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### Images of older workers

*Content, causes, and consequences*

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#### Publication date

2017

#### Document Version

Other version

#### License

Other

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#### Citation for published version (APA):

Kroon, A. C. (2017). *Images of older workers: Content, causes, and consequences*.

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Chapter 1

Dissertation Overview

Older workers are vulnerable to unequal treatment in the workplace. The majority of Europeans consider old age a significant disadvantage in finding employment (European Commission, 2015), a view that is supported by the overrepresentation of older workers among the long-term unemployed. In the Netherlands, for example, nearly two-thirds of the job-seekers in the age category 45 years and older do not succeed in finding new employment within 12 months, compared to about one-third in the age group 25 – 44 years (CBS [Statistics Netherlands], 2016a). Moreover, age has been shown to negatively impact advancement decisions (regarding workers' potential for development and promotion) and general evaluations (e.g., Bal et al., 2011; Rupp et al., 2006). These deeply rooted inequalities remain despite European national member states' commitment to achieving the goal of inclusion and equality by proactively promoting employment and worker mobility, and by combatting age discrimination across the member states (O'Dempsey and Beale, 2011).

The labor market inequalities experienced by older workers have been associated with an image problem faced by this group. Widespread myths about older workers' competences and characteristics are argued to be "central to the production of ageist attitudes, discourse, and behaviors that are commonplace in the workplace" (McCann and Giles, 2006, p. 164). Previous research has suggested that ageist beliefs can contribute to the experience of age discrimination at work, as age stereotypes (i.e., generalized beliefs about characteristics and competences of older workers) blur employers' and co-workers' ability to make fair and just decisions (e.g., Bal et al., 2011; Dordoni and Argentero, 2015; Gordon and Arvey, 2002; Krings et al., 2011; Posthuma and Campion, 2009).

Although a myriad of factors is known to contribute to beliefs of older workers, conceptualizations of becoming old in organizations are partly defined, reinforced or countered by mediated and interpersonal communication (McCann and Giles, 2002; Williams et al., 2007). Foremost, especially in western age-segregated societies, media portrayals can be conceived as an important source of information about older adults (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). As the media confronts individuals with information about the qualities and characteristics of older workers, it is plausible that this has consequences for how one thinks

about aging workers. In addition, and regarding interpersonal communication, scholars argued that

“... alongside the others “isms”, [ageism] also receives its impact through and is shaped in turn by communication” (Williams and Giles, 1998, p. 159).

Empirical evidence supports this notion: the communication of negative stereotypes has been shown to impair the ability that older workers can and want to perform well in their job (Gaillard and Desmette, 2010).

Based on the above-stated, one may argue that mediated and interpersonal communication plays a key role in perpetuating the content and consequences of the alleged image problem faced by older workers. This assumption is at the core of the current dissertation. Its primary goal is to investigate media’s role in reinforcing beliefs about older workers and trace consequences for employment outcomes of this group. In addition, the dissertation is concerned with how managerial communication with older workers can be improved. Taken together, the dissertation advances the argument that in order to understand the dynamics of age bias within organizations, the media and communication environment should be taken into consideration. The overarching research question is as follows: *how do organizations and news media represent older workers, what are causes of variation in such representations, what effects do media representations of older workers have for beliefs about and organizational outcomes concerning older workers, and how can managerial communication with older workers be improved?*

## 1.1 Relevance of the dissertation

Communication plays a central but largely understudied role in explaining workplace inequalities experienced by older workers (McCann and Giles, 2002). Scholars have frequently stressed the potentially adverse consequences of media coverage about older workers (Abrams et al., 2015; Van Selm and Van der Heijden, 2013) and have highlighted the importance of constructive managerial communication in dimin-

ishing the influence of age stereotypes at the workplace (e.g., Henkens, 2005). Empirical research, however, remains scarce. Communication is generally not the focus of inquiry in the fields of social and Industrial/Organizational (I/O) psychology and (gerontology-focused) organizational and Human Resource Management (HRM) studies. These fields have investigated the role of age stereotypes in fostering or obstructing the employment and employability of older workers, but generally neglected the question how stereotypes materialize through communication. In the field of communication, on the other hand, issues related to workforce aging have received surprisingly limited attention, and only from an interpersonal perspective (McCann and Giles, 2006; McCann and Keaton, 2013), hereby neglecting the content and consequences of mediated portrayals of older workers. This dissertation aims to overcome these shortcomings. By approaching the issue of older workers through a communication lens, the dissertation sheds new light on our understanding of the origin and effects of beliefs of older workers.

In addition, this dissertation challenges the individual- and organizational centric approach that is dominant in relevant research on beliefs about older workers. So far, the focus of previous research has been on interpersonal, intergenerational or organizational-level variables (Nelson, 2016; North and Fiske, 2012; Ruggs et al., 2013). This dissertation adds to this work by showing that older workers' experience of age bias should not be seen in isolation from, but rather as the partial outcome of, stereotypical features in the media environment. The central argument is that the issue of bias against older workers is highly complex and multilayered, and shaped by variables on several levels of analysis. To start, aging in itself is a complex process, affecting individuals "on the personal, organizational, and societal levels" (Kooij et al., 2008). In addition, how individuals, organizations, and societies think about and behave towards older workers varies as a consequence of time, location, and the interaction between variables located on these multiple levels of analysis (Tikkanen, 2006). Therefore, to understand the origin and effects of beliefs about older workers, all these levels should be taken into consideration.

In sum, a multi-level perspective on the interplay between key actors across time points is needed to provide insights into the complex debate regarding workforce aging and representations of older work-

ers that prevail herein. More in particular, the dissertation considers the media environment as an important societal-level variable where aggregated organizational and individual level actor categories (i.e., organizations, employers and individual older workers) compete for perspectives on the issue. The outcome of this debate may have, in turn, meaningful consequences for individual workers, organizations and societies at large.

The dissertation weaves together theoretical insights from related – but still relatively distinct – research fields. By boosting the theoretical integration of studies on the theme of older workers and beliefs about them, the dissertation responds to the call for multidisciplinary research in this field (Tikkanen, 2006). To start, the dissertation complements social and I/O psychology research, by demonstrating the extent to which dominant stereotypes of older workers are present and measurable in media content across diverse outlets, sources and time frames. Social and I/O psychologists have generally relied on experimental methods to trace the nature and effects of older workers' stereotypes (see Paluck and Green, 2009). By corroborating its findings in a real-world setting of actual media materials and work place settings, this dissertation adds to the external validity of empirical findings in this field. In addition, the dissertation adds to the field of organizational and HRM studies by demonstrating the effects of media stereotypes. More specifically, this dissertation argues that media portrayals are an important, yet largely overlooked, source of labor market outcomes of older workers. Last, this dissertation adds to the field of communication science by introducing interdisciplinary theories needed to explain the content and consequences of older workers' stereotypes in the media. The relevance of these theoretical approaches extends beyond the case of older workers – and has significant potential for understanding media stereotypes about other social groups. In sum, the current dissertation takes a novel approach to the study of beliefs about older workers, by adopting (a) a communication focus, (b) a multi-level perspective, and, (c) finally, by boosting the theoretical integration of relevant research fields concerning images of older workers.

In the remainder of this chapter, the dissertation will be introduced. First, the theoretical focus of the dissertation is addressed, by discussing the literature on age bias at the workplace and media stereotyping, and

by explicating the need of additional theoretical perspectives. Second, an outline of the chapters will be provided. Last, the conclusions and theoretical, methodological, and practical implications and limitations will be discussed. In the following, representations are broadly defined as both portrayals of older workers in mediated communication (in terms of frames and media stereotypes) as well as beliefs about older workers (in terms of cognitive stereotypes and attitudes). Portrayals are narrowly defined as media representations, while beliefs are narrowly defined as individuals' (non-) stereotypical beliefs and attitudes about this group. Furthermore, and in this dissertation, the term age bias refers to the negative orientation towards older workers in the workplace on the basis of age (for an extensive discussion of the concept, see: Finkelstein and Farrel, 2007).

## **1.2 Empirical and theoretical approaches to beliefs of older workers**

### **1.2.1 Perspectives on age bias at work from social and I/O psychology and organizational/ HRM studies**

Compared to prejudice on the basis of gender and race, the causes of age-based bias in employment have received comparably limited attention. Fortunately, however, the witness of population aging has increased scholarly attention to the topic, resulting in an improved understanding of age bias at the workplace (Nelson, 2016; Ruggs et al., 2013). The exclusion of older workers in the workplace is generally conceived the joint outcome of cognitive factors (e.g., age norms and stereotypes) and contextual factors (e.g., organizational values, occupational roles, age discrimination climate and structure) (e.g., Diekman and Hirnisey, 2007; Karpinska et al., 2013; Kunze et al., 2011; Perry and Finkelstein, 1999). Here, we highlight relevant studies addressing age stereotypes and age bias in the workplace that are pertinent to the current dissertation's focus.

First, studies in the field of social and I/O psychology offer several theoretical explanations for the content and processes of age stereotyping in organizations. To start, the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) offers a fruitful starting point for describing the content of older workers'

stereotypes. According to this model, individuals automatically perceive older adults as high in warmth and low in competence (Cuddy and Fiske, 2002). The theory predicts that this stereotype content triggers paternalistic prejudice, forcing individuals in low-level occupations and offering few routes to advancement. It is argued that on the basis of warm and incompetence stereotypes individuals are “likely not considering an older person as a match for many work environments” (Finkelstein and Farrel, 2007, p. 82).

In addition, and focusing on intergroup dynamics, studies have tried to explain the process of age bias at work through the lens of intergroup theory (see e.g., Dordoni and Argentero, 2015). Yet, and although in-group favoritism plays a role among younger people, there is little evidence of an in-group bias among older workers (Finkelstein and Burke, 1998; Lin et al., 1992). There are several explanations for this. Ageism can be differentiated from other –isms, such as racism or sexism, by the fluid nature of the variable age; no fixed figures define group boundaries, and everybody will – at some point in their lives – be part of the stigmatized age group (O’Cinneide, 2005). Who is part of the in-group therefore depends on what one defines as ‘old’ versus ‘young’. People of all ages learn stereotypes about the elderly; as a consequence, and although younger people have been shown to exhibit stronger age-bias (McCann and Keaton, 2013; Van Dalen et al., 2010), older adults also internalize stereotypes associated with the aging process (Lee et al., 2015; Levy, 2003). Moreover, an in- versus out-group perspective does not sufficiently grasp the complex system of interdependencies across organizational members. For example, discrimination against a job candidate depends partly on the extent to which one personally expects to compete with the candidate in the future (Lee et al., 2015).

Last, a recently developed and promising theory highlights the importance of intergenerational resource tensions in understanding age bias in the workplace. According to the Succession, Identity and Consumption (SIC) model proposed by North and Fiske (2012,1) ageism arises when older workers fail to step aside and pass along (i.e., retire; Succession), when they over consume societal resources (Consumption) and when they do not act their own (old) age (Identity) (North and Fiske, 2016).

In the field of organizational/ HRM studies, scholars have looked at the



factors that hamper older workers' (sustainable) employability. Pertinent to the dissertation's focus, some studies have explicitly investigated the consequences of stereotypes about older workers for diverse employment outcomes (e.g., Chiu et al., 2001; Gray and McGregor, 2003; Henkens, 2005; Krings et al., 2011; Loretto and White, 2006). These studies generally depart from the assumption that a target's age can trigger age stereotypes, which subsequently feed into biased attitudes or behavior. Although some empirical studies do not find a significant relation between endorsed age stereotypes and organizational outcomes (Karpinska et al., 2013; Van der Heijden et al., 2010), a solid body of empirical work offers support for the idea that age stereotypes, in interaction with institutional and contextual factors, are at the heart of age discrimination at the workplace (see for a meta-analysis: Bal et al., 2011).

Studies in both fields have consistently demonstrated that stereotypes about older workers are ambiguous in nature (see for reviews: Bal et al., 2011; Dordoni and Argentero, 2015; Posthuma and Campion, 2009). Negative beliefs about older workers' qualities and characteristics pertain especially to 'hard skills', such as low levels of performance and productivity, flexibility, willingness to learn, physical capacity and technological skills

Acknowledging this duality in stereotype content is of importance for two reasons. First, the literature seems to suggest that different domains of stereotype content of older workers trigger differential processing and effects (Cuddy et al., 2011; Desmette and Gaillard, 2008; Krings et al., 2011; Van Dalen et al., 2010). Second, ambivalence makes it harder for individuals to recognize stereotypes as such. Or, as Finkelstein and Farrel put it: "ambivalence involved in our perceptions of older workers [...] might lead us to believe that we are truly not biased" (2007, p. 82).

At this point, one may wonder whether stereotypes about older workers are consistent with reality. Several meta-analyses have shown that age does not – or only very limitedly – explain individual job performance, health or motivation (Avolio et al., 1990; Ng and Feldman, 2008,1,1). The negative stereotype that older workers are less willing to participate in training and development is the only negative stereotype for which empirical evidence exists (Ng and Feldman, 2012) potentially

as a result of internalization of this stereotype. This does not, however, mean that all older workers are less motivated to learn. The variation in employment competences and traits across individuals is generally large (Nauta et al., 2004). One should avoid to generalize on the basis of age categories, as “[r]elying on these group differences may reinforce stereotypes” (Finkelstein et al., 2015, p. 29).

Two central gaps can be identified in previous research on age-based bias experienced by older workers. First, and as mentioned before, the role of (especially mediated) communication is generally neglected. This is somewhat surprising, given that scholars explicitly refer to the importance of interpersonal communication (McCann and Giles, 2002,0; Mccann and Keaton, 2013) and media portrayals (Abrams et al., 2015; Van Selm and Van der Heijden, 2013) in confirming or dismantling age stereotypes about older workers. Second, the focus of previous research has been mainly on the micro- (individual) and meso- (organizational) level, instead of the macro- (societal) level. It is, however, of importance to take this level into account, as stereotypes are the partial outcome of societal dynamics (Durante et al., 2013).

### 1.2.2 Perspectives on bias in media portrayals and interpersonal communication from communication science

Most germane to this dissertation’s argument is that communication theories are pertinent to the advancement of the scholarly understanding of age bias at the workplace. An overview of the most relevant – in light of the dissertation’s research question – theoretical insights regarding media’s role in disseminating myths or stereotypes about social groups is provided below.

To investigate the stereotypical features of media content, as well as to identify its causes, previous work has mainly relied on social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and framing theory (Entman, 1990). First of these, and focusing on the formation of stereotypes, SIT posits that people’s identity is shaped by their membership in salient groups. By comparing positive characteristics attributed to their in-group to negative characteristics associated with out-groups, individuals’ boosts their sense of self-worth.

In addition, framing theory has been used to understand media’s

role in constructing and defining the (non-) problematic features of social groups (Entman, 1990; Van Gorp, 2005,0). In the framing process, producers of media content, as well as their sources, may – consciously or unconsciously – use stereotypes as a means to communicate the desired frame to the audience. Following Van Gorp (2005), stereotypes can be considered one of several framing devices. The framing power of stereotypes to construct persuasive images lies in the fact that they provide “mental shorthands which, because they are culturally transmitted, both the producer and the audience share access to” (Hoynes, 2007, p. 177). The majority of empirical studies in the tradition of SIT and framing theory have compared and contrasted the relative amount of media attention that different social groups receive, and looked at – often-times negative – stereotypes associated with group membership to answer the question how they are portrayed (e.g., Mastro and Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Quick et al., 2016).

To study the consequences of media stereotypes, theories such as agenda setting, priming and framing are useful. First, agenda setting focuses on the relation between issues presented in the media and the relative importance ascribed to these issues by audiences (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Second, priming theory posits that the news media play a role in the criteria that individuals use to evaluate issues or political actors (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Both theories share the focus on the accessibility of cognitive associations (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Third, and by pushing certain interpretations to the forefront while neglecting others, framing has a selective function (De Vreese, 2005; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2011), hereby suggesting a specific set of judgments and decisions to the audience (Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

Although the focus of these theoretical approaches differs, in essence, they appeal to the idea that exposure to repeated pairing of a certain group with certain attributes in the media can strengthen cognitive associations (Arendt, 2010, 2012, 2015). The processes of social categorization and stereotyping that emerge as a result hereof fuel intergroup conflict, negative self-perceptions, and potentially biased behavior (Arendt, 2013; Hansen and Hansen, 1988; Seate and Mastro, 2016).

A relevant theory to understand the causes and consequences of bias in interpersonal communication at the workplace is the Commu-

nication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles et al., 1991b). Often through the lens of CAT, intergenerational communication scholars have investigated the role of age stereotypes in a broad array of social interactions in diverse contexts, such as between caregivers and elderly patients (Nussbaum and Coupland, 2004). Surprisingly little attention, however, has been paid to the context of the workplace. CAT predicts conversations are biased towards members of the same group (in terms of age or organizational status). Empirical data supports the notion that younger workers hold both positive and negative stereotypes about older workers (McCann and Keaton, 2013) and that they believe that older workers are more difficult to communicate with (McCann and Giles, 2006).

Communication theories remind us that the subjective, based on dominant images in the media environment as well as our personal experience, can be transformed to the objective when the boundaries between the real-world and communication features start to blur (see Mastro, 2015). The transmission of age stereotypes through mediated and interpersonal communication is thus far from innocent, as it may result in “dynamic processes in which social reality is constructed” (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 73), with potentially meaningful consequences for employment outcomes.

Based on this selective review of the literature, it is argued that communication theories are valuable but insufficient to understand the causes, content, and effects of media representations of older workers. To start, the theoretical and empirical focus of communication studies has been on the content and consequences of one-dimensionally negative media stereotypes (e.g., Arendt et al., 2015; Burgess et al., 2011). However, and as argued before, the content of older workers’ stereotypes is mixed in terms of valence (e.g., loyal but not eager to learn) (Bal et al., 2011; Posthuma and Campion, 2009). In addition, with the growing importance of egalitarian norms in modern-day societies and the wider range of media portrayals available comes a greater diversity in category divisions (Sanders and Ramasubramanian, 2012). By merely focusing on negative categories, the potential attenuating or adverse influence of positive stereotypes are overlooked. In addition, and often through the lens of SIT, media stereotyping scholars have focused on responses to out-group members (usually minorities) in society. Yet,

as mentioned before, relevant social and I/O psychology literature suggests that an in- versus out-group perspective only partly explains processes of age bias in employment. To summarize, it is argued that to study media representations of older workers the multidimensional nature of older workers stereotypes should be acknowledged (a) while moving beyond a mere in- versus out-group perspective (b).

### **1.3 The dissertation's theoretical approach to the study of images of older workers**

The current dissertation weaves together some of the above-mentioned theoretical approaches and introduces some new perspectives to the study of media stereotypes. Specifically, the dissertation adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical focus, by combining insights from the field of social and I/O psychology and communication science. These theoretical approaches are discussed in more detail in the following section.

#### **1.3.1 *Content characteristics* of organizational and news media's representations of older workers**

To study media content about older workers, the dissertation relies on insights from framing theory and the Stereotype Content Model (SCM). (Entman, 1993, p. 52) defines framing as “[selecting] some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular definition of a problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” A distinction often made in the literature is between issue-specific and generic (news) frames (De Vreese, 2005; Vliegthart and Walgrave, 2012). The dissertation focuses on issue-specific frames that are considered especially suitable to provide a detailed account of the issue at hand and often matches the various elements that are also present in the definition of Entman, such as diagnostic (problem definition) and prognostic (solution definition) frame elements (Snow and Benford, 1988). This issue-specific analysis is necessary to be able to assess in detail the impact of media on perceptions. In addition to framing theory, the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) is used to understand media representations of older workers. The the-

ory's central premise is that people do not judge others on a single "bad to good" dimension, but instead use two trait dimensions: warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002). By acknowledging that stereotypes are not one-dimensionally negative, the theory offers a fruitful approach to understanding the underlying nature of divergent category descriptions of older workers in news content (and explain their effects).

Thus, the dissertation focuses on both frames and stereotypes in media content. Some elaboration on the conceptual distinctions and similarities between both concepts is needed. The current dissertation considers stereotypes as defining elements of media frames. More precisely, it is argued that – depending on the focus and level of analysis – media stereotypes are a part of or defining element of frames. To start, and focusing on the more general debate of workforce aging (including its societal-level antecedents and consequences), the dissertation considers diagnostic and prognostic issue frames that prevail in media coverage. Here, negative characterizations of older workers may be tied to problem definitions and consequently constitute a crucial – however not sole – element of the framing of older workers' employability. This conceptualization is in line with Van Gorp's (2005) notion of stereotypes as 'framing devices' through which frames are manifested (see also Entman, 1993, p. 51). In addition, and focusing in more detail on the portrayal of older workers in this debate, the dissertation investigates the framing of older workers' qualities and characteristics. Here, the framing elements are merely made up by positive and negative generalizations made about older workers. This conceptualization is most in line with what negotiation scholars denote as 'characterization frames' (Donnellon and Gray, 1989). These frames provide "ways of describing people and making judgments about them" (Dewulf et al., 2009, p. 168). In this dissertation, we refer to these lower-level frames as 'media stereotypes'.

It should be noted that the focus of this dissertation extends beyond static features of media content (i.e., 'frames' or 'media stereotypes'). Rather, the multi-level influences on the creation of (non-) stereotypical media features, as well as the dynamic process through which such content exerts its effect (i.e., 'framing' or 'media stereotyping') are at the heart of this dissertation (for an elaborate discussion of this conceptual

difference, consult Vliegenthart and Van Zoonen, 2011). The contextual features of the creation of media content about older workers are discussed next.

### 1.3.2 *Causes of variation in organizational and news media representations of older workers and managerial communication with older workers at the workplace*

To understand the causes of variation in older workers' media representations, the dissertation relies on the literature on organizational and news media logics. To start, the insights from the corporate communication literature on reputational and stakeholder management are used. One of the most important premises of strategic corporate communication is the alleged ability to create a favorable point of view among both internal and external stakeholders (e.g. Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). With the quality and treatment of employees as the main pillar of corporate reputation (Bebbington et al., 2008), organizations engage in social disclosures about egalitarian employment policies (e.g. Kent and Zunker, 2013) and age-diversity policies (Singh and Point, 2006). From a stakeholder perspective, such social disclosures function to strengthen relations with crucial actors (Neu et al., 1998) and endure the corporate identity (Du et al., 2010). These insights from the corporate communication literature are useful to understand how organizations deal with the issue of older workers in their media.

In addition, the theoretical underpinnings of news value theory and the hierarchy-of-influences approach are used to predict and understand the news media's account of older workers. First of these, news values such as personification or exemplification (Eilders, 2006; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001) are likely relevant to study news accounts of older workers. Second, the hierarchy-of-influences model emphasizes that news is the outcome of forces located at different levels of analysis (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). The theory points to the need to acknowledge contextual-level influences on news content, such as the occurrence of key events and real-world developments (e.g., unemployment rates). These logics are powerful in explaining news media's coverage of older workers.

In addition, the dissertation assesses the influence of age stereo-

types on interpersonal communication processes in the organizational context. More specifically, the dissertation focuses on the causes and consequences of non-accommodative communication behaviors of managers. The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles et al., 1991a) offers a robust framework to understand the extent to which individuals adjust communication to others – both in a workplace context and beyond. The dissertation relies on this theory to understand why managers are reluctant to address older workers' employability needs, and to trace its consequences for employment outcomes of older workers.

### 1.3.3 *Consequences of media representations of older workers.*

The dissertation relies on the activation-application framework to understand responses to media portrayals of older workers. Comparable to a priming effect, stereotype activation refers to a short-term effect of exposure to media content (or some other stimuli) on cognitive responses (e.g., Kunda and Spencer, 2003; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2009). It is a useful approach, because of the following reasons. First, the framework uniquely and decisively differentiates between stereotype activation (i.e., the extent to which stereotypes come to mind) and stereotype application (i.e., the extent to which activated stereotypes subsequently color judgments or behaviors) (Gilbert and Hixon, 1991; Kunda and Sinclair, 1999; Kunda and Spencer, 2003). Although this distinction is often neglected in the media stereotyping literature, it is of utmost importance for the adequate appreciation of media stereotypes' effects – as the activation of individuals' (implicit) stereotypes does not necessarily imply application (i.e., a change in attitude or behavioral intention). Second, because the ease with which stereotypes become activated in one's mind is directly related to its cognitive accessibility (Kunda and Sinclair, 1999), a memory-based processing model (such as the activation-application framework) is deemed more adequate than a model based on interpretive schemas (such as framing) (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).



## 1.4 Outline chapters

The dissertation includes five self-containing empirical studies. The first two chapters focus on causes and content of media portrayals of older workers, from the perspective of the public debate about older workers as well as stereotypes that prevail in such coverage. The third and fourth chapters investigate the consequences of media portrayals of older workers for the activation and application of stereotypes on the individual-level, and the experience of age discrimination on the aggregate level. The first four chapters all focus on mediated communication. The fifth and last chapter takes a different approach by investigating managerial communication in the internal organizational context. The studies presented in this dissertation approach the issue of older workers from multiple perspectives, using diverse methodologies. This is illustrated in the conceptual overview of the dissertation presented in Figure 1.1. On the macro-level, the causes and content of organizational and news media coverage of older workers are investigated, as well as the influence thereof for the filing of age discrimination claims. On the meso-level, attention is paid to the perspective of aggregated organizational actors that prevail in organizational and news media. On the micro-level, problematic aspects of managerial communication with older workers are considered. Herewith, the dissertation addresses both the external and the internal organizational environment. By considering media content as both the dependent and independent variable, the dissertation provides empirical evidence regarding both the origins and outcomes of media portrayals of older workers. As can be seen in Figure 1, the dissertation pays particular attention to the organizational outcomes of mediated and interpersonal communication. More in particular, the focus is on the consequences for selection outcomes in organizational settings, as “discrimination in organizations begins with selection decisions” (Lee et al., 2015). Decisions regarding who is eligible for recruitment (**Chapter 4**), and promotion (**Chapter 6**), are made on a daily basis in organizations, and are influential regarding individuals’ career success and (sustainable) employability. In addition, and capturing the experience of age discrimination in diverse organizational settings and contexts, the filing of age discrimination claims (**Chapter 5**) is considered an outcome variable of relevance.

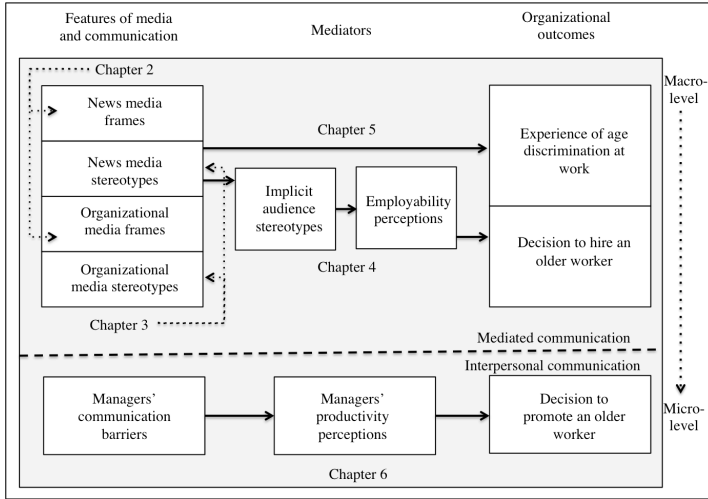


Figure 1.1: Dissertation overview

### 1.4.1 Defining older workers

Before the individual chapters are discussed, the definition of older workers deserves attention. Previous research has conceptualized the age-range of “older workers” in diverse ways, depending on national contexts and process explanation (Kooij et al., 2008). While some studies consider older workers as those above forty years of age (e.g., Maurer et al., 2008), others put the threshold at sixty (e.g., Farrow and Reynolds, 2012). In the first four chapters of this dissertation, older workers are defined as those 45 years of age and older. The main argument for doing so is that in the Netherlands, re-employment probabilities after dismissal tend to decrease as early as the age of 45 (Bierings and Loog, 2013; Smits et al., 2013). Other studies, both in the Netherlands (e.g., Strijk et al., 2010) and beyond (e.g., Cheung and Wu, 2013), have used the same classification.

The fifth and final chapter, however, defines older workers as those aged fifty and older. It was deliberately chosen to change the definition of older workers for the following reasons. First, **Chapter 6** focuses

on the internal organizational context. While it becomes increasingly difficult for workers of  $\geq 45$  years of age to re-enter the labor market, within organizations processes of age-based bias might surface somewhat later. Namely, during explorative interviews conducted for the study presented in **Chapter 6**, managers indicated that they considered workers aged fifty and above as 'old'. Second, in the time frame during which the studies presented in this dissertation were conducted, the mean retirement age increased substantially (CBS [Statistics Netherlands], 2016b). With this, perceptions about when old age at the workplace starts will change too.

#### 1.4.2 **Chapter 2** - Framing workforce aging by organizations and the news media

The first empirical chapter seeks to map and explain the debate about older workers' employability in organizational and news media. The framing of older workers' employability may have significant consequences for how the issue is interpreted by key actors, such as employers and policy-makers. More specifically, the aim of the study is to investigate differences between how organizational and news media frame older workers' employability and to trace how different sources explain variation in these representations. Theoretically, the study adopts Snow and Benford's (1988) conceptualization of prognostic and diagnostic 'core' frames.

Relying on an in-depth, qualitative analysis, five diagnostic and prognostic frames were identified. These frames were, subsequently, quantitatively coded in the five largest Dutch newspapers and the organizational media of 50 Dutch organizations. The study traces variation in the following framing clusters as dependent variables; problematization of the issue, the victimization of older workers, and the attribution of accountability to organizational actors.

The results show that the debate about older workers takes shape as a consequence of media logics and is influenced by key actors, who try to put forward their interpretation of older workers' employability. In organizational media, relatively little attention was paid to problems related to older workers. Moreover, organizations tended to highlight the efforts they undertake to address issues related to workforce aging

in their media outlets. Conversely, news media frame the issue more often in diagnostic terms and place emphasis on older workers' victimized position. Source characteristics affected these framing processes, so that older workers emphasized their victimized position, while employers highlight solutions and ascribe accountability to organizations. In sum, and due to the comparative approach, the study has been able to shed light on the prevailing gap between media and corporate framing of the issue. The findings imply that in order to close this gap and move towards a more open debate about the issue, it is imperative that organizations and employers acknowledge challenges and respond to the broader concerns related to the aging of workforces.

#### 1.4.3 **Chapter 3** - Stereotypes of older workers in organizational and news media

**Chapter 2** maps the dynamics of the debate about older workers' employability but does not answer the question whether and what kind of stereotypical portrayals prevail in such coverage. **Chapter 3** relies on the same corpus of news articles and organizational media outlets to investigate the extent to which stereotypes of older workers are present in organizational and news media, and how potential differences in these stereotypes can be accounted for. Using the SCM as a theoretical backbone, the study asks whether media stereotypes of older workers can be classified as high in warmth and low in competence.

Employing a manual content analysis, the study evaluated whether older workers are portrayed in positive or negative terms with regard to nine pre-defined stereotype categories. The results offer partial support for the SCM; older workers were positively portrayed regarding warmth stereotypes, but negatively regarding competence stereotypes. Yet, not all media stereotypes of older workers clearly fit the dimensions of the SCM. In addition, the findings show that media type (news vs. organizational) and source characteristics explain variation in negative (vs. positive) media stereotypes of older workers. The results show that negative stereotypes appear significantly less often in organizational compared to news media. In addition, quoted sources are reluctant to express negative stereotypes. In sum, the study demonstrates that media stereotypes of older workers are mixed in terms of

valence and that the majority of the stereotype categories can be classified in terms of high-warmth and low-competence. The findings imply that dominant beliefs about older workers are reflected and potentially reinforced by the news media.

#### 1.4.4 **Chapter 4** – Effects of media stereotypes of older workers on the individual level

What are the consequences of high-warmth and low-competence media stereotypes for older workers' employability? **Chapter 4** aims to answer this question. Building on the insights provided by **Chapter 3**, the study presented in **Chapter 4** applies the SCM to examine the processing and consequences of mixed media stereotypes of older workers. The study proposes a model of how media portrayals of older workers shape discriminatory outcomes, by differentiating between stereotype activation and application. Previous research in the field of media stereotyping has often neglected the distinction between activation and application. The study in **Chapter 4** argues, however, that this distinction is important, as activated stereotypes do not necessarily affect attitudes and behaviors.

Employing an online experiment based on a 2 (low vs. high warmth) X 2 (low vs. high competence) design, the study among Dutch employees traces the effects of reading a newspaper article in which older workers are portrayed in stereotype (in-) congruent terms. As **Chapter 3** found that stereotypes of older workers are more often present in news compared to organizational media, it was chosen to select news content as stimulus material. To trace the effects of exposure, the study uses measures that tap into implicit warmth and competence stereotypes, as such measures are relatively resistant to social desirability bias.

The results show that exposure to high-warmth and low-competence portrayals in a news article simultaneously prompt and constrain positive employability perceptions of older workers via implicit stereotype activation. This, in turn, affects the intention to hire an older worker. The net-effect of older workers' mixed media stereotypes is negative; negative competence media stereotypes played out stronger than positive warmth media stereotypes. The findings imply that mixed media stereotypes of older workers in the news media have negative conse-

quences for how older workers are perceived, as well as the likelihood that they are hired.

#### 1.4.5 **Chapter 5** – Effects of media stereotypes of older workers on the aggregate level

Where as **Chapter 4** assesses the effects of media portrayals of older workers on the individual level, **Chapter 5** does so for the aggregate level. Specifically, the study relies on time-series data of news media coverage of older workers in the Netherlands and age discrimination claims filed by older workers. The discrimination claims figures were administered by the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (NIHR). The study traces the effects of visibility and media stereotypes of older workers in news content while controlling for real-world events and expected unemployment rates. The hypotheses are based on Soroka's 'negativity bias', which emphasizes that effects of negative news are stronger than effects of positive news (2006). In addition, the study builds upon **Chapter 4**'s conclusion that negative media stereotypes are more persuasive than positive media stereotypes.

Relying on an automated content analysis, two positive (i.e., reliable, experienced) and two negative (i.e., problematic health status, unproductive) media stereotypes were coded in news articles about older workers in the largest Dutch national newspapers in the timeframe 2004 – 2014. **Chapter 3** informed the selection of these specific stereotypes. ADL- analyses were performed on quarterly aggregated data.

The results show that the news media visibility of older workers is associated with an increase in age discrimination claims six months later. This effect can be partially explained by the visibility of the negative media stereotype that older workers' health status is poor. Positive media stereotypes did not exert an effect on the filing of age discrimination claims by older workers. **Chapter 5** offers support for the negative consequences of negative media stereotypes on the aggregate level, and herewith confirms the individual-level mechanisms presented in **Chapter 4**. The findings imply that a macro-level approach to the study of age discrimination at work can move our understanding of the issue forward. More in particular, while previous research has offered mainly static and individual-level explanations for the experience of

age discrimination at work, the current study shows that media content dynamics explain variation in the extent to which older workers feel discriminated against in organizational settings.

#### 1.4.6 **Chapter 6** – Managerial communication with older workers

**Chapter 6** adopts a fundamentally different approach compared to the other chapters, by focusing on interpersonal communication between managers and older workers within the organizational context. This chapter advances the argument that the broader media environment is crucial for understanding interpersonal communication dynamics within organizational borders. In other words, where the other chapters investigate processes of stereotyping in the media context, **Chapter 6** investigates the consequences of these stereotypes for communication processes at the workplace. Managerial communication is imperative to stimulating older workers' sustainable employability (e.g., Schoppers, 2014), but it has so far remained unclear which factors hinder accommodative communication between managers and older workers. The study aims to understand which barriers hamper managers' accommodative communication with older workers. To do so, the study builds upon the insights of the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). CAT considers stereotypes key determinants of communication processes, and is useful to understand the connection between stereotypes in mediated and interpersonal communication processes.

**Chapter 6** reports two studies. First, in-depth interviews with Dutch managers were used to disentangle the kind of communication barriers experienced by managers. Second, a survey was administered among Dutch managers to quantify the identified barriers and trace their consequences for managers' perceptions of older workers' productivity and the intention to promote an older worker.

The results reveal five central communication barriers located at the individual and contextual level: negative beliefs regarding older workers' desire and ability to learn, a lack of managerial power, legitimacy conflicts, time constraints and low levels of organizational investments. The survey data show that, of these barriers, negative beliefs about older workers' desire and ability to learn, a lack of managerial power and low levels of organizational investments in older workers' employabil-

ity negatively affected managers' perception of older workers' productivity, and the intention to promote an individual older worker. The results indicate that accommodative communication between managers and older workers is of importance in fostering the opportunities for older workers in an organizational context.

## 1.5 Conclusions, discussion, and implications

Why is age discrimination against older workers maintained or even promoted? This question has become of vital importance, as the negative consequences of age bias are becoming potentially more far-reaching due to workforce aging (e.g., Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Wanberg et al., 2016). The current dissertation considers mediated and interpersonal communication as a potential and often neglected enabler of age bias experienced by older workers. In the next section, the overarching conclusions presented in this dissertation are discussed.

### 1.5.1 What are the *content characteristics* of organizational and news media's representations of older workers?

The dissertation started off with asking how older workers are portrayed in organizational and news media. Answering this question offers an overview of the possible roles that media may play in underpinning stereotypes about older workers.

In general, and on the basis of the results presented in **Chapter 2** it can be concluded that the organizational and news media debate about older workers is complex and highly contested. The results reveal that an elaborate set of diagnostic and prognostic issue-specific frames are present in news and organizational media. Prominent issue frames highlight the loss of knowledge and employment value due to workforce aging, and the need to improve working conditions. In addition, frequently attention is paid to the failure of older workers' labor market inclusion and the importance of increasing older workers' employment participation rates. Next, issue frames stress the need to reform the labor market, by either more strongly protecting older workers or, contrariwise, by abolishing accommodative labor market policies aimed at older workers. Relative to the other issue frames, least attention is paid



to the problem of ageism and the need to combat age-based stereotypes. *These findings suggest that older workers' poor labor market position receives attention by both news and organizations' media. Yet, frames regarding the most urgent problems and the right way to solve them vary considerably within and between news and organizational media.*

Second, on the basis of the findings presented in **Chapter 3** and **Chapter 4** the dissertation concludes that *a wide variety of positive and negative stereotypes is present in news and organizational media coverage about older workers.* Regarding negative media stereotypes, older workers are most commonly portrayed as being costly. Subsequently, negative media stereotypes represent older workers as being unproductive, unhealthy, not able and willing to learn, and as not competent to work with new technology. The most common positive media stereotype portrays older workers as mentors, whom can convey knowledge and experience, followed by the positive media stereotypes that they are involved and committed, have a warm personality, and are reliable and trustworthy. The identified media stereotypes largely correspond to stereotypes about older workers found in organizations (Bal et al., 2011; Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Van Dalen et al., 2010). In sum, these findings support the view that media are a critical source of stereotypical beliefs about older workers (e.g., Van Selm and Van der Heijden, 2014).

Third, the dissertation concludes that *the core dimensions of stereotype content – i.e., warmth and competence – (Cuddy et al., 2005; Fiske et al., 2002) are useful in understanding the myriad ways in which organizational and news media depict older workers.* **Chapter 3** concludes that most positive media stereotype categories of older workers fall within the warmth dimension, while most negative media stereotype categories fall within the competence dimension. This notion is supported by recent studies. For instance, previous research (using survey/experimental data) has argued that prejudice directed at older workers originates from the belief that they are uncompetitive and have little power in society. Thus; they are seen as warm and incompetent (Cuddy et al., 2011; Krings et al., 2011).

### 1.5.2 What are *causes* of variation in organizational and news media representations of older workers and managerial communication with older workers at the workplace?

The second aim of this dissertation was to understand the causes of variation in media portrayals of older workers. This is an important endeavor, as it improves our understanding of the circumstances under which problematic representation of older workers are most likely to occur.

Considering the *framing* of the organizational and news media debate about older workers and *media stereotypes* that prevail in this coverage as dependent variables, **Chapter 2** and **Chapter 3** offer insights in the antecedents of older workers' media portrayals. First, the results presented in **Chapter 2** identify *unemployment rates* as a potential source of variation in *attention* for the issue of older workers. It is concluded that organizational outlets – but not news media – pay less attention to the issue in times of economic downturn. This is likely because other problems are becoming more pressing and organizations have fewer resources to devote programs dealing with older employees and communicate about those actively (Taylor Walker, 1998).

Second, the dissertation concludes that *media logics* explain a large part of the variation in media *frames* and *stereotypes* of older workers. Organizations frame the issue of older workers' employability fundamentally different compared to the news media and use different (i.e., more positive) stereotypes to portray older workers (**Chapter 2, Chapter 3**). The results show that organizations de-emphasized problems related to older workers in their corporate outlets, but instead highlighted the efforts they are undertaking to improve their employability. In addition, organizations avoided negative stereotypes about older workers in their organizational media, but instead highlighted positive stereotypes. These findings are consistent with the primary notions of strategic corporate communication. Organizations are aiming to present themselves as responsible and accountable actors, so to maintain a favorable image among internal and external stakeholders (e.g., Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007).

A different picture emerged in the news environment. Based on news values such as exemplification, personification, and negativity

(Eilders, 2006; Harcup and O’Neill, 2001), it was expected that news media would frame the issue more strongly in terms of the problems that individual older workers encounter. In line with this, the dissertation shows that news media frame the issue in comparison more strongly in terms of problems, while paying attention to the victimized position of older workers on the labor market and presenting a more elaborate debate about the need to reform labor market policies. In addition, relatively more negative stereotypes are present in news compared to organizational media.

Third, the dissertation shed light on how *sources* influence media portrayals of older workers. Older workers and employers proved key sources in the media debate about older workers. The results show that both actors adopt opposing positions; where older workers highlight their victimized position, employers are important sponsors of prognostic frames and attribute accountability to organizations (**Chapter 2**). These opposing perspectives may add to the discrepancy between older workers’ and employers’ views, which may negatively affect employability outcomes of older workers (Patrickson and Ranzijn, 2000).

*Source characteristics* also influenced variation in media stereotypes. **Chapter 3** demonstrates that quoted sources are less likely to state negative compared to positive stereotypes. This is an interesting finding, as it seems to reflect sources’ attempts to give the impression of not being prejudiced. Due to salient egalitarian norms in today’s society, its no longer accepted to express negative sentiment towards social groups on grounds of gender, ethnicity, religion or age (Amodio, 2014). As a consequence, individuals may salience bluntly biased thoughts, so to present themselves – both for the other as well as themselves – as the fair and unbiased person they desire to be.

In addition, **Chapter 6** focused on the factors that hinder managers to effectively address sustainable employability issues in conversations with older workers. This is a worthwhile endeavor, as previous research has suggested that managerial communication with older workers is of importance in fostering their sustainable employability – but often falls short (Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2008; Henkens and Van Solinge, 2003). The results point to *five key factors* that hinder managers to communicatively accommodate older workers’ sustainable employability needs. Amongst these, *the stereotypical belief that older workers*

*lack the ability and motivation to learn was identified as one of the most persuasive barriers.* In **Chapter 3**, this stereotype was also identified in organizational and news media. This might indicate that the media environment reinforces negative beliefs regarding older workers' ability and desire to learn within organizational boundaries, or the other way around.

### 1.5.3 What are the *consequences* of media representations of older workers, and non-accommodative managerial communication with older workers?

This brings us to the core question of this dissertation: do media portrayals of older workers matter? **Chapter 2** and **Chapter 3** suggest that problematic portrayals of older workers are more likely to prevail in news compared to organizational media. Therefore, the focus of **Chapter 4** and **Chapter 5** is on tracing the effects of news media portrayals. A key contribution of the dissertation is the ability to test the hypothesized influence of media stereotypes about older workers longitudinally on the aggregate level (**Chapter 5**), and disentangle its processing and consequences on the individual level (**Chapter 4**).

Based on the results presented in both chapters, the dissertation concludes: Yes, media portrayals *do matter*. On the individual level (**Chapter 4**), the results reveal that exposure to a newspaper article in which older workers are portrayed as high in warmth, but low in competence, induces and impedes favorable employability attitudes, and subsequently affect the intention to hire an older worker. The net-effect of mixed media stereotypes of older workers is negative; exposure to a news article confirming older workers' mixed media stereotypes decrease the likelihood that an individual older worker is selected for employment. On the aggregate level (**Chapter 5**), the results reveal that the visibility of older workers in the news media leads to an increase in age discrimination claims six months later. This effect can be partly explained by the presence of the negative stereotype that older workers' health is poor; the visibility of this stereotype increased age discrimination claims at a lag of six months.

In addition to the influence of mediated communication, the dissertation finds support for the assumption that also *interpersonal commu-*

*nication matters.* The consequences of managers' communication barriers to accommodate older workers' employability were investigated in **Chapter 6**. The identified communication barriers were associated with unfavorable perceptions of older workers' productivity, which in turn leads to a lowered likelihood to offer an older (vs. younger) worker promotion. The findings suggest that a lack of constructive communication leads to a reinforcing spiral of decreased access to training, health and job rotation measures. This, in turn, decreases the perceived job performance of older workers, which may further strengthen negative beliefs about them. This conclusion is in line with the argumentation that, "[w]ithout effective communication between managers and their older subordinates, managers may find themselves trapped in the self-fulfilling prophecy of creating the circumstances under which older workers are gradually transformed into the stereotype the employer imagines them to be" (Henkens, 2005, p. 363).

## 1.6 Theoretical implications

### 1.6.1 Implication 1: Media matter

Although the media has been accused of condoning or promoting stereotypes about older workers, empirical work has remained lacking. In this dissertation, it is concluded that the inclusion of media variables helps to better understand variation in age discrimination at the labor market; both *the amount of attention* older workers receive and *the way* they are portrayed, matters. This implies that societal-level variables should not be underestimated when explaining inequality within organizational boundaries.

In addition, the findings imply that media stereotyping theories are useful for researchers occupied with the study of age bias in employment. In particular framing theory reminds us that the media plays an active role in the process of constructing, re-shaping and re-defining images about social groups, herewith contributing to what we see as realities (Van Gorp, 2007). The empirical data in this dissertation supports these theoretical premises and demonstrates their relevance for understanding older workers' poor labor market position. In sum, the dissertation contributes a piece to the puzzle of why ageism occurs in

the workplace and remains a persistent phenomenon.

### 1.6.2 Implication 2: Ambivalent media stereotypes have negative effects.

Secondly, the dissertation concludes that stereotypes about older workers are mixed in terms of valence. The results presented in this dissertation imply that the SCM offers valuable insights for the media stereotyping literature. Regarding media content, the dissertation shows that competence and warmth, as core dimensions of the SCM, are useful to bring order to the wide array of seemingly opposing and unrelated media stereotype category divisions. Regarding media effects, the results show that the SCM is helpful in understanding ambivalent responses to social groups. Being core dimensions of social judgments, competence and warmth stereotypes presented in media content are useful to predict audience responses above and beyond the onset of merely unfavorable responses.

The findings have implications beyond the specific case of older workers. The focus of the literature on media stereotyping has been predominantly on negative category descriptions of minority groups. Most societal groups, however, do not receive one-dimensionally negative stereotypes but are perceived in ambivalent terms (Cuddy et al., 2009; Fiske et al., 2002).

It is argued that the presentation of social groups in terms of mixed stereotypes helps journalists and editors to present two sides of the story. Previous research has argued that an important function of ambivalence stereotype content is to legitimize existing social arrangements and uphold inequality (Durante et al., 2013; Tajfel, 1981). It has been argued that “depicting societal groups in ambivalent ways—such as fortunate in one sphere while unfortunate in another—may mask socioeconomic disparities, facilitating, as a consequence, the rationalization and maintenance of the status quo” (Durante et al., 2013, p. 729). The representation of socially advantaged and disadvantaged groups in terms of opposing assets and flaws gives the impression that groups get what they deserve (Durante et al., 2013; Glick and Fiske, 2001). These processes are especially problematic when it comes to age bias, as ageism is highly institutionalized and “as such, people don’t even notice that

it is a prejudice or a form of discrimination when it occurs” (Nelson, 2016, p. 191). Negative age stereotypes are, however, more persuasive than positive age stereotypes. To start, studies argue that negative implicit stereotypes about older adults are more cognitively accessible and therefore more easily activated than positive stereotypes in social contexts, with implications for attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Schaie and Willis, 2011). In addition, negative stereotypes about older workers are suggested to be more robust than positive stereotypes. More specifically, when older workers behaviorally disconfirm negative stereotypes, they tend to be denigrated on positive stereotypes, while negative stereotypes do not necessary improve (Baumeister et al., 2001; Krings et al., 2011). In sum, ambivalent representations of societal groups mask processes of bias, making it harder to recognize and resist – hence, their power lies in their disguise.

This dissertation shows that these mechanisms resonate in media’s accounts of older workers – and arguably also other social groups (Sanders and Ramasubramanian, 2012). By portraying ambivalently stereotyped groups along the lines of dominant positive and negative stereotypes, journalists and editors create the false impression of neutrality. This allows journalists to present their audiences with a ‘balanced’ news story, which seemingly fits in with journalistic standards. In the end, however, these ambivalent portrayals inhibit equality by condoning or even promoting incorrect generalizations.

### 1.6.3 Implication 3: Implicit negative and positive stereotype dimensions can become activated simultaneously

In the above stated, it is argued that – with regard to the creation of media content – journalists and editors aim to keep up the appearance of egalitarianism by using ambivalent stereotypes. Along these same lines, it is argued that the reception of media stereotypes is subject to mechanisms of concealing bias. Due to the increasing importance of egalitarian norms in society, processes of stereotyping and discrimination have become less manifest and partly unconscious (Amodio, 2014). As a consequence, stereotypes operate partly ‘underground’, making it a methodologically challenging endeavor to detect bias. Importantly, stereotypes can become activated on the implicit level, which compro-

mises the extent to which individuals can control and reflect upon cognitive bias. Due to this unconscious nature of stereotypes and individuals' desire to maintain their egalitarian self-image, people may be unaware and/or unwilling to reveal age-based biases.

Acknowledging this, communication scholars have started to value and adopt measures that tap into implicit stereotypes (e.g., Arendt, 2010; Arendt and Northup, 2015). Previous research has, however, focused exclusively on the onset of one-dimensionally negative implicit stereotypes (and attitudes, for that matter). The results presented in this dissertation, however, suggest that responses to mixed media content are not one-dimensional but in fact multi-dimensional. More in particular, the dissertation demonstrates that negative (vs. positive) competence stereotypes and positive (vs. negative) warmth stereotypes can become activated simultaneously on an implicit level.

This finding has important implications. In modern-day fragmented media environments, several contrasting category descriptions of social groups are present – resulting in a cluttered portrayal of seemingly opposing negative and positive descriptions (Sanders and Ramasubramanian, 2012). Incorporating implicit measures that tap into both positive and negative media stereotypes gives scholars a more realistic insight into complex responses to such often-ambiguous media content. Neglecting the multi-dimensional nature of responses to media stereotypes may paint an incomplete picture or failure to understand null-findings when responses cancel each other out.

#### 1.6.4 Implication 4: Negative media stereotypes > positive media stereotypes

An additional important implication of this dissertation is that negative stereotypes are the strongest force in the power play of contradicting media stereotypes. The two chapters on media stereotyping effects show that responses to positive and negative stereotypes are asymmetric; negative media stereotypes exert a greater influence on attitudes (**Chapter 3**) and behavior (**Chapter 4**) than do positive media stereotypes. Positive age media stereotypes exert a favorable influence on attitudes, yet; their effect size is too weak in order to negate negative age stereotypes (**Chapter 3**).



These findings are consistent with previous research, which shows that negative age stereotype primes exert (much) stronger effects than positive age stereotype primes. It is argued that negative age stereotypes have stronger qualities and are more broadly available than positive age stereotypes (Cuddy et al., 2005; Levy, 2003; Nelson, 2005), “which may increase the ease or decrease the threshold to which these stereotypes are activated and applied to behavior” (Meisner, 2012, p. 17). The findings presented in this dissertation suggest that media serves as an important prime contributing to the cognitive availability of dominant negative and positive beliefs of older workers, herewith encouraging negative outcomes.

#### 1.6.5 Implication 5: Media stereotypes are dynamic

Fourth, the dissertation concludes that the content characteristics of media portrayals of older workers are associated with unemployment rates, and that media stereotypes vary as a consequence of media logics and source characteristics. In addition, overtime dynamics in media portrayals of older workers predicted variation in age discrimination claims. In sum, from these findings it can be inferred that a) media stereotypes are dynamic, and b) that over time changes in media content predict variation in key outcome variables.

Although these conclusions might seem straightforward, previous research has generally departed from the implicit assumption that media stereotypes are static across time and context. With some important exceptions (e.g., Arendt and Northup, 2015; Schemer, 2012b), the majority of studies have focused on effects at a single moment in time, and only rarely relied on comparative or longitudinal datasets. This dissertation argues that media stereotyping research should not forget the broader dynamic context in which stereotypes emerge, and exert their effects. In sum, the findings presented in this dissertation imply that our understanding of *how* and *why* media stereotypes evolve over time is needed to appreciate the meaning of media stereotyping effects.

## 1.7 Methodological implications

### 1.7.1 Implication 1: Implicit stereotypes can, but do not necessarily underlie explicit responses

The findings presented in this dissertation imply that the theoretical and methodological distinction between activation and application of stereotypes is needed to understand the effects of media stereotypes. Although previous media stereotyping researchers have started to acknowledge the important role of implicit stereotypes, they have largely neglected how implicit stereotypes may underlie media effect on explicit measures and actual (organizational) decision-making. Social psychologists have, however, long argued that activation and application are different processes (Gilbert and Hixon, 1991; Kunda and Sinclair, 1999). The findings presented in **Chapter 3** suggest that media content has strong effects on activation of implicit media stereotypes, but that activated stereotypes are not automatically applied to attitudes and decision-making processes. More in particular, the study found support for an application effect of warmth stereotypes, but not of competence stereotypes. By treating activation and application as the same processes, effects of media stereotypes may be overestimated.

### 1.7.2 Implication 2: Relying on one conceptual framework to study content in different domains adds to comparability and understanding

The dissertation shows that it pays off to use the same measurement instrument to investigate content features of organizational and news media. More specifically, the findings presented in this dissertation illustrate the cross-context usefulness of diagnostic and prognostic issue frames (as proposed by Snow and Benford, 1988) and media stereotypes. Previous studies have investigated issue frames and stereotypes in diverse contexts, yet, explicit comparisons of how a single issue is covered across contexts remains scarce. In **Chapter 2** and **Chapter 3**, the same toolkit was used successfully to compare and contrast the same objects (i.e., diagnostic and prognostic frames and media stereotypes) in highly distinctive domains (i.e., organizational and news me-

dia). By doing so, we were able to draw very precise conclusions about the differences and similarities in content features across contexts. This, in turn, allows for a more accurate appraisal of effects of content features in different domains. In conclusion, using the same toolkit across diverse contexts is imperative to our understanding of causes of variation in features of media content, and more fully appreciate its consequences across domains.

### 1.7.3 Implication 3: SCM measurement instrument should be extended to cover multifaceted media stereotypes.

This dissertation concludes that the SCM is partly useful in understanding the array of seemingly contradictory category descriptions of older workers present in organizational and news media; the scope of available media stereotypes is larger compared to the original items used to measure warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2011). More in particular, the findings indicate that in the media environment, a broader set of stereotypes prevails compared to the set of traditional items used to measure warmth and competence; The stereotype that older workers are costly and good mentors did not clearly fit one of two dimensions. Hence, the SCM does not fully grasp the multifaceted nature of media stereotypes. There is an obvious explanation for this; The SCM-literature has predominantly relied on experimental and survey data. In a 'real-world' setting, reflected in the media content, a more messy or cluttered picture is likely to emerge (Paluck and Green, 2009). Understanding this real world content is, however, of great importance for the external validity of the theoretical framework. This dissertation, therefore, implies that future studies should look beyond the original items that were developed to assess scores on the dimensions of the SCM. Furthermore, studies should consider how these alternative categories relate to underlying dimensions of warmth (which results from competitiveness) and competence (which results from status).

## 1.8 Practical implications

### 1.8.1 Implication 1: The media environment as a solution to invalidate stereotypes.

The dissertation concludes that media portrayals of older workers matter for the image problem experienced by older workers. This conclusion poses a cause for concern. On the bright side, however, it also implies that media have the capacity to change beliefs about older workers for the better. In fact, the media environment has considerable potential for changing the image problem of older workers, for the following reasons.

Due to the subconscious nature of implicit stereotypes, individuals are often not aware of their own biases. This limits the extent to which individuals can reflect upon their own biases. A potential solution for dismantling stereotypes may, therefore, be sought outside the individual, i.e. by changing the environment. Media can strengthen stereotypes by repeatedly pairing certain positive characteristics with social groups (Arendt and Marquart, 2015). By the same logic, if media would depict older workers in terms of more realistic characteristics, such as their competences and value for organizations, negative stereotypical associations are likely to decrease (Mastro and Tukachinsky, 2011; Ramasubramanian, 2007).

The findings presented in this dissertation offer new guidelines for communication practitioners, editors, and journalists by highlighting the domain of media stereotype content that should be targeted. It is recommended to invest resources refuting low competence stereotypes in a media environment. Amongst these, special attention needs to be paid to negative stereotypes about older workers' ability and willingness to learn, as the dissertation shows that this specific stereotype is especially influential in communication within organizations (**Chapter 5**).

### 1.8.2 Implication 2: Address managers' communication barriers.

Secondly, the dissertation offers implications for managers and employees alike within organizations. The communication barriers experi-

enced by managers identified in **Chapter 5** offer practical guidelines on how to improve managerial communication with older workers. According to this dissertation, contextual-level and individual-level barriers hamper managers to accommodate older workers' sustainable employability. To overcome contextual-level barriers it is recommended that organizations take a serious effort to improve older workers' sustainable employability by making financial resources available and by providing managers with sufficient time to address the issue. Individual-level communication barriers of managers can be addressed in education about communication skills. Notably, managers should be made aware of the influence of ageist beliefs on their (communicative) behavior towards older workers. This notion is supported by previous research suggesting that training about dispelling age stereotypes in the workplace is helpful in reducing its influence (Kooij and Zacher, 2016; Nelson, 2016).

## 1.9 Limitations and future research

The dissertation represents a first and important attempt to investigate the content and effects of older workers' media portrayals. Yet, the presented findings call for additional research.

### 1.9.1 Future research recommendation 1: Media effects on the self.

First, the focus of this dissertation has not been on individual differences in effects of media stereotypes. An obvious question that remains is whether older workers are affected differently by media content compared to younger workers. **Chapter 3** could not identify differences in implicit stereotype activation effects among younger and older workers. However, it is plausible that older workers are affected differently than younger workers regarding different outcome variables. For example, based on the notions of the hostile media effect, it can be expected that older workers perceive news coverage about their group as biased (Tsafati, 2007; Vauclair et al., 2016). This has likely consequences for older workers' perceived group image and strengthens meta-stereotypes – i.e., beliefs about how others perceive the self (Jiang and Gong, 2016; Shiu et al., 2015; Tsafati, 2007). The salience of older workers' meta-

stereotypes has likely consequences for how older workers view their place in society and how they interact with others (Hogg and Turner, 1987). For example, evidence shows older adults' meta-stereotypes are related to perceptions of age discrimination (Vauclair et al., 2016). Future research should further investigate the relationship between media content and older workers' meta-stereotypes.

### 1.9.2 Future research recommendation 2: Conditional media effects?

Second, the dissertation focused on variation in media portrayals of older workers across domains (i.e., corporate versus news media). However, the empirical studies presented in this dissertation pay little attention to domain-specific variation of media effects. Importantly, the dissertation concludes that negative media stereotypes outweigh the effect of positive media stereotypes. One may wonder, however, whether this is always the case. A question for future research remains whether negative stereotypes remain stronger under different circumstances. Competence is argued to be especially influential in the life domain of work and employment (Cuddy et al., 2011; Krings et al., 2011). Positive warmth stereotypes might, however, exert stronger effects in other – more interpersonal – domains of life (Kornadt et al., 2016). In other words, the interaction between the effects of positive and negative stereotypes and life domains may be helpful to understand asymmetric responses to media stereotypes in different domains of social life.

### 1.9.3 Future research recommendation 3: reciprocal effects of media use and effects.

Last, to investigate the consequences of media portrayals of older workers, the dissertation conceived media content as the independent variable. Yet, according to the notions of transactional media effects, the processes of media usages and effects should not be seen in isolation (Valkenburg and Peter, 2013). Instead, the outcomes of media use are suggested to affect selection and attention to media content in reinforcing spirals (i.e.: Reinforcing Spiral Model: Slater, 2007). This reciprocal relation is of importance to understand (negative) dispositions towards social groups. For example, previous research shows that feelings

towards asylum seekers and the attention to political advertising reinforce each other (Schemer, 2012a). Future research may benefit from disentangling the reciprocal relation between media exposure and (implicit) audience stereotypes.

These limitations notwithstanding, this dissertation provides a valuable starting point to understand the relation between (non-) mediated communication and images of older workers. The findings presented in this dissertation indicate that older workers' experience of age bias at the labor market should not be seen in isolation from, but rather as the partial outcome of, stereotypical features in the media environment.

## 1.10 References

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