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“It does not help to look young and dumb...” Ageism and intergenerational contact in the Norwegian technical industry

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Manuscripts

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3 ***“It does not help to look young and dumb...”*** Ageism and intergenerational contact in the
4 **Norwegian technical industry**
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7 **Purpose**

8 While age is receiving increased attention in the literature on workplace diversity, it remains
9 under researched. Intergenerational contact and its relationship to ageism require further
10 research to understand their mechanisms and impacts.
11

12 **Design/Methodology/Approach**

13 Using semi-structured interviews in the Norwegian technical industry, this paper explores
14 how generations are formed, how this influences intergenerational contact and the ways in
15 which perceived intergenerational differences may result in tensions between older and
16 younger workers, often acted on in relation to stereotypes which might result in ageism.
17

18 **Findings**

19 Through the lens of ageism, the findings reveal that generational stereotypes are strongly held
20 by respondents, and affect how members of the generations interact in the workplace.
21 Further, the data demonstrates that both age and generation are socially constructed, and age
22 discrimination in relation to assumed differences between the generations is perceived by
23 both older and younger workers. It was found that the participants tended to relate to
24 generational categories rather than age as the respondents come to age.
25

26 **Originality/Value**

27 The study has relevance for managers who are overseeing organisations with considerable
28 age differences.
29

30 **Keywords:** Ageism, generations, intergenerational contact, Norway, technical work
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32

33 **Introduction**

34 Age and generational diversity are receiving increasing interest as a dimension of workplace
35 diversity (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014), leading to some understanding of managers’
36 attitudes towards workers’ age (primarily older workers). Intergenerational differences in the
37 workforce provide challenges for managers and have become an increasingly important topic
38 amongst the human resource management practitioners (Benson and Brown, 2011). Workers’
39 age has been found to be important to workplace experiences within technological industries,
40 however generation and its interconnectedness to age remains under-examined. Older
41 workers are more likely to report increased satisfaction with work-life balance (Maruyama et
42 al., 2009), greater association between professional identities and their employing
43 organization (Marks and Scholarios, 2007) and potentially greater need for technology
44 training (Warhurst et al., 2006). Less is known about how ‘generations’ interact in the
45 workplace. Although there is some suggestion that younger workers may be sceptical of the
46 technological capacities of older workers (Weeks et al., 2017). The current research adds to
47 this body of research, by examining intergenerational attitudes within the workplace,
48 specifically the technical industry in Norway which is numerically dominated by younger
49 workers. The paper begins by defining ‘generation’ and intergenerational contact, with the
50 latter examined through the lens of ageism. The qualitative case study methods are then
51 outlined, which address the main research question of: how might perceived ageism affect
52 intergenerational contact within the workplace? The paper contributes to understanding of
53 age and employment within technology industries, with ageism apparent at the interpersonal,
54 institutional and meso levels.
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Defining 'Generation'

The term "generation" has been much debated and subsequently defined in several different ways (Urlick and Hollensbe, 2014). A common definition of a generation is 'individuals who were born and raised in the same time span' (Chi, et al, 2013:p.43). Several researchers have, however, challenged this definition stating that an age-based generation is more than a biological necessity (Sessa et al, 2007). Rather than being a biological issue, Mannheim (1952) argues that a generation is a sociological matter whereby younger and older generations collectively encounter a set of events during adulthood that distinguish them from each other. Benson and Brown (2011) suggest that a generation does not exist without the presence of social interactions between human beings, in other words a generation represents a unique social location based on the socio-political events that occur when the generation comes of age. Generational values, perspectives and beliefs are thus argued to be shaped by both social and historical events during the time they were born and raised (Costanza et al, 2012).

Joshi et al (2011) argue that successive entrance to an organization, or a tenure-based approach to generations, is a factor that may shape generations, also known as cohort-based generations. In this manner, individuals that enter organizations at the same time may develop greater in-group identification as they acquire similar values due to age and tenure (ibid.). The popular usage of the chronological-based perspective on generation formation suggest that the contemporary workforce is comprised by three generations namely Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials, which are discussed in the subsections below. Age groups are often used interchangeably with generations (Joshi et al, 2011).

Additionally, the development of personality, beliefs and values of these generations are argued to be influenced by early human socialisation and once formed are stable into adulthood (Srinivasan, 2012). However, viewed in this manner, the extant literature on generations has tended to conclude that the generations mentioned above are articulated as fixed entities. Pritchard and Whiting (2014) argue that age-based (young, old) and generation-based categories (Baby Boomer, Gen X, Gen Y) have often been conflated taking, for example, younger workers to imply Generation Y. Generational labels have tended to go unchallenged and their meanings thus needs to be unpacked (ibid.). For example, situational factors are not taken into account, as it implies that intergenerational conflict arises because of differences between the generations hence fixed traits exists within these generations (Urlick and Hollensbe, 2014; Hanks, 2001). As Ng and Parry (2016) identify there is little literature that supports the notion of intergenerational difference. However, Hillman (2014) identified two key explanations of generational difference; firstly, the difference in work values among the generations, established through birth-year-cohort membership. Secondly he suggested that the differences in work-values are associated with the development of age-based life stage values.

Generational identities as social construct

Joshi et al (2010:p.393) proposes the concept of "generational identity" defined as "a multifaceted construct that is broadly defined as an individual's knowledge that he or she belongs to a generational group/role, together with some emotional and value significance to him or her of this group/role membership". The authors draw on three approaches to generational identity namely cohort-based identity, age-based identity and incumbency-based identity. The former refers to particular events, such as entry to an organization, whereby an

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3 individual identify with the preceding or succeeding generations that result in similar
4 attitudes among that particular generation (Urick and Hollensbe, 2014). Secondly, a person
5 might identify with age, which draws on Mannheim's work whereby two elements, the
6 common location and distinct consciousness, are important for identity formation. This is
7 reflected in popular conceptualizations of generations based on age, including Millennials,
8 Generation X and Baby Boomers. Joshi et al's (2010) approach to age-based identity relies
9 on chronological ordering, collective memory and identity theory to stipulate
10 intergenerational contact. Finally, an individual can identify with an organizational role
11 associated with particular attitudes, experiences, skills and knowledges that is formed through
12 occupying a job or role for a particular time period (Joshi et al, 2010). However, a person can
13 draw on multiple aspects in generational identity formation hence generations can be
14 theorised as social identities in order to examine in-group and out-group creation both within
15 and outside of the workplace (Urick and Hollensbe, 2014).
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18
19 Researchers traditionally struggle to differentiate between generational and age effects. For
20 example, it is argued that generational identities are distinct but related to age-based identity
21 through a person's perceptions of own biological age (Lyons and Schweitzer, 2016). Rather
22 than taking an age perspective on generation, Urick and Hollensbe (2014) examine the
23 influence of generational identity and the extent to which individuals (dis)identify with a
24 particular generation. Such (dis)identification might be a choice made by individuals,
25 suggesting that definitions of generation which rely on age, birth cohort or historical events
26 do not capture adequately generational identities. Pritchard and Whiting (2014) suggest that
27 while both age and generation relies on chronology to "define terms, fix meanings around an
28 essentialized identity and measure variables and relationships of managerial interest", the
29 social construction of generation is often omitted from examination compared to age. As
30 such, this study examines the usefulness of 'generation' and whether or not there are age-
31 related patterns in generational identity formation. This is beneficial given the finding that
32 age identity can be seen as a dual model, referring to chronological age and a person's
33 generation, although individuals may identify with their generation more as they age (Weiss,
34 2014). As such, the generational labels might not be universally applicable (Lyons and
35 Schweitzer, 2016).
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39 Generations as social identities might, however, have consequences for organizational
40 outcomes including intergenerational contact or relations, work behaviour, conflict and
41 stereotyping (Lyons and Schweitzer, 2016). Further, social identity and self-categorization
42 theory have suggested that stereotypes influences behaviour and judgements towards people
43 belonging to different social identity groups (Finkelstein et al, 2012). People encountering
44 intergenerational contact may rely on ageist stereotypes in order to guide interactions
45 (Nussbaum et al., 2005) with tensions relying on the presence of the 'other' with implications
46 for the organizational culture, structure and turnover rate (Joshi et al., 2011; Riach, 2007).
47 Generational members construct their identity through "self-other talk" where identities are
48 produced and reproduced through negotiation based on the 'self' and 'other' (Ybema et al.,
49 2009; McInnes and Corlett, 2012). Consequently, the generations have come to the forefront
50 where the constructed differences create tensions that must be addressed by organizations
51 (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014; Therborn, 2013). In depth understanding of intergenerational
52 contact may help individuals to see beyond the stigmatized characteristics of the age groups,
53 which is known as ageism that has consequences for organizations (Hagestad and Uhlenberg,
54 2005). As such, age and generation are interrelated constructs that, on an individual level, are
55 "formative categories in making sense of ourselves" (North and Fiske, 2016:p.160). Viewing
56 age and generation as interrelated social constructs rather than pre-given, fixed entities, age,
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3 'younger', 'older' workers and the generations outlined above are "discursive achievements"
4 that is an outcome of continuous processes (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014:p.1607). In this
5 way, our understanding of stereotyping, diversity and tensions might be informed by how
6 people view themselves and others through the lens of generation, which might enhance
7 workplace cultures and intergenerational practices (Lyons and Schweitzer, 2016). However,
8 the ageism literature tends to omit to theorise intergenerational dynamics to the extent where
9 generational differences are often neglected as a driver in age discrimination, or ageism, by
10 social scientists (North and Fiske, 2012).
11

12 13 **Ageism**

14
15 Within the rapid changing and aging modernized world, it is particularly a risk for
16 generational tensions to arise for example through employee benefits that are intended to both
17 attract and retain (certain) workers (North and Fiske, 2015). Additionally, the tensions
18 associated with perceived intergenerational differences may, however, be exacerbated by
19 increased competition for jobs and within the workplace (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014) which
20 might result in ageism. Older workers tend to report higher satisfaction with their work life
21 balance (Maruyama et al., 2009). However, Marks and Scholaris (2007) suggest that older
22 workers, more so than younger workers, in the UK software industry find their employing
23 organization to be a source of professional identity. Older workers may also be viewed
24 negatively by managers who are sceptical of older workers' ability to learn new technologies
25 and skills (Furunes and Mykletun, 2007). North and Fiske (2015) thus argue that
26 modernization-ageism is particularly likely to occur in technologically cutting-edge industries
27 that tend to place emphasis on new ideas and skills that undermine industry experience that
28 might benefit certain workers, or age-groups over others.
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31
32 Ageism is discrimination in favour for or against any age group (Chonody and Wang, 2014).
33 The first component to ageism is cognition, such as stereotyping, which is generalized views
34 about the attributes or characteristics of an age group, affect is the second component
35 including prejudice and the final component is the behavioural dimension such as
36 discrimination on the basis of age (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). Even though the attitudes
37 towards age may be positive or negative, they may contribute towards discriminatory
38 behaviour, such as viewing older workers as more loyal to organizations, and perceiving
39 older workers as less productive than younger workers (Malinen and Johnston, 2013). Even
40 though ageism refers to discrimination of both young and older age groups, the majority of
41 studies focus on the aspect of discrimination against seniors (Trusinová, 2013). However,
42 ageism is rooted within the social identity of an individual where the separation by age
43 creates a form of 'otherness' (Bytheway, 2005; Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). The
44 reduction of workplace ageism hinges on the extent to which the ageist attitudes can be
45 changed (Malinen and Johnston, 2013).
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49 Furthermore, age discrimination may occur on a micro level, where young or older
50 individuals are targets, on a meso-level, such as discrimination through social networks or on
51 a macro level, which includes institutional age discrimination, such as compulsory retirement
52 (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). Further ageism may operate 'implicitly' through
53 unconscious age discriminatory biases (Malinen and Johnston, 2013). Within technology
54 industries Weeks et al (2017) have pointed to intergenerational tensions, with baby boomers
55 viewed as less technologically competent. As such, it is the 'explicit' measures of attitudes,
56 the conscious stereotypes that are often used for assessing ageism in workplaces (Iversen et
57 al., 2009). Another approach to ageism is that of descriptive and prescriptive stereotyping.
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3 Prescriptive ageism provides significant opportunities for cross-cultural inquiry, focusing on
4 intergenerational beliefs (North and Fiske, 2013). However, intergenerational contact tends to
5 be neglected from ageism literature. The aim of this research is to examine the impact
6 perceived ageism has on intergenerational contact amongst the generations within the
7 Norwegian technical industry. Norway represents a key national context to examine age,
8 ageism and intergenerational contact due to its ageing population and declining immigration
9 (Timonen, 2014). Despite these demographic changes, Hermansen and Midtsundstad (2015)
10 suggest that little effort is made by organisations to retain older workers, with older workers
11 viewed more negatively by managers (Furunes and Mykletun, 2007). Additionally, ageism,
12 or age discrimination, is often neglected and understudied as a form of prejudice as age
13 stereotypes between generations is thought to be more “socially condoned” than other forms
14 of stereotypes including sexism and racism (North and Fiske, 2015:p160).
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18 **Methods**

19 *Research context*

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22 Age is a ‘hot’ topic in Norway with the Norwegian Working Environment Act raising the
23 age-limit for employment from 70 to 72, with the aim of raising it to 75, to make it easier for
24 older workers to continue working. One concern is that despite the increased retirement age
25 employers still have to promote the equal treatment requirement, which implies that “one age
26 limit fits all” (Dagensnaringsliv, 2015). While the Norwegian government seeks to increase
27 the retirement age, only a minority of employers want to employ employees aged 50 years of
28 age or above (TU, 2014). The technology industries face particular problems, with graduates
29 in high demand within the private sector (Studenttorget, 2014). Despite this high demand,
30 employers are concerned about the lack of appropriate skills of graduates (TU, 2013). There
31 were therefore thought that ageism might occur in the technical industry, as North and Fiske
32 (2015) argues that modernization-ageism is particularly prevalent in technologically cutting
33 edge industries where emphasis is continually being placed on workers’ ability to quickly
34 learn new skills. However, there is a paucity of research focusing on the ways in which
35 ageism might occur through an examination of the processes whereby perceived
36 intergenerational differences might result in tensions between ‘younger’ and ‘older’ workers
37 (Lyons and Kuron 2014 in Hllensbe and Lyons, 2016).
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43 *Research strategy*

44 Semi-structured interviews were conducted within two technical organisations in Norway,
45 TechNor1 and TechNor2.
46

47 TechNor1 is of Norway’s oldest organizations with employees of all ages, and with a
48 previous history of concerns related to ageism. TechNor1 has a documented history of ageism
49 within its workplace (details withheld to preserve anonymity). However, the organisation has
50 since developed processes to take care of all employees that turn 60 years. They’ve also
51 substituted the term ‘senior policy’ with ‘life-phase policy’ in order to not group people in
52 age related boxes as the latter term takes into consideration the different needs of ‘seniors’
53 and ‘fathers’. TechNor1 is rated among the top five employers for those technology
54 graduates. TechNor1 delivers high-technological solutions and systems within the maritime
55 sector. TechNor1 has 415 employees spread across several departments with a low turnover
56 rate at 2,4 per cent in 2014. Access was gained through a gatekeeper, whereby a meeting was
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3 planned and held with the Human Resource Manager whom was approached with details of
4 the study, and facilitated access to employees.
5

6 TechNor2 (a supplier of TechNor1) is a similar but small firm, offering apprenticeships in
7 conjunction with a local vocational college, as well as contractual early retirement schemes.
8 Access to TechNor2 was facilitated by a representative of TechNor1. As such, TechNor2 is
9 smaller with approximately 70 employees across various department supplies
10 electromechanical solutions within the defence and electro industry. To investigate whether
11 ageism has an impact on intergenerational contact, one main technical organization was
12 chosen where the unit of analysis was embedded. Prior to commencing data collection, the
13 lead author visited both organizations to determine the generational and age profiles of the
14 employees, to ensure resulting interviews would provide access across the age span of the
15 workforce.
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18 The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview
19 guide was developed in line with the existing research, including questions relating to
20 meaning of work, organisational loyalty, conceptualising of generations, intergenerational
21 contact, the construction of age and its relatedness to generation and the perceived
22 importance of age on working patterns. Interviews took place in private rooms on the
23 employers' premises either in the participants' own offices or in conference rooms where
24 face-to-face interviews were conducted in Norwegian. Interviews averaged 35 minutes and
25 explored the relevance of generational identity for participants, contact between generations
26 in the case study organization, meaning of work and perceptions of ageism within the
27 organizations. The interview guide invited the participants to reflect on the extent to which
28 they felt belongingness to a generation, how they would characterise their generation (or age-
29 group if dis-associating with 'generation'), how they would regard the ties between the
30 workers of various generations/age groups, what the strengths/weaknesses the other age-
31 groups bring to the workplace, the contact between the different generations/age groups.
32 Whereas the previous questions was concerned about defining 'generations', and how
33 intergenerational contact might result in ageism if the stereotypes were acted on, more
34 explicit forms of ageism was explored through questions including the extent to which they
35 felt the organisation was taking age-diversity into account, whether they felt that there are
36 any differences in how their generation work compared to other age groups/generations in the
37 workplace, and if they've ever encountered any discriminatory events due to their generation
38 and/or age.
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43 Within TechNor1 15 interviews were conducted, 5 in each of the three broad generational
44 groups. Within TechNor2 5 interviews were conducted across the same generational groups.
45 Details of the interview participants can be seen in Tables 2 and 3. All interviewees were
46 fully informed of the true purpose of the study and assured of anonymity, and their right to
47 withdraw. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated verbatim by the lead
48 author a native Norwegian speaker, who is fluent in English. Based on the extant literature,
49 participants were allocated to generational groups by the research team. The relevance of this
50 allocation formed part of the interview discussions. Details of the interview participants can
51 be seen in Tables 2 and 3. The majority of the participants identified as male, which is
52 consistent with the gender profile of the Norwegian technical industry.
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54

55 [insert Tables 1 and 2 about here]
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3 Interview data were analysed using template analysis, to identify and investigate themes,
4 relationships and patterns from the data (King, 2004). Template analysis allows for both
5 apriori and posteriori codes (Sang et al., 2014; Fearfull and Kamenou, 2010). The 'apriori'
6 themes were generational inclusion; degree of generational diversity; organizational loyalty;
7 meaning of work; intergenerational contact; stereotyping and ageism. Additionally, several
8 'posteriori' codes were also explored including departmental segregation; work-life balance
9 initiatives and "self-other identity talk". Further, template analysis is appropriate for
10 comparing the perspectives of different groups of employees within a particular context. In
11 order to interpret and analyse the text from the semi-structured interviews, template analysis
12 is utilised and was developed based on King's (2004) steps to carry out the template analysis.
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15 Findings

16
17 The findings section begins by briefly outlining how participants articulated generation and
18 age, before moving towards a consideration of intergenerational contact and articulation of
19 ageism.
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22 Uncovering generations at work

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24
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26 The data suggests the concept of generation may be more relevant to older workers, and those
27 with longer organizational tenure. Members of the Baby Boomer generation reported a sense
28 of belongingness to the "after war generation", reflected in the increased number of births
29 during this period. Generational identity was further reflected with reported dedication and
30 availability to the organization, customers and colleagues, which they believed distinguished
31 their generation from those of a younger age. This was supported by Bob:
32
33

34 *".... I can tell by the way we are working. I belong to the generation that are at work until*
35 *the job and tasks are done and I feel that I am more available...I have noticed that the*
36 *younger generation have a greater focus on family and leisure... I feel that there has been a*
37 *shift in generational attitudes and the attitudes towards work..."*
38

39 It was further indicated the Baby Boomers' generational identities were articulated as being
40 linked to familiarity with changing technologies and work ethics.
41
42

43 Familiarity with technology was also reflected in Generation X's identity as well as being
44 hardworking and detail oriented compared to their 'younger' counterparts, whom were
45 regarded as a bit 'laid-back'. Georg and Isabel reflected on their age-based life stage
46 membership within the company:
47
48

49 *"I feel a part of the younger generation within this company, even though I am teasing the*
50 *service boys because there are a lot of younger people working there.... But I guess that I am*
51 *not the youngest but somewhere in the middle"(Isabel, Gen X).*
52

53 Generation X were categorized in relation to their greater employment security whilst having
54 the opportunity to secure an education through work. Chris (Generation X) within TechNor2
55 indicated this generation were more likely to consider themselves as young for a longer time,
56 while suggesting this generation is not easily defined.
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3 Luke was the only Millennial from TechNor1 that felt belongingness to a generation,
4 although he felt he was different to other members of his generation who he felt were
5 uncommitted to employers that did not provide them with freedom to do as they please. Mike
6 reflected on his age and indicated that he could not be categorized in terms of a generation,
7 “you have to do like that because you are of that age”, Similarly, Oscar also reflected on his
8 age and indicated that he felt young when he started working at TechNor1 as there were
9 many people older than him working there, which he felt implied a good working
10 environment.
11

12
13 This was echoed by Dylan (Millennial) in TechNor2 who said there were a lot of older people
14 working within administration. He further reflected on his generational identity and indicated
15 the Millennial employees were hardworking, concerned about their careers and exerted a lot
16 of job changes in order to strive for higher wages. This coincides with Nils’ (Millennial)
17 reflection on the characteristics defined his generation and emphasised:
18

19
20 *“... I guess that I belong to the generation that are regarded as job hoppers, so I think that*
21 *my generation would define long-term employment as 5 to 7 years, while it would probably*
22 *be 15 to 20 years for those that are older than me, as they tend to stay longer”.*
23

24 The definition of ‘long-term’ employment were found to vary considerably across the
25 generations where loyalty to the organization was incorporated within the culture of the
26 technical industry.
27

28 **Intergenerational contact**

29
30 Millennial respondents indicated working with older employees provided them with an
31 opportunity to learn about the various generations of technology. For example, Luke
32 indicated the older generation was less likely to take risks while also being better at the
33 practical assignments such as reports and notes than the younger generation are. While Oscar
34 did not think age was an important factor as long as an appropriate work ethic was prevalent.
35 However, Nils suggested the older workers had a more traditional working day, while
36 younger workers found it easier to take up flexible working practices, including taking a day
37 off, while catching up on the lost hours by working later other days. Mike suggested the older
38 workers had developed a systematic and methodical way of working, which made them a bit
39 slower whilst spending time on relatively simple and less important tasks.
40
41

42
43 However, Generation X employees reflected on the degree of contact within their department
44 rather than the organization as a whole. Whereas Isabel (Generation X) stated that
45 intergenerational contact is important for good working relationships, particularly given
46 generational differences in slang use:
47

48
49 *“...I feel that I have a great contact with both my younger and older colleagues. Even though*
50 *I may not have the same way of expressing myself as the younger group, I feel that it is*
51 *important to try and to be attuned with them as well, then things will go well”.*
52

53 Georg (Generation X) stressed the younger generation was more concerned about being at
54 work from 8am to 4pm while being casual with regard to deadlines as they (the younger) did
55 not consider that their job plays a role in a larger project, which is delivered to a customer.
56 This was also emphasised by Chris (TechNor2, Generation X):
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4 *"I feel that the younger people have "surfed" their way through relatively easily, no one has*
5 *demanding they do things, so when they enter the workplace they are in shock that they have*
6 *to turn up at work on time, not approximately, but precisely and you need to do your job*
7 *consistently, no slacking and without constantly checking Facebook and Snapchat."*
8

9
10 Baby Boomers felt generational contact had changed as a result of a changing society. For
11 example, Eric argued the Baby Boomer generation had taken a while to accept paternity
12 leave. Members of the younger generations were perceived to have extra-organisational
13 demands, which required a shift of organizational culture. This was further reflected on by
14 Bob:

15
16 *"The only thing that I have experienced is that the younger generation are always leaving at*
17 *4pm even though they are in the midst of something, because there is someone at home*
18 *waiting for them. I guess that they are better at balancing family and work than we have been*
19 *...the problem is that there is always someone that has to pay for those extra days off..."*
20
21

22
23 The perceived strengths of the younger generations were often associated with new ways of
24 thinking and updated technological knowledge. The notion of new ways of thinking were
25 often reflected on in relation to the older employees who were described as less innovative in
26 their thinking. Moreover, Nils (Millennial) emphasised that the younger generation were
27 more energetic and more inclusive, while older workers were resistant to increasing
28 intergenerational contact:
29

30
31 *"I feel that the older people are just within their group, while the younger try to create*
32 *social events and boards for social gatherings in order to change relations."*
33

34 Other perceived strengths associated with the younger generation included their
35 determination and enthusiasm, a more precise picture on how the society look like and will
36 look like in the future as well as the belief in themselves
37

38
39 Several of the interviewees felt that members of the younger generations were over-confident
40 in the transition from education to work. Lack of experience was also frequently mentioned
41 as a weakness as well as the issue of realizing own limitations. It was also indicated that the
42 younger generation were not willing to listen or learn by the older employees' mistakes. This
43 was further emphasised by Andrew (Baby Boomer):
44

45 *"...the young people do not have to make the same mistakes as us, they should learn by it....*
46 *I feel that something is missing here... I don't know whether it is the working culture, the*
47 *working environment of the company, within the workforce as a whole or if it is caused by*
48 *their education..."*
49

50
51 These findings were consistent within TechNor2 where the younger generation were
52 characterised as 'tech-savvy', contributing to new ways of thinking. Similarly, TechNor2
53 emphasised that the perceived weaknesses included the attitudes towards working hours, lack
54 of work ethic, not taking things seriously, laziness and lack of experience.
55

56 *Perceived strengths and weaknesses of older workers*
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3 Most respondents indicated that the experience held by the older workers was their main
4 strength. Georg stressed that the older workers had a strong ownership with their customers,
5 the company and the products. It was also indicated that older employees' life experiences
6 was a contributor to the workplace, Christian (Baby Boomer):
7

8
9 *“Well I would say a lot of life experience, which may, if there is a good environment, be*
10 *transferred to others...However, many people have started to become more rigid while*
11 *struggling to tolerate young people with other viewpoints than themselves, which may be*
12 *negative”.*
13

14 Christian suggests the experience held by the older workers may result in becoming 'fixed' or
15 'set' in terms of doing what they have done for 30 years. It was further suggested that this
16 could result in difficulties for the older employees to see other solutions or being open to
17 suggestions. Furthermore, Bob (Baby Boomer) argued that stubbornness was a weakness and
18 stated that *“I have been doing this for 30 years, so don't tell me how it should be done”* whilst
19 Dina (Baby Boomer) indicated that *“we do not adapt as rapidly as we used to, I think that it*
20 *takes a while before things are implemented”*. It was further emphasised that the older
21 generation was not as updated on new technology (Oscar, Generation X; Eric, Baby Boomer).
22
23

24 The perceived strengths and weaknesses associated with the older workers at TechNor1
25 coincided with what was found in TechNor2. The strengths included their life experience and
26 working experience as well as loyalty and knowledge. Similarly, the weaknesses were
27 associated with lack of flexibility in approaching tasks, not fully updated, new thoughts and
28 innovation whilst not being as solution oriented compared with the younger. It was further
29 argued by respondents that the mind-set of the older employees becomes rather 'fixed' that
30 restricts creativity in terms of technology.
31
32

33 **Ageism**

34 The previous sections have demonstrated that the participants had clear ideas about the
35 relative strengths and weaknesses of the generations, with the respondents demonstrating age
36 related stereotypes that they relied on in intergenerational interactions, and if acted on, tend to
37 be a more implicit form of ageism. The following section draws out participants' reflection
38 on more the explicit forms of age related discrimination. Respondents indicated that age
39 discrimination against older workers could be evident within the recruitment processes. Dina
40 (Baby Boomer) then indicated that she would probably hire someone that was younger:
41
42

43 *“I think that I would have thought about the new technology, experiences, ideas and those*
44 *that are young and vigorous are more likely to provide more effort to the job, and then I*
45 *would probably forget that they most likely have four kids at home that are sick every other*
46 *day... So I would probably do the same mistake”.*
47
48

49 It was emphasised by Eric (Baby Boomer) that ageism was a problem within TechNor1,
50 which he felt was evident but unspoken:
51

52 *“It definitely is. I am thinking about discrimination in terms of higher [older] age, but no one*
53 *will admit that it is a problem, but everyone can see that it is.... There's no doubt about that”*
54

55 Eric further indicated that ageism was something the organization *has*, resulting from leaders'
56 philosophy and emphasised that an employee had restricted opportunities in terms of
57 recruitment after turning 45. This was also emphasised by Dina (Baby Boomer) who
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3 indicated that there had been periods where the organization were determined that people
4 should retire at an age of 60 even though they did not want to leave, whilst she indicated that
5 people would be surprised if this occurred in recent times. Furthermore, several of the
6 interviewees mentioned situations where employees had taken the organization to tribunal
7 because they were expected to leave at an age of 67, despite the state retirement age of 70.
8

9
10 This perceived age discrimination was also reflected on by Herman (Generation X) who felt
11 that work opportunities were restricted in terms of responsibilities and work assignments
12 when reaching a certain age:
13

14 *“... There have been some cases here, especially with regard to those that are taking early*
15 *pensions leave and who decided that they wanted to be good employees so they told the*
16 *organization (about their decision) prior to retirement. What was evident then was that their*
17 *work assignments were taken from them, so they were left with nothing for 18 months.... A*
18 *colleague of mine left this summer and he said; “whatever you do, don’t tell anyone that you*
19 *are leaving until you actually are”.*
20

21
22 Eric’s (Baby Boomer) narrative supported as he reported ageism after he turned 45 because
23 that was when everything automatically stopped in terms of opportunities, recruitment and
24 responsibilities within the organization.
25

26
27 In contrast, there was evidence that ageism was not as evident with regard to delegation of
28 tasks, responsibilities or recruitment processes as two of the employees at TechNor2 were
29 hired after they turned 45 years (Adam, Baby Boomer; Chris, Generation X).
30

31
32 Few of the Baby Boomer and Generation X employees reported encountering any age
33 discriminative situations. However, Christian (Baby Boomer) indicated that age becomes a
34 physical obstacle, with reduced capability to undertake certain tasks.
35

36
37 In addition, Fredrick (Generation X) stated that age was problematic when he was younger as
38 it was difficult to enter the workforce and that it was easier to try for promotion between the
39 ages of 26 and 27. Several of the Millennial employees reported age discrimination in terms
40 of inexperience, which was a perceived weakness associated with being young. Nils
41 (Millennial) indicated that older employees required younger workers to have considerable
42 experience in terms of the products and the job in order to speak up and emphasised that *“it*
43 *does not help to look young and dumb...”*. Similarly, Luke (Millennial) indicated that
44 experience was deemed necessary in order to become a good leader, which he did not
45 necessarily agree with. Furthermore, Mike (Millennial), reflected on the problem of ageism in
46 relation to meeting customers on business travels, including its embodied aspects:
47

48 *“Lets say that a customer has purchased an expensive product, they question my ability to*
49 *handle their products as it looks like I am 20 years old, so they are a bit skeptical but they*
50 *may not say anything about it. However, before I grew a beard, I was always welcomed with*
51 *two questions: How old are you? And how long have your worked for TechNor1?”*
52

53
54 In contrast, one of the two women engineers reflected that age had become more salient as
55 she had become older and gained more experience. Dina reflected that when she was younger
56 her gender was a greater obstacle to having her expertise recognised than age. Dina’s
57 experiences suggest that generational identity and age based discrimination do not occur in
58 isolation from other social identities such as gender.
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4 When reflecting on the extent to which TechNor1 considers age diversity, it was believed that
5 ageism occurred in the recruitment process of service engineers, who tended to young. As
6 Jens suggests, age is perceived to relate to lack of responsibilities which may inhibit an
7 employees' ability to undertake additional work:
8

9
10 *"I guess it does with regards to hiring new employees, especially with regards to the service*
11 *department, as they are probably looking for relatively young people, not just age, but also in*
12 *terms of family responsibilities and stuff like that. As you are expected to travel a lot, it would*
13 *thus be beneficial that you are young and do not have several kids at home that needs to be*
14 *taken care of"* (Jens, Generation X).
15

16
17 There were other views on the extent to which age diversity was taken into account within the
18 organization. Luke (Millennial) argued that age was not taken into account and suggested that
19 the organization should focus on age, especially with regard to the social aspects of work and
20 within recruitment. Georg (Generation X) suggested TechNor1 should consider age in terms
21 of changing positions of those that have worked in the exact same position for several years.
22

23
24 Additionally, Dylan (Millennial) felt that TechNor2 took age diversity into account by
25 offering apprenticeships where a lot of young people were entering work through cooperation
26 with the vocational school as well as AFP schemes. He further indicated that there were a lot
27 of people that wanted to continue working after they turned 62 years, where the management
28 encouraged them to continue working until retirement as long as they have the necessary
29 knowledge. However, it was emphasised that the younger employees were segregated in the
30 production department, similar to the service department of TechNor1. However, this may
31 restrict opportunities for those that do not 'fit' into the criteria with reference to the
32 vocational school.
33

34 **Discussion and conclusions**

35
36 This research examined the impact of ageism on intergenerational contact within the
37 Norwegian technical industry. Interviewees recalled generation specific historical and social
38 events, distinguishing Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials from one another. The
39 events included material and technical developments and the changing society in terms of
40 work-life initiatives, which shape the beliefs, perceptions and the values of the generations
41 (Costanza et al., 2012). The generational stereotypes reported in the current study are similar
42 to those found in previous research, including the perceived loyalty of Baby Boomers
43 (D'Amato and Hertzfeld, 2008) and Millennials' desire for flexible working (Helyer and Lee,
44 2012). However, few of the Millennial and Generation X respondents felt belongingness to a
45 generation, which may be due to the unconsciousness of their generational inclusion (Aboim
46 and Vasconcelos, 2014).
47
48

49
50 Millennials and Generation Xers tended to identify as "young", reflecting their chronological
51 age. This finding coincides with the assumption that that the age identity is a dual model
52 where a person is more likely to identify with their generation than age during the second part
53 of their lives (Weiss, 2014). Generational labels within the Norwegian technical industry are
54 constructed around an age-based identity, linked to departmental units of the organizations
55 (Joshi et al., 2010). Age was a social construct where 40 was perceived as 'old' within the
56 sales and service departments because it was indicated that the service engineers (who were
57 usually young of age) would leave the employer within five years. Further, service engineers
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3 were perceived as laid-back, and this was associated with generational difference by Baby
4 Boomers and Gen Xers. In this sense, the generational identities were constructed based on
5 the relational positioning of the 'self' as opposed to the 'other' (McInnes and Corlett, 2012).
6

7 Perceiving generations may be an implicit discriminatory practice resulting from individuals
8 reflecting on own their age in relation to the 'other'. For example, Oscar (Millennial)
9 indicated that he felt young because there were many older people at TechNor1; constructing
10 a social relational age identity of 'self' and 'other' (McInnes and Corlett, 2012). However,
11 there was a significant age-gap between the oldest and the youngest employees, as most of
12 the Baby Boomers had remained within the organization throughout their career. It can hence
13 be argued that industry-specific nuances within the technical industry have an impact on the
14 construction of the 'older' and 'younger' worker (Riach, 2007).
15
16

17 The data suggest generations are produced by discursive differences, which allow the
18 generations to interact in multiple ways (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014). The underlying
19 ageist stereotypes were found to be implicit and explicit when reflecting on the perceived
20 strengths and weaknesses associated with the younger and older workers. The perceived
21 strengths of younger workers were often associated to be the weaknesses of older workers
22 and vice versa. These strengths and weaknesses were thus negotiated through "self-other
23 identity talk" that involved a discursive separation of the 'self' from the 'other' (Ybema et al,
24 2009:p.306). This was also found in TechNor2 where Chris (Generation X) assumed that the
25 younger generation had "surfed" their way through employment relatively easy hence
26 constructing a self-identity that implied that he had to work hard.
27
28

29 Ageism operated at the individual level with interviewees had negative perceptions of older
30 workers where they were interpreted as 'fixed' or 'set', suggesting that the older workers
31 were resistant to change hence viewed unfavourably (Chonody and Wang, 2014). However,
32 ageing was also viewed positively where the older workers were found more trustworthy,
33 also termed positive stereotyping (Iversen et al, 2009). When such positive stereotypes are
34 evident, it may be increasingly difficult for the younger generations to maintain negative
35 stereotypes of ageing (Nussbaum et al, 2005). In contrast, younger generations were
36 perceived to hold updated knowledge, which contributed towards organizational
37 development. As such the age identity was produced and reproduced within the technical
38 industry through intergenerational interactions. Ageism operated on a micro-level that
39 resulted in a discriminatory practice (Iversen et al., 2009). Similarly, it was evident that
40 ageing resulted in restricted opportunities for responsibilities due to prejudice with reference
41 to pension plans (Iversen et al., 2009).
42
43
44

45 However, ageism involves positive or negative discrimination in favour for or against any age
46 group (Chonody and Wang, 2014). For example, it was found that the Millennial employees
47 experienced prejudice in terms of their inexperience. For example, Mike's (Millennial)
48 experience was questioned in terms of his age and length of employment at TechNor1 when
49 he met customers, however, this was prior to growing a beard. Hence indicating that ageism
50 was rooted within the social identity of the individual that was conveyed by appearance
51 (Bytheway, 2005). It was further indicated that it was taken for granted that newly hired and
52 younger employees did not hold any knowledge. This level of ageism includes cognition in
53 terms of conveying to the stereotype that associate 'young' with 'limited knowledge', affect
54 in terms of prejudice of younger workers and the behavioural component that result in
55 discriminatory practices (Iversen et al., 2009).
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3 Institutional level ageism operated within TechNor1, through mandatory retirement at 67
4 years old; despite the official retirement age in Norway of 70 years. This may affect the older
5 workers' self-identity, as maintaining employment was emphasised to be an integral part of
6 their lives. In addition, it was emphasised that ageism was exercised by managers who
7 restricted opportunities for employees over 45. In other words, the leaders constructed 45 as
8 'old', which restricts space for individual agency of employees in constructing their own
9 reality of 'old' and 'young' (Riach, 2007). However, being too young was often articulated in
10 terms of inexperience with younger employees excluded from influence and power as a
11 consequence of the 'asymmetrical power structure' associated with institutional ageism
12 (Iversen et al., 2009).
13

14
15 The final level of ageism, namely the meso or intermediate level, can act as a relation
16 between the micro and macro-level, where institutional isolation produces and reproduces age
17 groups that are different from one's own (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). Furthermore,
18 segregating older and younger employees in various departments restricts opportunities for
19 individuals to gain high quality intergenerational contact where the 'not like us' distinction is
20 maintained (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). It was emphasised that the older employees
21 remained within their groups even though the younger employees attempted to create events
22 to promote socialization across the generations and departments in order to change relations.
23 Even though the intention was good, such events may, implicitly, contribute in targeting one
24 group over another, hence resulting in discrimination (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005).
25
26

27
28 While this research has revealed the impact of ageism within the workplaces under study,
29 future researchers may wish to consider larger scale surveys which could operationalise and
30 measure the extent of ageism across organisations. In addition, this research examined age in
31 isolation from other social identities. The sample was predominately white and male, limiting
32 the extent to which we can draw conclusions for other groups. Researchers should consider
33 an intersectional approach, to understand how age may interact with gender, ethnicity and
34 disability, to inform workplace experiences. Undertaking an intersectional analyses would
35 reveal how organisational and societal structures and individual agency can inform inter and
36 intragenerational experiences and how other identities such as gender or sexuality may
37 influence these. Doing so will create opportunities for organisations to develop specific
38 processes and policies which take into account age and intersecting identities, for example,
39 older women workers with responsibility for caring for grandchildren.
40
41

42 Failure by management to address generational differences could result in low morale, high
43 turnover rates and a decrease in profits (Hillman, 2014). Intergenerational conflict may also
44 affect the brand value of an organization, with again leading to difficulties in recruiting new
45 talent (Singh, 2013). In addition, the concept of work has changed over the last 25 years, as
46 employees view employment to be less important than other aspects of life, and suggests that
47 organizations have to develop practices that correspond with these changes (Twenge, 2010).
48 Stereotypes associated with Millennials may help organizations to understand the frictions
49 behind the generational gap; however, there are implications for managers applying
50 generational stereotypes on an individual level (Davis, 2014). Stereotyping of generations
51 may result in tension within the workplace (Fox, 2011) as well as unfair organizational
52 decisions, such as hiring and promotion decisions (Finkelstein et al., 2013). Due to the ageing
53 population, programs that are aimed at a particular age group, may result in discrimination
54 against the persons belonging to another age group (Nussbaum et al., 2005). As such,
55 discriminatory practices can lead to ageist behaviour where one group is treated in favour
56 over another group (Chonody and Wang, 2014). It is thus suggested that organizations need
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to incorporate policies against ageism while educating employees in terms of avoiding ageist practices (Nussbaum et al., 2005).

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Appendix 1: interview guide

Opening Questions:

Tell me about your job, what do you do etc.?

What university/degree did you go to?

What did you study?

How easy was it for you to find a job when you entered the labour market (or a job you wanted)?

How long have you worked for the organization?

Have you ever thought about leaving?

If yes, why did you intend to quit? What made you stay?

If no, what makes you want to stay?

What do you define as being loyal to an employer?

What do you define as 'long-term' employment? (I.e. 5 years, 10 years etc.)

How would you consider the working culture of the organization?

Do you consider yourself to belong to a particular generation?

Why?

In your own words, what characteristics do you believe best describes your generation?

Why did you choose these events as important to you?

Do you think that these events have an impact on how you perform your job?

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5 What motivates you to work?
6

7 What motivational factors do you find important in order to stay with your current employer?
8 (Such as pay, teamwork etc.)
9

10 Why did you choose these motivational factors?
11

12 Do you believe that your motivational factors to work have changed over the years?
13 If yes, in what way has it changed?
14 If no, why do you think it has not changed?
15
16

17 “Hard work pays dividends”, to what extent do you agree with this statement?
18

19 Besides the economic factors, in what ways is work important to you?
20

21 What do you consider as poor work ethic?
22

23 How easy do you find it to balance work and life?
24

25 Due to an ageing workforce and labour shortages, it is indicated that there will be an increase
26 in working age hence a larger age gap, how do you regard the contact between your
27 younger/older co-workers?
28
29

30 How would you regard the ties between you and the other members of your generation?
31

32 What kind of ages do you associate with ‘older’ and ‘younger’?
33

34 What would you say are the strengths ‘young’ workers bring to the workplace?
35

36 What about the weaknesses?
37

38 What would you say are the strengths ‘older’ workers bring to the workplace?
39

40 What are the weaknesses?
41

42 Do you feel that there are any differences in how your generation work compared to other age
43 groups/generations?
44

45 Do you think that age (whether ‘older’ or ‘younger’) is an important work-related factor with
46 regard to how work is done?
47 Why?
48
49

50 To what extent do you perceive that the organization takes age diversity into account?
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52 A research on ageism in Norway found that age discrimination takes place more often than
53 gender discrimination; to what extent would you agree with this finding?
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3 Have you ever experienced any form of discrimination because of your age? (For example,
4 prejudice for or against an age group related to career advancements, recruitment, training
5 etc.)

6 If you feel comfortable, could you please elaborate on this?
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Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Interviewee	Generation	Gender	Length of Employment	Department/Position
Andrew	Baby Boomer	Male	33 years	Customer support
Bob	Baby Boomer	Male	25 years	Sales
Christian	Baby Boomer	Male	25 years	Service
Dina	Baby Boomer	Female	30 years	Instructor
Eric	Baby Boomer	Male	35 years	Sales
Fredrick	Generation X	Male	14 years	Logistics
Georg	Generation X	Male	16 years	Sales
Herman	Generation X	Male	14 years	Sales
Isabel	Generation X	Female	3 years	Service
Jens	Generation X	Male	4 years	Service engineer
Kenneth	Millennial	Male	4 years	Service technician
Luke	Millennial	Male	4 years	Engineer
Mike	Millennial	Male	3,5 years	Service engineer
Nils	Millennial	Male	3,5 years	Service engineer
Oscar	Millennial	Male	9 months	Service engineer

Table 1 TechNor1: Respondents' Profiles

Interviewee	Generation	Gender	Length of Employment	Department/Position
Adam	Baby Boomer	Male	4 years	Technical planner

Ben	Baby Boomer	Male	32 years	Planning
Chris	Generation X	Male	1 year	Economics
Dylan	Millennial	Male	5 years	Administration
Emmett	Millennial	Male	1 year	Production

Table 2 TechNor2: Respondents' Profiles