INTEREST AND INDIFFERENCE:

THE ROLE OF AGE IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL SCIENCES

Barbara S. Lawrence

ABSTRACT

Over the past 100 years, scholars have consistently stated that age plays a critical role in social life. Yet, despite this unusual consensus, organizational research typically relegates the topic to peripheral status. This paper addresses why this has occurred and examines how age might contribute more prominently to organizational science. First, a summary of this cross- and multi-disciplinary subject's academic history shows the depth of interest in age as a behavioral predictor. This interest is then contrasted with our general ambivalence to age, which is explored using an ethnomethodological analysis of basic age assumptions and beliefs. Next, an organizational theory of age in-progress is used to review and critique work-related age research published between 1985 and 1995. The various contrasts, contradictions, and developments examined in the preceding sections are then used to propose directions for developing a broader, more integrated, and more "interesting" organizational theory of age.

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INTRODUCTION

How people experience work and how organizations relate to these experiences represent core concerns of organizational theory. We know that people and their work experiences change throughout life. We also know that context influences these changes. Such truisms generate nodding heads in most academic audiences. Yet, despite the taken-for-granted significance of the phrase "change throughout life," many scholars also respond with puzzlement, indifference, or irritation if told that age plays a critical role in an organization's everyday dramas.

However if age held no meaning, organizations might be unrecognizable. The role, power, and status structure might not change, but the ages of the people within that structure and their typical interactions would constantly violate our expectations of appropriate behavior. How would we react to being interviewed for a job by a fifteen-year old? What if the best venture capital proposal came from an eighty-year old? What if an engineering team with members in its 40s treated a marketing group in its 20s as equals? Like the plight of Cyrano de Bergerac, our reactions to these situations are determined by our perceptions of the senders rather than by the content of the message.

These scenarios suggest that age plays a role in human interaction. Yet, despite broad recognition that age influences individual, group, organizational, and national outcomes, most organizational research relegates age to control variable status. This largely assumes that age plays a predetermined, invariant role in such outcomes. If this depiction were accurate, the simple identification of age effects would represent a complete study of the subject. However, organizational researchers observe wide differences in age effects across studies (Rhodes, 1983). Thus, there is some explaining to do. Yet, as noted by Waldman and Avolio (1993) with reference to the research on age and work performance, the primary focus of most studies has been on the *detection* of age differences, rather than on *explanations* for such differences.

My purpose in this paper is to discuss why research on age should play a more central role in organizational theory, and why it has not. The paper begins with an historical review showing the extensive academic interest in age. Following this introduction, an ethnomethodological analysis is used to explore the paradox of our interest in and indifference to age as a subject for study. Next, an organizational theory of age in-progress is used to frame and critique the explanations underlying the past ten years of age-related work research. Finally, these contrasts, contradictions, and developments are used to propose suggestions for developing a broader, more integrated, and thus, more interesting organizational theory of age.

A BRIEF AND INCOMPLETE ACADEMICS' HISTORY OF AGE

My purpose in embarking on this brief history is twofold. First, I want to introduce organizational scholars to the literature on age and aging. Despite the many organizational articles concerned with this topic, almost the only aging literature that gets cited is life stage adult development, which, as you will see, represents a small island in a vast sea of research and theory. Second, I want to portray some of the history, depth, and scope of this work. The fundamental story it tells underscores my argument that age is a critical social phenomenon that should be taken seriously within the organizational arena.

Age is one of a handful of individual attributes known to influence behavior in all cultures ever studied. This refrain appears systematically in academic text. In 1936, anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936, pp. 116-118) wrote that he knew of no society in which age did not play a crucial role. George Murdock (1945) specified age-grading as one of a list of items "which occur, as far as the author's knowledge goes, in every culture known to ethnology" (p. 124). Shmuel Eisenstadt (1956) noted that "... we know of no society which does not differentiate between various 'ages' and does not define them through the norms and values of its cultural tradition" (p. 21). In 1968, Bernice Neugarten and Joan Moore suggested that "In all societies, age is one of the important factors in determining the ways people behave toward each other.... age-status systems emerge, in which duties, rights, and rewards are differentially distributed to age groups which themselves have been socially defined" (p. 5). More recently, Matilda Riley and her colleagues (1972) argue that "Age is fundamental to the social system ... Every society is divided into strata according to the age of its members" (p. 1).

Scholars in diverse fields such as psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics espouse the significance of age. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever stated that age does not play a major role in social systems. Within a set of sciences reknowned for their arguments and bickering, this implicit as well as explicit agreement is quite remarkable. Taking an historical perspective, the following brief academics' guide to age portrays the scope of this consensus and identifies major streams of age-related research. Given my interest in work and organizations, the review centers, although not exclusively, on research that examines age as it affects adults rather than as it affects children, and age as a social rather than as a strictly biological or psychological phenomenon.[1]

Psychological and Social-Psychological Approaches to Aging Research

The Early Years: 1800-1950

The first academic explorations of age emerged in psychology and medicine. These studies focused on age as an individual phenomenon, and the key

question was: what happens to a person as he or she grows older? Scholars viewed age as a deterministic human feature: heredity and race were believed to explain the predictably different abilities and behaviors people exhibit throughout life. In 1834, Adolphe Quetelet, a Belgian astronomer and mathematician, published *On Man and the Development of His Faculties*, in which he discussed the relationship between a person's age and his or her emotional stability, muscular strength, intellectual ability, and mental illness. This was followed in 1883 by biologist Wilhelm Preyer's book *The Mind of the Child*, which presented the first empirical study of behavioral changes ordered by age. In 1904, G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, was published. This book, based on Hall's work as a genetic psychologist in the 1880s and 1890s, is credited by many as initiating the field of child development in the United States.

By the 1930s, academics had recognized that while abilities and behaviors may be patterned by age, tremendous variations exist in age-related behaviors. This resulted in a distinctly different approach to theory and research. First, in contrast to earlier efforts to *describe* behavioral differences with age, the Behavior $= f$(Age) approach (Wohlwill, 1970), scholars now made efforts to *explain* why those differences occur. Their explanations produced the concept of "development," which remains central to theories of aging today. Second, in contrast to scholars' earlier reliance on hereditary and racial determinism, scholars allowed social environments a larger role in explaining age-related behaviors.[2] The balance between individual and social determinism moved back and forth over the ensuing years, with an extreme version of social determinism emerging from Skinnerian psychologists, such as Sidney Bijou and Donald Baer (1963) and Arthur and Carolyn Staats (1963), who eliminated age altogether as a factor in childhood developmental change. The push and tug between individual and social determinism provides a thematic tension that runs throughout the history of aging studies.

In the 1930s and 1940s, psychologically-oriented researchers converged on studies of children. Between 1935 and 1950, the Rockefeller Foundation financed several large research and development programs in New York and later in Chicago to study child development. The scholars involved in these programs, including Peter Blos, Fritz Redl, Erik Erickson, Caroline Tryon, and Robert Havighurst, were among the first to introduce developmental theories. They proposed that psychological change is driven by two mechanisms: the child's drive toward growth (individual determinism), and the demands, constraints, and opportunities the child experiences in his or her social environment (social determinism). They called the age-linked behaviors produced by these mechanisms "developmental tasks." This theoretical approach suggested that age-linked behaviors do not just happen: there is an underlying explanation for why change occurs at given times in life.

Although some research between 1850 and 1950 studied the entire life span, most of it focused on children. We can only speculate on this seeming disinterest in other ages. Havighurst (1973, p. 13) underscored the importance of education and childrearing as one explanation. However, he also wondered why the concurrent significance of adult education and psychotherapy did not generate similar interest in adult behavior. Chudacoff (1989) suggested that Americans have become increasingly cognizant of age differences over the past century. This argument is consistent with an initial interest in childhood or adulthood, as the most easily distinguishable age groups, and later interest in smaller and smaller subdivisions of the life span (Lawrence, 1980). However, as is discussed in more detail in the next section, it also seems likely that scholars are more comfortable studying age groups of which they are not members, and which hold lower status in their social system. Thus, childhood, broadly defined, remains the safest, most convenient age group to investigate. Interestingly, this suggests that old age, as the second lowest status age group in American society, should have been next in line for study, and this is in fact what occurred.

The Middle Years: 1930-1970

The next development, at least for psychologists and social psychologists, was recognizing that life change does not end with adolescence. Although G. Stanley Hall wrote his book *Senescence: The Last Half of Life* in 1922, and Charlotte Buehler published what many scholars consider the first life stage theory of adult development in 1933, adulthood did not capture academic interest as a topic for study until the 1940s. However, the initial focus of this work was on old age, rather than on studies of the entire life span.[3] In 1943, The Social Science Research Council identified adjustment in old age as the most significant issue facing social science research (Pollak, 1948), and the Council supported this research agenda for twenty years. In 1946, the American Psychological Association created a Division of Later Maturity and Old Age, and in the same year, the first issue of the *Journal of Gerontology* was published. The first issue of *The Gerontologist* came out in 1961.

During the years between 1940 and 1960, several research groups focusing on age and developmental issues emerged: in the 1940s at the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan; and in the 1950s at the University of California and Duke University. In 1945, the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago, broadening its original mandate beyond child and adolescent development, began studies of adulthood. By 1952, a Committee group started the Kansas City Study of Adult Life. Over the next twenty years, many of these scholars, including Robert Havighurst, Ethel Shanas, Bernice Neugarten, Everett Hughes, and David Riesman, made significant contributions to our social-psychological understanding of adult life.

A primary conclusion of psychological and social-psychological research during this period was that chronological age is not terribly useful as an independent variable. Although age provides a convenient marker, the data showed tremendous variations in behavior across individuals over the life span. This reconfirmed that seemingly age-dependent behaviors were not all hard-wired through biology. This was not a "new" finding, but psychologists had previously focused on children, and thus dealt with the family or school as social environments. The study of adults required researchers to focus on other social systems, and they typically examined "society," what today we might call the national culture. These movements, from less reliance to more reliance on social determinism, and from smaller social systems to larger social systems shifted the focus of age studies. They transformed age from a predictor variable, in which age was used to explain behavior, to the predicted variable, in which behaviors were used to understand age. Interest now focused on age as a social phenomenon rather than age as an individual phenomenon. The key question became: how is age embedded within the social system?

Neugarten and her colleagues, for instance, found that society defines age-appropriate norms, roles, and statuses that frame behavior during adulthood. In one middle-class middle-aged sample (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965), 80% of the men and 90% of the women felt that the best age for a man to marry was between 20 and 25. In the same group, 85% of the men and 90% of the women felt that the best age for a woman to marry was between 19 and 24. In terms of life accomplishment, 82% of the men and 71% of the women felt men accomplish the most between the ages of 40 and 50. Ninety-four percent of the men and 92% of the women felt women accomplish the most between the ages of 30 and 45.

These high levels of agreement suggested that society creates age norms for specific behaviors. For instance, people probably made it more difficult for a man to be perceived as a "top producer" after the age of 50, or for a woman to marry after 24. Such behaviors would not be prescribed, but they would be seen as less appropriate when they occurred outside the normative ages. Today, although we might disagree with the specified ages Neugarten identified thirty years ago, stereotypes representing our expectations for those who fall outside these norms remain: "over the hill" for the man and "spinster" for the woman. A recent replication of her work shows that while there has been some loosening of age norms, Americans still believe in age-appropriate behavior (Zepelin, Sills, & Heath, 1986-87). Neugarten's work on age norms and age status systems (Neugarten & Gutmann, 1968; Neugarten & Moore, 1968; Neugarten et al., 1965; Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976) remains fundamental to current thinking on this topic.

Anthropological and Sociological Research on Age

During the time psychologists and social psychologists focused on child development, anthropologists and sociologists were already studying age as a component of social structure. Age had been systematically included in anthropological research since the earliest works of the 1800s (Lowie, 1948). In 1902, Schurtz published *Age-Classes and Men's Associations*, which examined age group systems in Africa, India, and North America. Lowie systematically studied age organization in his work on the Plains Indians of North America (1916) and other "primitive" societies (1930, 1947). In 1929, Radcliffe-Brown defined age-grade and age-set, terms still used to describe age similarities and age differences in age groups. This was followed by decades of anthropological studies of age structures in non-Western cultures, including Eisenstadt's (1956) *From Generation to Generation*, and Stewart's (1977) more recent *Fundamentals of Age-Group Systems* (see Stewart, 1977, for a review).

Anthropology's long-standing tradition of studying age structures builds on the assumption that the irrevocable nature of biological aging places boundaries around human experience, and that these boundaries permeate the rules, roles, norms, and values that evolve within social systems. Linton (1940) expresses this succinctly:

> Although the structures of societies bear little relation to the special qualities of individuals, they bear a very close relation to the general qualities of our species. In all social systems certain basic physiological and psychological factors have to be taken into account. Thus the processes of human reproduction impose certain limits upon the ways in which a self-perpetuating group of individuals can be organized. Similarly, the different capacities of persons of different ages and sexes impose certain limits upon the possible patterns of organization. In both cases a wide range of organizational forms is still possible, but there are ultimate realities, firmly fixed at a subcultural level, which can be utilized in various ways but not escaped. (p. 871)

These ultimate realities produce age groupings, in which people who are similar in age are subject to similar biological and social constraints, and thus hold similar positions in society. As a result, a major theme of this research is identifying and describing the cultural definitions that make people similar within age groups and different across age groups. These cultural definitions are then perceived and acted upon by members of a society. Thus, age group distinctions emerge from observation by the researcher, they are not applied a priori. Unfortunately, with the exception of Neugarten's social psychological studies, anthropologists have paid little attention to the cultural definitions of age groups "at home," preferring instead to continue studies in other countries. Anthropologists rarely study age groups and age norms in Western cultures (although see Ikels et al., 1992, for a cross-cultural example) and, to the best of my knowledge, have never studied them within the smaller systems, such

as work organizations and communities, that exert the most immediate impact on our lives.

Recent Developments in Aging Research: 1970-Present

The 1970s were a fertile time for studies of aging. Sociologists began focusing on age demography as an important component of social structure (Riley et al., 1972), historians became interested in adult lives (Demos & Boocock, 1978; Hareven, 1978, 1982), and psychologists delved into life-span development (Baltes & Schaie, 1973; Baltes & Willis, 1977) and produced several empirically-based stage theories of adult development (Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977). Moreover, a growing recognition of the interdependence among these various views emerged (Atchley, 1975; Hareven & Adams, 1982; Riley et al., 1972).

Age stratification theory (Riley et al., 1972), while continuing to recognize the importance of cultural definitions of age, emphasized demographic divisions. Similar to the anthropological perspective, this theory divides societies into age categories, or strata, composed of individuals of like ages: "Partitions of the population by age acquire meaning as age strata only as they index socially significant aspects of people and roles" (Riley, 1976, p. 191). The socially significant aspects of people and roles that distinguish age strata may include chronological age, as in census categories, biological stage, as in categories based on physical development, or stage of social development. Thus, age categories are determined by the researcher on a priori theoretical grounds. In this way, age groups within stratification theories differed markedly from age groups within anthropology.

The significant contribution of age stratification theory was its integration of theories of aging with theories of age structure, and its focus on the cohort processes connecting one generation to the next. In other words, people experience certain changes with aging, but they experience these changes within a societal age structure that influences their aging process.

> People start their lives in one historical period, when all the age strata and people's definitions and evaluations of these strata and their feelings about them are organized in one particular way; but as these people age, the full set of age strata is continually being reorganized from one period to the next. (Riley, Foner, & Waring, 1988, p. 245)

For example, the age cohort that grew up during the Great Depression in the United States holds different attitudes towards marriage and family life than previous or later cohorts (Elder, 1974), and important components of the midlife experience today seem different than they were 200 years ago (Lawrence, 1980). The statistical procedures by which one might distinguish these age, period, and cohort effects were detailed by life-span developmental

psychologists (Baltes, 1968; Buss, 1974; Glenn, 1977; Palmore, 1978; Schaie, 1965; Schaie & Baltes, 1975; see Labouvie & Nesselroade, 1985, for a recent discussion on this topic).

Since the anthropologists continued their focus on non-Western cultures, it was left to historians, who entered the fray in the 1970s, to examine the importance of age-related behavior in Western culture. Their findings emphasized the significance of cohort and period effects: people experience different age-related norms and expectations in different historical times. Phillipe Ariès wrote on different interpretations of childhood and death (1962, 1981), and Tamara Hareven, John Demos, and Marie Vinovskis, among others, examined life events and family in American colonial times (Demos & Boocock, 1978; Haraven, 1982; Haraven & Adams, 1982). More recently, Chudacoff (1989) reviewed the historical evolution of American's age sensitivities noting that:

> Not only have we attached scientifically defined biological and psychological characteristics to specific ages, but also we have established roles and rewards in such a way that an individual experiences a kind of social mobility, receiving greater or lesser rewards, as he or she passes from one chronological age to another. (p. 4)

Life stage adult development theory was also born during the 1970s. Instead of examining continuous change as did the life span psychologists, life stage psychologists identified periods of relative life stability followed by abrupt transitions that produce discrete life stages. Following in the tradition of Buehler (1933) and Erikson (1950), life stage psychologists based their research on longitudinal data or retrospective interviews (Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977). Levinson's book is the most widely read and cited of these, and his findings have been particularly influential within the organizational arena, leading to many discussions of the intersection between life stages, careers, work, and family life (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989). Interestingly, life stage scholars, almost uniquely among those who study age, have held themselves aloof from the important debates regarding the interplay between age, period, and cohort effects (Lawrence, 1995).[4]

During the past 20 years, there has been burgeoning research and theoretical development on aging. The American Psychological Association has a Division of Adult Development and Aging and the American Sociological Association has a Sociology of Aging Division. The National Institutes of Health has a Social and Behavioral Division in its Institute on Aging. The third editions of two handbooks representing the breadth of recent work, *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging* and *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences*, edited by James Birren, were published in 1990. Countless books on age and aging have been written. Life span psychologists have perservered with their studies of continuous development and its links to biological change. Sociologists,

demographers, and economists have focused on the societal issues that must be faced with an aging population, such as an older work force and health care for the elderly.

Several theoretical developments during this time warrant attention. First, in sociology, in contrast to almost all previous theory emphasizing age group similarity, Dannefer (1984, 1987) suggested that age groups become increasingly dissimilar as they age. This results because an individual's advantages and disadvantages accumulate over the life course, and these cumulative individual differences produce heterogeneity within the social system over time. For instance, the life-time effects of occupation and income seem to produce diverse patterns of work and retirement among those sixty and older. While some people remain retired, some return to work full-time, some return part-time, and others make repeated moves into and out of the labor force (Hayward, Grady, & McLaughlin, 1988; Hayward, Hardy, & Grady, 1989). Occupational age norms also appear to break down for older entrants (Lawrence, 1992). Thus, while the entry of young and middle-age job applicants into occupations seems influenced by age norms, the entry of old job applicants does not. This theory of increasing heterogeneity with age requires fundamental rethinking of the impact of age on social systems.

Second, the "baby boom" in the United States, the result of a disproportionately large group of children born between 1946 and 1964, has promoted interest in and concern for the social and economic impact of national age distributions. The Hudson Report (Johnston & Packer, 1987) notes that:

> It is difficult to overestimate the impacts that this maturing of the population and the workforce will have on the society and the economy. While most commentary has focused on the benefits of an older workforce, the changes ahead will be both positive and negative, and the balance may be decidedly unfavorable. (p. 81)

Easterlin's (1980, p. 4) analysis of the impact of generational size on individual opportunity provides a more detailed view of the potential social and economic impacts of this age distribution. He suggested that people born in small generations experience disproportionately good fortune relative to those who are members of large generations. The disadvantages accruing to those in the baby boom may include slower rates of career advancement, higher economic pressures leading to both more illegitimate births and longer waits before having children, more women working and having families, higher rates of divorce, and higher psychological stress.

As this brief overview suggests, age has a long and distinguished history as a topic of academic interest. The research from this history suggests that age plays a variety of important roles in life. It is a chronological marker of life lived for individuals. It references significant biological events, such as puberty,

the childbearing years, and physical dependence. It acquires social significance in the values and norms that people create to make sense out of life's passage. It indexes roles and statuses within social systems. It produces demographic effects that influence people's group and organizational experiences, economic well-being, and work opportunities. These varied roles suggest a broad landscape of age effects within society, and many of them significantly impact the world of work.

The Organizational Literature and Its Neglect of Age

In the organizational literature, however, age has rarely moved beyond the Behavior $= f$ (Age) paradigm. In a 1983 review of over 185 research studies, Rhodes found considerable interest in age as a predictor of work attitudes, behaviors, values, needs, and preferences. However, these studies predominantly define age as a deterministic variable that explains the relationship between age and behavior: they focus on description rather than explanation. Age is or is not positively related to job satisfaction and committment. Age is or is not negatively related to turnover, and so on. Rhodes (1983) comes to the same conclusion that psychologists arrived at forty years earlier: "A review of the literature has shown that age-related differences exist for a number of work attitudes and behaviors. However, at this time there is limited knowledge as to why these differences exist" (p. 361).

My own review of the organizational literature since 1985 suggests that, while a more theoretical approach is seeping into the literature, little has changed (see Appendix, $N = 128$). Organizational psychologists, social psychologists, and sociologists continue to study age as an independent or control variable with a primary interest in description rather than explanation. Over seventy percent of the studies still describe the relationship between age and work attitudes and behaviors such as job satisfaction, absenteeism, work involvement, managerial skill requirements, and various types of performance. Very few articles appear in central "organizational" journals such as *Academy of Management Journal, Academy of Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly*, or *Organization Science*. The large majority appear in psychology journals, such as *Journal of Applied Psychology*, or journals less central or unrelated to the organizational literature, such as *Work and Occupations, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Psychology and Aging, International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, and *Human Relations*.

This suggests that organizational scholars do not see age as an actor in the central issues facing organizations today. Furthermore, despite the voluminous research showing that age affects work attitudes and behaviors as well as social structure, scholars either treat age as a control variable of little theoretical interest or ignore it altogether. A few recent issues of the *Academy of*

Management Journal provide some data for this concern. In a study of organizational citizenship behavior (Morrison, 1994), age is noted only as a control variable even though it is significantly correlated with 13 of the 16 variables in the study. A second study of organizational citizenship behavior (Van Dyne, Graham, & Dienesch, 1994) does not include age as a variable at all, although other factors potentially affecting organizational citizenship behaviors, such as organizational tenure and hierarchical job level are included. Another article examining sex-based bias in board committee memberships (Bilimoria & Piderti, 1994) also excludes age altogether, even though many studies have noted significant relationships between age and applicant evaluation and selection.

It would be easy for me to continue this review of the recent literature; I stopped when every article I looked at used or did not use age in the same way. However, my points are fairly clear. Age is almost completely ignored by organizational scholars as a topic of importance. In addition, although age is being studied by scholars interested in work, its dominant role seemingly ignores the advances made in other fields over the past eighty years. Age is being treated as a deterministic variable rather than as an individual characteristic with both individual and social components or as a social phenomenon embedded in and creating social structure. Moreover, it is being treated as a matter of little consequence to organizational life, even though the vast literature on age within social systems suggests this portrayal is inaccurate.

Summary and Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from this brief review. First, and foremost, age plays a significant role in peoples' lives and within social systems. Second, age is a multidisciplinary topic of widespread interest at many levels of analysis. Third, age is not particularly interesting as a deterministic variable. Its interest lies in its ability to influence behavior as a social phenomenon, and in its ability to be influenced by social phenomena. Fourth, change occurs at all ages, not just in childhood or old age, thus a life-span perspective is necessary to understand and study age and its effects. Fifth, the differential impact of social environments requires distinguishing between age, period, and cohort effects. Finally, and not least importantly, scholars have neglected age as a phenomenon of focal interest relative to its probable importance in influencing organizational life.

Thus, the study of age presents a paradox. On the one hand, social scientists show historical consistency in defining age as central to the study of social systems. On the other hand, organizational scientists show historical indifference to acknowledging this centrality or the research it generated. The vast majority of organizational studies view age as either a deterministic

variable, used to predict performance, job satisfaction, commitment, and job involvement, or as a control variable, disregarding its theoretical importance altogether.

Thus, when I discuss the topic with colleagues, it is not surprising that typical comments I hear include:

- We don't study age because there is nothing to study. If there were, we would have seen it.
- Scientists are objective, thus age may make a difference to other people, but it doesn't matter to us.
- Even if age matters, it affects everyone the same way and managers can't change someone's age so why should we care?
- In business, the key question is how people can be harnessed to generate superior rents and competitive advantage. A person's age doesn't enter into this equation.
- Organizational cultures influence behavior, but these cultures evolve around task requirements and what people do together, not around individual characteristics.

And so forth. Given the long history, breadth, and depth of age studies, which are considerably greater than those of more popular organizational subjects such as agency theory or empowerment, why have organizational scholars paid so little attention to this topic?

THE PARADOX OF INTEREST AND INDIFFERENCE

> It has long been thought that a theorist is considered great because his theories are true, but this is false. A theorist is considered great, not because his theories are true, but because they are *interesting*. (Davis, 1971, p. 309)

Several years ago, after giving an academic talk on age issues in work organizations, a member of the audience came up to me and said, "Age is such a boring topic, but you make it so interesting!" I was glad to hear I had crossed his "interest" threshold, but I was also frustrated by the paradox represented in his comment. On the one hand, he predefined my topic with indifference. On the other hand, he found it interesting. One could argue that I gave a good presentation and there is nothing surprising in his remark. However, I suspect the dynamics that underlie this response run deeper and hold significant implications for our approach to the study of age.

Fundamentally, the characteristic that makes age central also produces indifference: age is a commonplace. Everyone has one and everyone knows what it means to have one. Age changes but cannot be changed. It is there,

a part of everyday life so entrenched in our awareness that it becomes invisible. The notion that this invisibility produces indifference is not new. I first became aware of the relationship when I read Murray Davis' (1971) classic article "That's Interesting." Davis noted that ideas become interesting only when they stand out in "contrast to the routinized taken-for-granted world of a person's everyday life" (p. 311). In order for something to be interesting, it must first attract someone's attention.

Using the gestalt psychologists' metaphor, attracting attention requires a figure against a ground. The figure is easy to see because of its contrast with the ground, but when the figure is removed, people see nothing. The ground presents a bland, monotonous scene concealed from view by its sameness. People embed their most basic activities within this invisible scene. They do not think about getting up in the morning, eating, or going about their business because life requires sleep, food, and activity. They do not think about interacting with men and women because there is no third sex. They do not think about whether their colleagues' have an age because everyone has one. It is unnecessary to attend to everyday life because it is always there, and so familiar as to be beyond awareness.

The difficulty with this typical response is that deceptively obvious features, such as age, constitute the contextual background that frames all other action. Thus, the meanings such features bear for people hold significant implications for behavior. Harold Garfinkel (1967) established ethnomethodology by criticizing sociology for being mired in figural studies when it is the ground that requires attention: "... one set of considerations are unexamined: the socially standardized and standardizing, 'seen but unnoticed,' expected, background features of everyday scenes" (p. 36). He notes that scholars ignore such background features because they constitute "What Anyone Like Us Necessarily Knows" (p. 54), and are thus unnecessary to study. As a result, important components of what we know and how we know it remain neglected topics of study (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

In this manner, age comes by its position of indifference. Few topics provide less contrast with everyday life than age. Understanding age differences makes no contribution because everyone knows them already. Adults differ from children. Younger employees differ from older employees. Such differences are obviously true and we reject their value because of it. In 1940, Ralph Linton noted about the study of age that: "The current neglect of this aspect of social organization is no doubt due in part to its deceptive appearance of simplicity. The existence of age-sex categories is so obvious that their importance to social structure is likely to be overlooked" (pp. 872-873). Age plays a fundamental role in life, but it also presents a perfect prescription for boring theory.

This discussion suggests that, like most other people, scholars treat age with indifference because it is an unnoticed, unnoticeable, background feature. Yet, the paradox remains. What generates the pattern of interest and indifference

represented in the long history of age studies and the concurrent paucity of organizational research? Davis (1971) indicated that people acquire interest in background features only when their everyday expectations of these features are violated. As a result, we can project that since indifference results from the everyday, interest results from violations of the everyday. Thus, a deeper understanding of the paradox and its implications for organizational research requires that we identify peoples' everyday assumptions about age, and examine what it takes to violate these defining assumptions. This deeper analysis should help us identify how and under what circumstances age becomes interesting, and also provide some initial theoretical structure for probing explanations of age-related organizational phenomena.

Assumptions are a person's taken-for-granted beliefs about background features such as artifacts, individual characteristics, behaviors, and relationships. Thus, age assumptions are a person's taken-for-granted beliefs about age, providing meanings, understandings, and interpretations that guide his or her age-related action. This definition follows after Schein's (1985, pp. 18-21) definition of basic assumptions, Argyris' (1976; Argyris & Schön, 1974) theories-in-use, and Cancian's (1975) reality assumptions. Basic assumptions direct the process by which people encode and then utilize information about background features. However, this definition differs from Schein in that here, basic assumptions are held by individuals rather than shared within social systems. In this definition, you and I act on our own basic assumptions even though they may differ.

The central problem in exploring assumptions is that, like the background features they define, people are unaware of them. You cannot interview people about their assumptions, because they deny the questions. Moreover, it is difficult to observe the assumptions on which people act because the same lack of contrast hinders both the observer and the observed. Garfinkel (1967), whose work underlies Davis' (1971) theory of the interesting, suggested that the best way to uncover such unconscious information is to breach peoples' expectations. In one classic experiment, he had students walk into elevators and face the back wall of the elevator instead of the front. The students then observed the discomfort, uncertainty, and anxiety this produced in their fellow elevator-riders. If the students had interviewed these subjects prior to the experiment, it is unlikely the subjects would have been able to discuss their assumptions about elevator behavior. Yet, when confronted with deviant behavior, subjects were clearly aware of the discrepancy.

I have found that peoples' age assumptions are similarly difficult to study. Like Garfinkel's (1967) elevator riders, people hold these assumptions without conscious awareness. Furthermore, like Garfinkel's students, the only way to uncover them, to help people notice that they do not notice, is to provide deviant examples or to observe their behavior when their assumptions are violated. I make no claims that the following assumptions and their corollarys

are mutually exclusive or that they represent all possible age assumptions. In fact, people seem to support contradictory and overlapping assumptions that shift with the situation and peoples' connection to the setting. Moreover, some of these assumptions are more deeply embedded in peoples' consciousness than others. However, this short analysis begins to identify and describe peoples' relationship with the invisible nature of age, and as a result to uncover its theoretical structure.

In order to explore these assumptions, I will be explicitly ethnocentric, building on my experiences studying and discussing age issues with people working within the United States.[5] I do this not because I think ethnocentrism is a good idea, but because it is the cultural landscape with which I am familiar. As a result, some of the assumptions uncovered during the following discussion are more likely to be universal than others. In drawing this picture, I present assumptions people seem to make about age and examine behavioral violations. Using both as data in an iterative process, I explore how and under what conditions people use age to distinguish themselves from others.

Three Age Assumptions

I begin with what appear to be the three most deeply held age assumptions. The first is that *age makes me similar to or different from other people.* Biological survival requires that people recognize age differences. Children require different treatment than adults. Females who can bear children must be distinguished from females who cannot. Old people require different treatment than those in their physical prime. Our species would not survive without recognition of age-based biological differences, and this suggests that age differentiation is a universal phenomenon. Age differences distinguish "me" from "you" and age similarities create an "us." Regardless of whether people agree or disagree that they are similar in age, they always seem to make this comparison. When people meet for the first time, one of the first things they do is assess the other person's age. This age assessment provides a rough estimate of similarity: Is this person similar to or different from me?

What differs across social systems is not the occurrence of this comparison, but the meanings people infer from it. This produces a second deeply held age assumption which is that *age tells me how I am similar to or different from other people.* In addition to its role as a biological metric, age indexes considerable supplementary information. Age provides people with some indication of *the dimensions* on which they are likely to be similar to or different from others, *the extent to which* they are likely to be similar to or different from others, and the *meaning* of these differences. Is the person likely to be in school? To be working? To know the most recent technologies? To have sufficient managerial experience? To have children? Research in all cultures ever studied shows that people attach norms, values, and expectations to age.

Thus, while the form of the comparison remains constant across social systems, the content differs.

People can and do violate these age assumptions by acting as if age makes no difference when it does, or by acting as if age makes a difference when it doesn't. A tall eleven-year-old who tries to play basketball with a group of seventeen-year-olds is likely to be told to get lost. An older employee who tries to run a task force because he is the oldest is likely to be ridiculed.[6] A young MBA who tries to set a firm's strategic direction is likely to be seen as obnoxious. Such violations are easy to envisage and seem silly. People just shouldn't behave that way. Our standard response is "Don't be ridiculous, act your age." When people try to get accepted as members of age groups that are seen by others to differ from their own, they are likely to be rejected.

The meanings that age accumulates represent particularly powerful components of its impact on behavior. Perhaps because the first age difference in life marks the relationship between parents and children, age and age differences index status. Parents are higher status than children. Older children are higher status than younger children. Adults are higher status than teenagers. These accepted status differences mean that age represents relative power and weakness, and thus it evokes strong emotions such as shame and fear. This adds a fundamental emotional quality to our understandings and interpretations of age.

Emotional discomfort appears readily when people are asked to reveal their age or have their age revealed to others. In early talks I gave on age as a social phenomenon, I began with a Garfinkel-like experiment. In getting to know the audience better, I asked everyone between the ages of 20 and 30 to raise their hands. Then I asked everyone between the ages of 30 and 40 to raise their hands, and so on until I reached the 60 and over category. The audience would comply but the reactions were striking. People would titter. They would elbow their neighbors who were or weren't raising their hands. There would be smiles and groans. I would hear teases thrown about the room, "Hey! How come you didn't raise your hand?" When asked how it felt to respond to these questions, people would describe their extreme discomfort and embarassment.

These reactions display the emotional baggage that gets attached to age. People identify closely with the personal meanings they attach to their age, and the meanings they believe others attach to it. These meanings represent intimate self-perceptions of "who I am at this time in my life." However, as discussed below, because age is taken-for-granted, people also believe they know the meanings others attach to their age, even though they are not necessarily correct. Thus, asking people to disclose their age is asking them to open themselves to the intimate views of others, and asking them to reveal their age within a group of strangers increases their feelings of vulnerability. People are interested in an intimate understanding of themselves, but they are uninterested in anyone else having that intimate understanding.

Despite, and perhaps in contradiction to, these basic age comparisons, if I walk up to someone and ask whether age influences behavior, they are likely to say, "Yes, but not really." The "Yes, ..." shows their recognition that age creates differences. The "... but not really," shows a third deeply held age assumption, which is that *age does not affect behavior*. This negational assumption underlies many background features. When features are so ordinary that people don't notice them, their effects are also unnoticeable. If I walk up to someone and ask them whether elevators influence behavior, they are likely to think I am out of my mind. However, as shown in the example above, elevators do structure behavior in patterned, predictable ways. Similarly, the ambivalent response "Yes, but not really," suggests that while people recognize something is going on, they deny that anything is going on. People simply do not notice that age provides fundamental structure for everyday interactions. Thus, what they are really saying is "I know age makes us different, but it does not affect me."

While these three age assumptions represent basic truths people hold about age, they also present basic inconsistencies. People recognize that they use age to differentiate themselves from others. Further, they recognize that they attach meaning to these differences. Yet, people simultaneously treat these differences and their meanings as irrelevant by believing that age does not influence behavior. This produces a fundamental ambivalence about age that becomes evident in the following corollarys. These corollarys devolve from the preceding age assumptions, but they are closer to our awareness.

Three Age Corollaries

A first corollary is that *my age is my own business and no one elses'*. As just discussed, people are extremely sensitive about their age and often exhibit strong reactions to discussing it. As a result, although it is acceptable for me to make comparisons based on my age, it is unacceptable for you to do it. Age in itself is not so much the issue here. The difficulty arises because age is a social phenomenon. Age acts like a coat rack on which people hang norms, values, and expectations (Lawrence, 1987, 1988). Because age holds a central role in life, these norms, values, and expectations hold significant implications for peoples' feelings about themselves and others. People don't mind the coat rack, and they readily accept that it exists. However, they frequently wish to avoid the feelings and other inferences that get assigned to their particular coat hook. Once again, it is the content of the comparison, not the comparison itself, that creates the difficulties.

The age-is-my-business corollary provides additional detail to the age differences assumption. It suggests that, although everyone makes age comparisons, it is unacceptable to reveal that one is making the comparison. If I walk up to someone I don't know and promptly ask how old he is, he

is likely to be surprised, annoyed, or suspicious. He will probably wonder, "What is going on here? Why is she asking me that?" or "What potentially invalid inferences is she making about me?" Although I assess his age nonverbally whether he answers the question or not, it is unacceptable for me to announce that I am in fact making the assessment. His age is his own business and not mine. The validity of this assumption is reinforced within the United States' egalitarian culture, in which it is generally unacceptable to acknowledge or to act on differences people create between themselves and others.

A second corollary is that *age matters to other people but not to me.* Given the emotional sensitivity people exhibit toward age, this third assumption seems surprising. However, it is quite consistent with the notion of background features and the difficulty of knowing-what-we-know about them. In interviews with workers from many occupations, I find that people are extremely aware of work-related age issues, but they are convinced that it does not matter to them personally. In other words, "other people care about age and this is bad, but I don't and this is good." On one occasion, I described my research to a group including an older woman who emphatically stated that age made no difference at all to her. Later that evening, we traveled together by subway. The woman's daughter noticed a discount for senior citizens and asked the ticket attendant whether "sixty" qualified. On hearing the question, her mother promptly kicked her from behind. In fact, age made a considerable difference to this woman. However, she could neither recognize nor admit the discrepancy between her beliefs and her behavior.

In another example, while interviewing a middle-manager in the defense industry about the impact of age on employment, I was told "Age makes no difference here. We hire the best people for the job." However, later in the interview he responded with indignation when I asked whether he would hire a thirty-year-old for a middle management job, "Of course not." In fact, he was facing just this situation with young, rapidly promoted NASA managers who were attempting to obtain middle management defense positions. Yet, his immediate reaction showed an inability to decouple age from the work experience and maturity he was obviously inferring to it, and it is unlikely that he did so during the ensuing hiring period.

Consistent with these observations, Rosen and Jerdee (1976a, 1976b, 1977) have shown peoples' typical inability to acknowledge that age influences their own behavior. They asked *Harvard Business Review* readers to answer a series of questions about age-related work issues, and to evaluate several short personnel cases. The subjects were generally sensitive to the plight of older workers. In other words, "other" people treat older workers poorly. Thirty-one percent "of the participants felt that current business practices with respect to the treatment of older employees are inadequate, and 77% favored greater emphasis on affirmative action programs for older people" (p. 104). However, at the same time these subjects expressed sensitivity about age discrimination,

the personnel decisions they made as part of the study systematically discriminated against older employees, showing that age matters to these subjects as well. Similar to the woman described above, they seemed completely unaware of their contradictory beliefs and behaviors.

Neugarten et al.'s (1965) research on people's perceptions of age constraints also supports this corrollary. A quota sample of middle-class respondents was asked to answer questions regarding first their own designations of appropriate ages for specific behaviors, and second their perceptions of "others" designations of appropriateness. For instance, is it appropriate, marginal, or inappropriate for a man to move his family from one town to another to get ahead in his company when he is 45? 35? 25? The results suggest that people consistently perceive generalized others as having stronger age disapproval than they do themselves. In other words, "I am not strict about age norms, but other people are." Interestingly, this result was stronger for young people than for old people. A replication of this study in Japan (Plath & Ikeda, 1975) showed similar results, although the Japanese appear to perceive more age constraints overall than their American counterparts, and smaller differences between self-perceptions and perceptions of generalized others. These results suggest that the meaning of this corollary varies across cultures.

A third corollary is that *the meanings I associate with age are the same as the meanings you associate with age.* Once you remove the "me" from the equation, taking what Schutz (1970, p. 322) would call a "they" orientation, people cease to think about the differences between their beliefs and the beliefs of others. Here, the taken-for-granted quality of the phenomenon takes over. People see chronological age as fixed, and they assume that the norms, values, and expectations that they associate with given chronological ages also remain fixed. As a result, people assume that others assume what they assume, and that others apply these assumptions in the same way as they do themselves. This belief in similarities distinguishes this third corollary from the other two in which a belief in differences plays a large role.

We have already seen that people use age for comparisons. In this third corollary, we see that people assume everyone takes the same information from these comparisons. This similarity corollary is critical. While the comparison assumption gives people a rough estimate of appropriate ranges of discussion, the similarity corollary gives people confidence that their social interactions based on those estimates will be successful. Peoples' expectations of children differ from their expectations of adults, and when everyone agrees on the expectations, it is perfectly acceptable to treat children differently than adults. However, if people treat others as children when these others perceive themselves as adults, these others are likely to feel irritated, discomfited, or anxious. Thus, violations of this assumption occur either when peoples' defining age ranges for childhood and adulthood differ or when their norms, values, and expectations for childhood and adulthood differ.

Typical violations of this similarity assumption occur when people interact from groups, organizations, occupations, or other social systems holding different age norms. In most U.S. occupations, people generally assume that occupational status does not peak until people reach their 40s or 50s. However, in the U.S. movie industry, screenwriters are considered over-the-hill by the time they reach their mid- to late thirties. Thus, the peak years for screenwriters are considerably younger than the peak years for most occupations. Without prior knowledge of this culture, if I were to meet a 25-year-old screenwriter I would likely judge the individual's occupational status as low and make "errors" in my conversation until I learned more about his or her position. Similarly, research shows that age norms differ across organizations (Lawrence, 1987). Organizations even in the same industry may develop widely different age norms. A "young" middle-manager from Microsoft may be seen as too young and thus not worth listening to by "older" middle-managers at IBM, even though she holds a similar status within her firm. Differences in organizational age norms may underlie difficulties in intra-firm alliances.

An Essential Ambivalence About Age

In summary, peoples' feelings about age are saturated with ambivalence: age matters, age doesn't matter, I care, I don't care. On the one hand, age is a commonplace that is everyday, obvious, and uninteresting. On the other hand, age defines peoples' identity. Much as their gender defines who they are, age characterizes them as individuals and classifies their social position. Thus emerges the paradox of interest and indifference. Age is ordinary but holds intimate information about our lives, which makes it and everything we learn about it exceedingly personal, relevant, and potentially threatening. We cannot change our age, thus we also cannot deny any knowledge that gets attached to it.

This analysis suggests, then, that what is interesting about age is that it is a social phenomenon. Chronological age carries predetermined biological information, but it is the meanings people attach to age and the consequences these meanings hold for behavior that are of interest. Yet, the analysis also suggests that it is not surprising that organizational scholars rarely treat age as a social phenomenon. Most of these scholars treat age exclusively as a fixed chronological indicator with fixed effects on behavior and interaction, and this research is seen by others to be "boring." I think Levinson (1978) best described this essential ambivalence and its unintended consequences for research in the following quote:

> As our research progressed, it became increasingly clear that a developmental approach was needed in the study of adulthood, as of childhood. This was in itself hardly a new idea, yet despite its wide acceptance in the abstract it had remained curiously neglected

> in practice. ... Despite the increasing interest in adult development, there is still reluctance to study the course of adult life in some depth. The wish to learn more about the possibilities of personal growth is hampered by the fear that careful scrutiny will reveal only decline and restriction. Adults hope that life begins at 40—but the great anxiety is that it ends there. ...In embarking upon this work, I seemed to be entering a lonely and uncharted territory. (pp. ix-x)

WHAT IF WE ASSUMED AGE WAS INTERESTING?

I hope by now I have piqued your interest in this subject. As Davis (1971) would say, I have explicitly challenged your understandings about age by contrasting the expected with the unexpected. For me, the unexpected involves constant contradictions. Age has a long, distinguished academic heritage verifying its individual and social significance. Yet, many organizational academics consider it a construct of little theoretical value. People think age is serious business as it assumes a signaling role for self and social interaction. Yet, people think age doesn't affect behavior, certainly not their own. Age belongs to the taken-for-granted world of everyday life and thus remains a difficult subject to confront. However, such confrontations may yield important insights into social and thus organizational life.

In order to develop more interest in age as a topic of organizational research, we need first to assess existing organizational research on this subject. What about current work is interesting, and what are its strengths and weaknesses? This section begins by providing a framework for this assessment. Key definitions and an organizational theory of age in-progress are presented. The section continues by using this framework to review age research published between 1985 and 1995. The theoretical role assigned to age in these studies is discussed and characteristic studies are presented. Finally, the main features of current organizational research on age and their missing pieces are summarized.

A Few Definitions

Age phenomena differ. Thus, a first step in evaluating current research is to define those characteristics that distinguish one age phenomenon from another. Four such characteristics include age definition, mechanism, level of analysis, and domain.[7] Age definition is the most basic of these characteristics. Scholars generally define age theoretically, empirically, or both, as either a chronological or social phenomenon. Age is a chronological phenomenon when it is defined as the time passed since birth. The significance that this time holds for self or others is unimportant to the definition. Thus, the ages of a group of engineers represent age defined as a chronological phenomenon. In contrast, age is a social phenomenon when it is defined by the information,

beliefs, or socially constructed understandings people attach to it. Thus, peoples' perceptions of the ages of the group of engineers, or the beliefs and socially constructed understandings they attach to those ages represent age defined as a social phenomenon.

Mechanism is the process by which age influences outcomes. When age is a chronological phenomenon, it affects behavior *directly* through the inherent characteristics of chronological age. For instance, Behavior $= f$ (Age) is a statement that chronological age exerts a direct effect on behavior. The relationship between increasing chronological age and physical decline is also a direct effect. People's beliefs may influence the timing, extent, and speed of decline, but their beliefs cannot alter the fact of decline after physical maturity. When age is a social phenomenon it affects behavior *indirectly* through the significance these attachments hold for people rather than *directly* through the inherent characteristics of chronological age (Lawrence, 1987, 1994). For instance, if employees treat a 35-year-old CEO poorly because they believe he is too young, this treatment results indirectly from their shared beliefs about the appropriate CEO age. It does not result because 35 is inherently too young to be a CEO.

Level of analysis is the demographic unit of the age phenomenon to which generalizations will be made. For instance, the preceeding example of the 35-year-old CEO portrays age, not only as a social phenomenon, but as a socially *shared* phenomenon. The employees, as a group, agree that the CEO is too young. However, age-related information and beliefs do not need to be socially shared before age is a social phenomenon. For instance, a housewife's belief that undefined "others" think 40 is too old for her to make a career change (Lawrence, 1980) is a social phenomenon. The housewife's belief would not exist without her relationships within or perceptions of some social system. Similarly, scholars study age as a chronological phenomenon at different levels of analysis. When the level of analysis is individuals, an individual's behavior is examined as a function of his or her age. When the level of analysis is an organization, an individual's behavior is examined as a function of the organization's age distribution.

Finally, domain is the context within which age phenomena exist. Typically, scholars select one domain for focus. For instance, they study age and its work-related outcomes within a group, an organization, an occupation, or a nation. However, age and behavior are always embedded within multiple domains. What occurs within a group depends on what occurs in the organization as well as what occurs in the nation in which the organization resides. As a result, while each study identifies a domain of focal or proximal interest, it is important to remember that related domains, while not studied, may significantly influence the results.

An Organizational Theory of Age (In-Progress)

In previous work (Lawrence, 1987, 1988), I presented a theory-in-progress that begins to integrate these theoretical distinctions with our historically diverse perspectives on age and its relationship with behavior. As the theory offers a useful framework for reviewing recent research and suggesting future research directions, the following discussion summarizes its main characteristics and notes its advantages and disadvantages.

The theory suggests that *age distributions* produce *age norms*, whose structure and meaning are shaped by the invariant characteristics of *chronological age*. Age norms in turn produce *work-related outcomes*, mediated by the influence of *individual age expectations*, which are the individual's typical age judgments and the meanings such judgments hold for the individual (see Figure 1). Relationships among the five components are driven by direct and indirect processes. Arrows between components indicate the primary direction of the effects. In other words, some components tend to be, although are not always, causally prior to others. Other associations are more typically non-recursive, representing what Giddens would call the duality of structure (1984, p. 25).

The theory includes four age phenomena at different levels of analysis. Two of these age phenomena, age distributions and chronological age, define age as a chronological phenomenon. The remaining two age phenomena, age norms and individual age expectations, define age as a social phenomenon. Chronological age and individual age expectations occur only at the individual level of analysis. In contrast, age distributions and age norms represent collective properties. They do not exist for individuals, although they might exist at the dyad, group, or organizational levels of analysis.

The theory specifies three types of relationships among these four age phenomena and work-related outcomes. First, it suggests that all four age phenomena influence behavior. Each is linked straightly to work-related outcomes. For instance, age distributions affect work-related outcomes such as vacancy chains and organizational labor markets (Stewman, 1981; Stewman & Konda, 1983). Second, the theory suggests that relationships among these age phenomena influence behavior. Thus, individual age expectations may moderate the relationship between chronological age and performance evaluations (Ferris, Yates, Gilmore, & Rowland, 1985). Third, the theory suggests that these age phenomena influence one another. For instance, an organization's managerial age distribution may influence the age norms that evolve around appropriate ages for different career levels. This, in turn, produces age-appropriate expectations for promotions, which then influences the ages of managers selected for future job openings, and thus the organization's future managerial age distribution (Lawrence, 1988).

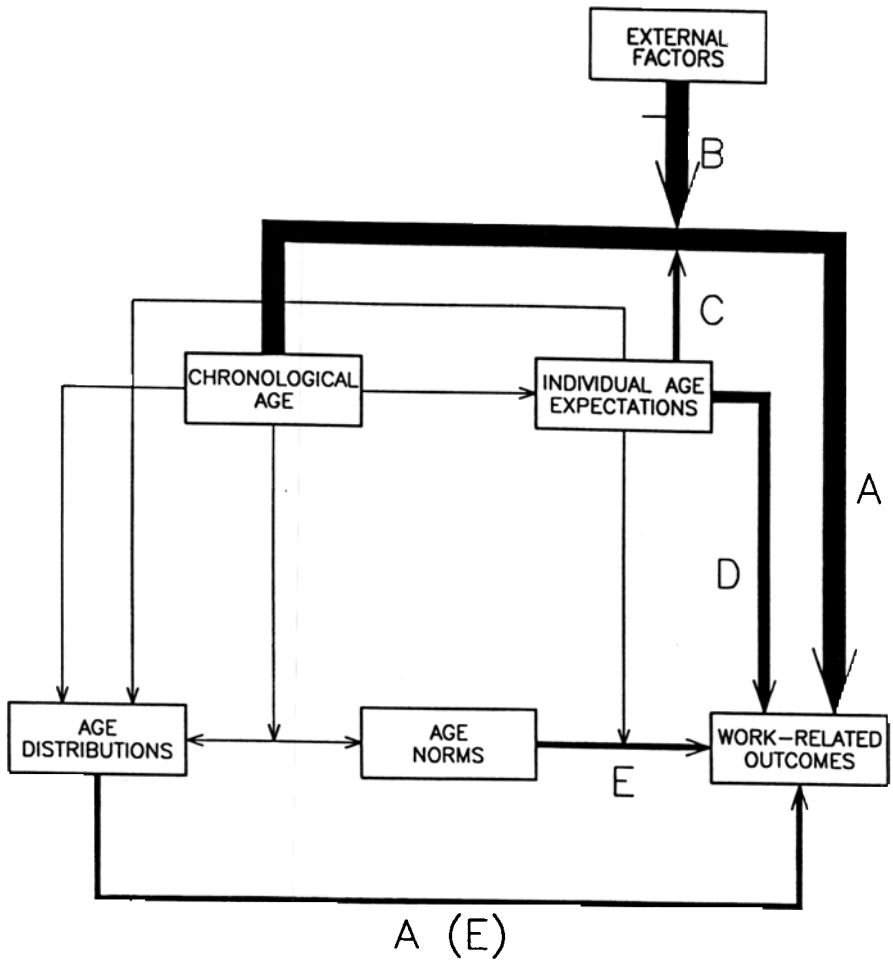

Figure 1. An organizational theory of age. The width of the line connecting age phenomena and work-related outcomes indicates the relative number of studies published between 1985 and 1995 that examine the relationship. The wider the line, the larger the number of studies.

This theory provides several advantages for an organizational theory of age. First, in contrast to most organizational age research that focuses on age *either* as a chronological *or* as a social phenomenon, this theory includes both. Thus, it encourages exploration of the independent and interdependent effects of these distinct age phenomena. Second, this theory recognizes age phenomena at different levels of analysis. The model includes individuals as well as social systems. Third, the theory proposes initial hypotheses about the relationships among the components, recognizing the non-recursive nature of these relationships and their impact on behavior. Fourth, the theory suggests the processes that underlie these relationships. Thus, it indicates the mechanisms

through which age phenomena influence and are, in turn, influenced by one another and the outcomes they produce.

This theory also provides several disadvantages for an organizational theory of age. First, the model is entirely endogenous. It does not include contextual effects on the relationships within the model, for instance, the impact of job type, occupational culture, or cohort effects on the age phenomena themselves or their work-related outcomes. Second, while the theory recognizes age phenomena at different levels of analysis, it doesn't provide much detail on how these phenomena are related. It furnishes only a sketch of some possibilities. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, while the theory includes age as holding important meanings for people, the actual content of the age-related perceptions, beliefs, and socially-constructed understandings is not specified.

Current Organizational Research on Age: 1985-1995

During the past ten years, nearly 130 articles and book chapters have been published on the relationship between age and work (see Appendix). This suggests that scholars have not been indifferent to age, and the results consistently show that age predicts work-related outcomes. The articles do not fall neatly into mutually exclusive categories. Thus, the review highlights the distinct explanations these articles propose. As shown in Figure 1, scholars tend to focus on explaining work-related outcomes rather than on explicating or testing associations among the various age phenomena.

The articles chiefly address the question: What happens to people at work as a result of their age and the ages of their co-workers? Although this question suggests age is an independent variable that explains work outcomes, the articles treat work outcomes as criterion variables, making age the dependent variable of interest. The primary human resource implications of these studies involve employees and employee groups, and include selection, evaluation, performance, labor force participation, and discrimination effects.

Age as a Chronological Phenomenon

About 71% ($N = 92$ out of 129) of the articles and book chapters published over the past ten years study age as a chronological phenomenon. Many focus on age within organizational or occupational contexts, examining outcomes such as an individual's job or work satisfaction, commitment, turnover, and performance. Others focus on age within national contexts, examining outcomes such as an individual's earnings, occupational productivity, and life-cycle economic decisions. The human resource questions these articles address include: What happens to employees as they age? Does their performance suffer

or increase? Are they more or less committed to the organization? At what ages do men and women enter and exit the labor force? And, how are workers distributed by age across various occupational or industrial settings?

The results typically show that age is associated with work-related outcomes, although the direction and size of the effects varies. Explanations for these associations tend to fall into three categories. In the first category, they suggest that the outcomes result directly from chronological age or the distribution of chronological ages (Figure 1, A). In other words, behavior is a function of age. In the second category, the explanations suggest that the outcomes are not a function of chronological age; rather, they result from external factors that produce the age-behavior relationship (Figure 1, B). For instance, these associations may result from mediators, ranging from individual characteristics, such as job tenure, to contextual factors, such as the nature of the work. Alternately, they may result from other external phenomena for which age provides an indicator. In the third category, the explanations begin with the assumption that behavior is a function of age, but end by including age perceptions and beliefs in the explanation (Figure 1, C). Thus, these explanations cross the boundary between age as a chronological and social phenomenon, although the hypothesized associations with age as a social phenomenon tend to remain proposed rather than tested.

In a typical study within the first category, McNeely (1988) examined the relationship between the age and job satisfaction of human service workers. The study reported that average job satisfaction scores increase with age, concluding that older human service workers are more satisfied with their work than their younger colleagues.[8] This occupational finding is elaborated with multiple regressions performed within three age groups (see, Table 3, p. 166). The results show that the relationship between employees' perceptions of work conditions and their job satisfaction differs by age. For instance, dullness of work seems to matter more to older workers than to younger workers. Thus, the author concluded that human service workers' perceptions about work change with age.

Avolio and Waldman (1987, 1990, 1994) studied the relationship between age and ability. In their 1990 study, they examined the association between age and general cognitive ability, verbal ability, and numerical ability for 24,219 American workers. They found that age shows a negative relationship with these abilities across occupational groups. However, this negative relationship is moderated to a small degree by occupation, with members of health care occupations showing the highest negative correlations between age and ability, and members of clerical occupations showing the lowest negative correlations. Surprisingly, job complexity did not significantly moderate the relationship between age and ability.

Within the national domain, Jablonski, Rosenblum, and Kunze (1988) documented the productivity of men and women by age group in different

industries. They found, for instance, small declines in productivity between the ages of 25 to 64 in factory workers in the footwear and furniture industries, clerical workers, and mail sorters. However, they also found considerable variation in productivity within age groups. Thus, despite the small, overall declines in old workers' performance, many of these workers out-produce their younger colleagues. In another study, Hutchens (1988) compared the 1983 distribution of recently hired young and old workers in the United States. The results show that recently hired old workers are concentrated in a smaller range of industries and occupations than their young counterparts, suggesting that job opportunity declines with age.

Cross-culturally, Loscocco and Kalleberg (1988) compared the work values of 4,567 American employees with 3,735 Japanese employees. They found that Americans show no age-related differences in their feelings about the importance of job stability or good pay; however, older Japanese employees value job stability significantly more than younger Japanese employees, and younger Japanese employees value good pay significantly more than older Japanese employees. They also found that older men show more work commitment than younger men in both countries. American women show the same age-related commitment pattern, but Japanese women show no age-related commitment differences at all. Thus, the results suggest that the relationship between age and work-related outcomes is moderated by national culture.

As these examples demonstrate, studies in the first category take a descriptive approach. They document the association between chronological age and various work-related outcomes, with the implicit, and sometimes explicit, assumption that behavior is a function of age.

Studies in the second category also focus on the association between chronological age and work-related outcomes; however, their primary explanation for this association does not involve age. Some studies introduce mediators that explain rather than refine the relationship between age and work-related outcomes. Other studies use age as a surrogate or indicator for various social processes and effects that explain this relationship. For instance, many explanations for the relationship between age and job satisfaction, such as cohort effects, job differences, "grinding down," and accommodation (Lorence & Mortimer, 1985; Mottaz, 1987), involve either socialization processes or situational effects. Socialization explanations suggest that peoples' work satisfaction differs by age because over time, people respond to their environment. For instance, they may accommodate to the work values of their organization over time and thus become more satisfied. Conversely, they may get ground down by their organizational and life experiences, which decreases their expectations and increases their satisfaction. In each of these examples, it is not peoples' age that produces the effect. It is their socialization over time that creates what then appear as age-related differences in work satisfaction.

Situational explanations suggest that work satisfaction differs by age because people of different ages experience different working environments. Thus, characteristics of the domain within which work occurs produce the results. In one example, people obtain better jobs over time and thus become more satisfied with work as they get older. Once again, the explanation for higher satisfaction is not age per se, but something about the nature of the work in "better" jobs. Presumably, young people who hold the same jobs as old people are equally satisfied.

Glenn and Weaver (1985) applied this approach to age research on work satisfaction by proposing cohort effects as the explanatory factor. They suggested that one reason old people in the 1980s were satisfied with work was that it exceeded the expectations they developed during a time of relative economic poverty in the 1940s. In contrast, young people in the 1980s were less satisfied with work because it fell short of the expectations they developed during times of economic growth in the 1960s. This suggests that the relationship between age and work satisfaction results from differences in experience-based expectations. In this case, people of all ages would feel similarly satisfied with work if their economic experiences during early adulthood were similar.

Studies in the third category tend to differ from those in the first two categories in their level of analysis. The latter articles focus almost exclusively on individuals as the demographic unit. In other words, they examine how an individual's chronological age produces certain outcomes. Articles in the third category tend to focus on dyads, groups, or organizations as the demographic unit. In other words, they examine how the chronological ages of two or more individuals within a group or an organization produce certain outcomes. These articles have a more ambiguous theoretical heritage than the preceding articles, because, while they define age as a chronological phenomenon, their explanations frequently involve age as a social phenomenon.

For instance, Ferris et al. (1985) found that as subordinates' ages increase, supervisors' performance ratings of subordinates decrease. This result might indicate that performance declines with age. However, they also found that older subordinates give themselves higher performance ratings than younger subordinates. Thus, as a subordinate's age increases, the discrepancy between the supervisor's perception of performance and the subordinate's perception of performance increases. Moreover, they found that supervisors are more likely to attribute poor performance to lack of ability for older subordinates than for younger subordinates. Similarly, supervisors are less likely to attribute high performance to ability for older subordinates than for younger subordinates. Taken together, these results suggest that performance ratings are increasingly likely to alienate employees as they age. Older employees rate themselves higher than do their supervisors, and even when they do receive

high ratings, their supervisors may not attribute their work to ability. Thus, this study crosses the boundary between age as a chronological and social phenomenon. While it focuses on age as a chronological phenomenon, the results are interpreted by considering people's perceptions and beliefs about age.

In a similar study focusing on dyads, Shore and Bleicken (1991) examined how the relationship between a supervisor's and subordinate's ages influences their rating congruence. This study included supervisor ratings and subordinate self-ratings of subordinate's work quality, work quantity, judgment, initiative, teamwork, and dependability. The results show that, except for dependability, the interaction between supervisor and subordinate age exerts no effect on their rating congruence for these work outcomes. For dependability ratings, increasing dissimilarity in supervisor and subordinate ages produces increasing congruence. Young supervisors' ratings of dependability are more congruent with middle-age and old subordinate's self-ratings of dependability than they are with young subordinate's self-ratings of dependability. Conversely, old supervisors' ratings of dependability are more congruent with young and middle-age subordinate's self-ratings of dependability than they are with old subordinate's self-ratings of dependability. The authors suggested that the inconsistency of these results with previous studies, which show more significant dyadic interactions (Cleveland & Landy, 1981; Rosen & Jerdee, 1976a; Schwab & Heneman, 1978), may result from either situational effects, such as job type or occupational context, or age as a social phenomenon effects, such as age stereotypes or age norms. Thus, one of the alternate explanations provided, although untested, is that age perceptions or age context may explain the different results.

At the organizational level of analysis, Nicholson (1993) and Krecker (1994) examined how the distribution of chronological ages within careers produces timetables. Nicholson mapped actual age distributions of managerial grade levels in a large corporation and, using interquartile ranges, defined managers as ahead of or behind schedule. He argued that such demographic age grading provides a better career plateau measure than more standard measures, which do not account for inter- or intra-organizational differences. The results show that behind schedule managers do not exhibit negative outcomes such as lower career satisfaction, adjustment, or mobility aspirations. However, ahead of schedule managers do exhibit higher career satisfaction and future expectations. While this study focused on the relationship between actual age distributions and behavior, the meaning that age-in-career-level comes to hold about organizational status explains the outcomes.

In summary, the articles discussed in this section examine age as a chronological phenomenon. They exhibit three dominant explanations for the association between age and behavior. The first is that behavior is a function of chronological age. The second is that behavior is not a function of

chronological age, and when it is not, the association between age and behavior results from non-age-related factors. The third is that behavior is a function of chronological age, but other age phenomena, such as age perceptions and beliefs, influence this association. The primary theoretical assumption in all three explanations remains that behavior is a function of age. Only a few of these studies, mostly those that examine chronological age at the dyadic or higher levels of analysis, consider the possibility that when behavior is not a function of chronological age, it may still result from age. I turn next to studies that focus on this possibility.

Age as a Social Phenomenon

About 29% ($N = 37$ out of 129 articles) of the articles and book chapters published over the past ten years view age as a social phenomenon. These articles represent a small, but growing interest in how age perceptions, beliefs, and socially-constructed understandings influence age-related outcomes. Similar to developments in the other social sciences, organizational scholars began to examine such social phenomena when it became apparent that the Behavior $= f$(Age) paradigm was incomplete (see, for example, Avolio, 1991). These studies tend to examine age within organizational and occupational contexts. The human resource questions they address include the same work-related outcomes as those described above, for instance, selection, performance, and mobility. However, they also include other organizational outcomes, such as innovation and communication. Typical questions include: How do age stereotypes affect managers' evaluations of their employees? How do age perceptions affect selection decisions? How does the age distribution of a team influence its social integration or its ability to communicate? And how do age norms limit the work contributions of employees?

Explanations for the association between age as a social phenomenon and behavior tend to fall into two categories. In the first category, they suggest that age influences behavior through age perceptions and the expectations these perceptions generate, which influence one's own and others' work-related outcomes (Figure 1, D). In the second category, they suggest that age influences behavior through its collective properties, such as the age composition of a group or the age norms of an organization. (Figure 1, E).[9] In both cases, age influences behavior, not because chronological age is inherently connected with behavior, but because the perceptions, beliefs, and socially-constructed understandings people attach to age influence their behavior.

Age perception studies resemble the chronological age studies described previously. However, in contrast to the previous studies, which suggest that individual behavior *is* a function of age, age perception studies suggest that people *perceive*, either consciously or unconsciously, that behavior is a function of age. For example, where the previous studies might conclude that work

performance declines or increases with age, age perception studies conclude that people perceive that work performance declines or increases with age. In other words, peoples' perceptions of performance are affected by the information they encode about an employee's age.

For instance, numerous studies show that people attach different ages to different occupations. Gordon and Arvey (1986) showed that subjects easily distinguish occupations by their perceptions of the average age of employees in that occupation. Subjects' perceptions of average ages ranged from 24.4 for file clerk, to 34.7 for choreographer, to 45.8 for mayor. While subjects made clear distinctions across occupations, their responses varied more for older occupations than for younger occupations. This suggests that subjects find "younger" occupations easier to type than "older occupations." Macan, Detjen, and Dickey (1994) found that peoples' perceptions of occupational incumbents' actual ages differ from their perceptions of the suitable ages for occupational incumbents ($r = .43$). These findings suggest that people develop beliefs that distinguish between what are and what ought to be the ages of occupational members.

Cleveland and Shore (1992) used age perceptions to address the unexplained variation in the Behavior $= f$ (Age) research. Their theory suggests that the relationship between chronological age and work outcomes depends on the meanings people hold about age. Thus, in contrast to earlier studies that posited behavior as a function of age, this study proposed that behavior is a function of the meanings people hold about age. Cleveland and Shore did not measure meanings directly, rather, they used perceptual age measures as indicators for these meanings. The study includes five different age measures: chronological age (individual's actual age), subjective age (individual's felt age), perceived relative age (individual's self-rated age relative to co-workers), social age (manager's general perception of individual's age), and manager's perception of individual's relative age (manager-rated perception of individual's age relative to co-workers).

The results increase the explained variation in work outcomes beyond that provided by chronological age, especially when self-perceived relative age is included as an interaction term. For instance, an individual's chronological age alone explains 1% of the variation in his or her performance ratings, 5% of the variation in his or her promotability, and 0% of the variation in his or her organizational commitment. In contrast, the interaction between chronological age and self-perceived relative age explains 48% of the variation in performance ratings, 58% of the variation in promotability, and 68% of the variation in organizational commitment. Although the pattern of the interaction effects is not consistent, the results suggest that something about people's experience of age and the meanings it holds for them influences their behavior within organizations.

Age context studies assume that age influences behavior through its collective properties. Thus, unlike age perception studies that assume behavior is a function of *an* individual's age perceptions, age context studies assume that behavior is a function of individuals' *shared* age perceptions. Age context studies resemble chronological age studies in which non-age-related contextual effects operate as mediators or moderators of the relationship between an individual's age and work outcomes. However, in contrast to these chronological age studies, in age context studies, age *is* the contextual effect.

Although this literature is small, representing about 10% of all studies, scholars have studied several distinct age phenomena. The first is age similarity. Studies involving age similarity draw on Byrne's (1971) similarity-attraction theory suggesting that shared common characteristics facilitate comfort levels and thus social bonds among people. For instance, a group in which members are similiar in age may find it easier to establish communication than a group in which members are dissimilar in age. The second is age composition. These studies draw on Kanter's (1977a, 1977b) work suggesting, for instance, that a skewed group in which most members are young is likely to treat a young person differently than a balanced group with equal numbers of young and old members. The third is age norms. Age norms are the "widely shared judgments of the standard or typical ages of individuals holding a role or status" (Lawrence, 1988, pp. 309-310). These studies draw on the long history of sociological and anthropological studies of age norms, which suggest that age norms sanction specific behaviors within social systems and thus produce age-related behavioral patterns. Age composition effects, for instance, may result because age composition produces age norms (Lawrence, 1987, 1988, 1996).

In one study of age similarity, Zenger and Lawrence (1989) compared the effects of age and tenure similarity on technical communication within work groups and within an organization. The results show that age similarity is related to increasing technical communication both within groups and within the organization, whereas tenure similarity is related to increasing technical communication only within the organization. In addition, the effect of age similarity on technical communication is greater than the effect of tenure similarity within work groups, and less than the effect of tenure similarity within the organization. The authors suggested that while age similarity eases communication in all settings, the effects of tenure similarity depend on context. The influence of tenure similarity on communication decreases with increasing working proximity. Tenure similarity exerts little influence on communication in a group where people work with each other every day. It exerts a larger impact on communication in the organization where people see each other infrequently. In contrast, the influence of age similarity on communication seems somewhat independent of context. These results indicate that age is not just an indicator for tenure and experience effects within organizations.

Ferris, Judge, Chachere, and Liden (1991) compared age similarity and age composition explanations for performance ratings. They used the subordinate's chronological age as an initial control and found, similar to many studies examining direct age effects, that performance ratings decrease with the subordinate's increasing age. They then tested whether the supervisor's age similarity to each group member influences his or her performance evaluations of them, and found that age similarity exerts no effect. Finally, they tested whether the supervisor's age relative to the group's age composition affects his or her performance ratings. Here, they found that although age composition itself does not influence performance ratings, the interaction between age composition and supervisor age does. Young supervisors tend to rate subordinates in older groups more positively than they rate subordinates in younger groups. Conversely, old supervisors tend to rate subordinates in younger groups more positively than they rated subordinates in older groups. These results indicate that age produces a social context that affects behavior independent of peoples' interpersonal relationships.

Finally, Lawrence's (1987, 1988, 1996) work on age norms provides support for the existence of age norms as well as an explanation for the connections between age as a chronological and a social phenomenon. She found that age norms exist for managerial careers. For example, in one company 66 to 80% of the subjects agree on managers' typical ages in specific career levels. By inference, they also agree on what ages are "young," and therefore viewed as ahead of schedule, and what ages are "old," and therefore viewed as behind schedule. These age norms appear closely related to reality; however, subjects consistently underestimate the age of the oldest manager and overestimate the age of the youngest manager in each career level. This suggests that cognitive biases influence how age norms evolve from actual age distributions.

Lawrence's (1987, 1988, 1996) studies examined age-graded career levels as both a chronological and a social phenomenon, and at the individual and organizational levels of analysis.[10] The results suggest that the impact of age deviations on behavior is more powerful when age is considered a social phenomenon than when it is considered a chronological phenomenon. For example, deviations from age norms appear to exert a greater influence on performance ratings than deviations from actual age distributions. Moreover, deviations from age norms appear to exert a greater influence on other work-related outcomes, such as employees' work expectations and the intensity of their relationship with the organization, than deviations from employees' self-perceived age judgments.

Conclusions About Current Age Research

Several conclusions can be drawn about current theoretical and empirical research on age. Most importantly, not surprisingly, and consistent with the

long history of age research, recent studies indicate that chronological age and perceptions of it influence work-related outcomes in organizations. Important individual outcomes such as work satisfaction, commitment, and performance, and important evaluation processes, such as performance ratings, interview decisions, and selection, all seem related to age phenomena. Thus, age plays a significant role in behavior within organizations.

The remaining conclusions are less clear and seem best evaluated using the half-full versus half-empty glass metaphor. On the half-full side, recent research focuses on a comparatively small outcome set, which has encouraged theoretical and empirical development. Part of this development has produced an expanding perspective on age phenomena themselves. For instance, social age phenomena have been seeping into the chronological age literature as alternate explanations and predictors of work-related outcomes. Thus, the literature shows increasing recognition of the interdependence of chronological and social age phenomena.

On the half-empty side, by focusing on a comparatively small outcome set, many significant organizational outcomes, such as change, inertia, negotiations, strategic alliances, and innovation are ignored. Yet, it seems likely that age intrudes on these latter outcomes as well. In addition, this focus on outcomes has limited the explication and testing of a more comprehensive organizational theory of age. Organizational scholars are beginning to propose mechanisms that link the various age phenomena; however, their proposals typically come in the discussion section and are not tested empirically. As a result, the dominant, tested theory for age-related outcomes remains that Behavior $= f$(Age).

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR AN ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY OF AGE

My purpose in writing this paper has been to motivate organizational scholars to develop and test a broader and more "interesting" conception of the role age plays in organizations. I began by reviewing the roughly 100 years of social science research on age. This work consistently shows, across history, cultures, and even academic disciplines, that age plays a significant role in human exchange. Given this finding, it seems likely that age also plays such a role in organizations. Yet, for the most part, organizational scholars have shown indifference to the topic. Some of this indifference probably results from the assumptions people hold about age. People see age as both a critically important and ridiculously insignificant feature of social interaction. As organizational scholars are people, this creates the interesting contradiction that while everyone agrees age significantly influences behavior, they also agree it is peripheral to what-is-really-important in organizations.

This inherent difficulty for scholars in "seeing" the importance of age is compounded by the dominant approach taken by organizational scholars who have studied it. Scholars' focus on human resource issues stereotypes this work as holding more limited relevance than other broader organizational issues. Moreover, organizational scholars studying age have only recently become interested in explanation. The historical approach has been description, and this characterizes the work as less theoretical, and thus less important, than other work in the field. Yet, despite these difficulties, a peripheral group of organizational scholars and scholars in other fields continue studying this paradoxical topic of inquiry.

Given these conclusions, my job for the remainder of this paper is to examine the "So What Next?" question. The goal at this point is to take existing age research and develop a broader, more integrated, and thus more "interesting" theoretical approach. I have several suggestions for achieving this goal.

The first suggestion is that *organizational theories of age need to be separated from theories of other things*. Age phenomena are related to many work-related outcomes, but many non-age phenomena influence or explain these associations. Thus, distinguishing which associations belong in an organizational theory of age, and which do not, is an important first step. While this is standard practice in good science, testing alternate explanations is especially difficult in studies of age. One reason for this difficulty is that age covarys significantly with important alternate variables. For instance, age tends to be highly correlated with experience and tenure in a job, work group, or organization, and it is these time-in-social-setting variables that produce the observed effects, not age. Such high correlations make it difficult, although not impossible, to separate out age effects from tenure effects, and some studies have attempted to do this (e.g., Avolio, Waldman, & McDaniel, 1990; Kacmar & Ferris, 1989; Zenger & Lawrence, 1989).

Another reason for this difficulty is that in some cases, age may *either* covary with *or* be influenced by the important alternate variables. The effect of domain on the relationship between age and behavior provides an example. As shown in previous research, domains such as job or occupational context may explain what appear to be age-related behaviors. In other words, after accounting for domain, the original relationship between age and behavior disappears. As a result, these findings are not age-related and thus do not contribute to an organizational theory of age. In contrast, domains may actually alter the fundamental relationship between age and behavior. For instance, scholars hypothesize that people holding substantively complex jobs are more likely to maintain their intellectual flexibility over the life-span than people with substantively simple jobs (e.g., Schooler, 1987; Spenner, 1988). These results contribute to an organizational theory of age by specifying the domain-dependence of the relationship between age and behavior. While in the former

example, peoples' behaviors are *explained* by the alternate variable, in this example, peoples' behaviors are *moderated* by the alternate variable.

These examples suggest that scholars need to identify the theoretical role age plays in research, and specify what the results imply for an organizational theory of age. Are mediators being used to clarify the relationship between age and behavior or are they being used to show that the relationship does not really exist? Do moderators change something inherent in the relationship between age and behavior, or do they merely shift the appearance of this relationship? How do the findings from any study contribute to our "big picture" of an organizational theory of age?

The second suggestion is that *organizational theories of age need to focus more on the connections and feedback mechanisms that govern relationships among different age phenomena.* One example involves research on age-related career timetables in organizations (Krecker, 1994; Lawrence, 1984a, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1996; Nicholson, 1993; Roth, 1963). This research examines and generates questions about the process by which normative and demographic timetables are related, and the effect such timetables exert on other age phenomena and work-related outcomes. Specifically, the distribution of chronological ages in a job produces an actual timetable for that job. The distribution has an actual "typical age" and actual age ranges that represent the youngest and oldest employees. Because everyone does not progress up a career ladder, some jobs have a wider distribution of typical ages than others. A first-level supervisor job, for example, includes many young employees just beginning their managerial careers as well as many old employees who, for various reasons, have not been promoted.

This normal chronological age phenomenon appears to produce a social phenomenon (Lawrence, 1988, 1996). People develop perceptions of what ages mark those who are on schedule in their careers, and thus what ages identify those who are ahead of schedule or behind schedule. As a result, age acquires meanings of status and power based on the job an employee holds. Young people in "older" jobs, usually those higher up in the hierarchy, acquire high status and power as a result of their age, whereas old people in "young" jobs, acquire low status and power.

The typical distribution of chronological age by hierarchical level produces another age-related social phenomenon. The future status and power of a young person is considerably more uncertain than the future status and power of an old person. In other words, the future expectations of the young include a range of possibilities from tremendous success to relative failure. In contrast, the future expectations of the old are quite limited. Old employees' success in the past has determined their current position. However, it is unlikely that their future includes many changes, either because they have reached the top, there are few options left, or there is little time remaining.

These relative differences in uncertainty, the result of both chronological and social age phenomena, may influence organizational outcomes. For example, they may help elaborate the accommodation explanation for the positive association between age and job satisfaction. Perhaps employees accommodate to jobs and thus become more satisfied because their certainty of status increases at the same time that their possibility of exit decreases. This suggests the additional hypothesis that this positive association does not occur for older workers who are still "in the mobility game" with alternate job options, or for older workers with uncertain status, for instance those involved in downsizing organizations.

Thus, this line of research generates ideas about the connections between age as a chronological and social phenomena, as well as the processes by which these phenomena influence other age-related phenomena and organizational outcomes. Although there are many connections to be studied here (see Avolio, 1991, for some other suggestions), the influence of age distributions on age norms and individual age expectations seems particularly important. Managers exert some control over age distributions through hiring, selection, and retention activities. As a result, understanding the associations between these age phenomena provides managers some influence over this component of employees' organizational relationships.

The third suggestion is that *organizational theories of age need to apply and test existing age theories from other disciplines to issues of organizational relevance*. For example, psychological research suggests that observed age differences may result from developmental or life stage processes. In Levinson's (1978) life stage theory, individuals experience periods of stability and transition throughout life. For instance, the Entering the Adult World stage, between the ages of 22 and 28, and the Settling Down stage, between the ages of 33 and 40, represent periods of stability for young adults. These stable periods are bracketed by the Age 30 Transition, between the ages of 28 and 33, and the Midlife Transition, occurring between the ages of 40 and 45. If life stage theory accurately portrays an individual's internal development process, it seems likely that it also provides information about changes in the individual's relationship with work. For instance, it seems likely that commitment to work would be most stable and less likely to fluctuate during times of developmental stability, and most likely to fluctuate or change during periods of transition when an individual is questionning him or herself and presumably his or her relationships with others.

Historical research suggests that age differences may result from historical context. The social and economic fabric at any given time in history provides a potent situational background against which all relationships between age and behavior are ultimately framed (Lawrence, 1984b). In one example, Anderson (1985) examined how historical changes in life cycle timing affect work-related decisions. In pre-industrial British society, people viewed family

inheritance as playing a large role in establishing each new generation. An individual might decide to marry in anticipation of the increased financial security represented by an inheritance. This made sense, as until the late 1800s, first children received their inheritance (if there was any to receive) at around age 37, a time during which they also experienced relative economic stress from their young families. In contrast, first children born in 1946 had to wait until age 56 before both parents died. By this age, the children were experiencing relative economic security. Their own children were grown and frequently financially independent. In this situation, inheritance was much less central to a family's financial planning and decision making. Thus, historical changes in age at death influenced the role inheritance played in an individual's life, which subsequently influenced his or her decisions about work and family.

As this example suggests, history provides a temporal domain effect. The importance of this domain and the difficulty of studying it increases the complexity of age research. However, history raises fundamental questions about whether the age phenomena we observe are stable or temporally created. For example, do existing life stage theories depend on historical context? It seems likely that the social and medical conditions surrounding the "mid-life crisis" differed in the 1770s and the 1970s (Lawrence, 1980). Will technology increase the variation in adult functioning as it alters the level of substantive complexity for different occupational groups? The sociological notion of "haves" and "have-nots" may come to include the intellectual flexibility of as well as the monetary differences between social classes.

A fourth suggestion is that *organizational theories of age need to examine the perceptions, beliefs, and socially constructed understandings that get attached to age.* As we know little about this topic, I have more questions than examples. For instance, we know that people ascribe power and status to age (Friedman, 1987; Friedman, Tzukerman, Wienberg, & Todd, 1992) and also individual characteristics such as appearance, energy, and intellectual curiousity (Bird & Fisher, 1986; Stagner, 1985). However, what other kinds of perceptions, beliefs, and socially constructed understandings do people envision with age? By what process do they attach these observations and meanings to age? Do different conditions produce different configurations of perceptions, beliefs, and socially constructed understandings, and if yes, do these distinct configurations produce different work-related outcomes?

In the second section of this paper, I outlined several basic age assumptions and contradictions. However, this was by no means a complete typology. What other age assumptions guide peoples' work-related behavior, and to what extent are people aware of them? Do peoples' work-related behaviors change if their previously unrecognized assumptions are uncovered? In other words, can people change unconsciously discriminatory behavior when they are "educated" about their age assumptions? Which age assumptions appear most

fundamental across cultures and time, and thus are least likely to change? What do these age assumptions tell us about the limits of managerial control in organizations?

In addition to proposing the existence of basic age assumptions, I also suggested that these assumptions hold meanings of status and power because they probably evolve from basic familial relationships. As a result, one important line of questionning involves how age assumptions get entangled with other status and power issues in organizations. Do they enhance or attenuate bargaining positions in negotiations, and if so, under what circumstances? What contextual characteristics increase or decrease these effects? In other words, if someone is in a position of low age-status, are there things he or she can do to diminish its probable unconscious and negative effect?

At a less fundamental level are questions about the content of the perceptions and socially constructed understandings people attach to age. Although research on age stereotypes and age norms contributes to this topic by beginning to outline the existence of these phenomena as well as the positive and negative associations people hold about them (e.g., Avolio & Barrett, 1987; Lawrence, 1988; Neugarten & Gutmann, 1968; Plath & Ikeda, 1975; Singer, 1986; Zepelin et al., 1986-87), we know little about the fine detail of such associations. What kinds of information gets attached to age stereotypes and norms for a given organizational position? One can imagine such information, or signals (Spence, 1974), including ability, status, power, and educational level. What is the "typical" set of signals that accrues to such age phenomena? Are there some conditions under which a rich and varied set of signals gets generated, and others under which the signal set is relatively narrow? Perhaps the impact of age stereotypes and norms varies by both the degree to which people agree on them, as well as the richness of the signal set attached to them. Certainly, one would anticipate that differences in the signal set would produce differences in work-related outcomes.

In addition to questions about *what* content gets attached to age is the question of *how* it gets attached. Do people take "relevant" information from those they observe at work and attach it to age? Do they apply the characteristics of a reference group, perhaps friends, co-workers, or admired others? Perhaps they identify "visible" positive and negative examples and allow the extremes to define what they view as typical. These possibilities suggest that network studies may provide useful information about how people construct and make sense out of their age-related relations at work.

Examining peoples' age perceptions, beliefs, and socially constructed understandings seems a rich vein for future work because such notions provide the basic motivations for age-related behavior when age operates as a social phenomenon.

A fifth suggestion is that *organizational theories of age need to study the processes by which age phenomena influence one another and work-related outcomes*. Earlier I proposed that age phenomena influence outcomes through either direct or indirect processes. Direct processes produce the same outcome under all conditions. Thus, relationships produced by such processes are deterministic and require little explanation.[11] However, indirect processes require something-going-on between the age phenomenon and the outcome it effects. Scholars have proposed many such processes, but the processes are usually untested and not elaborated. This situation frequently produces mis- or underspecified theories (Lawrence, 1994).

For instance, scholars propose that negative age stereotypes result from peoples' factual experiences with others' age-related behaviors (Warr, 1994, p. 488). However, to the best of my knowledge, no one has ever tested the association between factual experiences and age stereotypes. How many negative factual experiences must people observe before they form a negative age stereotype? Does the number of necessary experiences change depending on existing group perceptions? It seems likely, for instance, that if the group holds an existing negative age stereotype, a new member may not need to see any negative factual examples before accepting the group's stereotype. This suggests that groups holding positive age stereotypes might need to observe a large number of negative factual examples before their perception changes. Another question is who, rather than how many, in the group needs to observe the factual example? If the supervisor observes the negative factual example does this produce a negative age stereotype in the group more rapidly than if a less powerful group member observes the example?

Scholars' proposal that age norms influence work-related behaviors provides another example. Presumably age norms influence work-related behaviors because people experience social pressure to conform to or to exceed expectations. While on a superficial level this makes sense, the explanation becomes more complex when one considers the process by which it occurs. First, the explanation assumes that all people are similarly observant of or similarly affected by the pressures they experience. This seems unlikely. Organizations always have some members who are more sensitive than others to what is "being required" of them. In some cases this results from personality differences, in others because of role or status differences. For instance, it seems likely that high status people are less likely to be influenced by such pressures than low status people. In addition, there are always those who seem out-to-lunch partly because they never notice anything.

Second, the explanation assumes that all group members apply similar pressures. Once again, this seems unlikely. People have very different ways of using rewards and punishment to support or sanction behavior. Some use encouragement to elicit desired behaviors, and others resort to nasty remarks and ridicule. Some feel constant reminders are necessary, while others feel a

single comment should suffice. Finally, the explanation says nothing about whether people are or are not conscious of the age norms they support or are pressured with. Given the analysis of age assumptions presented earlier, it seems entirely likely that people are aware of some age norms and not others. It also seems likely that peoples' responses to age norms differ depending on their level of awareness. Some people might actively deny age norms of which they were aware and at the same time conform to others of which they were unaware.

All of this suggests that the process by which age norms influence work-related behaviors is quite complex. The people receiving the normative pressure must experience or observe that pressure is being applied, and be sufficiently sensitive to that pressure to alter their behavior in the desired direction. Moreover, it suggests that the people applying the normative pressure must be giving consistent messages about what behavior is or is not desired at "necessary" times or time-intervals. In addition, it suggests that peoples' conscious awareness of what is going on affects both the experience and application of normative pressures.

Vecchio's (1993) study of the impact of differences in subordinate and supervisor age on subordinates' attitudes and performance provides another example of our need for better process models. He proposed four explanations for such effects, each of which predicted a different association. The status congruence explanation suggests that attitudes and performance are most positive when subordinates are younger than supervisors. This should occur because their age statuses are consistent with their role statuses, which facilitates a good relationship. The similarity attraction explanation suggests that attitudes and performance are most positive when subordinates and supervisors are similar in age. This should occur because age similarity produces attraction, which produces effective working relationships. The social competition explanation suggests that attitudes and performance are most positive when subordinates and supervisors are dissimilar in age. This should occur because social comparisons would produce competition and thus more negative relationships. Finally, the loyalty and commitment explanation suggests that attitudes and performance are most positive when subordinates are older than their supervisors. This should occur because older employees are more likely to be committed to the organization than younger employees, thus they are more likely to be motivated to work with their supervisors, and this facilitates a positive relationship.

The results do not clearly support any of the four explanations, raising:

> concerns as to how well researchers understand the avenues by which age difference may have an impact on attitudes and behaviors. Despite indications that the age-difference variable was adding to predictability, no single model emerged as a clear winner in the present analyses. This suggests the prospect that the various dependent variables may not be influenced in a singular fashion by one, overriding process but instead that the different outcome measures may be influenced by different processes. (pp. 116-117)

The point of these examples is that none of the ideas, questions, or hypotheses about the processes by which age influences behavior are evident in the simple explanatory statements that begin each discussion. These processes require elaboration and testing.

A final suggestion is that *organizational theories of age need to expand the set of dependent variables that are studied.* There is little research and even speculation on how age might influence other organizational phenomena besides individual behavior. Even studies of age at the group and organizational level still primarily reference individual outcomes. If age is to become a more "interesting" topic in the organizational sciences, we need to explore the relationship between age and other organizational issues considered central to the field. For instance, it might be intriguing to consider how age influences central organizational processes such as change, innovation, and inertia.

Because our basic assumptions about age make such considerations difficult, the notions of contradiction and contrast provide a tool for exposing interesting questions and concerns. Let us begin by changing some assumptions about age and organizations as a way of entering this topic. Hume once suggested that one way of considering the impact of human generations on society was to consider a world in which humanity resembled the butterfly. Each generation would live and die without any reference to or experience with the previous generation (Mannheim, 1952, p. 277). Butterfly societies differ markedly from our own, and if we apply this metaphor to organizations, its striking peculiarities generate numerous questions. The following discussion uses the characteristics of butterfly societies to probe the age dependence of existing organizational theories of change and inertia.

The common sense understanding in today's organizational change literature is that young organizations are flexible and dynamic, and that in contrast, old organizations are cantankerous, inflexible, and inert. Thus, one of the central questions facing managers attempting to survive in today's turbulent economic environment is how to keep organizations maximally flexible and responsive, while maintaining the efficiencies occasioned by structures that develop over time.

This common sense understanding about organizational change and inertia results primarily from two assumptions. The first assumption is about what happens to people who work together over a long time. The longer people work together, the more common understandings they generate, the more social bonds they develop, and the less open they become to information from external sources. As a result, such people develop efficient mechanisms for working together, but have difficulty assimilating to changes generated externally. The second assumption is about what happens to people as they age. As people age, they become less open to new ideas and less interested in responding to forces for change. The result of these two assumptions and their interaction is that older organizations tend to become bureaucratic and nonresponsive.

However, assume for the moment several organizations within a butterfly society. It is still possible in this society to have younger and older organizations, but regardless of the organization's age, all employees are the same age. The question then becomes "Will the pattern of flexibility and dynamism in these organizations look the same as the pattern in the younger and older organizations in our current society?" The answer depends on the assumptions above. If age and the interaction between experience and age exert no impact on an organization's ability to change, then organizations in the butterfly society will experience the same problems as organizations in our own society. However, this seems unlikely. There is considerable evidence that age is related to behavior within organizations, that organizations influence how their employees respond to age, and thus influence how employees behave at given ages, and that experience effects are not independent of age.

Moreover, the answer also depends on how long the butterfly society lives before dying to procreate the next generation. If the society lives a long time, one can imagine reasonable differences emerging between younger and older organizations because the length of a person's working life would be long enough to provide variation in organizational age. However, if the society lives only a short time, variations in organizational age would be relatively small, thus there might be no observable differences in competitive response across organizations and the issue of change and inertia would not arise. Alternately, the definition of what constitutes a critical change or inertia might grow much narrower. Changes considered unimportant in our society would become critical forces of reckoning in theirs. Even the pace of change might increase to accommodate the shorter life span available.

A third assumption underlying current organizational change theories is that organizations cease changing and become inert because people who are in power pass on their conception of the world and their way of doing things to the next generation that takes over. This passing on of knowledge and know-how is a defining component of organizational culture (Schein, 1985). To the extent that such cultural transfer takes place between generations, such transfers serve as mechanisms for reinforcing stability and impeding change. However, in the butterfly society, an organizational generation would be defined purely by tenure cohorts rather than age cohorts. Thus, at the beginning of society, there would be no prior generation from whom to obtain knowledge. As time progressed, "generations" would get defined. In human society, generations are typically defined at between fifteen and twenty years. However, this definition is based on the typical timing of biological reproduction. If I am old enough to be your parent, then I am one generation removed from you. Since such biological definitions would be inoperative in a butterfly society, it is hard to know on what basis a generation would get defined. At what point would a tenure cohort find it necessary to pass on its knowledge to the next cohort?

All of this discussion suggests that some of our fundamental notions about organizational change and inertia result from assumptions about human life and the aging process. However, the questions these assumptions generate have not been examined. To what extent is an organization's ability to change influenced by the age distribution of its employees? Do different age distributions generate distinct cultures with varying abilities to manage change? Or is the human ability to change linked directly to an individual's age and stage of development? To what extent are age and experience independent in producing inflexibility? Answering these questions would provide critical information for the human resource management of firms.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By now it should be clear that I think age is a critical but undervalued subject in organizational science. Although there is considerable interest in the subject, the field has relegated age to peripheral status. As discussed, there are numerous probable reasons for this situation, among them the dominance of the Behavior $= f$(Age) theory, the narrow focus on individual outcomes, and the paradox of interest and indifference. What we need is a broader and more integrated organizational theory of age. This is not, however, such a simple task. The impediments involve both theory and method. Age is embedded in our everyday assumptions about life, thus it is difficult to surface appropriate questions and hypotheses about its role in organizational life. Moreover, age is inherently correlated with several important alternate explanations, for instance organizational tenure and historical domain, which make it difficult to study. Further, age as a chronological phenomenon and age as a social phenomenon are correlated by definition, which makes it difficult to separate the effects of one from the effects of the other. Yet, despite these difficulties, the fundamental importance of age to organizational life, as suggested and supported by the vast history of research on age in social systems, indicates we need to continue our efforts to understand this crucial subject, and to bring it from its backstage status to the forefront as a phenomenon of organizational interest.

APPENDIX

Articles on Age and Work Published Between 1985 and 1995

This review includes work-related journal articles and book chapters published between 1985 and 1995 in which the title mentions age as a central variable. Because my focus is the life span, articles that focus on specific age groups, such as adolescence or old age, are not included although articles discussing attitudes towards these age groups

are. Work on this review concluded in August 1995, thus materials published after this time are not included.

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NOTES

1. This section draws on Chudacoff (1989, pp. 159-162) and Havighurst (1973). Other historical reviews of research on adult development and aging include Charles (1970), Groffmann (1970), Maddox and Wiley (1976), and Riley (1987).

2. The push and tug between these several views underlies the nature versus nuture argument that continues to this day. Scholars generally accept that both nature and nature are important in adult development. The main questions are to what extent and under what conditions these forces influence life. Although the impact of social environments on people was given considerable attention during the post-Milgram, Zimbardo, Asch, and Sherif eras, the pendulum is swinging back toward nature's side of the coin. For instance, recent research on twins reared in separate families suggests that heredity plays a larger role in personality development than was previously thought (Bouchard, 1994).

3. See Streib and Binstock (1990) for a comment on the shift from studies of old age to studies of the life span in the 1980s.

4. Psychologists typically conceive of adult life stages as fixed and inevitable. For instance, Levinson (1978, p. 20) states that all men between the ages of 40 and 45 are in the Mid-Life Transition stage, and thus share the same developmental experiences. This ignores the potential historical dependence of life stages (Lawrence, 1980; Riley, 1987), suggesting that shared developmental experiences change over time. Attitudes toward age, age-related work experiences and notions of time, and the impact of medical practice on life have shifted dramatically in the United States over the past 200 years (Chudacoff, 1989; Rodgers, 1978).

5. This analysis is based on my interviews and behavioral observations in the United States in the late 20th century. Research suggests that age assumptions exist in all social systems. However, it also shows that age assumptions change over time (Chudacoff, 1989) and differ across cultures (Ikels et al., 1992; Stewart, 1977). Thus, although my analysis may be appropriate for this particular time and place, it may not generalize to other times and places.

6. This example may be particularly culture-specific to the United States. In some cultures where age is revered and associated with wisdom, this older employee would be seen as within his rights.

7. These characteristics build on classifications presented in two earlier papers (Lawrence, 1987, pp. 39-41; 1994).

8. The results could also be interpreted to show that age exerts no impact on job satisfaction. A multiple regression (p. 166) suggests that age explains little variation in job satisfaction after accounting for perceptions of work conditions. In other words, age may have little to do with the results. The author interprets this result by suggesting that employee perceptions of work differ by age, and that these variations produce the non-significant result. However, the assumption is that these variations result from age. People find different components of work salient at different ages.

9. Age similarity and age composition studies in this category are noted in Figure 1 by the association between age distributions and work-related outcomes (E). This is not the ideal location in Figure 1 for these studies as they do not assume direct processes explaining the association between age and behavior. However, it seems the most appropriate location given their current level of theoretical development. While age similarity and age composition studies propose indirect processes that may connect them with other age phenomena, these processes remain loosely specified and untested producing a "black box" between age and its outcomes (Lawrence, 1994). As a result, the association between age distributions and work-related outcomes (E) seems to best characterize this work at this time.

10. This contrasts with Nicholson (1993) and Krecker (1994) who examined a similar timetable phenomenon, but only used a chronological age definition.

11. I recognize that the biological processes that produce direct age-related outcomes may eventually be explained as biology gets more closely interconnected with social science. However, this connection is not well understood at this time.

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