Original Paper

Building a robustness against ageism: The potential role of coaching and coaching psychology

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Older workers are commonly perceived to be less able to adapt to change, particularly during challenging times such as those we are now experiencing. This paper will explore the origins and impact of such negative stereotyping and suggest a possible means to guard against it. It will then provide a consideration of how such a mechanism can be used to inform a coaching approach across the lifespan of a worker and how this can fit within existing coaching and coaching psychology models. Additional interventions will be explored and, within this context, a position will be suggested as to why coaching may be best placed to tackle the issue of ageism and promote successful ageing at work.

Keywords: Ageism; older workers; mindfulness; control; cognitive behavioural coaching; mindfulness-based cognitive behavioural coaching; developmental coaching; lifespan development psychology; positive psychology; evidence-based coaching.

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Contrary to the increasing body of evidence suggesting that much can be gained from an extended period of employment for older workers, it appears from the literature that the affects of ageism may continue to be a barrier in bringing about this change (e.g. McVittie et al., 2003).

Definition and measurement

The term ‘ageism’ was first used by Butler (1969) who defined it as a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old. Palmore (1990) has more broadly defined ageism as any prejudice or discrimination against or in favour of an age group.

Ageism is a unique form of discrimination as age is a part of our identity that constantly changes, and everyone can potentially be affected by it at some stage in life. Age is also regarded as problematic to measure. Although a continuous variable, most studies use chronological age bands that have used different and often arbitrary clas-
sification of workers as older or younger (Barnes-Farrell & Mathews, 2007). Sugarman (2001) points to other key ‘non-chronological’ variables that may be considered in order to understand and measure the effects of the ageing process, such as subjective (you’re as old as you feel); social (acting your age); and biological (lifespan affected by fitness level).

The nature of ageism
A review by Finkelstein and Farrell (2007) concludes that age discrimination is one of the most widespread and casual forms of prejudice that is often hidden and difficult to detect. According to research undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in 2003, a five-year window exists between the ages of 35 and 40 that employers consider the ‘perfect working age’. A common stereotype is that ability suffers with ageing, particularly in the areas of reacting and adapting to change and technical skills (Lyon & Pollard, 1997). It is likely that the impact of these common stereotypes will have a particularly negative effect on older workers during times of economic difficulty, with a strong shift in attention to the experience of young apprentices and school leavers.

Although ageism appears to be a widespread form of discrimination, there is little research to suggest that performance in the workplace is affected by age. Warr (1996) provides a comprehensive review concluding that, although some slight deterioration in cognitive functioning can occur, in the general there is no significant association between age and overall work performance. Warr (1996, p.309) looked at more than 100 research investigations and found ‘in almost every case variation within an age-group far exceeds the average difference between age-groups’. Warr (1996) also pointed to possible contextual factors that may distort the picture and need to be reflected within research in this area. One example may stem from higher performing employees being more likely to achieve promotion, making an exploration of the age profile across a role a potentially unfair comparison. In addition, cohort effects, such as changes to standards of recruitment over time, need to be considered.

Not only does the research suggest that decline is not an inevitable experience for older workers, but that ability and performance can continue to develop throughout our working lives. The brain is now regarded as far more ‘plastic’ than previously assumed and structural change associated with new learning has been found to occur at any age (e.g. Langer, 2009).

How ageism develops
Langer (1989, p.22) describes how ageism may result from what she terms ‘mindlessness’, due to a process of ‘premature cognitive commitments’. These stem from labels or categories internalised in childhood that help to organise our thoughts in order to make sense and navigate around the world. Problems are said to arise when these beliefs or mindsets are ‘mindlessly’ accepted as fixed truths, allowing them to be applied in an automated and insensitive manner. It is this process that may lead to stereotyping. Therefore, Langer contends that our view on the elderly is constructed during childhood based on our experiences. An example of research to support of this theory showed that elderly subjects who lived with grandparents when 2-years-old – compared to after 13-years-old – were rated as having both more youthful mindsets of old age and as being more active and independent (Langer et al., 1988). In this way, stereotypes may have a priming effect with two profound consequences on the experience of growing older.

Firstly, stereotypes ‘prime’ what has been internalised as ‘appropriate’ behaviours at certain ages. For example, Neugarten (1968) has shown that we are deeply influenced by ‘social clocks’ and gauge our lives on the implicit belief that there is a right age for certain behaviours and attitudes. Traditionally, the life course has been viewed in terms
of a growth-maintenance-decline model (Sugarman, 2001). Such negative assumptions can lead to a lowering of expectations of the older person by both the employee themselves and the organisation, resulting in a snowballing effect of negative consequences. Once perceived as entering the ‘decline’ stage of later working life, employees may be more likely to experience a lowered confidence or self-efficacy, thus challenges are more likely to be avoided – denying the older worker the positive experience of mastering new skills and behaviours. This process, once embarked upon, may diminish the skills that the older workers have to offer, and so lessen the choices and opportunities that are realistically open to them, and ultimately the level of control they can exert over their lives. An example of research in this area is an experiment conducted by Langer and Rodin (1976) with nursing home residents. One group of participants were given a choice of house-plants to care for and were asked to make a number of small decisions about their daily routines. After 18 months the participants were found to be ‘more cheerful, active and alert’ (Langer, 2009, p.4) when compared to the control group, and experienced a significantly lower mortality rate – less than half of the control group.

In the context of the workplace, Barnes-Farrell and Mathews (2007) point to the value of regular exposure to mastery experiences through challenging assignments as ways of enhancing attitudes towards training and development. This to some extent may explain Warr’s (1996) finding that as workers age, they are less likely to take development opportunities. Failure to participate and keep up-to-date may contribute to the negative stereotypes associated with older people becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy of decline.

A second process of the priming effect taps into a process similar to the ‘placebo effect’. A powerful example of this process was demonstrated in Langer and Rodin’s ‘Counter Clockwise Study’ (1976). They wanted to see what effects turning back the clock psychologically would have on people’s physiological state. They took a group of men over 70 years of age to a retreat for five days where the world of 20 years earlier had been re-created by using props and instructions. This group were encouraged to make a psychological attempt to be the person they were 20 years earlier. Everything was replicated for a second group – the control group – but with one key difference, they reminisced and viewed the past from the present rather than taking a psychological step back in time. All participants were given more responsibility to take care of themselves than is usual for the elderly, and were all found to be functioning fairly independently almost immediately from the start. At the end of the experiment both groups demonstrated significant improvements across a range of physical and psychological measurements such as memory, hearing and strength. However, the experimental group showed additional improvements – such as joint flexibility, finger length (affected by arthritis), manual dexterity, posture and performance on some intelligence tests.

We are still trying to fully understand the connection between our thoughts and bodies, and how the language we use can place our minds and subsequently our bodies ‘in a healthier place’ (Langer, 2009, p.110). There is good evidence to demonstrate this link – for example, a longitudinal study found that those who endorse statements such as ‘as you get older, you are less useful’ do not live as long as adults who have a more positive view of ageing (Levy et al., 2002).

‘Mindful Ageing’

Langer’s (1989) research suggests a solution to offset the affects of stereotyping. Langer advocates a form of ‘Mindfulness’ or ‘Mindful Ageing’ that involves the application of critical thinking to mindfully select and use the internalised rules determined by ‘premature cognitions’ as only a guide, and so enabling the rejection of rigid labels and
beliefs. In this way, individuals may become mindfully aware of their own unique experience, what they can do and the options open to them. Langer explains that her definition of ‘mindfulness’ has a more Western scientific perspective – developed from considering ‘mindlessness’ and the cost of a rigid mindset – in contrast to more Eastern traditions that emphasize meditation during which ‘the mind becomes quieter and active thought is discouraged’ (Langer, 1989, p.79).

The suggested approach involves a form of internal behavioural monitoring that has two purposes:
1. To firstly increase our awareness of the distinctions we notice about older people and so sharpen our understanding of the futility of arbitrary categorisations.
2. Secondly, to keep us open to the variability of the choices available to us, and through the ability to exercise control in a given situation, boost our confidence to tackle changing and complex situations. For example, by mastering new skills and more effective ways of behaving.

Langer (2009, p.171) calls this ‘increasing control through attention to variability’, rather than functioning on ‘autopilot’. This has implications for the traditional approach of equality or diversity training that attempts to eliminate the perception of difference. Langer’s (1989, p.154) argues that we need to learn to make more distinctions among people and view categorising as a ‘fundamental and natural human activity’ as it is ‘the way we come to know the world’. It is suggested that a ‘mindful’ approach recognises that we may deviate from the majority with respect to some of our attributes, and that each attribute of skill lies on a continuum.

Integrating ‘Mindful Ageing’ within coaching and coaching psychology
A key strength of Langer’s (2009) theory on ‘Mindful Ageing’ with respect to coaching, is how readily it may be applied within a coaching setting.

O’Connor and Lages (2007, p.164) provide a useful outline of the basic coaching process. They define coaching as a methodology of change, which has ‘three basic steps that are present in all models’. These are:
1. Supporting the client and guiding their attention.
2. Giving meaning and reflecting the client’s material in a way that goes beyond the client’s thinking.
3. Helping the client take action.

O’Connor and Lages (2007, p.164) describe the second process – giving meaning and reflection – as fitting what clients say (language) and do (behaviour and body language) into a particular ‘model’ that provides a means of reflecting back a different and more helpful perspective on the issue. Therefore, the model needs to be ‘rich enough to encompass the myriad material the client presents’. Langer’s (2009) theory appears to meet this requirement in terms of helping the client obtain an insight into possible unhelpful and self-limiting mindsets about the ageing process. Langer’s suggested ‘internal behavioural monitoring’ may inform an action-plan to help the client exercise more control and choice, meeting the requirement of the third step of the coaching process.

Cognitive Behavioural Coaching (CBC) appears to be a particularly useful model for incorporating the ideas from Langer’s theory. CBC helps a person take a different perspective when they are experiencing emotional blocks or difficulties, such as anxiety or depression. These emotions may arise when a person is in a situation that they feel that cannot change or influence (Neenan & Dryden, 2002). CBC regards the root cause of such emotional blocks as negative ‘core beliefs’ formed earlier in life and which may lead to distorted thinking. There appears to be a good link between this process and Langer’s theory about ‘premature cognitive commitments’ and their internalisation in childhood, possibly leading to later anxieties and lack of motivation for seeking
challenges and additional development in later working life. CBC uses techniques to identify, challenge and change the aspects of thinking that perpetuate emotional difficulties. Both CBC and Langer’s model emphasise the need for continuous behavioural monitoring to avoid ‘slipping back’. CBC is also viewed as having a ‘psycho-educative’ element – in other words ‘its goal is to help the individual develop the necessary skills to become their own coach in the future’ (McMahon, 2006, p.38). This aspect of CBC may be seen as particularly important for handling the emotional difficulties arising from internalised beliefs about age-appropriate behaviours, as ageing is seen as a continuous ‘life transition’ (Linley et al., 2011) and so may require frequent monitoring on the part of the coachee well beyond the initial coaching intervention.

There is a growing body of research that makes the connection between CBC and ‘mindfulness’ paving the way to an intervention called ‘Mindfulness-based Cognitive Coaching’ (MBCC) (e.g. Collard & McMahon, 2009). The mindfulness aspect of the intervention helps the coachee connect with the ‘here and now’ and so avoiding the so-called stress response associated with ‘over planning, ruminating and fretting’. A connection is also made in this model between our thoughts and bodies, as being ‘present’ in the moment, ‘stimulates a completely different physiological response’ that enables an individual ‘to create a greater sense of calm and control’ (Collard & McMahon, 2009, p.35). The aim of MBCC is to help clients appreciate, enjoy and have more control over their daily lives. Donaldson-Feilder and Panchal (2011) see mindfulness as enabling us to relinquish ‘automatic pilot’, and help individuals to respond thoughtfully so choices can be better aligned with our purpose and identity. The link between the mind and body, and the ability to have more control over our lives are key factors in Langer’s ‘mindful ageing’ theory.

Lifespan development psychology challenges the traditional growth-maintenance-decline model of the life course to seeing development as a lifelong process (Sugarman, 2001).

Palmer and Panchal (2011) describe how the theory and research of lifespan development has traditionally focused on areas involving counselling and therapy, but is now being adopted into the an emerging and rapidly growing field of developmental coaching. Palmer and Panchal’s (2011, p.5) definition of developmental coaching suggests that it ‘facilitates the effective negotiation of key lifespan transitions, supporting positive growth and development’. A central assumption associated with developmental coaching is to facilitate a positive stance towards growing older. O’Connor and Lages (2007) describe adult development as moving through developmental stages, each differentiated by the way a person constructs the world from their experience, culture and language. Kegan’s (1994) model is viewed by O’Connor and Lages (2007, p.220) as ‘the most useful and best researched’ to apply to coaching. The model has five stages, and progression through these is marked by an increasing awareness of how language shapes reality and that a ‘meaning-making’ process has ‘made distinctions that are not there but necessary for social living and communication’ (p.227). An ability develops to see such processes as a limitation, and a different and wider world-view becomes more apparent. Kegan (1994) also points to an increased ability to make finer distinctions. There appear to be some parallels with Langer’s suggested approach of ‘internal behavioural monitoring’. Progression through Kegan’s stages is described by O’Connor and Lages (2007, p.231) as the movement to ‘self-actualise’. It is about ‘clearing obstructions that are preventing clients from achieving and developing all they can’ and this appears to be what Langer’s ‘mindful ageing’ sets out to achieve for older people.

Langer’s (2009) ‘mindfulness’ approach enables a person to become more optimistic by being more open and attentive to possibil-
ities, and so fits well within a framework of Positive Psychology Coaching. Langer (2009, p.15) suggests adopting the term ‘the psychology of possibility’. This begins with the assumption that we do not know what we can do or become. Rather than beginning from the status quo (what is), the starting point is where we would like to be, and from there we can ask how we might reach the goal or make progress. The features of control, self-efficacy and mastery, are common to both Langer’s model and those that promote positive work experiences and well-being (Seligman, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi, 2001).

**Additional interventions and coaching’s key role**

Legislative changes to enable older workers to remain in the workforce have been implemented across Europe over the last decade. However, the experiences of other countries with longer standing age equality legislation, such as the US, Canada and Australia, suggest the overall effect of such legislation is, in most cases, weak (Hornstein et al., 2001). Mention has already been made of research by Finkelstein and Farrell (2007) that indicates the often hidden nature of ageism. In addition, McVittie et al. (2003) showed that for employers claiming to be committed to equal opportunities, attitudes regarding age can still operate as a subtle, often unconscious mechanism to preserve the status quo.

Research points to a potentially effective intervention at the organisational level. It has been suggested that the more widespread introduction of bridge employment and flexible working arrangements would be particularly useful for older workers (British Psychological Society, 2010). This would provide for more leisure and family time, particularly as older workers increasingly assume responsibilities for eldercare and grandchildren (Baltes & Young, 2007). Such an arrangement may also accommodate any changes to physical health, particularly for those employees working in jobs requiring high levels of physical or psychological resilience. Perhaps this may complement the idea of the ‘fit note’, with an emphasis on what the person can do and how the work environment can be adapted to ensure the worker remains productive and engaged. However, for such initiatives to have impact, sufficiently large numbers of older workers need to be open to the possibility of taking on the challenges of continued engagement in the workplace.

The effectiveness of legislative and organisational initiatives – such as flexible working – may, therefore, depend to an extent on a significant shift in attitudes on the part of both older workers and the wider working population. A traditional intervention at the organisational level to bring about such a shift is equality or diversity training. Some success by organisations in attitude change has been identified by Pendry and Driscoll (2007). This research examined the effectiveness of diversity training and assessed a number of techniques to determine possible impact on behavioural change. Nonetheless, they concluded that to bring about significant change the use of such diversity programmes alone is considered unlikely to be sufficient. As identified previously, Langer (2009) provides some possible explanation on why attitudes towards categorisations may be difficult to shift. Research by Chiu et al. (2001) suggests that a more effective approach to bring about a change in attitudes may involve increasing the exposure of employees to older workers who can provide concrete evidence of good ability and performance to directly contradict existing negative stereotypes.

It may appear, therefore, that a direct intervention at the level of the older worker would be the key part of any successful solution to increasing the number of older workers. Such an approach would have the aim of building a robustness to offset the negative consequences of ageism and to help ensure an openness to any increasing opportunities presented by organisational initiatives. In time, it would be hoped that this would result in increasing numbers of older work-
ers performing effectively to provide a catalyst for more widespread attitudinal change. Integrating the ‘mindful ageing’ process within the practice of other coaching and coaching psychology models may provide just such a mechanism.

There appear to be similarities with regard to the introduction of equality legislation in the 1970s. Although both the legislation and more flexible working arrangements were important factors, Baron (2007) suggests that a widespread change in thinking did not occur until women and ethnic minorities engaged in ‘consciousness raising’ to examine and challenge their own discriminatory thought processes. Baron (2007) suggests that it would have been difficult to confront sexist and racist attitudes in others until these groups recognised that they had internalised such attitudes themselves.

**Conclusion**

Due to global financial and demographic pressures and the accompanying legislative and policy changes, the numbers of older people at work will continue to increase. Such numbers should eventually provide positive role models to bring about a change of attitudes regarding their capabilities, and so creating a more welcoming environment. However, it can be argued that such change will be slow due to the continued widespread and potent affect of ageism towards older workers in the workplace, and there is a need for more direct positive action. It will be important that decisions on the direction and priorities of such action are supported by comprehensive evidence-based research.

A review of research in the area of older workers and ageism suggests that there is an opportunity for coaching and coaching psychology to play a key role in providing an effective and accessible solution by building a robustness to withstand the negative effects of ageism. Langer’s (2009) theory of ‘mindful ageing’ may provide the potential for a sufficiently rich approach that effectively explores and reframes a client’s understanding and experiences of ageing. A further strength of such an approach is the ease with which it may be integrated into a number of existing coaching and coaching psychology models.

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