Analysis 62
  Perceived Age Discrimination 62
  Dignity 75
  Professional Identity 86
Chapter V: Discussion 97
  Practical Application 112
Chapter VI: Conclusion 127
References 129
Appendices
  Appendix 1: Informed Consent 139
  Appendix 2: Interview Instrument 143
  Appendix 3: Call to Action 145
  Appendix 4: Interview Participants 147
Introduction

My first experience understanding the challenges our economy is facing in regards to job retention happened a little over a year ago. I understood the scarcity of jobs in our country’s current economic state, but did not realize the impact until it was at my doorstep. My father, a salesman in the transportation industry, with over twenty-five years of experience, would be considered a professional in his field. He is the kind of person that enjoys the monotonous questions people ask such as, “What do you do for work?” when engaging in conversation. I cannot recall a time of my father complaining about work. Up until recently, my father has always nudged me in the direction of the transportation industry with the hopes that I may one day join him in the field. I considered it as a real possibility, up until recently.

My father was laid off three times within the span of one year. The reason? He was told he was too old and a monetary liability. People in white-collar, middle-management jobs, with a lifetime of experience, skills, and knowledge are finding themselves at a crossroads. Is it due to their lack of qualifications or inability to keep up with demand? No. Contrary to societal belief, these professionals are finding themselves at a loss of a job due to society’s idea of the capabilities of older workers and cultural implications.

For many years, an older employee within an organization was not seen as being anything but an advantage or an asset to the organization. With older workers most times residing as the “face” of these organizations it is questioned as to why there has been a rise in discrimination against older workers. This question is not as simple to answer as it may seem. First, one must understand what it means to discriminate against someone due to his or her age. For some people age discrimination happens in overt ways where
organizations are barring them from the organization simply because they are “too old.”
In other circumstances, organizations participate in age discrimination covertly and may
not even understand that they are discriminating against their older workers. As a result,
there is confusion over what *is* and what *is not* age discrimination and how organizations
are participating in discriminatory practices.

*Age Discrimination*

Discrimination persists in many social realms in our society. Discrimination is a
critical term used in understanding the problems our society has with diversity.
McConnachie (2014) describes discrimination as, "treating persons differently in a way
which impairs their fundamental dignity as human beings" (p. 610). To discriminate
against something is to "criticize it, or to assert that it is wrong" (Helman, 2008, p. 3). For
this study's purpose, I focus on age discrimination within employment practices and the
workplace. Discrimination is ethically suspect because it "accords differential treatment"
(Woodruff, 1976, p. 158), where in this case age discrimination accords differential
treatment of those of "older age" in the workplace. The unjust treatment of different
categories of people based on the grounds of their age is the basis of this study.

Similar to other social inequalities, age discrimination involves associating
negative qualities to a certain age group, or a socially constructed bias to a particular
group. Age discrimination can manifest in a variety of ways as stated by Macnicol
(2005). He states, “Ageism is 'age proxies' in personnel decisions relating to hiring,
firing, promotion, re-training and mandatory retirement” (Macnicol, 2005, p. 6).
Although the act of age discrimination is illegal, human resource departments play a large
role in being discriminatory towards someone due to their age or perceived age. As more
claims of age discrimination occur daily in our society, age discrimination becomes one of "the most elusive and damaging type of discrimination" (Kendig, 1978, p. 9). In other words, this discrimination can affect not only the individual, it can also affect the perceptions within organizations and society.

Ageism can be seen in media, advertising, education, etc. Age is a social category that readily has preconceived norms related to it. As I discuss in this study, age discrimination does more than just affect a person’s ability to be in the workplace. It also affects her/his dignity in the workplace and how they see themselves as a professional, or their professional identity. The notion that abilities decline with age creates the perception in institutions that older employees are not as efficient and effective as their younger counterparts. Negative age biases exist before and outside of the workforce too. Within the workplace, it has been found that there are damaging effects such as affecting the professional social identity and dignity of older workers. With age discrimination defined, it is important to understand the terms and legislation that "protect" individuals from age discrimination.

Age may be just a number, but with that number comes societal status, expectations, and biases. Age has been, and continues to be, an important cultural dimension of status throughout our society (Roscigno et al., 2007). Dennis and Thomas (2007) confirm that ageism is a social injustice that is a part of American life. They discuss the number of age-bias complaints received in 2005: "16,585 age bias complaints were filed by the EEOC". 90% of age discrimination accusations do not make it to trial (Dennis & Thomas, 2007), which shows the severity and prevalence of age discrimination
as a social injustice. Attempting to protect against this injustice, there are specific regulations and laws that all organizations are subject to.

Before deciding upon age discrimination as a topic to study, I looked to see if there was a need for further research. There are rules and governing regulations that protect individuals from age discrimination, but, nonetheless, it is happening.

Current Laws and Regulations

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is responsible for, “Enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of a person’s race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 of older), disability or genetic information” (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016). The EEOC is the governing body that investigates charges of discrimination against employers who are covered by the law. This institution investigates allegations and charges against the various social injustices (race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or genetic information). In 2002, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) "received more than 20,000 age discrimination cases" (Kaye & Cohen, 2008, p. 30). These are only the "documented" age discrimination claims. This does not include the hundreds and thousands of age discrimination acts that go unclaimed. Age discrimination, “involves treating someone (an applicant or employee) less favorably because of his or her age” (U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, 2016). This excerpt from the EEOC is the foundation of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) of 1967, which is the most prominent of the regulations in our society protecting older workers. The purpose of the ADEA is “to promote the employment of older persons based on ability rather than age” (Dennis &
Thomas, 2007, p. 84). As baby boomers in the workplace are on the rise, knowledge and education about age discrimination is necessary so bias and stereotypes towards older workers do not persist in the organizational realm. Rothenberg and Gardner (2011) explain the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) of 1967 in detail and note that even though the act was implemented 46 years ago to protect aging individuals, age discrimination continues to present obstacles for older employees. There are specifications on what a person can "claim" is age discrimination. Other claims, therefore, are then deemed as perceived age discrimination, and are ultimately "thrown out" as age discrimination cases. Dennis and Thomas (2007) offer insight regarding how to make an anti-age discrimination law more effective and show the limitations of the current act in place. The act states, “It is unlawful for an employer to discriminate in hiring or in any other way of individuals 40 and over (The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1998, p. A-2). This excerpt from the EEOC gives a description of what age frame is protected by the ADEA.

The ADEA has achieved some success in combating age discrimination in the workplace (Gregory, 2001). The problem arises for those who are experiencing age discrimination in ways that are not specified in the ADEA. In this study, I seek to understand individuals’ perceived experiences with age discrimination. Discrimination does not need to be as overt as the ADEA proposes it to be. Since its implementation, there has been great discussion of the changes in what age discrimination and ageism means as academic scholars have discussed multiple definitions. Those agreed upon definitions usually align with the definitions the EEOC and ADEA provide. Of those claims that fall under the agreed upon definitions of age discrimination in 2015, 22.5% or
20,144 of the discrimination charges filed were relating to age out of 89,358 filed charges (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016). Almost one fifth of all discrimination charges filed in 2015 by the EEOC were age discrimination charges. Since 2008, the number of age discrimination cases has stayed steady. According to the U.S. EEOC it states the numbers of age discrimination cases is, “2009: 22,778, 2010: 23,264, 2011: 21,465, 2012: 22,857, 2013: 21,396, 2014: 20,588, 2015: 20,144” (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016). These are only the "documented" age discrimination claims. This does not include the countless acts of age discrimination that go unclaimed. The specificity of the ADEA does not take into consideration the people who have encountered age discrimination that does not fall under the parameters given for a claim to be age discrimination in the ADEA. With laws in place to protect individuals from age discrimination, it is vital to question how age discrimination manifests at institutional and individual levels and the real consequences for those individuals who have experienced age discrimination. The following section examines extant academic research and unpacks the main themes involved in this study.
Literature Review

Many theories have been proposed to explain what motivates the act of age discrimination in the workplace. The literature in academia covers age discrimination and how it affects the individual. However, there seems to be a lack of research on how age discrimination affects certain aspects of the individual such as a person's dignity and professional identity. This literature review will focus on social identity theory, age in the workplace, class, knowledge workers, precarious work, professional identity and dignity.

Current literature presents the themes mentioned above in a variety of contexts. This study will primarily focus on age discrimination in the workplace. Specifically, I address how such discrimination relates to participant understandings of age as a social identity and their dignity as workers. Age discrimination in employment practices and in the workplace, although illegal in the United States and in many parts of the world, has received attention over the past decade across multiple disciplines. What follows is an examination of the major strains of extant research that inform the project and my analysis of interview data.

Age discrimination and ageism have persisted as a recognized form of discrimination for over fifty years. As defined by Robert Butler in 1968, ageism is the "systematic stereotyping of, and discrimination against older people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender" (p. 84). The 1968 definition given was not directly associated with age discrimination in the workplace. Since then, researchers have updated the definition to include implications of the workplace relating to age discrimination and ageism. Age discrimination in the workplace involves treating someone, an applicant, or an employee, less favorably based
on his or her age, which, I argue, can affect a person’s identity and how he/she perceives her/himself and his/her worth. The issue of ageism, as Dennis and Thomas (2007) explain, is present and relevant to our current employment practices because ageist patterns of thinking are embedded in organizational actions and policies.

**Social Identity Theory**

This study is largely grounded in social identity theory. Social identity is broadly defined as, "The individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups" (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002, p. 384). In other words, an individual understands her/himself in relation to social categories of people. Tajfel and Turner describe social identity as, “Those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging” (1979, p. 16). Again, social identity theory is how we make sense of who we are and certain identity characteristics associated with the groups with which we identify. To understand social identity theory completely, it is important to unpack the terms associated with the theory. Identities are informed by associations to groups, people, organizations, and other social and cultural constructions. Identity refers to the various meanings associated with an individual and how others understand those groups as well (Gecas, 1982). The negotiation among personal understanding of self and cultural understandings of social groups intermingle to craft identities. Ibarr (1999) explains, "Self-conceptions are based on people's social roles and group membership as well as the personal and character traits they display and other attributes to them based on their conduct" (p. 766). In other words, personal identities are not just what we think of ourselves. The things we do, how we act, who we are with, our environment, our relationship to social groups, etc. all shape our self-concepts.
According to Steele (2010) social identities greatly impact our lives, whether that be how we act towards a certain situation, the way we respond to challenges, and so on, as everyone can be constrained by their social identity. We all have various social identities based on group membership and social categories we identify with. Our social identities are in constant flux related to context. Research shows that our identities shift based on context and setting. Pratt et al. (2006) continue to flesh out the idea of changing identities by explaining, “Groups and organizations actively engage in shaping members’ identity through socialization” (p. 237). In this instance, socialization processes inform how an individual makes sense of her/himself through interaction with a group or groups. Further, communicating with people in an associated social group by learning the group’s broader practices and attitudes informs how a person makes sense of the group and one’s place within it. Thus, the way one communicates and understands age as an identity can evolve due to group membership and socialization. For example, if an age group is negatively conceptualized and communicated, a person may associate certain identity characteristics towards a person of a certain age informed by social understandings of the group.

The concept of identity negotiation helps unpack the relationships among context, personal identities, and social groups. The concept of identity negotiation is defined as a "transactional interaction process whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others defined self-images" (Ting-Toomey, 2004, p. 217). Thus, we are not just one identity as we are constantly negotiating, socializing, adapting, adding, and disassociating multiple identities. The management of identities is largely understood in social identity theory by
using in-group out-group distinctions. Giles (2013) defines an in-group as a social group or category which an individual strongly identifies with, and an out-group is a social group or category with which individuals do not identify. Each social group communicates distinctive language and speech styles, dress codes, traditions, rituals, and attitudes. Put simply, an in-group is a social category or group that one strongly identifies with. In-group/out-group dynamics can easily be understood by using a popular example from professional sports. A fan of the Green Bay Packers, a team in the National Football League, identifies as a fan (hence a member of the in-group) as he or she learns the practices and understandings of the group while also internalizing that group membership. In contrast, fans of the Chicago Bears, the rival of the Packers, can be labeled the out-group since this is a social group formation a Packers fan would not identify with. This professional sports example is a clear distinction of in-group/out-group dynamics when relating to managing group identifications.

In-group identification is a way of understanding social dominance when communicate identities. Pratto et al. (2006) mention, “Social dominance theory was developed in an attempt to understand how group-based social hierarchy is formed and maintained” (p. 272). In other words, in-group identification is the maintaining of dominant ideologies from a socially dominant group of individuals. Schniter, Shields, and Dickhaut (2012) suggest that the creation of inter-group contrasts create a disparity that in-group stereotypes are relatively different than the stereotypes of the out-group. An example of in-group dominance is describes in a study investigating age stereotypes and cooperation. Schniter, Shields and Dickhaut (2012) examined older adults (over age 50) and younger adults (under age 25) comparing the in-group (the group they belonged to)
to the out-group (the age group they did not belong to). Schniter, et al. (2012) found that ageist beliefs in younger and older adults derive from social constructs which position one age group as being dominant over the other. In other words, when difference is recognized, the in-group becomes the perceived dominant group and the social identities that are associated with the perceived in-group also become dominant.

In order to increase the self-image of the group we belong to, we enhance the status of the group. The in-group will discriminate against the out-group to enhance the in-group’s self-image. We often put people and things into two categories, marking the difference between groups, and the similarities of characteristics and practices in the same group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In other words, we can see ourselves in the group that we belong to, also known as the in-group, as being different from the others, also known as the out-group. This is one way that discriminatory practices can evolve because we recognize members that are not a part of our groups as being different.

Relating to this study in particular, in-group/out-group distinction can be seen in relation to the young workforce and baby boomers that often experience age discrimination. Dominant research relating to the topic of age puts primary focus on the younger workforce or baby boomers. The workers that make up the rest of the workforce are rarely put into focus. Generation X, born 1965-1980 becomes the dominant group in the workforce. LaMotte (2014) further explains Generation X and their position within the workplace. He states, “Generation X may be the smallest portion of the workforce, but they’re your company’s rising current leaders” (LaMotte, 2014, Time). In other words, despite the fact that younger workers and older workers make up the majority of the workforce, Generation X would be considered the perceived dominant, or the
perceived in-group in our working society. This leaves the younger workforce and baby boomers within the workforce the out-group, or often times, the marginalized groups.

This in-group/out-group distinction in relation to the “us” versus “them” dichotomy can also be seen within an organizational context in relation to age of worker. Older workers being a part of this out-group may strive to be a part of the in-group, causing these individuals to work their identities to emulate that of the non-stigmatized group. This is just one example of identity negotiation a person being discriminated against based off their age must manage. Older workers who are discriminated against become a stigmatized majority group being that baby boomers are the largest percentage of our current job market. In a study conducted by Richeson and Shelton (2006), they found that participants would pair photographs of young-old (55-64) looking individuals with more positive stereotypes, and paired photographs of old-old (75 years and older) looking individuals with negative stereotypes. Without their age even being announced, the pictures of perceived, older workers, were stigmatized and judged as “old,” making them a part of the out-group.

As an example of how we have multiple identity locations in organizational contexts, Tracey and Trethewey (2005) provide the framework of a real-self/fake-self dichotomy as part of the process included in managing our social identities. They suggest employees that perform subservient tasks are encouraged to consider their “real selves as separate from organizationally defined selves” (p.169). This positions workers to be their “fake” selves as they perform certain tasks, necessitating a tendency to compartmentalize their public and private selves. One of the social identities that is often being managed within the workplace is how one sees herself as a professional. A way a person who is
experiencing perceived age discrimination in the workplace may be forced to be their “fake” selves in order to make sure they are not associated to the social identities people may readily associate towards people of a certain age.

In terms of attributing characteristics to social groups, there is ample evidence to suggest that there are negative notions and stereotypes about the competence of older adults in the workplace. Hummert et al. (1994) describe conceptualizations of older adults as more forgetful and less able to learn new information. Negative stereotypes, like the example given, can be harmful to the way an older worker sees her/himself. To actively fight the way an older worker’s colleagues see them as a worker, they may be positioned to use their “fake” selves to avoid association with the social identities that are attributed to older workers. To understand why older workers feel a need to display their “fake” selves, it is important to understand how we conceptualize age as an identity.

There are many ways that our society sees being old. Concepts of age are not biologically fixed, they are socially constructed (Vincent, 1995). In other words, a person may biologically be a certain age, but act and appear in ways that are associated with another age group. As Logan et al. (1992) note, “Age is a construct having social content and personal meaning” (p. 451). In other words, the way our society thinks and communicates about age is largely in relation to how we construct and identify age.

The social constructions and the ways that people associate words, actions, attributes, etc. to their age can also be known as age identity. Age identity is defined as “the circumstances under which people attach age labels to themselves and the consequences of those labels” (Logan et al., 1992, p. 451). In other words, among a certain group of people with the same numerical age, there will be an array of categories
(young, old, middle-aged) in which they place themselves. Age identity is the attempt to understanding how people understand themselves in terms of their age. Karp (1988) suggests that “aging messages” increase during one’s 50s, causing distinctive changes in self-conceptions of aging. A different set of social meanings begins to be associated with, and identified with, an aging individual.

Age identity, as it is seen in this study in specific, can be associated with palpable consequences. In other words, if age has social meaning, then age and age identity are susceptible to attitudes, beliefs, self-concepts, feelings, etc. that are not always positive. According to research in Western culture, aging and old age has been viewed with and described as a negative experience. As Gove, Ortega, and Style (1989) note that in a youth-oriented culture, there is a perceived declining well-being and self-esteem as age increases. In other words, the United States values youth and associates positive characteristics to youth. The opposite is associated with old age. The general experiences relating to age are often associated with decline. Studies have demonstrated the “centrality of health for the self-concept and the ways that people strive to maintain a vigorous, healthful, and ultimately youthful presentation of self” (Schafer & Shippee, 2010, p. 250) to distance themselves from displaying socially understood age indicators. In other words, older workers actively “work” to avoid accepting the biological decline of their bodies so they are not associated with the socially constructed age identities that come with an aging body. Negative age stereotypes and ageist attitudes are common. This furthers the idea of the in-group/out-group dichotomy previously discussed. Identity issues are relevant for this study because intergroup age stereotyping processes are closely related to age identities. As Harwood (2008) suggests, “Social identity theory
demonstrates that negative stereotypes reinforce positive in-group identities” (p.136). In other words, ageist communication continues to enforce in-group dominance and marginalization of out-groups in this study specifically, old age, which can be evident in the workplace.

As social beings, we simultaneously negotiate in-group and out-group identities. In the case of older workers, they identify with an age demographic (in-group), such as being the “youngest” older worker within their organization, yet are also the non-dominant ideal (out-group), because they are deemed old based off their chronological age and there are negative biases that are attached to this identity construct. This clearly articulates the complexity that is social identity.

*Age in the Workplace*

As many countries are experiencing an ageing population, older workers have increasingly been seen as a “problem” in organizational life. Age is “constructed primarily as a ‘problem’, as governments focus on the negative effects of an ageing workforce on economic growth and productivity” (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2009, p. 1200). In other words, governments focus on the difficulties in retaining an older worker and the effects they have on profitability. Yamasaki (2014) states, “Chronological age may indicate the number of years we have lived, but social constructions largely shape how we experience age as individuals and collective groups” (p. 356). To rephrase, our assumptions about social groups based on age are enforced through patterned behavior and those processes inform how individuals make sense of age. These assumptions have significant influence on how older workers experience identity in relation to organizational life.
Older age marginalization is not only apparent in empirical studies of age, but also evident in the lack of theorizing of ageing and age discrimination in general (Riach & Kelly, 2015). Studies rarely call into question the organizational contributions that are explicitly or tactily enforcing biased attitudes towards older workers. Hence, the ways in which age discrimination is an inherently social process that is normalized in organizational life remains largely misunderstood. McCann and Giles (2007) note, “Examples of ageism in the workplace include ageist discourse (e.g., ageist jokes), ageist attitudes (e.g., “older people can’t handle new technology”), and discriminatory practices based on age (e.g., training, hiring, and firing decisions)” (p. 2). In other words, there are many forms of age discrimination that manifest within the way we speak, the way we think about something, and our actions. This means that communication scholars should have more than enough reason to pursue research concerning age discrimination in organizational life.

In both claimed and unclaimed age discrimination accounts, the discrimination manifests at institutional and individual levels. Pincus (2001) defines institutional discrimination as, "The policies of the dominant age of the institution and the behavior of individuals who control these institutions and implement policies that are intended to have a differential/harmful effect on minority groups" (p.1). In other words, those who have power in the institution have more access to initiating and controlling dominant behaviors and attitudes towards minorities in the institution. Rupp and Vodanovich (2006) suggest that age bias not only exists in the workplace but manifests within institutions’ practices and principles as well. Age discrimination manifests itself at an institutional (macro) level through our legal, political, and other systems. As Reio and
Sanders-Reio (1999) note, "Ageism was found to exist not only among executives and managers, but even among trainers" (p. 2). Institutional discrimination starts with management and the practices they use through training, hiring, etc. Though many organizations would argue they abide by the ADEA, others argue that age does matter for employability and factors into hiring retention practices. Kendig (1978) explains some of the forms taken by age discrimination in employment. They include:

Dismissal of older employees without cause, involuntary retirement on an individual basis and not agreed upon as a condition of employment, maximum age limitations for initial employment within an organization with little or no supporting justification for such a requirement, limitations placed upon promotion and/or training based upon age, and consideration of only younger employees for certain positions without valid occupational reasons for doing so (Kending, 1978, p. 11-12).

While Kendig (1978) illustrates the many forms age discrimination can take, this list ignores discrimination that may not be as visible. Another way age discrimination takes form, despite organizational rhetoric that claims "fairness," subtle organizational practices, like recruitment materials, privilege younger workers. Ann Brenoff, Senior Writer for the Huffington Post, explained that her friend was looking "to hire an intern specifying that applicants needed to be young and good with websites" ("'Young' Has No Place in a Job Description", 2015). This was posted to a Senior Recruiters Facebook page. To further examine mistreatment of older workers in the workplace, a question was asked regarding older workers in an interview in the European Union: "In our country, when a company wants to hire someone and has a choice between two candidates with equal skills and qualifications, which of the following criteria may, in your opinion, put one candidate at a disadvantage (Sargeant, 2011, p. 3). 48% of the respondents indicated that a candidate's age would put them at a disadvantage (Sargeant, 2011). There is a need
for the protection of these older employees and for the detection of why there is hidden workplace ageism regardless if there are laws and acts to avoid such discrimination.

Regardless of the laws and acts in place to prevent age discrimination, there are ways that institutions actively discriminate by positioning blame for their termination on the employee. Older employers are being eliminated from organizations not based off their work ethic or what they can do for an organization. They are being eliminated based off the cost and the perceived negative impact of older workers on the organizational bottom line. Iverson and Pullman (2000) described a study of older hospital employees and assessed the reasons they were being eliminated from the hospital. They found that based on data from a sample of 415 hospital employees over a five-year period, those employees most likely to be downsized from this hospital specifically, were older, and full-time working employees. Another example of institutional discrimination is the case of Tramp v. Associated Underwriters. Marjorie Tramp was written up for performance issues and eventually fired after she refused her employer’s demand to use Medicare instead of employer provided insurance. The court recognized that the employer wanted to cut costs in order to save money for the company, which eventually led to the elimination of Marjorie Tramp (Tramp v. Associated Underwriters, 2014). The Tramp v. Associated Underwriters case further illustrates the real life institutional discrimination that posits employees as an expense to the organization due to their age.

With a rise in numbers of aging people still in the workforce, baby boomers and beyond, it is imperative to understand how our society discriminates against these workers. To discover the reasons behind the prejudice, one must explore the assumptions that have brought about and the unfavorable attitudes associated with aging (Goldberg,
Malinen and Johnston (2013) examine hidden bias within workplaces in regards to ageism. Their study shows that there is an age bias in the majority of their subjects towards the work performance of older employees. Rupp and Vodanovich found that "people would associate poorer performance with the older workers, in comparison to the younger" (2006, p. 1348). The judgment, however, does not start after the employee is hired. As Mendenhall (2008) mention, there is evidence that suggests that older workers correctly perceive disproportionate mistreatment based on age. Mendenhall (2008) states:

Sixty percent of respondents 50 years of age and older discussed perceiving some form of age discrimination in the job marketing during an interview... In contrast, only about one-third of the younger group (49 or younger) mentioned feeling limits due to their life course stage (p. 201).

It is easy to assume that with negative initial feelings towards older workers, these perceptions ultimately will affect the way a person understands and identifies as an older worker. In addition, the way that others think about older workers can be affected when there are already established negative feelings towards older workers.

Age inequality in organizational life can be identified as something that is influenced through workplace interaction or through social perceptions or norms connected to the biology of age. Popular discourse and media tend to set limits on the identity of older workers or position them in particular ways. According to Ainsworth and Hardy (2009), there are two discourses relating to older individuals: physical discourse and mental discourse. By situating the discourses as physical and mental relating to age, there are immediate inferences that can be made. One of these problematic inferences in relation to older workers is that the body and the mind inevitably decline. Instead of embracing the knowledge that older workers have due to
experience, discourse tends to focus on the inevitable decline of both the physical body and mental capacity. As Tulle-Winton (1999) suggests, “The ageing body is thus a ‘cultural icon of decline and helplessness’” (p. 297). According to this quote, the mind and the body serve as a social construction that constrain the identity work of older workers and in essence, frame older adults as liabilities for organizations.

Media is another facet of our society that furthers notions of older workers. Aligning with social constructionism, media presents topics that audiences begin to interpret as our social reality. In a study by Bailey (2010), when comparing negative and positive biases in media, she found that there were close to twice as many negative framing descriptors of age, as there were positive. Bailey states, “Middle age and the experience of aging were framed as a time of declining health and appearance” (2010, p. 52). In other words, media shapes social attitudes about groups and how individuals must deal with those social attitudes.

The assumptions that are associated with people of a certain age are created based off social constructions that become a part of the image of an older worker. Age biases create assumptions that older individuals often are seen as unable to communicate, old-fashioned, prejudiced, conservative, ill-tempered, easily upset, emotionless, and less culturally sensitive (Dearmond et al., 2006). Not only did literature include personal attributes of an older worker’s temperament, the research also describes workers in relation to their work ability. A consistent theme in the literature is that older workers are reluctant and harder to train than younger workers (Dymock et al., 2012). This is one example of showing the feelings associated with older workers’ working ability.
In a study assessing younger worker’s perceptions of older workers, it was found that a young respondent may place a 50-year old in “older person” categorical terms in the workplace, but perhaps not outside work (McCann & Giles, 2007). This displacement of bias at work and away from work shows how much influence organizational attitudes play within the workplace. If ageist acts and attitudes are allowed and permeated through organizational structures, that mindset, to which McCann and Giles (2007) allude, will be embedded and become normalized thought for those within the organization.

Increased work satisfaction and meaningful participation is necessary for an older worker. To do this, it is necessary to create and implement policies that focus on retaining older workers in the labor market. Older workers experience devaluing of their knowledge, stereotyping, subtle barriers to learning opportunities, and pressure to present themselves as younger and technologically savvy (Ainsworth, 2006). In other words, the identity that older workers portray in the workplace is affected by the ideologies that are embedded and performed in the workplace. To overcome socially constituted ideologies about older individuals, older workers often do more to stay relevant. As Fenwick (2012) notes, “These professionals assumed full personal responsibility to learn what was necessary to remain competitive, ‘value-added’, employable workers” (p. 1015). Thus, older workers, despite the notion that they are less productive and perform less work, may actually be performing more work since they engage in the emotional labor necessary for them to retain their employment.

The biases toward an older worker may not only be understood by people within the organization, but also in the way older workers understand themselves. Biases can become internalized, influencing how the older individual thinks of him/herself. Social
identities about age are formed by social processes and are “influenced by societal age-related expectations” (Ylanne, 2009, p. 171). It is damaging to view social identity regarding age as a cultural implication within our society. In other words, we need to see social identity in regards to age as a process that ultimately results in someone “being” something.

With three to four generations in the workplace at one time, it comes as no surprise that conceptions of age and what it means to be an older worker change across generations. According to Fineman (2014), there is “something of a self-fulfilling prophecy in dividing populations according to preconceived segments and then explaining any differences on the basis of these preconceptions” (p. 294). In other words, age is a performance that becomes socially regulated. Sargent et al. (2012) discussed that organizations are realizing the challenges related to managing a multigenerational workforce. Sargent et al. (2012) state, “Some will engage in more proactive approaches, characterized by strategic planning that consists of analyzing and forecasting business needs, as well as considering the specific needs of the ageing workforce” (p. 11). Most of the time, structured organizational planning is not the case and organizations engage in more passive strategies that do not include or do not take into consideration, the needs of the older worker.

Generations in our society have distinct perceptions of one another. For example, Richeson and Shelton (2006) suggest that older adults constitute a stigmatized group in the United States. Youth is valued in the United States whereas age is normally stigmatized and associated with negative values. Managers view young generations with a “lack of certain ‘soft’ interpersonal skills, including prioritizing work, having a positive
Attitude, and good teamwork skills” (Giang, 2013, Business Insider). Although, especially in this study, being young in the workforce seems to be favorable and older unfavorable, there are ways that the young workforce is negatively critiqued as lacking certain skills because of their generational positioning. Another way our society depicts social categories is through the social construction of class.

**Class**

Social class is a key organizing principle in our society and in organizations. As communicative beings, we understand and value work through the lens of social class. Social class cannot be described without insight about Marx and Engels’ definition of class. The two classes Marx recognized are the bourgeoisies and proletariat (Marx & Engels, 1895). The bourgeois society is the equivalent to the ruling class. The proletariat class consists of the wage earners whose only power comes in the form of producing and selling labor. According to Marx (1895), the exploitation of the proletariat is the basis of capitalism and how the bourgeois are able to stay the ruling elite. The division between the two (bourgeois and proletariat), is a clear depiction of class struggles. Van Galen (2007) argues that many social struggles over material, social, and cultural interests are associated with class struggles. Marx and Engels were of the first to recognize that society had a significant struggle between classes, and that there was a distinction between the elite (the bourgeoisie), that owned modes of production and property, and the middle-class/poor (the proletariats), those who worked under the bourgeoisie.

Economic factors are significant and important in determining class position of any person. To belong to a particular level in the social class system of America means an individual has gained what is culturally see as acceptance by an equal of the ruling
Social class is understood as a system of social ranking and unbalanced distributions of opportunities, resources, prestige and power among social groups (Lopes, 2011). Status plays a large role in the formation of attitudes and beliefs of social class. Morley (2009) states, “classes are still very powerful social institutions” (p. 488). We continue to see literature, movies, television, and other media that evidence that class is prominent and very much still important. “Across our mass media are portrayals of class that justify class relations of modern capitalism” (Avril, 2010, p. 191). Class relations, and what people have access to certain commodities are positioned and reinforced by those (people, structures, and institutions) in power. Our position in the socio-economic strata has certain categories that group people based off of occupation and income. One of those distinguishers is the white-collar worker segmentation.

The popular terms white-collar and blue-collar worker came to be after World War II. The term white-collar is often associated with the middle class (Hope, 2015). The definition of white-collar workers has advanced as our society’s organizations have advanced. White-collar workers are, “salaried and non-union members” (Schrager, 2014, Businessweek). The term was coined literally due to the clothing workers wore to their professions. White-collar workers often have high levels of formal education and this may create opportunity resulting in higher wages (Gershuny, 2005). White-collar workers can be associated with jobs in office positions. White-collar workers can be seen as managers, professionals, etc. (Murray & Khan, 2014). White-collar workers, although this working segment of society continues to rise, still encounter age discrimination and unfair treatment.
As baby boomers get older, there are more biases associated with their aging. As Hirsch et al. (1980) state, “There is inequality associated with white-collar workers due to steeper age-income profiles than from inequality among skilled workers” (p. 1192). In other words, there are inequalities and unfair treatment to those white-collar workers who have worked and are earning a higher salary due to the amount of time they have put into the organization, or in the position. As economic pressure of a diminishing middle class continues to rise in our society, white-collar workers are faced with more challenges. Murray and Khan (2014) state, “More companies are laying off employees and/or restructuring jobs in effort to cut costs and increase profits” (p. 23). Older workers become the target when there is restructuring of an organization's jobs. The restructuring of jobs can affect the way a professional recognizes their place within the workforce. This concept of understanding one’s position in society also means possibly taking on or inheriting the social identities attributed to white-collar workers. Our society largely esteems white-collar work, yet these workers are increasingly in precarious working conditions (getting laid off, insecurity, etc.). This is especially concerning for older workers who are deemed a liability and too expensive to keep.

In our society, there seems to be preconceived notions of what a white-collar worker is and how they work. The social class attributed to the white-collar worker usually has a high social status. White-collar workers in our society are still thought to hold more esteemed jobs and are considered more important when compared to blue-collar workers. Judgments about intellect are often associated with white-collar and blue-collar work. Kiplinger (1953) explains:

That’s why, why you think about a blue-collar career, you may be troubled by thoughts like these: “People look down on the man in overalls.”, “Parents want
their children to have white-collar jobs.” “Dirty work isn’t dignified.” Such ideas sound ridiculous, blurted out that way. And so they are. Nevertheless, in subtler forms, they may be powerful enough to influence the career you choose (p. 17).

By creating a hierarchy between white-collar workers and blue-collar workers, it is implied that one type of work is socially valued more than another. White-collar workers benefit our society by maintaining the status quo instead of challenging the current social hierarchy (Torlina, 2011). In other words, white-collar workers are seen in higher regard than other workers. This sentiment furthers the idea previously mentioned relating to in-group/out-group distinction. The white-collar worker is perceived as the dominant in society, or the in-group, and the blue-collar as the marginalized, and often stereotyped, in comparison to white-collar workers.

There is more to the general and perceived social identities that are often attributed with white-collar workers. According to Ozkan (2014), there is a discrepancy between the image of the so-called white-collar worker and reality of what a white-collar worker is described as. Our society has constructed the social identity of a white-collar worker. There is much more to the white-collar worker than a suit and tie. Odman (2014) state, “White-collar workers are emotionally coerced to work as it requires a greater emotional and financial investment to maintain the image inherited from the old social value system about them” (p. 69). In other words, the pressure that can be put upon white-collar workers requires them to engage in emotional work because of their position in society. Socially, white-collar workers tend to be more internally motivated by setting goals that affect performance and work attitudes. Motivation can be divided into internal and external factors. The internal motivational factors are created from within the human itself and can be affected by performance. White-collar workers usually have a value
system that is intrinsically oriented (Pennings, 1970). As the literature states, the intrinsic motivation that white-collar workers feel can be linked to job satisfaction and how a worker feels about their position within the organization and as a professional. One type of worker in our society that is described based off the work they do or can do is knowledge workers.

**Knowledge Worker**

Although the long time distinction between "workers" has been white and blue-collar workers, another social construction of a variation of the white-collar workers has come forth as the knowledge worker. Not only is social class divided by socio-economic status, the way we communicate our social class through society is also important. According to Warner et al. (1949), inhabitants are divided into status levels that are ways of life with definite characteristics and values. A more recent piece of scholarship similarly describes the characteristics and values we associate with social class as Warner, et al. (1949) describes. Allen (2010) explains, “Social class encompasses a socially constructed category of identity that involves more than just economic factors; social class includes an entire socialization process” (p. 111). In other words, both Warner et al. (1949) and Allen (2010) are describing that there have been communication processes to create, reinforce and challenge already established attitudes towards how our society perceives social class. Social class is an identifier that aids in constructing our self-concept. It is important to understand social class because there are certain attributes and social identities that are attached to certain social classes, and therefore, become a part of a person's social identity makeup. Knowledge workers are those whose jobs are to think for a living. A knowledge worker is, "The man or woman who applies to productive
work ideas, concepts, and information" (Drucker, 1968, p. 264). On the brink of the Industrial Revolution, there was a shift from manual labor to jobs that needed education, expertise, and experience to not only create knowledge, but also be able to share it (Karabell, 2015). An example of some jobs that could be considered knowledge workers are scientists, lawyers, accountants, academics, etc.

The emphasis on knowledge as capital over financial capital has been increasing within organizations. 43% of the American workforce was classified as a knowledge worker in 2007, with trends of knowledge workers in the workforce steadily increasing since then (Economist Intelligent Unit, 2007). Although the term knowledge worker is becoming more prominent in today's society, the term knowledge worker was first used in the 60s by P. F. Drucker (Igielski, 2015). Since then, the term has molded and been recreated to its current definition. One of the most recently agreed upon definitions of a knowledge worker by scholars like Michal Igielski is, "knowledge workers are trained in their profession, they have unique skills and are aware of their role and self-esteem as independent participants of the organization" (Morawski, 2003, p. 19; Igielski, 2015).

With society's economic systems consistently changing, it is understood why the term knowledge workers has undergone change. Mosco (2008) describes knowledge workers involving making use of information to efficiently and effectively deliver an information product. Knowledge workers not only have to identify as workers, they must negotiate the identities as being the producers and creators of information.

In a communication and information driven society, it can be understood why knowledge workers are included closely under the realm of white-collar workers. Igielski (2015) explains the current status of knowledge workers. He states, "People are becoming
basic strategic resources - with endless source of creating new values and building the competitive advantage" (Igielski, 2015, p. 36). Knowledge workers are good for business because they are a strategic resource to businesses; they work and produce knowledge. Knowledge workers' labor is dynamic, ever-changing, and autonomous whereas work in the past was quantified, prescribed and controlled (Eyl, 2015). This creates a sense of value for the worker within their organization. Being valued is one of the ways we identify as being a part of an organization. If workers do not feel a sense of security within the organization they are in, they can find themselves in a state of precarity.

Precarious Work

Precarious work is becoming a more common segment of work within our society. Since there is a clear link between an individual’s identity and work, it is important to understand precarious work and how it affects the worker. Precarious work is, “Employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 2). In other words, precarious work is the work that causes workers a certain amount of distress. McKay et al. (2012) explain that precarious work involves the inability of individuals to enforce their rights where social insurance protection is absent. This means, precarious work enforces social risks such as unemployment, exclusion, old age, disability, etc. In precarious work some issues that may arise are, more and more workers are earning less money, working either too much or too little and having little to no control over their work. Kalleberg (2009) mentions that institutions and structures generate precarious work and furthers cultural and individual factors that influence people’s responses to uncertainty. Precarious work, however, is not a new idea. There has been growth in precarious work as it relates to organizational
contexts. “Layoffs or involuntary terminations from employment have always occurred and have fluctuated within the business cycle... They reflect a way of increasing short-term profits by reducing labor costs, even in good economic times” (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 5). In other words, involuntary layoffs are one of the few ways described in the previously stated article that employees are feelings uncertain and insecure, resulting in precarity.

As a societal problem, precarious work elicits feelings of uncertainty and stress. D’Amours (2010), mentions that insecurities towards a job could result in disastrous consequences for a precarious worker. In other words, feeling insecure towards a job can add an emotional element to working life that the worker must then deal with on top of doing his/her job. Precarious work can be seen as directly related to older age in the workplace. McKay et al. (2012), explains that those over the age of 50 are commonly perceived as being most likely involved in precarious work. This means, the group that already suffers from discrimination based upon their age is also most at risk for precarity in the workplace. Cranford et al. (2003) state, “The young are less likely to have full-time permanent wage work than the middle aged or older age group” (p. 17). Precarious work in our age-biased society has targeted older workers as most susceptible to becoming involved in precarious work. Older workers are experiencing greater difficulties in finding new jobs once they have become unemployed, as well as being at risk for uncertain and insecure work. Another way we position the older worker is through the type of work they are engaged in. The type of worker and the type of work that an employee engages are a few aspects of what forms a person’s professional identity.

Professional Identity
Professional identity is one such social identity we see in organizations. We identify with organizations and our professions, and these are strikingly important in a society that values labor the way Americans do. Pratt et al. (2006) suggest that professionals are often defined by “what they do” (p. 236). It is not uncommon for humans, in the labor-intensive society we live in, to associate parts of their identity with their work. A definition of professional identity by Ibarra (1999) reads as “the relatively stable and enduring constellations of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experience in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (p. 764). In other words, professional identity is how one understands their role in the workplace, how one understands her/himself as part of the organization, and how one understands her/himself as a worker. We see our professional identity as a major part of who we are as individuals due to the large part working plays in our society and in our own lives. As Americans, we spend so much of our lives at work that it naturally becomes part of our identities. It is important to understand what social hierarchies exist in our society being that social class can influence how we understand our professional identities. Understanding social class explains how and why someone describes themselves as a professional.

Professional identities alter as organizational influence becomes more prominent. Kirpal (2004) explains how work identities are formed. He states, "Work identities are closely linked to forms of identification individuals develop with their job, work setting, or their employer” (Kirpal, 2004, p. 274). Identities that can be a part of professional identity can range from the actual job description to other aspects of work such as being a part of a team or a part of a culture. Kirpal (2004) mentions, "Work-related identification and commitment may include the company, but also the occupation, the professional
community, the work team, work environment, work actions performed" (p. 275). The professional identity builds layers of the actual work the person is doing and work-related commitments. Most research in professional/organizational identification has been linked with social identity theory and how we perceive our professional identities.

Trethewey discusses how professional identity changes over time. In a study of middle aged, white-collar women, aging in the workplace, Trethewey (2001) explains, "Many of these women reinvented themselves... They reproduce the master narrative and attempted to be something different" (p. 212). The professional identity can change or alter as need be based on context. In the study, Trethewey (2001) describes Vicki, “…she spent much of her life trying to achieve success according to others’ standards. Since tuning 50, however, she’s begun to become someone else” (p. 212). In other words, Vicki was looking to change the way that she displayed herself and the age identity (master narrative) she portrays. Discrimination based on age could be a situational affect that could change or alter a person's professional identity. Coon (1994) argues that possession of a strong functional professional identity contributes to an individual's occupational self-esteem. Our professional identities build off the feelings we have to the work and jobs we attach to. Schmidt and Boland (1986) generated 99 adjectives and characteristics to describe older adults. Their findings depicted people of age as unintelligent and warm care givers showing the biases that are readily attached to older individuals. Schmidt and Boland (1986) identified four stereotype sub clusters under which elderly people are categorized: impaired/vulnerable, healthy/active, miserable/waiting to die, and continuing to enjoy life/ending life. This boxes older employees into these dichotomies, which perpetuates the idea that if older employees are
not one thing, they are the other. If workers begin to understand the biases that are being
communicated, the biases may begin to affect the worker’s self-concept or how they see
themselves within the organization.

The job position, organization, and the organizational practices are just a few
factors that influence professional identity. In a later article written by Tracy and
Trethewey (2003) they proclaim, "Organizational discourses do more than construct
organizational identities; they articulate a "preferred" core self, and in doing so, produce
outcomes that benefit the organization" (p. 9). Organizations not only have influence on a
person in general, organizations aid in distinguishing our core professional identities are
and how they come about. Kaye and Cohen (2008) further encourage the importance of
professional identity, "It is fundamental to note the employees who feel valued tend to
remain loyal, and this is the best way to keep your intellectual capital in your own camp”
(p. 32). The author goes on to say, "These productive valued, longtime workers take
fewer days off and maintain productivity" (p. 32). By investing in employees, there is a
clear competitive advantage in investing in understanding employees’ perceived
professional identities and the needs those identities may have. Organizations would
benefit from shaping and investing in the identities of their workers to create a greater
understanding of the worker’s needs, feelings, capabilities, etc., which will later impact
the organizational climate, productivity, etc.

Organizations as well as the individual are responsible for cultivating professional
identities that are strongly associated with the organization and its foundations. Nathan
(1995) states:

Individual employees must build their own identities and careers instead of
subordinating their needs to the corporation. They must know and understand the
corporation's mission, adding value through their strategic implementation efforts (p. 99).

Due to the amount of time in our lives we spend at work, it is inevitable we associate, or can associate aspects of our identities as a professional to the actual company we work for. In addition, if an organization seeks change or undergoes change, the employees' professional identities may see a change. When change occurs, our social constructions also alter. The way we communicate about certain topics can change depending on how we understand something, and how it affects our identity. According to Newton (1995), "Notions of workplace reform or societal changes are also therefore largely peripheral in identities" (p. 49). When changes occur in the workplace, or the economy is affected, it can affect the identities we see play a part in our working lives. For example, if a job position as a manager is eliminated and a person is employed to a lower position such as a supervisor, the person may have to renegotiate how to be a team-player or work as a part of a team instead of independently as a manager. As an example, if a company alters a facet of their identity as being environmentally friendly and it changes policies or protocols, an employee may follow suit and become more environmentally conscious. Understanding one’s position within the workplace and who they are as a professional is important to an employee’s job satisfaction. Social class and who we are as a professional in the workplace helps us mold our self-concepts, and this indicates the ways in which we feel dignified within the workplace.

Dignity

Throughout the history of social science, dignity is a word that is continually used to express concern about various aspects of work. Marx, who set the stage, critiqued capitalistic modes of production, and our current wage-based labor gives a nod to dignity.
Bolton (2007) describes, "Marx' focus on alienation and the relentless drive towards economic efficiency leads to a state of normalness" (p.1) and alas, ideas of dignity began to develop. Dignity, a term found in workplace discourse, is often found relating to management. Dignity is "the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect for others" (Hodson, 2001, p. 3). The definition of dignity changes when in the workplace. When an employee endures discrimination, the dignity they feel in the workplace can falter.

We are deeply social beings, which makes the concept of dignity difficult to manage. Roscow (1978) states, "Creating improved quality of working life - humanizing work and working conditions - is the objective of a good society and is also the objective to a productive society... It translates to dignity" (p. 3). In other words, when a person feels a sense of purpose and feels needed, it improves their work life and overall productivity and attitude within an organization and, simply, makes them feel like a human being. Academic research has called for management practices to take self-esteem, which would be later coined as dignity, into account in the workplace environment. Dignity at work, according to Bolton (2007) is linked with our workplace experiences: how we are perceived and valued as a person in the workplace. Capitalism only views workers as cogs, or interchangeable grist for the grist mill. The idea of dignity at work intersects with our definition of identity. Maslow (1965) wrote about the early human aspects of management referring to the possibilities of dignity at work via recognition of the need for self-esteem in work. In other words, management previously recognized that if employees felt esteemed in their work, they had greater feelings of dignity, and vice versa.
In a goal driven environment, such as the workplace, we seek to feel dignified. Unfortunately, employees are not encouraged to address their own workplace dignity despite the fact that it is essential in the organizational realm. Hodson (2001) explains that life demands dignity, and meaningful work is essential for dignity. If an employee is being discriminated against, the discrimination will begin to affect the self-worth the employee feels. Perry (2005) states, "According to the morality of human rights, because every human being has inherent dignity, no one should deny that any human being has, or treat any human being as if she lacks inherent dignity" (p. 101). Being a part of a community that allows for dignity is another aspect of organizational structures that must be assessed before the effect of dignity can be measured.

An act such as age discrimination within the workplace could violate the way a person is to earn and maintain their professional identity and dignity. Hodson notes, "The inherent human dignity of a worker can be violated by mismanagement or by managerial abuse" (2001, p. 249). The inequalities create feelings of mistrust and denial of abilities based on the feeling of being undignified. This further can affect a person's work ethic and workplace identity. Considering this, Lucas (2011) offers that although organizations want dignified work identities on behalf of its members, "this goal may be more challenging for some people depending on their occupations" (p. 353). Further, Lucas (2011) posits, "dignity is a manifested idea perpetuated through communication" (p. 2). The way we speak and construct ideologies contributes to our treatment of workers and our sense of esteem of their work. If biases are attached to older employees and the biases are communicated, the discrimination can greatly affect an older employee's self-concept at work and therefore, affect their dignity.
Encountering undignified behaviors in the workplace can make it hard to maintain respect for others, but more importantly self-respect, lowering a person's perceived dignity. Sayer (2005) states, "For those in high-status professions, dignity and dignified treatment can usually be taken for granted, but it is often at risk for workers lower down the occupational hierarchy" (p. 17). This furthers the notion that we are communicating dignities and indignities through organizational settings and towards employees through discriminatory practices and assumptions. Being overworked and facing abuse are challenges to dignity most likely that lead to resistance in the work environment (Rubin, 2004). If employees do not feel dignified, a great sense of mistrust can be built within an organization. When there is mistrust within an organization and employees feel undignified, there is a sense of mistrust that trickles to more than just the person suffering from the feelings of being undignified. Bolton and Wibberly (2007) state, "The most recent prescriptions from management tend to mirror human relations writing in their call for management practice to create employee engagement and cohesive corporate culture" (p. 134). Organizations are implementing organizational practices to keep legitimacy and social responsibility a highly valued factor in employee relations helping to keep a person's dignity intact.

This literature review focused on social identity theory, age in the workplace, class, knowledge workers, precarious work, professional identity and dignity. As mentioned, the literature in academia covers age discrimination and how it affects the individual, but it does not mention how the professional identity or dignity of the individual is affected because of the discrimination they have perceived. Social identity theory is valuable in addressing my research questions at various levels. First of all,
social identity theory is a theory in which a person begins to understand themselves as an individual. When faced with age discrimination, the social identity of older workers can/may have to adapt based on the socially constructed idea of what being an older worker is in society. The intersections this study seeks to find, between age discrimination and professional identity, and age discrimination and dignity can be understood related to social identity theory. I am confident that approaching age discrimination in the workplace towards older workers with the theoretical lens of social identity theory will yield the answers to questions I am eager to explore.
Methodology
Research Purpose & Questions

The goal of this research is to cultivate a better understanding of perceived age discrimination in workplaces, and to create a practical application based off the data that emerges from this study. The objective of this research is to understand how people have experienced perceived age discrimination in the corporate world. The “perceptions” talked about in this study come from the participants. What they have experienced becomes their perceptions of how older workers are viewed as due to attitudes and biases against old age in the workplace. This study also aims to examine the ways older individuals understand their own professional identities, and if they are dignified in the workplace.

This study seeks to address the following questions:

RQ1: How have participants experienced age discrimination in the workplace?
RQ2: How does discrimination intersect with workplace dignity, if at all?
RQ3: How does age discrimination intersect with professional identity, if at all?

To fully understand how a participant has experienced perceived age discrimination in the workplace, it is important to look at the intersections of professional identity and dignity. The effects on both workplace dignity and professional identity are important in understanding how age discrimination functions in organizational life.

Philosophical Approach

Considering my research questions, approaching the topic with an interpretive paradigm is the most appropriate route for this body of communication research. The interpretive paradigm understands reality as subjective and truth as emergent from the human experience (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In other words, there is no objective, sole
truth in the interpretive paradigm when describing how humans experience the world. The idea of “truth” can change based off the situation and the data that emerges from the human experience being studied. I seek to inductively understand how perceived age discrimination in the workplace affects the dignity and professional identity of the study’s participants. I utilize the qualitative research method of qualitative narrative interviewing to collect data from those who have experienced age discrimination in the workplace.

Qualitative research is a series of methods used in communication research and many other academic disciplines. Qualitative methodologies provide scholars with approaches, methods, and techniques that can provide insight into understanding the social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). These approaches, methods, and techniques are concerned with answering the questions, "why" and "how" of people’s experiences and actions in life not just the “what, where, when”, or “who” which are often the main focus of other communication research approaches.

The goal of qualitative research is to understand and describe human behavior, not to predict it. Qualitative research aims for a holistic comprehension of the context in order to gain a sense of how people understand the circumstances of their lives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Patton (2002), a holistic perspective in qualitative research is, “the whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts…” (p. 41). In other words, holistic understanding suggests a total or complete picture to describe the nuances of phenomena. The holistic side of qualitative research is concerned with rich and thick description of the data to describe the human experiences. Reality, in qualitative research, is constructed by humans through their subjective experiences. Qualitative research is helpful in marking
sense of daily activities and routinized behaviors (Miles & Huberman, 2004). Daily activities and routinized behaviors help to have themes emerge from the lived experiences of participants.

Qualitative research methods are ideal for this communication research study to help understand the impact of perceived age discrimination in the workplace. Being that qualitative research seeks to make sense of daily activities, it would make sense to use qualitative research as my philosophical approach when understanding age discrimination in the workplace since work is both a daily activity and routinized behavior. When understanding how ageism functions in organizational life, there is no objective truth regarding employee experiences with age discrimination since age discrimination in the workplace is subjective and emergent. This furthers that using qualitative research as a method is the best for the study and research questions proposed. Thus, qualitative methods focus on how individuals internalize and make sense of the discrimination they have encountered.

Qualitative research "provides information about the 'human' side of an issue... the beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of the individuals" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 1). Qualitative research is concerned more with the human, social action of individuals rather than using participants as a number, or used in mathematical, scientific ways as is the tendency in quantitative research. Qualitative research focuses on understanding and representing people’s experiences and actions as they engage in life (Ha, 2001).

One of the goals of qualitative communication research is to gather a rich and descriptive collection of information (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Qualitative research helps to interpret and understand the complexities of contexts because rich and thick
description allow for emergent themes to surface. Baxter and Babbie (2004) state that the
"goal of interpretive communication researchers is to identify the rules that guide
communicative actions in a given setting or social group" (p. 61). Qualitative research
uses subjectivity to show that human behavior is created, not determined. Therefore as
mentioned by Baxter and Babbie, one absolute truth in unachievable when using
qualitative research methods because reality is unable to be predicted. The method uses
coc-constructions of knowledge to create rules that help to guide communicative actions.
The ability to have flexibility with qualitative research is what sets it apart in
communication research. The quantitative approach focuses on objectivity which does
not give room for flexibility and subjectivity. Data is gathered by questionnaire,
observations, etc. to predict how a certain variable measures experiences.

The goal of quantitative methods is to describe and predict behavior instead of understanding. Quantitative methods are usually closed-ended which does not allow flexibility. Flexibility in qualitative methods is a part of a qualitative research project’s design. Flexibility is, “Openness to adapting inquiry as understanding deepens and/or situations to change; the researcher avoids getting locked into rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness and pursues new paths of discovery as they emerge” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). In other words, flexibility allows for the researcher to have the ability to adapt based off the situation, information, data, that is emerging through a given qualitative research method. In this study, I used multiple participants’ subjective experiences to build an argument for the research question which, according to Bukowski and Lisboa (2005), is the goal of this research approach.
Qualitative research is ideal for this project based on the characteristics of the nature of the data that is found in this communication research approach. According to Chesebor and Borisoff (2007), “Data includes the feelings and interpretations of what subjects reveal both explicitly as well as tacitly” (p. 11). For this study, understanding the participants’ experiences in the most authentic way, would be hearing their own experiences.

In this study, it is important to fully understand the human experience the participants have felt in regards to perceived age discrimination in the workplace to explain the data. A primary goal of this research is to examine how perceived age discrimination affects the participants’ dignity and professional identity. To answer these research questions, it is important to choose a data collection method that best suits the project at hand that will allow conversation about perceived age discrimination in the workplace to emerge between participants and researcher. The best method to allow for this is through interviews.

Methods

In order to understand the affects age discrimination has on an older individual in the workplace, I have chosen to use qualitative interviews. In this section, I discuss the advantages of qualitative interviewing as a means of addressing the research questions for this study.

Qualitative Interviews

To cultivate the emergent themes I address in my analysis section, I conducted interviews to gather my research data. Interviews are one of the most common qualitative methods. Lindlof and Taylor (2012) explain, "A research interview unfolds as a social
WHAT'S THEIR EXPIRATION DATE: AGE DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

process" (p. 171). In other words, by using interviewing as a data collection method, the participants can describe in a natural, social setting, their own experiences, in their own words of perceived age discrimination in the workplace. Describing and understanding the human experience is one of the goals of the qualitative approach, so the social process of the human experience emerges through interviewing. Siedman (1991) considered the qualitative interview to be representation of a person’s interest in other people – and method of understanding the participant’s experiences and hearing their stories. The purpose of qualitative interviews is to bring to the surface the opinions, attitudes, likes and dislikes of participants, to best answer the research question for the study at hand.

Lindlof and Taylor (2011) note that understanding the participants’ experience by eliciting stories is one of the major purposes of qualitative interviewing. When offered the chance to have a participant reveal a story that relates to the research study, the human experience is not only being described, it is also able to be understood because a picture is being painted. “Conducting and participating in interviews can be a rewarding experience for participants and interviewers alike" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 29). An interviewer poses a question they want to be answered, and the interviewee helps to answer the question, and vice versa. Both parties become a helping hand in the interviewing process. As Mack et al. (2005) note, “Conducting and participating in interviews can be a rewarding experience for participants and interviewers alike" (p. 29). The interviewer and participant feed off of each other and a context is created where the participants want to discuss their own experience with age discrimination.

As Lindlof and Taylor discuss, "qualitative interviewers often try to emulate the form and feel of a talk between friends" (2014, p. 171). The need to build a rapport is/
one of the main concerns I had when interacting with participants. Through rapport “a basic sense of trust has developed that allows for the free flow of information” (Spardley, 1979, p. 78). In other words, rapport is the management of the relationship between researcher and participant. There is a taboo that is usually associated when speaking about discrimination in general. When speaking to participants about their experiences in the workplace, I felt the most important thing was to build a rapport with them ensuring that their confidentiality was an utmost importance so they felt free to share their stories. According to Tewksbury & Gagne (1996), “The importance of strong, positive rapport is intensified when the research endeavor involves a sensitive topic or stigmatized population” (p. 128). Ensuring confidentiality and trust of persons who are stigmatized in an organizational setting due to their age will be essential for success with the participants of this study. I looked to build rapport with respondents so they could open up and feel comfortable expressing themselves. According to Fontana and Frey (1994), the goal of interviewing is to understand a participant’s experience, where rapport becomes important. Relationships between the researcher and participant in semi-structured interviews is more easily accessible because of the disclosure of information that often occurs.

For this study, using semi-structured interviews was necessary. Lindlof & Taylor (2002) describe semi-structured interviews as an interview guide consisting of “topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants” (p. 195). In semi-structured interviews, there is an initial direction, but no bound formal structured interview format. Baxter and Babbie (2004) explain that "qualitative interviewing design is flexible, interactive and continuous" (p. 325). Since I am trying to
gauge the human experience and understand how they have been affected, the questions that I asked were open-ended so there was freedom for the participants to offer their responses. A semi-structured interview approach allows the researcher the ability to ask follow up questions. In addition, this structure allows participants to further elaborate on answers they share. Interviews are useful for learning about perspectives of participants. Being that qualitative research seeks to understand the human experience, using interviews helps to understand individual experiences. Interviews are most appropriate for eliciting individual experiences, opinions, feelings and addressing sensitive topics (Mack, et al., 2005). A semi-structured interview allows the conversation between researcher and participants to grow organically and use personal narratives as a foundation of interviewing answers.

To draw out participant's accounts in regards to age discrimination in the workplace, I employ narrative qualitative interviews. Narrative interviews, “encourages and stimulates interviewees to tell a story about some significant event in the informants’ life” (Bauer, 1997, p.1). Narrative interviews allow participants to reveal their own attitudes, beliefs, interpretations, etc. on a certain topic using their own words (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The interviews created a social process for the participants to recount their experiences and build an understanding of how the age discrimination affected them. This phenomenon is often known as storytelling.

Storytelling is when, “Members of social groups or subcultures tell stories with words and meanings specific for a certain social group” (Bauer, 1997, p. 3). I interviewed all of the participants individually about their experience with perceived age discrimination in the workplace. Being that the participants were of the same
criterion/demographics, and all had experienced perceived age discrimination, they were from similar social groups and subcultures explaining their experience and meanings of age discrimination. This would be the best method for this research because the narratives allow participants to recollect stories with their own feelings, language, etc. “By telling, people recall what has happened, put experience into sequence, find possible explanations for it, and play with the chain of events that shapes individual social life” (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p.1). As social beings, story-telling helps make things familiar, alleviate or answer questions, make things more familiar, etc. Narrative interviews are also beneficial for this study because the power is in the researchers hands based off the semi-structured questions that are asked. In structured interviews, there would be no room for narratives to occur. By using semi-structured narrative interviews, there is a process that leads to narratives, or storytelling from participants. Presenting the initial central topic helps to semi-structure the interview, giving participants to ability to construct their narratives around the context of investigation.

Due to semi-structured interviews giving the ability to construct narratives around the topic of discussion for the study, people can openly express how much or how little they would like to speak about age discrimination in the workplace. Interviews are appropriate for addressing sensitive topics that people may not be comfortable to discuss in a group setting. As discussed, building rapport, confidentiality, and trust between participant and interviewer is needed for a research study involving interviewing to be successful. For the purpose of this study, having a set criterion for participants and procedure makes those who are involved in the study more comfortable discussing their issues they have experienced with perceived age discrimination in the workplace.
Participants/Procedure

Before engaging in the qualitative interviews, it is important to define the characteristics and criteria of my participants due to the specification that participants must have experienced or perceived age discrimination in the workplace. "Purposive, or quota sampling identifies participants based on a selected criteria" (Mack, et al., 2005, p. 5). Mack, et al. continue defining quota sampling, "characteristics might include age, place of residence, gender, class, profession, marital status... etc." (2005, p.5). The criteria for this study revolves around the concept of the older worker. Older workers, in today's society are those that are forty-five years old to the average age of retirement, sixty-five. I have determined this number based on the age range the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 protects, along with the popular literature that states "who" constitutes an older worker. The ADEA, "protects individuals who are 40 years of age or older from employment discrimination based on age" (The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1998, p. A-2). According to a 2013 survey of 1,503 adults by non-profit advocacy group AARP, the survey showed that "two-third of workers between the ages of 45 to 74 said they have seen or experienced ageism" (Reaney, Reuters, 2015). Considering the research and current state of age discrimination claims currently in our society, I chose 45 as a benchmark to start with as the youngest participants I would seek who had experienced age discrimination.

The parameters of 45-65 became my criterion because I wanted to gauge at what point people begin experience age discrimination in the workplace, but felt the age of forty was too young, and age sixty-five or older was bleeding into a different criterion of people. Within the last few years, due to our economy and society, people ages sixty-five
and older have continued to stay in the workforce. Every two years the Bureau of Labor Statistics makes a projective of the nation’s workforce 10 years into the future. According to Pew Research Center, “By 2022, the agency projects that 31.9% of those ages 65 to 74 will still be working” (Drake, 2014). I chose the average retirement age as the cap for my criterion. Along with the criteria of age, a participant for this study had to be employed in a white-collar job and have experienced perceived age discrimination within the workplace. These individuals could be of any race, ability, or sexual orientation because they are all capable of experiencing perceived age discrimination in the workplace.

In regards to ethics, I sought the approval of the Institutional Review Board of Eastern Illinois University due to the use of human subjects. Before interviewing, I gave the participants informed consent forms (see Appendix 1). This document told the research participants what the study was about, exactly what they were going to be doing in the interview, the risks and benefits to the participants, and requirements of the participants. These documents were to be signed and turned in before data collection was allowed to begin.

Additionally, I felt it was important to address the issue of possibly knowing the participants or having a relationship with the participants and using their accounts to add to my research due to snowball sampling. Normally, in similar studies, it would be urged to stray away from knowing the participants in the study, but for this study it was unavoidable. My father, and his experience with age discrimination, is the reason I am contributing to communication research. His situation regarding age discrimination was the pilot that inspired me to write on the topic. Based off the situation that happened to my father, he was the inspiration that built the criteria for this study.
Having a criterion established, my father began the snowball sampling process. Scholars use this terminology to describe a sample that is constructed “through referrals among people” that “possess the characteristics of the research interest” (Biernacki et al., 1981, p. 124). I recruited a primary group of respondents who then went to their social media pages, co-workers, friends, and family members that fit the set criterion and asked for them to participate. Snowball sampling is also known as chain referral sampling (Mack, et al., 2005). Participants or people who are aware of the study referred people who could potentially fit the given criterion for this study. Snowball sampling, for this study was used to find and recruit participants that were not easily accessible due to the nature of the research topic. With laws and regulations put in place to prevent age discrimination, the amount of people claiming they have experienced or perceived age discrimination is smaller because it is a muted subject due to legal protection of the topic.

To employ quota or purposive sampling, which is sampling determined by the recognition of a particular sampling unit as being “critical to understanding some process or concept” (Schwandt, 1997, pg. 122), I went to social media sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook and joined support groups for people against age discrimination. My goal was to recruit four participants using quota sampling. I posted a call for participants (see Appendix Three) and asked them to reach out to me through messaging if those in the groups met the criterion set for the study. I then elicited snowball sampling within the post by asking the members of the group to "share" the post or refer the post to anyone they may know that would fit the criterion.

Continuing with snowball sampling, which is used once a criterion is set in place and participants that fit the criterion have agreed to participate, I used my father as a
catalyst. My father informed people whom he had contact with that had already spoke about feeling they had been discriminated against due to their age. My father fit the criterion set forth for this study. He began to spread the word to others that fit the same criterion, which snowballed to others making up my participant pool. Mack et al. (2005) mention, "participants and informants with whom contact has already been made use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participant or contribute to the study" (p. 5-6). Social media became one of the major resources I used to find participants and display information to prospective research participants.

I used LinkedIn to post to my connections about a “call to action” for participants for the study (see Appendix 3). My father saw the post and “shared” the post to his connections. His connections on LinkedIn had potential to be participants based on the age range of his friends, employees, clients, and co-workers.

For the purpose of this study, there were eleven participants interviewed about their perceived age discrimination experiences (see Appendix 4). Once a participant confirmed they wanted to be a part of the study and fit the criteria, an interview was set up. Interviews were done at the convenience of the participant through Skype voice call, phone call, or video chat. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted by asking a set of participants about their experience relating to, or as a cause of age discrimination in the workplace. Upon agreeing to participate, the participant was sent the informed consent form. Once the participant signed the form, it was saved as an electronic file. After the informed consent was signed, I set up interviews with the participants at their earliest convenience. The interviews totaled to 39 single-
spaced pages of transcription, 300 minutes and 27 seconds of interview recording, with
an average interview recording lasting 27 minutes and 27 seconds (See Appendix Four).

**Approach to Analysis**

After gathering the data, the next step was to analyze it. Using the information
gathered through the method of semi-structure narrative interviews, my analysis
continued to follow qualitative communication research and was based in thematic
analysis. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) note that the goal of thematic analysis is conceptual
development. This method emphasizes rich and thick description, which is one of the
main tenants of qualitative research. Boyatzis (1998) explains thematic analysis as a
process of "encoding qualitative research" (p. vii). Thematic analysis will be used to
understand the data. According to Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis is a process for
encoding qualitative information, requiring explicit "code" (p. vi). Thematic analysis
allows the information that is collected to facilitate a new way to communicate age
discrimination and the effects it has on the older worker.

Thematic analysis emphasizes and examines themes within the data. From the
formation of this study, there have been "sensed themes" or codable moments that would
intersect with age discrimination in the workplace (Boyatzis, 1998). These themes that
develop are from a level of patterned responses that relates to the research question which
is known as coding. Coding is the primary process of developing the themes from the raw
data that is compiled from the participant's interviews. The codes that we have developed
will be a way to describe the patterns that are found across the interviews. These themes
will serve as a description to understanding the phenomenon of age discrimination
answering our given research questions.
To allow for these themes to emerge, I transcribed the interviews that I conducted with the participants. Since transcribing can be a tedious task, it is important to keep the interviews focused and guide the participants with probing questions. Although the interviews were open-ended and narrative, a compiled list of questions at my disposal guided the conversation. The list of questions (see Appendix Two) served as a framework to start the conversation with the participants. One of the most important aspects of transcribing these interviews was paying attention and making sure to transcribe responses from the participants.

Thematic analysis is performed through the process of coding in six phases to create the patterns from the data. “These phases are: Familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16). The first phase, familiarization with data is often associated with the researcher immersing themselves in the data collected. Braun & Clarke (2006) explain immersion. They state, “Immersion usually involves ‘repeated reading’ of the data, and reading the data in an active way” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16). Active searching for patterned themes and codable moments throughout, the data was involved in immersion and ‘repeated reading.’ Before the next step of generating initial codes, it was important to read the entire data set before starting coding. Once I was familiarized with the data, it was time to generate a list of initial codes. This phase involves the production of initial codes found within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While familiarizing yourself with the data, an initial list of ideas about what was in the data is formed, also known as codes. Codes are “the most basic segment, or element, of raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way
regarding the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). For this study, there was a set of research questions regarding age discrimination’s effects that we that we coded around.

The next phase was searching for themes. After initial coding, searching for emergent themes that your codes combine to form helps to find overarching themes. Reviewing the themes, phase four, begins when refinement of the initial themes occurs. “During this phase, it will become evident that some candidate themes are not really themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 20). Some themes may not be dense enough or have data to back them, and some may not be specific enough and are too diverse. This was the phase where consideration of the specificity of the themes was most important. The next step, defining and naming themes occurred once a thematic map of the data is available. This was the point where a researcher defined and refined the themes that were presented in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For each theme, a detailed analysis was conducted. The detailed analysis became a story the researchers told about the data in relation to the overall research study. One of the main reasons for the defining and naming phase was to clearly be able to define what the themes are and what they are not. It should be clear when looking at the naming/defining of the theme what the data was speaking to. Lastly, once worked-out themes were set out, it was time to produce the report. The write-up provided sufficient evidence of the themes within the data. “Choose particularly vivid examples, or extracts which capture the essence of the point you are demonstrating, without unnecessary complexity” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 23). The examples used were easily identifiable and connected to the theme. When using examples/extracts, they helped illustrate a narrative that the data was already telling. The
examples needed to go beyond the themes description and connect back to the research question.

Because this research was looking for how people ages 45-65 have been discriminated against on account of their age in the workplace, it was important to select an approach and methods that would allow me to understand their human experiences from their own narrative perspective. The interpretive approach based in qualitative interviewing (semi-structured and narrative), allowed me to be flexible and build rapport with the participants for this study. By using purposive sampling, I was able to be strategic in the criteria needed for those willing to participating in this study. The process of coding for later thematic analysis, helped me understand and pick out codable moments of the participants recounts of age discrimination in the workplace. Due to these codable moments, the product of this research, with its theoretical contributions of social identity theory, in specific professional identify, and workplace dignity, help to understand the effects age discrimination in the workplace has on persons age 45-65.
Analysis

Several themes emerged from the interview data collected from participants in this research study. The emergent themes are presented in this chapter in relation to the research questions. The first research question sought to explore how participants experienced perceived age discrimination in the workplace. Participants described "how" they experienced age discrimination by being fired, barred, or denied training opportunities from the organizations they were employed with. Themes emerged about how the participants experienced age discrimination. The themes are: organizations were firing, not hiring, barring or denying training opportunities to older workers and, as a result, the participants and the participants being viewed as an expense to the organization. The second research question examined the intersection of age discrimination and dignity in the workplace. After analyzing the data, two themes emerged including worthlessness and valuing the knowledge an older worker has. The third, and final research question looked at how age discrimination intersects with professional identity. For this question, two themes emerged including the insecurity for the future and questioning of abilities. All of the themes, while all unique, are related as the themes show the way the social identity of older workers is being affected when they are being discriminated against. In this analysis, I address each research question in turn.

Perceived Age Discrimination

The first research question for this study looked to identify how participants have experienced age discrimination in the workplace. In other words, this question sought to explore what types of discriminatory behaviors organizations are engaging in, or that the participants have perceived due to their age. The analysis revealed that participants were being fired from their organization, not hired, denied training opportunities and barred
from the organization, directly answering how participants in this study have experienced perceived age discrimination in the workplace. The theme revealed “why” participants were being discriminated against and ultimately fired, not hired, barred, or denied training opportunities from their organizations. The participants were quick to theorize the reasons why they were denied these opportunities. In addition, the analysis revealed that participants were perceived to be an expense to their organization which also led to them being fired, not hired, barred or denied training opportunities.

Through the interviews with the participants, their responses indicated “how” they experienced discrimination, which was either being eliminated, barred from the organization, or not receiving training. Participant 10 explains an experience of denial of opportunities. She states:

There were all women my age sitting at this job fair. I thought that they were going by last name, but my last name started with a C… Then I started talking to a woman that was my age. I was like “Is this a good thing that we are going first?” The woman said, “Probably not.” I mean they were just going through us old ladies to get us done and gave the younger people that were there 30 minute plus interviews and I wasn’t even given 5 minutes. I was pissed. I was like, “Are you fucking kidding me?”

She goes on to say, “When I went for the interview, it was so blatant. Even the recruiter reacted when I said I was here for an interview.” Participant 6 explains the lack of opportunity an older worker can be faced with after recounting her husband’s experience, “My husband had an interview cancelled after he got there and checked in. They put a face to the name and then cancelled. That is age discrimination.” As Rupp and Vodanovich (2006) suggest, age bias not only exists in the workplace but manifests within an institution’s practices and principles. In the aforementioned examples, bias is evidenced in the organizational practices related to interviewing. In addition, Kaye and
Cohen (2008) explain that older workers are still denied training, development opportunities, participation in internal programs, and advancement despite the fact that such denials are illegal. Although illegal, the participants clearly answer “how” in the first research question by giving examples of being fired, barred from, and are denied training because of age discrimination and discriminatory practices.

Participants were given a reason or an excuse that lead to them being fired, barred, not hired, or denied training opportunities from the organization, or lead to being discriminated against. Participants reported an array of excuses/reasons for being fired relating to not performing to the company’s standards even though the employee’s performance was not an issue or hindering the company’s performance. Participants indicate overt and covert ways the organizations discriminated against older employees. An example of the overt way organizations discriminated against older workers was when Participant 5 found that the 2008 recession was affecting the company’s performance. Instead of recognizing the influence the 2008 recession had on the company’s performance, Participant 5 became a target of discrimination and his performance was used as an excuse to fire him from his position. He states:

In my last position, I worked with [Software Company]. It happened that I turned 55 and at that point all of the sudden my boss was telling me that my performance was not up to standard. Now those figures were based off a couple of things. We had the best year in [Software Company] storage history. Regardless because of the 2008 recession, we were down 40% that year. I was only down 20% which was half of what the company was down. It wasn’t even me who was to blame, it was the sales partners that had deals on the table that were being pulled, yet I was let go from my job.

In Participant 5’s excerpt, he indicated that the reason he was fired from his organization was because he was not performing to the standards of the company. Even though outstanding factors were preventing the organization from performing as they
normally would, Participant 5 was fired. Participant 7 reiterates the firing of older employees in overt ways. Participant 7 states:

Once it happened to me, many other people in the same job got laid off. When we all sat down and we were talking we all realized we were between the ages of 45-60. None of us had done anything to elicit a lay off. We were like there is something not right here. We didn’t break any laws and we didn’t do anything wrong. We weren’t even told why we were being laid off. Turns out, they hired replacements for all of us that were half our age. It was frustrating and clear discrimination.

Participant 7’s excerpt makes evident that organizations are targeting older workers to be fired from the organizations for reasons that are out of the employee’s control. In other words, organizations assess the employees they have working for them and group them based on social categories, to then fire them. Logan et al. (1992) explain age identity as, “the circumstances under which people attach age labels to themselves and the consequences of those labels” (p. 451). Through Participant 7’s excerpt, it is clear that age can be seen as a social category. The participants perceive that organizations are understanding age as the actions, attributes and biases that are often associated with age. This leaves the employees seeking to understand, as Participant 7 mentions, what it is that they did to be fired.

During the interviews, participants discuss being fired and express their concerns over the future possibility of being fired because they are older workers. Organizational practices can continue and reinforce discriminatory actions and attitudes toward older employees. Participant 6 recounts a time where he was advised that the reasoning for an older employee being fired was due to “upgrading” the organization. He states, “A year before I was let go, a gentleman was let go that was probably a year older than me. When I asked my boss what happened with him he said, ‘Well… We are upgrading the
WHAT'S THEIR EXPIRATION DATE: AGE DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

department.” This example solidifies Iverson and Pullman’s (2000) findings that those employees most likely to be downsized were older and working full-time. The practice of firing older individuals is not uncommon and research further supports the participant’s claims. Participant 7 recalls, “Months before I was laid off, people started treating me with less respect. I felt less dignified in the months leading up to my layoff. The highers-that-be were looking to get rid of me. They were looking for a sneaky way to do it.” In addition, Participant 6 recalls similar discriminatory practices against a co-worker, “A lady I know, my age, never made mistakes. She was a great worker. She made one tiny mistake one day and that was apparently grounds to fire her. I have not talked to her recently, but I know she hasn’t been able to find work.” The experiences of the participants reflect Dennis and Thomas’ (2007) understanding of age discrimination as they explain that ageism is present and relevant to current employment practices because ageist patterns of thinking are embedded in organizational actions and policies. Based off the sentiments from the participants, it is clear that organizations find reasons and excuses to fire and not hire older employees.

Organizations frame excuses and give reasons for firing employees by using a “cover up” or more covert discrimination. Participant 2 explains, “Companies are way too smart. They have lawyers and people within the organization that look for all of the loop holes so they can get around age discrimination, otherwise it wouldn’t be as prevalent as it is.” The participants allude to the fact that organizations are aware of the discriminatory practices they execute. Echoing Participant 2, Participant 6 says, “I think they are very careful from a legal perspective. They are careful to avoid lawsuits. Other than that I don’t think they care about age discrimination. They just don’t want to get
sued." Based off the above interview with Participant 2 and 6, they perceive that institutional discrimination is prevalent in our society. Pincus (2001) states that institutional discrimination refers to dominance within the organization that controls policies and behaviors within the organization. In other words, the group of people in charge of implementing policies within the workplace are those who influence differential/harmful biases throughout the organization.

Participant 2 and 6’s excerpt also related to what was previously discussed as in-group/out-group distinctions. In this example, in-group/out-group identification is understood as the way that we understand social dominance in the way we communicate identities. The dominant age groups are younger workers and the marginalized group is the older workers in this study. Older workers are often related to younger workers for what they are not, creating a distinction of in-group/out-group. Schniter, Shields and Dickhaut (2012) explain the creation of inter-group contrasts create a disparity that in-group stereotypes are relatively different than the stereotypes of the out-group. In other words, in-group identification is how, socially, ideologies remain dominant. Ageist communication continues to reinforce the hiring manager, and higher-ups’ dominance and further marginalize those who are the out-group. Ageist communication creates a disparity between the younger and older workers, creating an in-group/out-group distinction. The younger workers are the dominant, in-group and the older workers become the marginalized, out-group. Identity issues relate to the practice of institutional discrimination because if institutions continue to reinforce ageist communication or biases related to older workers, it can affect the ways older employee sees themselves. The notion of identity relating to discrimination is enforced by Tajfel and Turner (1979).
Tajfel and Turner explain those who are different than the dominant age within an organization further our social need to categorize what a group is and what it is not. Another example of how organizations further marginalize older employees is how the participants have explained the organization’s rationale for discriminatory behaviors, such as not hiring an employee or firing older workers.

The way organizations communicate to the older employees about firing them toes the line of being not only discriminatory but illegal. The notion of organizations being “careful” was another way participants explained how organizations explain and rationalize discriminatory behaviors. Participant 8 explains:

The companies are carefully protected by sub-contracting or subbing out the task to human resources work. Or, they may have a human resources group that will also complement subbed out work. The further they can have a third party business model, the better off the companies are to save themselves from any kind of age discrimination lawsuits and claims.

Participant 8 discusses the practice of contracting out third party human resources units instead of recruiting within their own human resources departments. Contracting third party human resources and recruiting departments is often organizationally justified as a cost-cutting measure. However, the practice is also a means to distance the organization from discriminatory practices that are not committed by the organization, yet in the organization’s interest.

Participants continue to explain the covert ways organizations discriminate against older workers. Participant 6 recalls, “For example, one of the CEO’s boys at the last company I worked for took a job of an older employee that was laid off for no reason. They waited 6 months for him to take over the position and were very careful before they just did it.” Participant 6 goes on to further explain the notion of caution
when he states, “Companies offer you your 2 weeks’ vacation but you have to sign this statement that you won’t take legal action against them. They are conscious of age discrimination, but careful so there is not legal exposure.” The way organizations frame eliminating employees falls under illegal and covert acts of age discrimination.

Participant 7 explains, “Corporations have a way of wording things that makes it seem like it is the employee’s fault, but then you look at it and they manipulated you, they made you feel that way.” As previously mentioned by Kendig (1978) forms taken by age discrimination in employment include:

Dismissal of older employees without cause, involuntary retirement on an individual basis and not agreed upon as a condition of employment, maximum age limitations for initial employment within an organization with little or no supporting justification for such a requirement, limitations placed upon promotion and/or training based upon age, and consideration of only younger employees for certain positions without valid occupational reasons for doing so (Kendig, 1978, p. 11-12).

Participant 5 nods to the above quote relating to what Kendig referred to as, “maximum age limitations for initial employment within an organization with little or no supporting justification for such a requirement” (1978, p. 11-12). Participant 5 states, “You know that the reason they are putting pressure on you to leave your job is not because of your knowledge or competence. It is because of your age.” Covert or not, the perceived discriminatory acts organizations are participating in are all instances of illegal age discrimination. This ties back to Marx, again, because of the disposability of employees. The way that an organization communicates covert discrimination can leave employees in a realm of identity negotiation. Ting-Toomey (2004) explains identity negotiation as a process where an individual or situation attempts to change, define, challenge and support one’s own or other’s defined self-images. If organizations are
disseminating biases towards older employees through organizational practices, the way a person understands age as an identity can constantly be in negotiation. Another way participants have accounted for experiencing/perceiving age discrimination is through the way the organizations describe older employees as an expense. I address this theme in the following section.

*Age as an Expense*

One of the most prominent ways older workers were being fired, barred, not hired or denied training opportunities was the discrimination the participants reported relating to the organization’s economic bottom-line; relating age as an expense the organization. A modern day example of Marx and Engles (1895) class system is the bourgeois society as the upper-management/organization executives, or those who have the power to exploit those under them. The proletariat class consists of the wage earners. The participants argue there is still an inherent struggle between the hierarchies within organizations, the “us versus them.” The participants allude to the fact that organizations are solely focused on profits and increasing the bottom line. Participant 5 states:

*Businesses are so driven to make profits on a quarterly basis and that is their first and foremost look. That means getting rid of the people that are most likely the most valuable people to your organization. The people that can get the job done in the long run, but having an unrealistic expectation that those people are too expensive.*

Participant 5 emphasizes the fact that businesses are profit driven and that is the only thing that they care about, which leads to either firing or not hiring of older employees. Labor practices in our society trend toward cutting costs to increase profits, which can be seen with older employees being fired. The participants view organizations as a “they” especially after they are fired. This is in itself a process of in/out grouping
because the participants do not refer to themselves and the organization as a “we” which positions older workers as out-grouped.

Other participants indicated similar feelings about an organization’s emphasis on the bottom line often at the expense of employees. Participant 2 refers to how organizational practices are cutting their overall budgets, including and referring to older employees as a budget cut. Participant 2 states:

A lot of those middle-level jobs went away because of automation and the tendency for jobs to make more money and be lean… They got rid of the older people and brought in maybe two people who were right out of college who could do that job for much less money.

Participant 2’s excerpt further exemplifies the profit driven mentality claim.

When asking Participant 5 what organizations need to do to work against age discrimination in the workplace he responded, “Today is so much more quarterly focused now that they [the organization] have moved away from how valuable a person could become to making it strictly a numbers game.” Older workers are positioned as an economic problem instead of an asset. Ainsworth & Hardy (2009) explain that age is constructed primarily as a problem and an ageing workforce has negative effects on economic growth and productivity. This sentiment further reemphasizes the organizational mindset of getting rid of employees or not hiring them to maintain the organization’s economic bottom line. Steele (2010) explains that social identities greatly impact our lives in the way we respond to things and act towards certain situations. If organizations are treating older employees as an expense and easy to fire or replace, the treatment of older employees can be understood as a normalized social behavior, affecting an older employee’s concept of themselves.
Furthermore, participants in this study reveal their fears about reaching a certain age within an organization. As Participant 3 noted, “In this day and age, you get to a certain age and you max out what a company is willing to pay you and we start becoming obsolete at a certain age because they can hire someone younger and a lot cheaper and phase us older workers out.” The participants continue to further what Murray and Khan (2014) state, that companies are laying off employees and restructuring jobs in an effort to cut costs and increase costs. These previous sentiments relate back to how the identity of a worker can be affected when being faced with precarity in an organization. Kalleberg (2009) states that layoffs or terminations from employment have occurred in organizations as a way of increasing short-term profits by reducing the costs associated with older workers. The way organizations fire or choose not to hire older employees because of perceived costs that are associated to their age increases feelings of uncertainty and stress.

As an employee works for a company for a certain amount of time, they are often eligible for raises in their salary, access to more vacation and paid time off. Participants expressed experiencing being positioned as too expensive for their organizations to “keep”, or knowing someone who was fired due to the expense of an older worker. For example, the data revealed that for almost all of the participants, in some fashion, they were positioned as a financial liability to the company. When asking Participant 2 what he meant when he referred to himself as a liability he replied:

A financial liability because of insurance premiums because as you get older, it costs them more. It doesn’t cost them that much more but the feeling is that… that your value is not valued anymore because they can get someone new.
In this excerpt, Participant 2 shares his feelings about the cost for his organization and organizations, in general, to keep an older employee. Participant 2 goes on to say, "The tendency is to discriminate against them [older employees], because they are more expensive to keep on as employees with benefits and whatnot. Even though they have a lot of worth still."

The claims the participants are making align with Hirsch, Seaks, and Formby (1980) regarding problematic treatment of white-collar workers. They explain that there are inequalities and unfair treatment of white-collar workers due to their steeper aged-income profiles, more than other skilled workers. In other words, there has been unfair treatment associated with white-collar workers that have been in their field for long time. The expectation is that they are to be paid more from their organization because of their experience, which results in inequalities because organizations are more focused on their bottom lines and not their employees, particularly as they age. Participant 6 explains his feelings about this sentiment:

I think they [organizations] started to look at the older workers that are making the top end of their job classifications, and I think they looked at what they were earning with vacation pay and benefits. I think they figured, we [organizations] can hire younger and pay less, less vacation days, and limited benefits. I think that precipitated the age discrimination that I have seen and has been quite prevalent within our corporate America the last few years.

This suggests that there are inequalities and unfair treatment of white-collar workers due to their income related to the amount of time they have been with the organization. Odman (2014) explains that white-collar workers require a greater financial investment to maintain the image inherited from the old social value system about them. In other words, there is confusion between the socially constructed idea of what a white-
collar worker is and the image that our society has been constructed to think of throughout history of a white-collar worker is. Participant 5 continued to enforce this theme by saying:

Now obviously there is money that is involved. The salary is probably higher, insurance costs are higher. But at the same time, you also are delivering more value as a person because you have the experience.

As Participant 5 and 6 noted, the mentality that organizations display is that the older an employee, the higher their salary. Thus, unfair treatment of firing or not hiring employees due to the organizational idea that they are a financial burden persists in organizational life. This mentality as previously stated by Ainsworth and Hardy (2009) is that age is constructed as a “problem” in organizational life because of the negative effects an ageing workforce has on both economic growth and productivity. Organizations focus on the negativity of having older workers employed due to the economic factors instead of valuing an older employee’s experience and knowledge. Participants 6, 7 and 9 recount the reason they felt they were laid off and discriminated against based off their age relating it to the “cost” of keeping them. Participant 6 says, “Yes, I feel I was discriminated at my last corporate job. I think they looked at the potential for a less costly employee without looking at the value of what those employees bring.” Participant 6’s comment shows the perception that organizations look at age and relate age to higher cost. Participant 7, when asked why age discrimination occurs said, “My concept is that they want a person with a lot of knowledge but they do not want to pay for that knowledge.” Moreover, Participant 7’s statement supports the idea that organizations are looking to cut costs, leading to the cutting of older workers.
Lastly, to further the sentiment that organizations focus on the negative economic factors of employing an older worker is the statement from Participant 9. He states, “On the older side of the scale, a person has a lot of experience and may be making too much money in the eyes of the organization.” What is evident in all of these participant accounts is the fact that an older employee is compared to being an expense. Whether that be the organization seeking to meet their bottom lines and an older employee hindering that, or making it difficult to reach that, or because the cost of an employee based off their benefits and salary which costs an organization more to employ an older worker. The participants have revealed the ways in which older employees are being fired, not hired, barred, or denied training opportunities due to the cost associated to their age. This feeling of being dismissed from the organization because of outstanding factors was another common theme that appeared while the participants answered questions associated to dignity.

Dignity

The second research question for this study sought to examine the intersection of age discrimination and dignity. The question seeks to understand how participants that have been discriminated against on the basis of their age experience dignity. As Hodson (2001) notes, dignity is the “ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect, and to appreciate the respect for others” (p.3). My analysis revealed two ways participants who have experienced age discrimination understand workplace dignity. The first theme was the participants’ relating lack of dignity to feelings of worthlessness. The second was experiencing feeling dignified with valuing knowledge. The first theme being discussed with participants explains the ways they felt a sense of worthlessness when asked how dignified they felt after their experiences with age discrimination.
Worthlessness

The analysis suggests that participants felt a sense of worthlessness after encountering discriminatory practices. Moreover, when asked about feeling dignified after being discriminated against, the participants revealed their lack of dignified feelings and increased sense of worthlessness to not only the organization but to themselves as well. Participant 7 was asked a question relating to the dignity she felt after she was discriminated against. She responded, “Just because I am 50 something years old does not make me old and decrepit and that I don’t have the brains… It just makes you feel worthless.” The feelings the participants recounted after being discriminated against were overwhelmingly negative. Our identities are largely determined by how we are perceived as belonging. Tajfel and Turner (1979) explain social identity as, ‘those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging” (p. 16). In other words, if an older worker is feeling a lack of dignity and worthless, the self-image they have of themselves can result in negativity and incapability. Participant 1 related feeling dignified as, “Like you’re bent in a corner and you don’t have any other options or opportunities. So I have to stay here and live under whatever direction.” Participant 1’s feelings display an utter lack of dignity. When asked about the incident he encountered of age discrimination and how the discrimination affected his workplace dignity he said, “It takes you down a few pegs. It just takes you down a few notches. It has a negative impact on your self-respect.” Participant 7 and Participant 1 have clearly had their dignity negatively influenced due to the discriminatory behavior of their organizations. As posited by Roscow (1978) workplace dignity consists of humanizing work and working conditions. When a person’s dignity
and sense of purpose is violated due to age discrimination, as participants suggest, they report feeling like less of a human being.

*Every* participant interviewed had a negative perception of their dignity after they were discriminated against. As Perry (2005) explains, human beings have inherent dignity and by denying our dignity we are treated less like human beings. This was apparent in the accounts from the participants. The attack on their dignity is furthered by the notion of their lack of worth within an organization. Participant 9 spoke specifically about the affect age discrimination has on dignity:

Dignity suffers. Self-doubt sets in. You don’t think something is fair and then your co-workers look at you with diminished respect because you were let go and discriminated for whatever reason. Those discriminating feelings trickle down. You take a blow to your dignity personally and then your perception from others also suffers.

The biases attached to older workers are social identities and constructions that are understood by the organization and the individual. Ylanne (2009) stated that social identities about age are formed by social processes and “influenced by societal-age related expectation” (p. 171). In other words, an older worker can start to think of themselves in specific ways because of the societal perceptions that are understood in relation to age. Participant 9 gives a nod to the socially constructed views on older workers that have been precipitated into our society. The way that employees perceive certain views of older employees can be influenced from actions, attitudes, beliefs, etc. If employees think of older workers as worthless, that concept can become the identity associated with older workers and one associated with oneself. If an older worker associates him/her with worthlessness they can further marginalize themselves (put themselves in the out-group). Giles (2013) describes the out-group as a social category in
which individuals do not identify with the dominant group, or the in-group. Steele (2010) confirms that social identities greatly impact our lives in how we act/act towards a certain situation. If an older worker feels marginalized as an out-group member within their organization the older worker can feel disconnected, or not a part of the organization affecting their identity. Tajfel and Turner (1979) mention that our individual self-images derive from the social categories we perceive ourselves to be a part of. In other words, our social identities make up who we are, and if an older worker has one of their identity locations discriminated against, it can have them questioning their worth, as it was seen through the interviews with the participants in this study.

Feeling dignified and valued is important for an older worker in an organization. Participant 2 remarks on how he experienced dignity after being discriminated against. “It makes you feel horrible. There is no reason that someone should be discriminating you based on your age. It is very demeaning.” He continues with this sentiment later on in the conversation about dignity stating, “I didn’t feel like I had any [dignity]. Obviously, because they didn’t believe in me and they felt that I was just another number and disposable.” As Lucas (2011) posits, “Dignity is a manifested idea perpetuated through communication” (p. 2). In other words the way organizations discriminate against older workers and informs ideologies that contribute to the unfavorable treatment of older workers and their sense of esteem in their work. When encountering undignified behaviors it is difficult for an older worker to feel respected and supported by the organization. This could be seen through participant’s recounts of lacking dignity and in turn feeling disrespected or respect being non-existent.
If biases are attached to older workers through the organization by discriminating against them, the feeling of esteem that an employee may have once had for themselves, the organization, and their co-workers may cease to exist. Participant 6 comments on respect in relation to dignity, “Regardless if someone is not valuable to you, you should still respect them to a certain extent, and that is not happening anymore.” The exact opposite is happening to these participants as they feel the effects of undignified behavior making them feel no sense of worth within their organizations and beyond (for example, in their private lives). Participant 5 furthered this sentiment when stating, “I don’t feel based on my last job with a corporation that there is much in the way of dignity. In fact, there is much more in the way of belittling people as opposed to making them feel more dignified.” With negative frames of mind associated to older workers, it is no surprise the feelings of worthlessness that these workers feel after being discriminated against.

If employees do not feel their need for dignity is being met, there could be a sense of mistrust for the organization. While describing their feelings of dignity as worthlessness, participants felt trust issues towards the organization. Our identities have the ability to fluctuate based on changes in our daily lives. Pratt et al. (2006) state that groups and organizations actively shape member’s identities through the socialization process. In other words, if an employee is experiencing age discrimination, it can actively affect older worker’s identity in the organization. Positively or negatively, the organizations that we belong to affect the ways we understand ourselves and can greatly affect our identities. Participant 2 merges the idea of mistrust with the organization, dignity, and worthlessness:

I had no worth. Just because I am building up the trust that has been damaged for so many years. It is not the fault of my current employer, but once it [age
discrimination] happens, even just one time, it is very hard to build yourself back up and trust the organization.

Participant 2 reaffirms the feelings of worthlessness that permeate through older workers when they are faced with the injustice of age discrimination in the workplace. As Participant 2 explains, even though it was his previous employer that discriminated against him, he still felt a sense of distrust for the new organization he was employed with regardless if they were not engaging in discriminating behaviors.

Participant 5 combined both themes, dignity as worthlessness and valuing of knowledge as dignity together in one remark. He states, “If there is age discrimination, and you are only looking at age and not experience, capability, ability, the knowledge behind it, then it is discrimination and there is no dignity at that point.” Employee’s knowledge due to their longevity with an organization, long-time career within a certain field, and their experience in general were described as ways of becoming dignified or understanding dignity.

*Valuing Knowledge*

The second theme that emerged in relation to research question two was concerned with knowledge not being valued and participants not experiencing dignity. The participants describe the idea that with age comes experience and knowledge. When a participant is being discriminated against due to their age, participants responded that organizations were not recognizing the value of their knowledge. Participant 7 mentions, “When you are interviewing for a position and someone has been working for 30 years for the specific job, open your eyes. Look at them and their experience.” In other words, Participant 7 suggests that 30 years on the job creates a unique understanding, knowledge base, and skill set of the job or organization. Participant 7 realizes that organizations are
bypassing keeping older employees or hiring older employees because they are not giving older workers an ability to share their experiences and talk about their expertise in the areas they were previously employed in. Participant 7 explains one of the issues with age discrimination is that it starts as early as the hiring process. She says, “I am from the understanding that if you have the knowledge and understanding, then why would someone take that away from you?” As Ainsworth (2006) notes, older workers describe experiencing a devaluing of their knowledge in organizations. Older workers experience subtle barriers to learning opportunities, pressure to compete with younger workers, pressure to become more technologically savvy and they experience biases put upon them that are already embedded within organizations towards older workers. This notion is clearly related to how the identity of older workers is socially constructed. The identity that older workers portray in the workplace is affected by attitudes, actions, beliefs that devalue an older worker’s knowledge. Research furthers that older workers are being positioned as valued less within organizations, regardless of the opportunity they have had and the knowledge they have.

The participants in this study all attribute age with knowledge and knowledge with dignity. They also relate inexperience to youth. With these dichotomies, the participants urge for value to be associated with the social category of “older worker” because of the amount of knowledge they can provide an organization. Schniter et al. (2012) found that ageist beliefs in younger and older adults derive from social constructs which position one age group to be dominant over the other. In other words, once difference is established, the group that is different from the norm becomes marginalized. If knowledge was recognized as a positive attribute among all age demographics in the
workplace, it can work against the category of older workers being the out-group. Participant 1 states, “I feel that people that are older have experience and knowledge more than the younger people do. Things don’t necessarily always come out of the book.” This participant suggests that younger people may have the educational experience allowing them to understand the work world and their job position, but an older worker has on the job experience that makes them knowledgeable, valuable, and ideally dignified. Participant 5 breaks down what historically seemed to be understood as a business dictum in organizations up until recently. He states:

I always thought at one point companies and businesses were very much appreciative of older workers because the longer you have been around in an organization, the more knowledge you would have which would make you a more valuable employee. They need to go back to what was historically a general business dictum. They wanted to keep an employee because the employee over time had knowledge of the organization and became more valuable to the organization.

Participant 5 notes that older workers were more valuable employees. Participant 7 also makes a nod to feelings of being dignified when she felt secure. This “business dictum” is what organizational communication theorist refer to as a “social contract.” Social contract theory is, “An implicit agreement within a State regarding the rights and responsibilities of the State, i.e. the government and its citizens” (Nyamaka, 2011, p. 2). This is significant because social contract theory explains the cooperation between one person to another or one group to another for mutual benefit. In other words, Participant 5 wants to see mutual benefits from organizations instead of being one sided and engaging in actions that imitate “survival for the fittest.”

The feeling of dignity is often related to worth. If an employee recognizes their worth in an organization, the idea is that they will be a better worker (more productive,
happier with the organization, etc.). Participant 7 says, “I felt very secure because I was knowledgeable about what I was doing and what I knew. I worked hard and it was noticed.” This notion of enhanced efficiency and productivity is directly related to dignified working environments. Kaye and Cohen (2008) further encourage the importance of an employee feeling valued. When an employee is feeling valued, the more likely they are to stay with that organization. Additionally, Kaye and Cohen (2008) state, “These productive, valued, longtime workers take fewer days off and maintain productivity” (p. 32). This relates to the participant’s comments about being knowledgeable and an organization recognizing their value. When the knowledge of an older worker is recognized, a sense of belonging and worth is established. The feeling of being worthy in an organization can make an older worker feel humanized and more productive in the workplace. Worth established within the organization seems to be a contradiction, however, because it seems organizations view older workers as expensive, whereas academic research suggests the opposite – that they bring a lot of “value.”

A knowledge worker is a term that Igielski (2015) describes as, “Workers trained in their profession, they have unique skills and are aware of their role” (p. 19). The knowledge worker is equipped with information and knowledge creating an effective and efficient competitive advantage. Organizations should go back to understanding what a person can offer, not just the salary that is attached. Igielski (2015) states that people are strategic resources with endless value. In other words, workers can offer organizations a competitive advantage with the knowledge that they bring. Participant 9 explores this notion. He states:
For example, my genes are recessive so I had gray hair in my 20s. The barber had people coming into the shop and wanting gray hair. The perception of young people is that you are young and don’t have the knowledge and experience.

We identify certain attributes towards certain age demographic as Participant 9’s interview explains. The perception of gray hair used to be related to knowledge and experience. As social identities began to change, and the social perception of older workers began to change, having gray hair and the knowledge that came with it is now not valued. If organizations are phasing out individuals that are older, they are not thinking about the efficiency of having an employee who already understands company practices, the industry, the job functions, etc., and this can actually work to undermine the organization’s goal of being cost-effective. The knowledge that older workers possess cannot be taught from a book, which is what many of the participants in this study make a note of.

When asked how they felt most dignified in the workplace, some participants directly connected feeling dignified to working and being able to provide knowledge and experience to their co-workers. In Participant 9’s excerpt below, for example, he calls himself a team player and feels most a part of the team when he is able to share his knowledge. He states:

I think I have a lot of knowledge and experience to share. I don’t go around telling people how much I know because that is counterproductive. I believe I am a team player. The ultimate team player because I can add a lot to an organization or team that may not have a lot of experience or knowledge and I can help them to make quality decisions.

In this segment, Participant 9 makes clear links of the knowledge that he has and being an addition to any team or organization he is able to be a part of. Participant 9 also states that he was hired specifically for his knowledge at his current place of work by
saying, “I was hired for my extensive knowledge and experience within the industry… My skills and knowledge are different from the people that I work with because they are all in IT and I am in sales.” Participant 9 depicts an organization that appreciates knowledge of an older worker and attaches value to the knowledge that he is able to bring to his new team. Literature confirming the effect of valuing the knowledge of older workers was described by Coon (1994). Coon (1994) relates the feelings of being valued to feelings of occupational self-esteem. This clearly relates to identity and how an older worker understands themselves. Pratt et al. (2006) explain that organizations shape a person’s identity through socialization. In other words, if an older employee feels valued, and therefore dignified, the older employee is able to understand and make sense of themselves based on the interaction (valuing) they are feeling from others. On the other hand, if discrimination is occurring towards older workers, the value that could once be felt can be undermined by the discrimination and feelings of being undignified. To show how feelings of discrimination have undermined an older worker’s feelings of value and dignity, the participants recalled how they have treated older workers. Participant 1 put himself back in the position when he was a hiring manager for the organization that ultimately fired him due to his age. He states:

I never let age become an issue. I always thought that it was inappropriate. For my own purposes, I hired several people older than me. I thought they were smarter than me and they knew more than I did.

Participant 1 comments on the fact he perceived older workers as having more knowledge. Due to the fact that he felt they were more knowledgeable, he wanted to have them a part of his organization when he was a hiring manager because he understood the value that was associated with an older worker’s experience and knowledge. Participant 9
echoes this sentiment by saying, “It establishes value and dignity, because everyone knows that I am older, and with age comes a perception of wisdom if you will.” Bolton (2007) mentioned that dignity is linked with our workplace experiences: how we are perceived and valued as a person in the workplace. If an older employee, like the participants mentioned, feel knowledge gives that an opportunity to feel a part of something bigger than themselves, then their dignity has the ability to be restored after an incident of age discrimination with a different organization, not the one that fired them. Participants understood themselves as team members and belonging to the organization when feeling dignified and valued. Participants realizing their value through the organization is an example of identity work. Gecas (1982) explains that our identity is associated with meanings and how others understand those meanings as well. In other words, it is not just our personal identities that matter when we think of ourselves. Social groups construct the way identities towards a certain group are formed. The identity that we portray within our organizational settings are at risk of being damaged if age discrimination is persistent enough and damages our self-concept of who an older worker is as a person within the organization.

**Professional Identity**

The third and final research question for this study examined the intersection of age discrimination and professional identity. The interview questions sought to examine how participants who have been discriminated against on the basis of their age sense their professional identity. Ibarra (1999) describes professional identity as, “The relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (p. 764). In other words, professional identity is the compellation of life experience in relation to work and
the workplace. Professional identity is a segment of our social identity. It is how we understand ourselves in relation to our jobs, professions, and organizations. The analysis for this research question revealed two themes in relation to professional identity and age discrimination. The first theme was participants feeling insecurity for the future of their careers. The second theme was a questioning of abilities on account of age discrimination. I address each theme in turn.

**Insecurity for the Future**

The first theme that emerged in relation to the third research question was participant feelings of insecurity for the future. In other words, participants, after being fired from their organizations on account of perceived age discrimination began to question what their future regarding work and their careers looked like. The question, “What are your feelings regarding your current job position and job security for the future?” was asked to elicit the responses that will be discussed in this portion of the analysis. When asked that question, Participant 5 about his feeling regarding job security he said:

> It makes you feel like there is nothing you can do to keep your job. It makes you feel like you have to know it is the age because I saw other people my age or older going through the same thing in the same organization. You know they are paring down the crop and not giving anyone that has experience a fair shot.

Participant 5 makes a remark that there is nothing to do to keep your job. This shows the insecurity that people feel after being discriminated against and the little faith they have for the organization to keep them employed. Participant 1 continues this sentiment of feelings of loss when it comes to keeping their job by saying, “I thought I had job security, but after three months there doing everything that I was supposed to and then some, I was let go for no reason besides what they said as, ‘It just wasn’t
In other words, Participant 5 continues to echo the feelings that there is nothing that an older person can do to keep their job once they have been a victim of age discrimination. Kirpal (2004) explains that the work actions that are performed are also a way that our social identities within the workplace are influenced or constructed. In other words, when the participants found themselves questioning their abilities, or having their abilities questioned as a worker, it affected the way they see themselves socially as a worker. The precarity the participants felt was due to uncertainty and insecurity relating to the future because of prior discriminatory experiences. In other words, the participants began to feel a sense of insecurity because their position as a worker was being threatened. D’Amours (2010) states that insecurities towards a job can be a disastrous towards a person’s sense of security at an organization. Age discrimination creates a sense of insecurity in an older worker as they begin to question their identity as a professional and personally attribute negative socially constructed biases. As Ibarr (1999) explains, self-conceptions are, “based on people’s social roles and group membership as well as the personal character traits they display…” (p. 766). When an older worker is in flux with questioning of job security because of age discrimination, the personal characteristics, social roles, and group memberships that make up one’s self-concept can be damaged. The participants in this study felt that their careers were essentially over. They felt that there was no purpose in working anymore because they would either not be hired, or they would be fired because of their age.

As referred to earlier in this analysis, Participant 7 experienced insecurity in regards to being fired from the organization she belong to. Participant 7 states:

Once it happened to me, many other people in the same job got laid off. When we all sat down and we were talking we all realized we were between the ages of 45-
60. None of us had done anything to elicit a lay off. We were like there is something not right here. We didn’t break any laws and we didn’t do anything wrong. We weren’t even told why we were being laid off. Turns out, they hired replacements for all of us that were half our age. It was frustrating and clear discrimination.

Since there is a clear link to an individual’s identity and their place within an organization, it is important to understand Participant 7’s experience in relation to insecurity and instability felt at their place of work after being discriminated against.

Kalleberg (2009) states, “Precarious work is employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the viewpoint of the worker” (p. 2). The above excerpt shows the uncertainty Participant 7, and the other employees that were fired felt. The precarity of the situation was clear as it relates to the participant’s age, ultimately leading to them being fired.

Further evidence of the damaging of an older worker’s self-concept was found through continued conversation about insecurity for the future. Participant 1 continues to talk about his job security describing his career as “over.” Participant 1 said in regards to his future, “Very negative. My career is essentially over… I am basically treading water. I am trying to make enough money to retire off of.” In other words, he attributes the future of his career to being over due to being discriminated against because of his age. This feeling of insecurity is related to a sense of precarity since workers face the difficulty in obtaining secure and stable work post-discrimination. McKay et al. (2012), state that precarious work involves the inability of individuals to enforce their rights where social insurance protection is absent. This affects the overall stability of living because of the precarity of the work they are doing. McKay et al. (2012) go on to state that, “insecurity is another key element of precarity which links to uncertainty, income
insufficiency, lack of protection against dismissal, an unknown length of employment and where there is uncertainty about future employment” (p. 9). Through the transcriptions of all 11 participants, each of them made a comment about the insecurity they feel in regards to the precarious work they are doing. Participant 3 said, “I guess my emotions about it [job security] is that it is a scary thing because something can change in a company on a dime and it could eliminate a lot of people.” In other words, Participant 3 finds precarity in being an older worker who has experienced discrimination because of their age because they feel insecurity towards the future of their employment at the organization they are employed with. Participant 6 continues with this sentiment of precarious work by saying:

What I have seen is that there is no job security anymore. A consultant at my last company told me, ‘If you have been here for 5 years and you have not been promoted, you should get out because they are going to lay you off’. That is the new culture out there today.

D’Amours (2010) echoes the sentiment the participants have mentioned about precarious work. He states that insecurity towards a job, “could have disastrous consequences for the precarious worker” because it can affect the overall identity of an older worker and the perceptions of others in the organization. In addition, as McKay et al. (2012) mention, those over the age of 50 are commonly perceived as being most likely involved in precarious work. This relates to social identity because our society socially constructs limits on the identity of older workers in particular ways. In this instance, older workers involved in precarious work effects the identity of an older worker because they may find themselves managing and reworking how they see themselves in the workplace to fight against socially constructed biases towards older workers. In other words,
precarity can create identity work for older workers as they try to mold their identities with the changing workforce and societal perceptions of older workers. This sentiment is confirmed by Trethewey (2001). She explains that women in the workplace that were facing identity changed in the workplace reproduced master narratives of themselves attempting to further themselves from the constructed views of an older worker. Trethewey (2001) states, “Since turning 50, however, she’s [Vicki] begun to become someone else” (p. 212). In other words, Vicki reworked the way she displays herself and the age she portrays.

Participants feel emotions of instability and questioning of their future regarding age discrimination in the workplace. Participant 8 mentions, “Well, my emotions are very... It is an unstable feeling. Okay? It’s not very – there is no security. It is an unsecure feeling of the workplace.” Continuing with this sentiment, Participant 11 said, “My experience is so old to the people that are looking at my resume. I have a lot of fears when I think about it. I have stuff that dates me on my resume like an old carton of ice cream.” The notions of uncertainty these participants are feelings can be generally attributed to precarious work. Kalleberg (2009) notes that institutions and structures generate precarious work and furthers cultural and individual factors that influence people’s responses to uncertainty. In addition to providing participants with a high level of insecurity and uncertainty of the future of their employment and career after experiencing age discrimination, participants make mention that when going through age discrimination, they questioned their abilities. Questioning of their abilities is another facet of precarity that affects the professional identity.

*Questioning of Ability*
The second theme that emerged in relation to answering the third research question was the participant’s questioning of their ability in the workplace because of age discrimination. In other words, participants, after being fired or not hired from their organizations on account of perceived age discrimination began to question their abilities as a worker and their position in the organization if they are still with the organization. The question, “Has your professional identity changed or stayed the same since the perceived age discrimination incident?” was asked to elicit the responses that will be discussed in this portion of the analysis. When asked about the effects of age discrimination on the professional identity, Participant 11 states:

I really felt that my background was impressive. Then my self-worth got its ass kicked. You go through this process and you find out you are nothing and not that special. You are kind of a piece of shit because you are older. You lose your enthusiasm. Being discriminated made me feel hideous. It makes me feel like, what was I just doing for the past 25 years? Why did I go to college? So I can get a job working at Jewel? I studied my ass off, I traveled and have experience people can’t touch.

Participant 11 discusses her feelings regarding the questioning of her abilities. As Tracy and Trethewey (2003) suggest, our “preferred” core self, produce outcomes that benefit organizations. In other words, when workers are able to perform as who they as an older worker, then they will be more productive and feel more valued, benefiting the organization. The participants questioned their abilities and what they could do for the organization because they were discriminated against.

Participants related themselves to being a literal commodity for the businesses that they could get rid of (fire). Instead of being human beings, the workers constructed
themselves as an addition to the company and not so much a person. Participant 2 echoes this sentiment by saying:

It sucks to get old and being older because you can’t do as much as you used to be able to do physically when you were younger and mentally. You are going to work at least 40 years out of your life and when you have that taken away prematurely it is not good.

The participants describe questioning their own respect and how they understood themselves. The process of an individual understanding themselves in relation to the social categories around them is the essence of social identity theory. Gecas (1982) mentions that identity refers to meaning associated with an individual and how we understand the groups we socially belong to as well. Participant 2’s excerpt, in other words, displays the challenges he had when questioning his identity because of the discriminatory behaviors he encountered.

Kirpal (2004) notes that our work identities are closely linked to forms of identification we develop with our jobs. This means, we spend so much time working in our lives that it is inevitable that we have identity locations specific to working and being a worker. The feelings these participants felt after being discriminated against threatened their professional identification when they still had something to offer their organization. As previously stated, identities form as we develop with our jobs (Kirpal, 2004). If the identity we have developed within our job is threatened, as the participants make reference to, it can affect the overall way one understands their position in the workplace. Participant 6 remarks, “It is frustrating and discouraging. I felt like I still had a lot to offer. I had not planned on retiring as early as I ended up doing and it makes you feel like your experience and knowledge is pretty much non-relevant.” Participant 7 echoes this sentiment by saying, “It does affect your dignity and respect for yourself because you are
trying to figure out what happened and what you did for it to happen to you. My age has nothing to do with me and my ability. It is just a number.” This emphasizes the idea that participants feel as if they are able, but are being treated as if they are not. Gove et al. (1989), states that there is a decline in well-being and self-esteem as age increases in the workplace. In other words, the negative social constructions associated with age as an identity can affect not only the individual but also other workers within the organization. Age identity as Logan et al. (1992) states is when people attach age labels to themselves. This means, age identity is the way people make attempts to understand how the individual, and those around them, make sense of and understand age. If there are negative biases attached to age, those biases then can attach to the identity of the older person. The way these participants are feeling doubt in their ability is a nod to the way we construct identities based off changes or threats to those already established identities. Participant 7 goes on to say, “I was feeling funky. I needed to figure out what I had to do. I was starting to think that that maybe even though I had been doing it for 30 years, there must be something wrong with me.” Literature affirms the participant’s recounts. Ylanne (2009) explains that social identities about age are formed by social processes and, “influenced by societal age-related expectation” (p. 171). If the participants who have been discriminated against have feelings of being unwanted and not needed in the workplace, the societal age-related expectations for older workers that are enforced will change the way they think of their professional identities.

Age as an identity and the socially constructed norms that are attached to age as an identity can affect the professional identity. Participant 2 describes the feeling of his
professional identity changing to being more careful and watching his every move when it came to his ability within the workplace. He states:

I was looking over my shoulder to make sure I am doing exactly what they want me to do, and doing the best I could do. Once you lose some of your dignity and you have been discriminated against it is hard to believe in yourself and your ability.

As Nathan (1995) states, “Individual employees must build their own identities and careers instead of subordinating their needs to the corporation” (p. 99). In other words, the organization and the work that individuals participate in have a strong social influence on one’s overall identity. Ibarr (1999) mentions that our identities and how we understand ourselves is formed through group membership. The participants in this study understood themselves by associating their identity with the organization they worked for and the position they were in which is explained in the above excerpt from Participant 2. The participants alter the way they think of themselves once they are fired from an organization. Newton (1995), explains when change happens in society or in the workplace, it largely can affect our identities. In other words, the identities we portray can be affected from outside factors relating to workplace reform, or changes within society. When change occurs in the workplace or to the employee, it can affect the identities that we portray or our positionality within the organization showing the ways that our identities are easily affected by change.

The above analysis reveals the ways in which age discrimination effects an older worker in the workplace. For many participants, the feelings they felt while experiencing discrimination, how dignity was effected and how the professional identity was effected because of age discrimination are all evident. What is most evident from this analysis is
that age discrimination has elicited a total reconstruction of who the older worker is as a social being tying to their social identity. It affects the way they feel about themselves, the way they feel other people see them and how they see their value/worth to an organization.
Discussion

This study sought to answer how age discrimination in the workplace affects older workers. Three research questions were posed to investigate how age discrimination impacts an individual’s social identity related to their employment. There was a clear need for this study because of the lack of research in specific to how the older worker’s social identity is managed and negotiated when being discriminated against. There is much research concerning age discrimination, but minimal studies about how age discrimination of an older worker and their social identity are affected. An additional rationale for this project is that even though age discrimination is illegal, it seems that organizations have found a way around the illegality of it.

Organizations and society in general do understand how older workers can be posited in a negative light due to biases that are attached to aging, (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2009; Yamasaki, 2014; Riach & Kelly, 2015; McCann & Giles, 2007; Pincus, 2001; Kendig, 1978; Saegeant, 2011). However, previous research has largely bypassed the way age discrimination affects the identity of an older worker. The previous research recognizes the biases attached with aging (Reio & Sanders-Reio, 1999; Kendig, 1978; Rupp & Vodanovich, 2006; Tulle-Winston, 1999; Dearmond, et al., 2006; Dymock, et al., 2012). The study examined the ways in which age discrimination intersects with professional identity of an older worker. Lastly, the study described the way age discrimination intersects with how dignified an older employee feels. In the following section of this study, there is a discussion offered for each of the research questions. Moving on, there is an explanation of the theoretical implications of this study that became apparent through the study’s findings. Following the theoretical implications, this chapter discusses the limitations of the present study and directions for future research.
Next, this chapter provides a practical implications section with an in depth practical application section. The practical application for this study is a communications plan for organizations to prepare for an older workforce. Lastly, this chapter ends with a brief conclusion.

Discussion: Research Question One

The first research question sought to answer how participants experienced age discrimination in the workplace. The analysis showed how the participants in this study experienced age discrimination in the workplace. The how in this study was the participants being fired, barred from the organization, and being shut out of training opportunities. There were two themes that emerged from the analysis for the first research question. The first theme explained the reasons the participants were being fired, barred or denied training opportunities and the second posited older employees as an expense to the organization for the reason they were being fired.

The first emergent theme directly answered the first research question. The first theme answered the “how” organizations were discriminating against older employees. Moreover, the participants revealed the reasons organizations told them they were being fired from the organizations. Whether it was an organizational wide layoff, an employee not “hitting their numbers for the quarter,” or the organization was looking to “upgrade,” these participants were fired from their organization. Each of the reasons the participants were fired from their organization later resulted in discriminatory behavior. The participants made it evident that they were targeted, or an older subset of people in an organization was targeted for being fired. This was usually coupled with an excuse that did not relate to the performance or any wrong doings of the participant. There is a clear
link of a person’s identity and their place of employment. When a participant felt a threat of precarity, they were left to rework and understand their identity coupled with trying to figure out what they did to be fired from their organization.

In the second theme, the participants positioned themselves, or explained how the organization positioned them as an expense to the organization. In this section, participants related their being fired or not hired because of the capitalistic practices of organizations. The participants relate the organization’s bottom line to the reason older workers are being fired from their organizations. In addition, the analysis of this theme positioned older workers as being too much of a cost to their organization which furthered discriminatory practices and gave the organization grounds for firing the employee.

The findings from the first research question were supported by previous literature and academic scholarship. The interviews with the participants showed how the participants were being discriminated against. The analysis revealed that the participants were being fired from their jobs as a result of age discrimination or because they became an expense to the organization (Hirsch, Seaks & Formby, 1980). In addition, the literature furthered that organizations used excuses to fire employees such as a company-wide layoff, which later were found to be discriminatory (Murray & Khan, 2014). The feelings the participants experienced after being fired from their organizations began to affect their overall feelings of dignity within the workplace.

The broader implication to this research question is that employees have clearly internalized organizational notions that they are commodities. Data relating to the first theme supports existing organizational research, which emphasizes the importance of
understanding why older workers are being fired, barred and denied training opportunities from organizations. Due to age being constructed primarily as a problem and an ageing workforce has negative effects on economic growth and productivity (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2009), older workers internalize the fact that they are hindering the organization instead of being any sort of advantage to the growth and success of the organization. This is because social identities greatly impact our lives in the way we respond to things and act towards certain situations (Steele, 2010), so older workers begin to internalize the organizational notion that they are a commodity and begin to let those attitudes affect their performance, the way they feel about their organization, and other aspects that come up later through analysis like the dignity and professional identity of the older worker. Since companies are laying off employees and restructuring jobs in an effort to cut costs and increase costs (Murray & Khan, 2014), it is easily understood why an older worker would see themselves as a commodity and expense to the organization they are a part of. Therefore, it is crucial that organizations construct environments where older workers are ensured their talent, job security and identities are accepted and not seen as an expense to their organization.

**Discussion: Research Question Two**

The second research question examined how age discrimination intersects with workplace dignity. The analysis indicated that age discrimination directly affected how dignified an older employee felt in the workplace. In other words, an older employee’s dignity at the workplace suffered due to discriminatory practices relating to age. There were two themes that emerged from the analysis, which included the participant’s
feelings of worthlessness and the participants associating valuing knowledge to feeling dignified.

Several participants indicated that age discrimination and the discriminatory behaviors of organizations affected how dignified they felt in the workplace. The first theme related feelings of indignity to worthlessness. When asking participants how dignified they felt after they had experienced discriminatory behaviors, they revealed that they felt nothing but worthlessness. The participants related their feelings of indignity and worthlessness to not feeling like they were needed in the organization. The feelings of worthlessness affected how humanized the workers felt after being discriminated against. All of the participants in this study related dignity to a negativity after they were discriminated against. Feeling undignified after being discriminated against furthered the lack of worth they felt in their organization. When being discriminated against, the concept of worthlessness can become socially attached to the identity of an older worker. The feeling of worthlessness further marginalized older workers within the workplace.

The second theme examined the way participants felt dignified by relating value to knowledge. The participants suggested the idea that with older age come knowledge. Participants related being an older employee with knowledge because of the experience they had, and they then related knowledge with feeling dignified. Participants also related worth to recognizing the knowledge an older worker possess. In other words, participants described the knowledge they have to something that cannot be learned. The experience they have made them feel a sense of dignity because of the things they knew other workers did not because they did not have the knowledge or time within the organization. Moreover, the participants connected feeling most dignified when being able to provide
the knowledge and experience they had to their co-workers in some respect within the organization.

The findings from the second research question were supported by previous literature and academic scholarship. The interviews with the participants illustrate how age discrimination negatively affects how dignified an older worker feels in the workplace. The literature supports the claim that participants feel that their knowledge is devalued at work (Ainsworth, 2006). As well, the literature supports that the organizations we are involved in have a strong influence on our socialization process which led to participants feeling a sense of worthlessness when they were being discriminated against (Pratt, et al., 2006). The analysis revealed the ways that age discrimination affected how dignified the participants felt which ultimately began to affect the way they saw themselves as a professional, and their overall identity.

The broader implication to this research question is that organizations seem to be undermining their goals since age discrimination may actually rid an organization of its best and most knowledgeable employees. The data from interviews with participants and existing organizational research create an understanding of how low self-esteem and valuing of older employees within the organization can affect and older worker ultimately resulting in the older worker feeling a lack of dignity and questioning their abilities. This is because, our individual self-images derive from the social categories we perceive ourselves to be a part of (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and when something threatens the way we understand our social identity, like precarious work, or being fired, barred or denied training opportunities, it can have long lasting effects on an older worker (lack of dignity and not valuing their knowledge). Understanding how the social identity, dignity, and
valuing the knowledge of an older worker in the workplace illuminates the need for organizations to value the knowledge these workers have. One objective of workplace dignity is humanizing work and working conditions (Roscow, 1978). This analysis depicts the opposite of workplace dignity, showing what can happen when an older worker’s dignity is threatened by age discrimination and discriminatory practices. Precarious work can ultimately make older workers feel like they are underappreciated and do not have a sense of value or are needed in the organization. This implication is supported by existing research that older workers describe a devaluing of their knowledge in organizations (Ainsworth, 2006). Coon (1994) relates the feelings of being valued to feelings of occupational self-esteem. Without feeling valued or recognized for the knowledge an older worker possesses due to age discrimination, an organization can actually rid themselves of some of their most knowledgeable employees.

**Discussion: Research Question Three**

The third research question addressed how age discrimination intersects with professional identity. Two themes emerged regarding the way age discrimination intersected with professional identity. Both of the themes explained the negative effect age discrimination has on the professional identity of an older worker. The two themes that were revealed were the participants feeling insecure about the future of their careers and the participants questioning their abilities in the workplace. Identification and the professional identity of older workers plays a major role in the way age discrimination affects older workers. The participants found themselves questioning the identity they have associated with during their time with the organization they were employed as a result of discriminatory practices. Upon being discriminated against, the participants
found themselves renegotiating or managing their already established professional identity.

The first theme, insecurity for the future, illustrated the fears the older workers experienced regarding job security. Participants revealed, after being fired from their jobs due to age discrimination, they questioned what their future as a professional would look like. The participants made remarks about not being able to do anything to keep their jobs and felt sentiments of loss and precarity. The precarity these older workers felt because of age discrimination made them question themselves as professionals because they felt uncertainty. Age discrimination furthered the insecurities the participants felt because of the negative socially constructed biases that are associated to older age. The participants began to attach the negative concepts to their identities as a professionals.

In addition, participants displayed clearly that their professional identities were damaged through their conversation about insecurity. All eleven participants made mention that they do not feel secure with the future of their careers and that they felt their professional career was essentially over. Identity negotiation and management was obvious through the accounts of the participants. Instead of understanding themselves as a professional and their identity as a professional, the analysis showed the participants were affected by the age discrimination and reworked and reproduced who they were in the workplace. The reproduction of the participant’s professional identity was also seen when they were questioning their abilities regarding their ability in the workplace.

The second theme that emerged in this analysis was the participants questioning their abilities in the workplace because of discriminatory behaviors. After being fired and discriminated against, the participants began to question their ability to be the worker
they once were. This theme emerged after asking participants if they felt their professional identity had been affected by the age discrimination they encountered. Besides stating that they questioned their abilities, the participants described feeling like they had to change who they were because they did not feel they could do anything more for the organization. This lead to participants questioning how they understood themselves and their professional identity.

Overall, the findings from the third research question were supported by previous literature and academic scholarship. The research that is currently in academia, however, has limitations when it comes to the way that age discrimination affects the professional identity. There is literature that supports that negative biases and social constructions that affect the way individuals understand their own professional identity, and how other perceive their professional identity (Coon, 1994). In addition, the research supports that precarious work furthers notions of insecurity in the workplace for older workers, affecting the way they see themselves as a professional (McKay et al., 2012; D’Amours, 2010). Lastly, the literature supports the participant’s claims that age discrimination led to questioning their abilities, which led to renegotiating of their professional identity (Trethewey, 2001). The interviews with the participants illustrate how age discrimination negatively affects professional identification of older workers. The analysis revealed the ways that age discrimination affected different segments of the social identity of older workers which leads to the theoretical implications found in the current study.

The broader implication for this research question is that the sense of precarity adds to the overall trend toward precarious work for people in our study. The interviews
with participants and previous support from organizational research emphasize the importance of understanding the effects of precarity on an older worker. The sense of precarity creates feelings of insecurity for the future in older workers and questioning their abilities. Insecurities towards a job can be disastrous towards a person’s sense of security at an organization (D’Amours, 2010) and ultimately leads to the older worker questioning themselves as a professional within the workplace. Due to the fact that precarious work is uncertain, unpredictable and risky for a workers (Kalleberg, 2009) this threatens the way an older worker feels about themselves while in the organization. The security an older worker may have once felt is stripped due to the insecurities that come with precarious work. This sense of precarity, overall, affects the way an older worker understands themselves as a professional. Precarious work involves the inability of individuals to enforce their right where social insurance protection is absent (McKay et al., 2012) furthering their ability to stop precarity in the organization because once discriminated against, the feelings of security and having ability within the organization no longer remains.

**Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study will add to the research and literature concerning age discrimination in the workplace, age discrimination on the social and professional identity, and age discrimination on dignity of older workers. Much of the scholarship has generally focused on the biases and stereotypes that are associated with older workers as they age in the workplace. However, the findings in this study make it evident that there is a link to the biases and stereotypes of older workers and how those factor into the overall identity and dignity of an older worker. The present study explains that there
should be more research associated with the age identity construct, specifically. While many scholars understand age as an identity, (Vincent, 1995; Logan, et al., 1992; Karp, 1988; Gove, et al., 1989; Schafer & Shippee, 2010; Harwood, 2008), there was a lack of connection with age as an identity and age discrimination. This study attempted to draw larger implications between the intersections of age discrimination and identity and age discrimination and dignity.

As it has become apparent through the presented study, the identities that individuals negotiate are affected due to the discrimination they encounter in the workplace. Age discrimination in the workplace makes older employees question their professional identity, their position within the organization, and affects how dignified they feel in the workplace. Age as an identity construct becomes an important element of the current study. Participants were found negotiating identities and relating them back to their age. The current study provides that age discrimination has risks and harmful effects on older employees. Age discrimination needs to be given a greater consideration due to the way it intersects with employee’s feelings about their professional identity and dignity within the workplace. This means, if an older employee is discriminated against just once, it has long lasting effects on these intersections. The broader overall implications throughout this study are: The employees have clearly internalized organizational notions that they are commodities; that organizations seem to be undermining their goals since age discrimination may actually rid an organization of its best and most knowledgeable employees; and the sense of precarity adds to the overall trend toward precarious work for people in this study. Instead of mindfully working to
understand the socially constructed nature of age discrimination, our society has constructed age biases and attached them to older employees.

**Limitations**

Regardless of the results that were addressed through this study, the study was found to have its limitations. Initially, in the proposal part of this study, there was concern about narrowing down the participant criteria to a certain gender classification. To alleviate this consideration, the researcher posed a question to all participants asking if being a different gender would make a difference in their experience of age discrimination. None of the participants made a claim that if they were a different gender being discriminated against would make a difference. However, even though the participants indicated otherwise, academic literature suggests that organizational practices and employee experiences with them are deeply gendered. Future research might want to explore this direction to gauge how gender intersects with age discrimination and organizational life.

Moving on, age discrimination was found to be limiting in itself when attempting to attract participants. In the preliminary stages of gathering participants, there were seventeen participants who reached out through the various postings (Appendix 3: Call to Action). Of those seventeen, eleven filled out informed consent forms and agreed to interviews. The participants that did not participate expressed concern and insecurity over their protection in the study regardless of the regulations set out by the Institutional Review Board that were put into place before being able to work with human subjects. This was interesting because insecurity played a part in participating in the study, and
also in the analysis when participants felt insecure due to precarity of their jobs and in the workplace.

Additionally, another limitation was time. If there was more time in this process, rapport could have been built addressing the previously mentioned limitation concerning social media organizations and groups. Since this study involved participants sharing personal experiences about how they have perceived age discrimination, having more time to build a rapport with the organizations and group of participants may have led to more people agreeing to be involved in the process. Lastly, it is important to address the fact that those involved with this study could have been influenced by the researcher. The researcher’s negative belief toward age discrimination can be seen in the way the study was conducted positing age discrimination as a negative and counterproductive attitude to have in the organization. Without force and without ill-intentions, the participants could have been more apt to responding negatively when asked about their experiences with age discrimination with how the questions were posed.

**Future Research**

The current study asserts results that pave the way for further research endeavors. Through the results, one aspect of the study that was interesting was the way the participants described the patronizing behaviors they experienced in the workplace. Since this study was focusing on social identity theory and the effects of age discrimination on the older worker, specifically with the research questions posed, the researcher felt that as further extension of this research, it would be interesting to examine the content of the interviews, focusing on the patronizing behaviors the older workers faced. Another possibility of future research was to see if, and how age discrimination persists with the
younger workforce. Through the interviews with my participants, most spoke about the younger workforce, specifically the, “millennials” in a negative light. Millennials were either posited as the reason for the older workers being eliminated, or the participants were describing the younger workers as lacking the experience and knowledge that older workers possess. It would be interesting to uncover the discriminatory practices and claims that are associated with being young in the workplace and the biases attached to younger generations in the workplace.

Lastly, a segment of this study that would create an interesting and research worthy study was to focus on the transportation and logistics industry in the United States. Out of the participant pool that this study gathered, five of the participants currently work in, or were fired from an occupation under the transportation and logistics industry. Almost half of the participants for this study were involved in this industry, perhaps suggestion that age discrimination must be more prevalent in the transportation and logistics industry. This could act as an extension of the current study by adding the additional criteria of a participant having to have worked, or currently work in the transportation and logistics industry. With this being said, the above suggestions illustrate that there is still a great deal of research that needs to be done addressing age discrimination in the workplace. This study has aided in the hopeful and eventual ending of discriminatory practices of older workers, and helping organizations prepare for an aging workforce.

**Practical Implications**

This study offers opportunities for practical implementations for organizations. This study can serve as a model for organizations to understand the implications, risks,
and damage age discrimination can have of the identity of older workers. In addition, the way organizations are treating their older employees in these discriminatory ways can lead to a lasting effect on the production of the organization. As it has been indicated throughout this study, age discrimination does have an effect on an older worker’s professional identity and dignity at work. If the older workers in an organization do not feel valued, question their abilities and feel insecure about their position within the workplace, this could lead to feeling like an outsider or part of the marginalized out-group. There are many implications accounted for when a person feels a part of an out-group, as the literature in this study has mentioned.

One of the most salient implications the researcher found in the current study is assessing the organization's frame of mind. This study provides a great deal of practical application for an organization to understand why discriminatory practices can be harmful for older employees. The reality of this is that, for an organization to truly understand what this study is explaining, the organization needs to have a concern for their older employees and how the discriminatory practices they are engaging in affect their employees. Unfortunately, organizations, as the participants in this study elude to, are too focused on their corporate agenda and profit gains. If an organization truly does not understand the practices of the organization are discriminatory, then the current study could be of great value to the organization. However, if an organization cannot separate themselves and the discriminatory practices they engage in to focus on the effects of age discrimination, then the current study may not be applicable.

Another practical implication this study presents is a way for employers and organizations to prepare for an older workforce. The current study can serve as
theoretical touchstone for organizations to recognize the risks that can occur when age discrimination is present in organizations. In the next section of this chapter, the researcher offers a communication plan equipped with recommendations for an organization looking to prepare for an older workforce.

**Practical Application**

**Executive Summary**

The following is a communication plan for organization’s responding to an aging workforce. According to a report from the Center of Aging & Work at Boston College (2006), the percentage of the population, age 50 and older, was 13 percent in 1900, 27 percent in 2000, and is expected to surpass 35 percent in 2020. As the first of the Generation Xers (ages 35-50), turn 50, this demographic of working adults finds themselves susceptible to being discriminated on account of their age. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act protects those workers ages 40 and older which would now include a portion of Generation Xers as at risk for being discriminated due to their age. A PEW Research Center study from 2015 shows that there are 52.7 million Generation X workers in the American workforce. As Baby Boomers and Generation Xers to age, it is important for organization’s to understand the importance of preparing for an aging workforce.

To understand how to create successful communication tactics for organizations to prepare for an aging workforce, an assessment of the treatment and perception of older workers in our current economy was conducted. The analysis shows that it is important to understand the demographic landscape of age in our current economy, the perceptions of older employees, and the amount and cause of age discrimination claims throughout the years. Following the analysis, I then assess the way that organizations practice responding to an aging workforce. In other words, the things that should be in place to be more inclusive of an aging workforce. From this research, a list of recommendations have been created for organizations to prepare for older workers.

This communication plan provides organizations with tactics and allows for a better understanding of what it will take for an organization to effectively plan and prepare for the changing workforce. The plan will highlight the importance of preparing for the future within organizations, specifically for the changing emphasis of older employees becoming more prevalent than ever.

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1 Traditional communication plans are formatted with single spacing within businesses and institutions.
In the following section, the demographic landscape of our current economy will be analyzed as a reason for organizations to prepare for what is to come concerning older workers. The focus then moves from the demographic landscape to the perceptions of older employees within our society. In other words, the next section will further discuss the negative stereotypes associated with age as an identity. Lastly, in this section the amount and causes of age discrimination claims will be assessed. The communication plan proposes objectives, strategies and tactics that are specific for the goal of organizations preparing for an aging workforce.
Section One: Research Analysis

Demographic Landscape:

Our current economy is experiencing a change in the age demographic of workers. The U.S. Census Bureau suggest that in 2016, one-third of the total U.S. workforce will be age 50 or older and will continue to increase to 115 million by 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). There is a growing amount of older workers within the workforce and the projections show that the number of older workers is going to continue to increase. It was projected that in 2010 and 2050, workers aged 55 or older would make up 19 percent of the workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). The steady increase of older workers is also coupled with an increasing chronological age of retiring adults. In 2010, the Bureau of Labor Statistics announced that the age of retirement has increased from 65 to 70 years old. Today, older workers are working from the later 60s and 70s. In comparison to previous years, the U.S. economy was comprised of a smaller percentage of older workers in the overall labor force. Now, a larger percentage of older workers are still employed full-time.

Perceptions of Older Workers:

Older workers are faced with discrimination as soon as their resume gets to the organization that they are applying to. A survey by Reynolds, Ridley, and Van Horn (2005) showed in 2005 there were 800 adults working or looking for work. Of those 80, 36 percent said the employer treated older workers less fairly than the younger workers (Reynolds, Ridley, & Van Horn, 2005). AARP conducted a 2002 study that found 60 percent of workers 45-74 felt they would be the first to go when an employer would be looking to layoff. In the same AARP study, two-thirds of the workers 45-74 felt there was age discrimination in the workplace based on what they had experience or based off what they had seen in their own workplace. Mendenhall (2008) mentioned, “Sixty percent of respondents 50 years of age and older discussed perceiving some form of age discrimination in the job marketing during an interview... In contrast, only about one-third of the younger group (49 or younger) mentioned feeling limits due to their life course stage” (p. 201).

Middle age and the experience of aging were framed as a time of declining health and appearance (Bailey, 2010). In addition, age biases of older individuals were identified as unable to communicate, old-fashioned, prejudiced, conservative, ill tempered, easily upset, emotionless, and less culturally sensitive (Dearmond, et al. 2006). Another consistent theme in the literature is that older workers are reluctant and harder to train than younger workers (Dymock, et al. 2012). Tulle-Winton (1999) suggests, “The ageing body is thus a ‘cultural icon of decline and helplessness’” (p. 297). Rupp and Vodanovich found that "people would associate poorer performance with the older
workers, in comparison to the younger" (2006, p. 1348). As it can be seen through the grouped literature mentioning the perceptions of older workers, there is a need for awareness to prepare for the future of the current economy’s aging workforce.

**Current Age Discrimination Laws:**

There are two laws or regulatory practices that organizations currently abide to in effort to avoid age discrimination and discriminatory practices. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is responsible for, “Enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of a person’s race, color, religion, sec, national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information” (*U.S. EEOC*, 2016). The act states, “It is unlawful for an employer to discriminate in hiring or in any other way between individuals 40 and over (*The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, 1998, p. A-2).

It is important to make the distinction of “who” counts as an older worker in the U.S. economy. Older workers that are seen as a protected group under age discrimination laws are those ages 40 and older in the workplace. Another age discrimination law in place to serve “protected workers” is the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA). The purpose of the ADEA is “to promote the employment of older persons based on ability rather than age” (Dennis & Thomas, 2007, p. 84). The ADEA was implemented 46 years ago to protect aging individuals, age discrimination continues to present obstacles for older employees. The ADEA has specification on “what” is age discrimination or discriminatory behaviors that are acceptable for an age discrimination claim. Some of the protections in the ADEA include dismissal of older employees without cause, involuntary retirement on an individual basis and not agreed upon as a condition of employment, maximum age limitations for initial employment within an organization with little or no supporting justification for such a requirement, limitations placed upon promotion and/or training based upon age, and consideration of only younger employees for certain positions without valid occupational reasons for doing so (Kendig, 1978, p. 11-12). However, there are still ways that organizations and business practices subtly discriminate employees based off their age.

**Current Amount of Age Discrimination Claims:**

In 2002, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) "received more than 20,000 age discrimination cases" (Kaye & Cohen, 2008, p. 30). Dennis and Thomas (2007) discuss that 16,585 age bias complaints were filed by the EEOC. Of the 16,585 complaints that were filed in 2007, 90 percent of the claims did not make it to trial. The EEOC and ADEA provide that in 2015, 22.5% or 20,144 of the discrimination charges filed were relating to age out of 89,358 filed charges (*U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, 2016). Almost one fifth of all discrimination charges filed in

Section Two: Communication Plan

As it is clearly shown through the research analysis, organizations need to be prepared for the older worker that will make up a large portion of our current workforce. With an understanding of the current demographic landscape of our working economy, the perceptions of older workers in our society, current age discrimination laws and the amount of age discrimination claims currently filed in the United State, I have created objectives and a strategy specific to the nature of this communication plan.

Objectives:

The goals of this communication plan are to:

• Undergo research to show a need for organizations to prepare for an aging workforce.
• Identify organizational communication tactics that are more inclusive towards older workers including, but not limited to: recruiting, hiring, retraining and retaining older workers.

Strategy:

The strategy for this communication plan is to provide inclusive organizational practices to businesses and industries to create awareness for the aging workforce that is to come in our current economy.

NOTE: This communication plan is for organizations that are looking to understand age discrimination. If an organization understands the effects discriminatory practices have on older employees, then these tactics have room to be successful if implemented within an organizational setting. However, if the organization does not recognize the risk and harmful effects of age discrimination on older employees, these tactics will not be of any use to the organization. This communication plan is for organizations that are unaware of the subtle, ageist discourse they may be engaging in, or for the organization that is willing and wanting to prepare for the future workforce of older employees.
Tactic One: Recruiting/Hiring Older Workers

Recruiting/Hiring Older Workers:

Currently, most organizations do not use a targeted recruitment approach to attract older workers. Recruiting should start with the decision of whom to target as the potential applicant before creating/starting recruitment.

To prepare for an aging workforce in relation to recruiting older workers, the goal is to:
Target older job seekers, discuss the importance of recruitment messages, recruitment sources, and the recruiter.

Recommendations:

- Targeted recruitment
  - Target older workers as potential applicants
    - Using strategic marketing to target older workers for potential employees can project a need for the age demographic, which will be an encouraging message for older workers to apply.
  - Understand the external needs, demands, and benefits of older workers
    - Create hiring packages that consider the needs of older workers that takes into consideration aspects of life beyond the workplace that can be harmful to an older worker’s performance if not acknowledged or considered. Examples of life needs, demands, benefits: flexible work schedules, retirement plans, day care (for grandchildren if they are sole provider or caretaker), family assistance (for those taking care of aging parents).
  - Understand the personality, values, and preferences of older workers
    - Create hiring packages that consider the personality, values and preferences of older workers that take into consideration aspects of life beyond the workplace that can be harmful to an older worker’s performance if now acknowledged or considered. Examples of these are, but not limited to: Schedule preference, supplemental benefit packages (if day care is not something needed – subbing this benefit with another).

- Recruitment Messages/Material
  - Communicate that organizations require older worker’s strengths as a part of a well-running business, or to be successful
    - Communicating a need for older worker’s strengths will help with the inclusivity of recruitment messages and material. This creates a need and want for older workers by emphasizing the attributes that
an organization can benefit from when having older workers employed. This also addresses identity issues that can arise when an older worker feels threatened by ageist discourse that sometimes appears throughout recruitment messages and material. In a more inclusive environment with inclusive discourses, there is less of a threat to the age identity of older workers.

- Emphasis on job and organizational characteristics that are important to older applicants
  - Restructure all material and recruitment messages to be more inclusive and understanding of older workers. This can range from explaining retirement policies, benefit policies, flexible schedule policies (if applicable). Emphasize and promote organizational characteristics of the organizational culture that will appeal to an older audience.

- Non-discriminatory and diversity staffing policy communication
  - Create discourse that enforces non-discriminatory practices and is stated on all recruitment material (job postings, emails, marketing material). By communicating non-discriminatory and diversity staffing policies, older workers may feel a sense of safety from precarious work environments or an environment that supports discriminatory behaviors against older workers.

- Equal opportunity program implementation
  - The equal opportunity program that should be listed and disseminated from the company on all forms of recruitment material and all communication should refer to older workers as a target group.

- Recruitment Sources
  - Source must consider the searching behaviors of older jobseekers
    - Advertise in journals and newspapers read by an older audience and use technology that is accessible for people of all ages (keeping in mind the digital divide).
  - Cooperate with older or retired person’s associations to post notices, organize job fairs, sponsor events
    - Contact local AARP, SCORE, National Older Worker Career Center (NOWCC), National Association of Older Worker Employment Services (NAOWES), Labor Unions, etc., to contact and have information sent to, and through the organization’s communication channels to their constituents.
o Engage with employment agencies and services who target older workers and placement/advancement of older workers
  ▪ SCORE – Organization that gives business advice, mentoring, business plan education, marketing education, finance and money education, technology education, etc. Has a long history in specializing in mentoring older individuals.

o Involve current and retired older employees to “spread the word” and to testify about their work experiences
  ▪ Showcase members of the organization that are older in marketing materials and marketing platforms to display inclusivity and diversity of age within the organization.

o Social responsibility or philanthropic partnerships with community partners
  ▪ Volunteer or set up workshops and initiatives with groups aligned with advocating for older workers (AARP, SCORE, etc.).

- Recruiters
  o Invest in diversity training for recruiters to avoid discriminatory behavior
    ▪ Investing in diversity training helps to maintain a productive and dignified work environment. If recruiters are knowledgeable of the discriminatory behaviors that could harm an older employee, then the needs of diverse groups, like older workers, will be understood.

- Image of the Organization
  o Use ads in targeted media
    ▪ Using targeted media like diversity statements from older workers can show the inclusivity an organization engages in to show diversity within the organization.

  o Highlight diversity success
    ▪ Create marketing material showing the diversity breakdown of the organization. If an organization claims to be a diverse organization, there should not be an issue with releasing numbers that proves the claim.

  o Convey to older job seekers that they are needed to become a more diverse organization
    ▪ Understand the value and knowledge an older worker can bring to an organization based on the time they have spent working and the leadership and mentorship they may be willing to offer.

Potential Outcomes:
• Potential to reach a variety of different aged workers and recruit them for positions that they can excel in with their knowledge and experience.
• More informed employees (recruiters, human resource workers), that will be reminded and educated about the advantages of employing older workers.
• Feedback: During the recruiting process, ask for feedback from older employees that are/were considered for employment to gauge the effect of targeting and inclusive messages (equal employment opportunities), and what older employees need more of in the recruiting/hiring process.

Additional Consideration:

• As an example of recruitment material that can have messages targeting older individuals: Create job posting templates that have the equal employment opportunity and inclusive targeted messages towards older workers already included. A template can serve as a tool for not only recruiting older workers, but also for the employees to serve as a reminder of proper diversity practices.

Measurement of Success:

• Through feedback opportunities (verbal or written)
  o There can be a follow up email (which there should regardless if an employee is/is not hired as courtesy thanking them for their time and application), for older workers to send their thoughts, feelings, suggestions about the changes and implementations of new practices and messages within the recruiting/hiring process.
Tactic Two: Retraining Older Workers

Retraining Older Workers:

Due to our rapidly changing society, it is important that organizations continue retraining programs for all employees, targeting specific trainings/retraining for older workers. Retraining should continually be offered within organizations and required a certain amount of trainings a year to keep the mind engaged regarding topics, and to make sure that older workers continue to stay on top of their skills.

To prepare for an aging workforce in relation to retraining older workers, the goal is to inform employees about changing policies and offer courses about changing policies and offer courses for them, provide financial assistance to older workers for education and training, offer support services and mentorship programs.

Recommendations:

- Inform employees about changing policies and offer courses
  - By informing older employees about changes in company policies, governmental policies, etc. the organization is keeping them up to date with our constantly advancing world. By offering courses, older employees can keep their skills up to date and refresh their skills in a given area.

- Provide financial assistance to older workers for education and training
  - Offering education assistance and tuition assistance is a great motivator in the workplace. More adults than ever are reentering and reenrolling in college. If an organization offers their employees assistance, there is an opportunity for the organization to build loyalty with the worker which, as an effect, could increase the employee’s career with an organization.

- Offer support services
  - When an organization offers support service, the worker will feel a greater sense of the organization caring about them. If an organization shows investment in their employees, the hopeful outcome is that the employee will invest in the organization. Some examples of support services are: Technology support training, bereavement support, disability support, etc.

- Mentorships
  - Giving older workers an opportunity at mentorship can increase their feeling of worth within the organization. Older workers come with a great deal of experience and knowledge from careers and years of working. The information that they can provide new workers could be a part of an onboarding experience through human resources, where older workers within the organization become the best source of information and training the company has.
Potential Outcomes:

- Employees sense loyalty from the organization and in turn, become loyal to them through production and increased productivity.
- Employees are more successful at their jobs because they are being trained to stay current and fresh in certain areas of the business they are involved in.
- Feedback: One way an organization can provide feedback for retraining is to give them a written comment card to provide their likes, dislikes, what is needed, what is not needed, to make the training process of the organization more successful.

Additional Consideration:

- Our ever changing world is the biggest additional concern when regarding retraining employees. It is important for human resource teams to recognize new trends, policy updates, certification updates, etc. to make sure that employees feel capable and understand the changes occurring.

Measurement of Success:

- One way an organization can measure their success of retraining employees is by giving them a survey each quarter asking them what their needs consist of in regards to training.
- Another tool of measurement success would be setting a quote for each training event, and by attendance and gauged interest, determine if the training session was successful.
Tactic Three: Retaining Older Workers

Retaining Older Workers:

Currently, most organizations do not engage in retaining approaches to ensure older worker’s needs and preferences are being met due to life’s challenges and other influences. Retaining older workers should start with the decision of what factors can cause added stress, or what policies can alleviate some of life’s stressors due to the demands that older workers may have to deal with internally and externally.

To prepare for an aging workforce in relation to retaining older workers, the goal is to: Encourage recruiters to check in with older employees, modify retirement options, offer job flexibility, and offer supplemental benefits packages and offer professional growth and development opportunities.

Recommendations:

- Encourage recruiters to check in with older employees
  - As human resources professionals, it is important to check in with older employees to make sure they are receiving the support they need to be successful in the organization. Recruiters can do this by completing or offering: Onboarding, mentoring, employee development, career counseling and support groups.
- Job flexibility
  - When an organization offers job flexibility, it gives older workers the opportunity to make their schedule based off the things they may have going on in their lives (care for parents, child care, early risers, etc.). Incorporating telecommuting could be an option that would appeal to older workers as well, giving them the opportunity for flexibility.
- Supplemental benefits packages
  - By offering supplemental benefit packages, employees that may not have use for some of the benefits by the company offered (child care), may be able to supplement benefits for another benefit the organization offers (paid time off, extra sick days, etc.).
- Professional growth and development opportunities
  - Giving older employees the opportunity for education and further development of training programs will not only keep the mind engaged, but it can further motivation of productivity.

Potential Outcomes:

- Advantage to help not only the older worker, but as well, to help the organization with possible recruiting opportunities of engaged and dedicated older workers.
The older workers that are employed could feel a sense of loyalty to the organization that can trickle down through the organization and beyond.

- Potential to create loyalty and social responsibility of worker to organization. If organization to employee social responsibility is established, workers could be more likely to support their organization.
- Feedback: Create exit interviews (Discussed in ‘Measurement of Success’ section).

Additional Consideration:

- Considering internal and external life challenges that come with being in a different age demographic should be considered when hiring older workers. For example, an employee age 55 may have children who are still in college that they are providing for, as well as an elderly parent they made have to be providing for. Taking this into consideration, modifying and offering recommendations as listed about can help older workers regardless of life’s demands.

Measurement of Success:

- Create exit interviews for employees leaving the organization, whether that be because of retirement, leaving willingly, layoffs, firing, etc., to gauge levels of satisfaction and why the organization was unable to retain them.
- Each year run an analytics test on the amount of older workers who have left or remain employed with the organization.
Communication Plan Summary

The overall goal of this communication plan was to prepare organizations for an aging workforce. The objectives for this plan were to undergo research to show a need for organizations to prepare for an aging workforce and to identify organizational communication tactics that are more inclusive towards older workers including, but not limited to: recruiting, hiring, retraining and retaining older workers. The strategy for this communication plan was to provide inclusive organizational practices to businesses and industries to create awareness for the aging workforce that is to come in our current economy. This can be accomplished by providing information to organizations through tactics that layout the framework for being inclusive to older workers in the areas of recruiting, hiring, retraining and retaining older workers. Through the implementation of the recommended tactics mentioned, an organization can enhance its inclusivity towards older workers and create more awareness about age discrimination and discriminatory practices to older workers. Overall, the organization that uses this plan should be willing and able to prepare for an older workforce for the plan to be utilized to its full potential, and have the ability for success.
Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate the importance of understanding the effects age discrimination and discriminatory practices have on an older worker in the workplace and how age discrimination affects an older worker’s social identity. Being inclusive of older workers is a balancing act for organizations. Those organizations that are seeking to understand how they could be acting in discriminatory ways must be aware of the overt and covert implications that can be made through organizational practices, as addressed in this study. Research suggests that threats to social identity, in this study, the threat of age discrimination, creates identity work and a need for identity negotiation causing an older employee to question themselves, their work ethic, their position in the workplace, to name a few. Therefore, significant attention needs to be paid towards constructing an inclusive workplace environment for older employees where they are not threatened by age discrimination or discriminatory practices. The first step toward creating a workplace environment that is inclusive of older workers is to treat them justly by not firing, barring or denying them training opportunities without plausible and legitimate reason. As the participants in this study had indicated, there were overt and covert ways that older workers were/are being fired, barred and denied training opportunities within organizations simply due to their age. The second step toward creating an inclusive workplace environment for older workers is understanding the effects age discrimination has on an older workers social identity. This study indicates that both the dignity an older worker has and the older worker’s professional identity are effected when facing discriminatory practices.

The findings in this study, the participant accounts and the research included within this study provide insight into how organizations are participating in
discriminatory practices and how it effects the older worker’s dignity and professional identity in the workplace. Organizations seeking to change and address issues of age discrimination or discriminatory practices towards older workers can learn how to be more inclusive and how they may be, even unknowingly, participating in age discrimination.
References


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Appendices

Appendix 1: Informed Consent

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

What's Their Expiration Date? Age Discrimination in the Workplace

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Bianca Tomlin and Dr. Samantha Szczur from the Communication Studies Department at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have experienced age discrimination within the workplace of as a white-collar worker.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To study the effects age discrimination has on the white-collar working individual. The primary driver of this research is to examine potential intersections between age discrimination, dignity, and professional identity. I would like to look at how being in a situation where age discrimination is present affects a person’s professional identity and dignity in the workplace. It is essential to better understand how and why organizations are engaging in age discrimination, and how it is affecting the organization’s constituents. As an extension of the research, I will conduct a practical application that an organization can consider when evaluating values and practices that may be discriminatory.

• PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Set up and interview with myself, Bianca Tomlin. Interviews will be done at your convenience through Skype voice call, phone call, or video chat. You, upon agreeing to participate will be sent the informed consent form. Once you have signed it, scanned it, and emailed it back to me, I will be able to set up a meeting time for a Skype call at the earliest convenience with you.

I will be conducting qualitative interviews with you to discuss the impact age discrimination has had in your life through the intersections of professional identity and dignity in the workplace. These interviews will be conducted through Skype and recorded by myself, Bianca Tomlin. The interviews time length is based on the narratives and discussion that unfolds due to the questions I ask. The anticipated time length of the
interviews is 30-45 minutes each. The length of the interviews is greatly determined by the narratives, and amount of information you are willing to give.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Since the research only asks participants to respond to the questions asked by the researcher, the potential, foreseeable risks to the participants could be emotional feelings that may result due to the feelings that are associated with discrimination. As well, the feelings the participants felt due to a given situation they are recounting could spark emotions. If at any time the participants feel emotional distress, they will have the option to remove themselves from the research and stop the interview process with no consequences.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Participants may benefit by having the opportunity to recount situations they have been through involving age discrimination. By providing this information the participants shed light on the topic and create a dialogue so age discrimination awareness can be heightened in organizations. The experiences and voices of the participants can create a voice for those that may not have the opportunity, courage, availability, etc. to share their stories involving age discrimination. The potential benefit to society is providing opportunity to create an awareness of age discrimination and the harm it can/cannot have on constituents of organizations.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of anonymous codes that will ensure that no response will be linked back to a particular participant. The audiotapes and coded responses will be kept in the researcher’s personal residence and she will only have access to them. The audiotapes will be disposed of following final submission of the Master’s thesis.

The only person otherwise that would be able to have access (listening purpose only in my presence) would be my Sponsor, Samantha Szczur. I will discuss the data with Dr. Szczur with the intent to answer the research questions for the research project.

Samantha Szczur will be the only other individual available to listen to the audiotapes under the researcher’s (Bianca Tomlin) supervision.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**
Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Principle Investigator: Bianca Tomlin: (630) 379-3222; bjomlin@eiu.edu

Sponsor: Dr. Samantha Szczur: sszczur@eiu.edu

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant
WHAT’S THEIR EXPIRATION DATE: AGE DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

__________________________  ________________________
Signature of Participant    Date
Appendix 2: Interview Instrument

INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

What's Their Expiration Date? Age Discrimination in the Workplace

Tell me about your work history?

How would you describe a white-collar worker?

Do you consider yourself a white-collar worker and why?

What is your definition of discrimination?

What are your feelings about age discrimination?

Have you encountered age discrimination in the workplace?

How did being discriminated on the basis of your age make you feel?

What were your thoughts about age discrimination before the incident?

How would you describe professional identity?

At work, what identity do you feel you portray?

When being discriminated, what were your feelings regarding your professional identity?

After being discriminated, what were your feelings regarding your professional identity?

How has your professional identity changed/stayed the same since the incident of discrimination?

How would you describe your professional identity at your current place of work?

What does dignity mean to you?

How do you see dignity playing a part in the workplace?

What are the emotions you feel when thinking about your current position and your job security?

How does dignity have a place in the workplace?

When being discriminated, what were your feelings regarding your dignity in the workplace?
After being discriminated, what were your feelings regarding your dignity in the workplace?

How dignified to you feel at your current place of work?

How would you describe the relationship between age discrimination and dignity?

How would you describe the relationship between age discrimination and professional identity?

How are organizations actively preventing age discrimination?

What would you implement to help prevent age discrimination in the workplace?

How does being discriminated on the basis of your age against make you feel about the future of your career?

Do you think your age intersects with any other part of your identity?

Do you think it would be different if you were a different gender, etc.?
Appendix 3: Call for Participants

Craigslist Call to Action:

CL western IL > community > volunteers

Reply  Posted: less than a minute ago

45-65 yr. olds that experienced age discrimination

Looking for participants to help with a Master's thesis. Participants must be 45-65 years old, white-collar workers that have experienced age discrimination in the workplace. You will be asked to do a Skype voice interview about your experience!

The purpose of this study is to study the effects age discrimination has on the white-collar working individual. The primary driver of this research is to examine potential intersections between age discrimination, dignity, and professional identity. I would like to look at how being in a situation where age discrimination is present affects a person's professional identity and dignity in the workplace. It is essential to better understand how and why organizations are engaging in age discrimination, and how it is affecting the organization's constituents. As an extension of the research I will conduct a practical application that an organization can consider when evaluating values and practices that may be discriminatory.

Please message me if you fit the criterion of a 45-65, white-collar worker, who has experienced some form of age discrimination. I will provide an email address accordingly for further discussion!

Much thanks in advance!

• do NOT contact me with unsolicited services or offers

Facebook Call to Action

Hello all, I am working to finish my Master's thesis but need your help!
If you know a white-collar worker that has experienced age discrimination in the workplace that falls between the ages of 45-65 please ask them if they would be interested in a quick interview with me about their experience.
If you know someone that you think would be interested, please let me know and I can send them more information! Thanks!
LinkedIn Call to Action

Seeking participants age 45-65 who have experienced age discrimination in the workplace!

Looking for participants to help with a Master's thesis. Participants must be 45-65 years old, white-collar workers that have experienced age discrimination in the workplace. You will be asked to do a Skype voice interview about your experience!

The purpose of this study is to study the effects age discrimination has on the white-collar working individual. The primary driver of this research is to examine potential intersections between age discrimination, dignity, and professional identity. I would like to look at how being in a situation where age discrimination is present affects a person's professional identity and dignity in the workplace. It is essential to better understand how and why organizations are engaging in age discrimination, and how it is affecting the organization's constituents. As an extension of the research, I will conduct a practical application that an organization can consider when evaluating values and practices that may be discriminatory.

Please message me if you fit the criterion of a 45-65, white-collar worker, who has experienced some form of age discrimination. I will provide an email address accordingly for further discussion!

Much thanks in advance!
### Appendix 4: Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Duration of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant #1</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Transportation/Logistics</td>
<td>19:44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #2</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sales/Logistics</td>
<td>16:50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #3</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Wine Sales Representative</td>
<td>10:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #4</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Warehouse Operation</td>
<td>10:03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #5</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Business Owner “Money Mailer”</td>
<td>18:26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #6</td>
<td>60-65</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Transportation/Supply Chain</td>
<td>32:08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #7</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Administration for Airline</td>
<td>40:48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #8</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sales Representative for Cellular Network</td>
<td>17:08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #9</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Transportation/Logistics</td>
<td>28:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #10</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sales Representative</td>
<td>27:57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #11</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Marketing/Brand Manager</td>
<td>1:20:29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>