

RESEARCH STATEMENT — STÉPHANE P. FRANCIOLI

How do major demographic changes such as the aging of the workforce and women's growing contribution to their household's income redefine social exchanges and group inequalities? To explore this question, I look at the psychological consequences of these macro-phenomena, in society, at the workplace, and even at home. In doing so, my work informs contemporary issues of **age and gender disparities in economic opportunities and career outcomes**.

My current streams of research combine experiments, archival studies, quasi-experiments, text analyses, and field interventions to investigate (1) how older adults' biased perceptions of younger generations shape the economic opportunities of today's young; (2) how transitioning from a seniority- to a merit-based model of upward mobility redefines interactions between younger and older workers; and (3) how the uneven split of domestic labor at *home* impacts women's outcomes at *work*. Importantly, I strive to not only **shed light on modern diversity issues**, but also **contribute psychologically driven solutions to alleviate the inequalities they reveal**.

1. BEING YOUNG IN AN AGING WORLD

Although young people represent the future of society, the future of today's young looks surprisingly bleak in aging post-industrial nations. Overburdened by mounting student debt, the projected insolvency of social security, and two of the worst economic crises of the last century, today's young (people age 18 to 35) face the largest intergenerational wealth gap in history.^[1-4] While the situation has led some to plea for a renegotiation of the social contract that binds young and old,^[4] this crucial conversation is largely contingent upon the goodwill of older generations, who enjoy most of the economic and political power needed to address said inequalities. In this context, older adults' empathy and support for today's young will largely shape their future economic outcomes.

Yet, despite the precarity of young people's condition, scholars of organizations and related disciplines have left younger generations' experience largely unexamined. In an aging world where they have fast become a minority, **one of my research streams seeks to understand how young adults are perceived, and how these perceptions, in turn, shape their life experiences, professional trajectories, and long-term economic prospects**.

1.a. How are young adults perceived today? Research on ageism has mostly focused on perceptions of and biases against older adults, implicitly assuming that age-based stigma increases throughout the lifespan, such that young adults benefit from a positive image relative to that of their older counterparts. My work challenges this assumption and shows that young adults too are victims of strong—if not stronger—ageist beliefs. For instance, in a preregistered study surveying a large, US-representative sample, my co-authors and I find that people overwhelmingly report the most favorable attitudes toward the oldest age cohorts, and the least favorable ones, toward the youngest ([Francioli, North, & Shakeri, in progress](#)). Consistent with this attitudinal pattern, my detailed examination of the stereotype content of today's young shed more light on people's ambivalent feelings toward younger adults ([Francioli & North, *JEP-G*, 2021](#)): Praised for their perceived youthful energy, fluid intelligence, and adaptability to the current times, they are also seen as naïve, radical, entitled, and overly reliant on—yet excessively defiant toward—older generations. These findings highlight the paradoxical nature of anti-young ageism: a longing for the qualities commonly associated with young adulthood, but a contempt for the people who exhibit them the most (i.e., the current young).

1.b. What drives anti-young ageism? My work shows that, in sharp contrast with ageism targeting older adults—driven by perceivers’ fear and discomfort toward the target’s later *life stage*—anti-young ageism is primarily *generational*. That is, people attribute to contemporary youth negative characteristics that they believe did *not* apply to previous generations at the same age (a “kids these days!” effect). For instance, we found that people associate the positive traits of the young stereotype content to both past and present generations of young but negative traits only to present generations of young (Francioli & North, *JEP-G*, 2021).

In another project focusing on intergenerational tensions between Millennials and Baby Boomers, we are building on intergroup threat theory⁵¹ to better understand what drives anti-young ageism (Francioli, Danbold, & North; target: *Psych. Science*). We find that Baby Boomers’ animosity toward Millennials primarily stems from a fear that the norms, values, and habits of the young threaten the way of life Boomers have established (i.e., symbolic threat). In contrast, Millennials’ hostility toward Boomers reflects a belief that older generations are stripping the young of their shot at wealth accumulation by hoarding valuable economic and political resources (i.e., realistic threat). Contrasting with classic threat theory predictions, according to which dominant groups like Baby Boomers report more realistic than symbolic threat—and vice versa for non-dominant groups—our results stress the unique nature of age: As older adults witness the inevitable disappearance of their generation, they fear for their cultural legacy more than for the economic power they likely secured for the remainder of their lives; in contrast, younger generations’ predicted cultural ascendancy makes them long for the tangible resources they need now in order to establish their personal and professional lives.

1.c. Why does anti-young ageism matter? Since young adults represent a shrinking portion of the population—and, hence, of the electorate—policies to alleviate their economic struggles require the support of a growing, older segment of the population. In this context, the prevalent belief that today’s young are not as worthy as were previous generations at the same age casts a dark shadow on their future. Consistent with this general observation, we found that anti-young ageism predicted people’s hostility toward a political candidate pledging to address the current economic struggle of younger generations—even though the pledge did not infringe upon the opportunities and economic outcomes of other age cohorts (Francioli & North, *JEP-G*, 2021).

1.d. Future directions. Focusing on the organizational implications of anti-young ageism, I plan to explore how leaders’ and supervisors’ endorsement of anti-young discourses shapes junior employees’ outcomes (e.g., mentoring quality, performance expectations, years before their first promotion). I also plan to dive into the origins of anti-young ageism and conduct linguistic analyses of large, longitudinal text databases to determine whether disparaging younger generations simply echoes the recent aging of the population or whether it has been a common practice throughout history.

1.e. How does this stream of research advance theory? While purporting to explain the roots of ageism in general, past theories on age stigma have emphasized prejudices targeting older adults, mostly overlooking plights faced by the younger side of the age spectrum. By addressing this gap, my work offers a more nuanced understanding of age-based stigma and age-based inequalities. It also highlights the unique generational nature of anti-young ageism, stressing the need for scholars to more clearly identify the distinct influences of different age-related constructs (e.g., chronological age, generational affiliation, tenure) on outcomes for individuals, in and outside of organizations.

2. FROM A SENIORITY- TO A MERIT-BASED MODEL OF UPWARD MOBILITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

In the wake of large social movements such as Occupy Wall Street, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter, diversity scholars have pondered how growing concerns for social justice will redefine the organization of tomorrow.^[6] Unfortunately, age-based research on prejudice and inequalities—mirroring that on age more broadly—has largely focused on the older segment of the population. Most notably, researchers have addressed whether older workers underperform their younger counterparts (answer: they don't), whether they are stereotyped as such (answer: they are), and whether these unfounded stereotypes hinder their opportunities and engagement at the workplace (answer: they do; for a review, see [Francioli & North, *Handbook Psych. of Aging*, 2021](#)).

Yet, an aging workforce has important—and widely understudied—implications for younger workers too. Historically, employees' position on the corporate ladder has been highly contingent on age and seniority.^[7] However, employers and employees alike have expressed growing concerns that the delayed retirement of older staff members might create a bottleneck at the top of the corporate ladder and curb younger workers' opportunities for upward mobility and wealth accumulation,^[8,9] a sentiment supported by early-stage research in labor economics.^[10] In this context, transitioning from a seniority- to a merit-based model of upward mobility—one that rewards competence independent of a worker's age or any other demographic attribute—should rise as a major priority for organizational scholars and socially concerned leaders.

Some evidence suggests that this transition might already be underway: Tech booms have propelled young professionals into previously unobtainable C-level positions;^[11] organizations are shifting toward flatter hierarchical structures with fewer, more age-diverse corporate echelons;^[12] and supervisor arrangements in which younger managers oversee older subordinates are on the rise.^[13] For all its promises however, such a transition also disrupts the longstanding norms surrounding career trajectories and social exchanges between younger and older workers. In this context, **my work explores the opportunities and challenges associated with organizations' transition from a seniority- to a merit-based model of upward mobility.**

2.a. How does younger workers' success affect others' job performance? In one project ([Francioli, Jachimowicz, & North; target: *AMI*](#)), my co-authors and I examine how the rapid ascent of younger “star” workers affect the performance of other people in their network (e.g., colleagues, friends, relatives, subordinates). Across three studies—a longitudinal archival study of a US-based professional sport league, a pair-matched quasi-experiment at a Latin American financial institution, and a large pre-registered experiment with full-time UK workers—we find consistent evidence that exposure to younger (but not older) higher-status workers triggers unfavorable social comparisons that can hinder others' career engagement and job performance.

These findings highlight some of the unique challenges faced by managers supervising workers older than them, a historically atypical arrangement that now accounts for more than one-third of all supervisory appointments.^[11] My research in this area also stresses the need for organizational leaders to invent new career paths that keep workers of all age groups engaged, particularly those whose career peak is behind them. For instance, organizations may complement the traditional “corporate ladder” status structure by further valorizing mentoring and expert career paths.

2.b. Future Directions. I plan to examine other tensions between age and corporate hierarchy, such as: How a seniority- versus merit-based model of upward mobility shapes younger workers' attitudes

toward older generations' delayed retirement? How can younger supervisors maximize trust, collaboration, and knowledge transfer with older subordinates? And how do expectations of deference toward one's elders affect younger managers' likelihood of recruiting subordinates older than them?

2.c. How does this stream of research advance theory? Although modern firms often purport to be meritocratic systems, most corporate ladders still mirror the societal inequalities of their time, with privileged groups (i.e., senior white men) disproportionately represented at the top, and disadvantaged ones (i.e., the young, women, and people of color) at the bottom. Moving toward a less demographically biased corporate structure implies that members of the latter rise above—and sometimes gain formal authority over—members of the former. By looking at tensions between younger and older workers in an aging workforce, my work builds on specific examples of age and generations to shed light on the implications and obstacles of a transition toward a more merit-based model of upward mobility in organizations.

3. ADDRESSING GENDER DYNAMICS AT HOME TO REDUCE GENDER INEQUALITIES AT WORK

Sociologists, labor economists, and family researchers have long documented both the persistent nature of gender disparities in contributions to domestic labor (i.e., housework and childcare) and its damaging impact on women's career outcomes. This issue has been further highlighted by the COVID19 pandemic, during which many women reported having to leave the workforce to handle the extra duties at home.^[14,15] Unfortunately, current literature emphasizes deeply ingrained socialization processes and enduring power imbalances between men and women, offering few practical solutions to redress said disparities. In contrast, **my work reframes gendered division of domestic labor as a culturally tolerated form of free riding, identifying psychologically based interventions that address gender disparities at *home* to alleviate gender inequalities at *work*.**

3.a. Can information transparency reduce gender inequalities at home? Research has long shown that making individual contributions to a collective goal known to all group members reduces free riding. Building on this observation, my co-author and I conducted a longitudinal field experiment during the UK's first COVID19 lockdown to test whether increasing transparency regarding partners' individual contribution to their household's labor helped reduce gender disparities in contributions at home ([Francioli & Zee; target: OBHDP](#)).

For two weeks, both partners of dual-earner, heterosexual couples provided daily accounts of their individual activities (e.g., work, cleaning, laundry, childcare, leisure). At the end of Week 1, participants (initially unaware of the true purpose of the study) received a customized intervention report graphically summarizing both their own and their partner's contribution to their household's domestic labor over the past week. Male partners (who generally contributed the least in Week 1; i.e., pre-intervention) increased their effort in Week 2 (i.e., post-intervention). Conversely, female partners (who generally contributed the most in Week 1) reduced their effort over that same period, lessening disparities in domestic labor contributions in the household.

To our knowledge, this study constitutes the first intervention to ever attempt—and succeed—at reducing uneven contributions to domestic labor. What's more, both male and female partners reported less work-family conflict post-intervention, offering early evidence of the benefits of addressing gendered dynamics at home to reduce gender inequalities at work.

3.b. Future directions. My future work on this topic will take two forms. First, building on the success of our first intervention, I want to set up a largescale follow-up, and: (i) take advantage of modern technologies such as mobile apps to deploy it to a larger audience, (ii) create multiple experimental conditions to better identify the mechanisms behind the success of the intervention, and (iii) explore a broader range of OB-relevant outcomes. Second, I am currently outlining a theoretical paper diving into the ways in which management scholarship might help improve the gender dynamics at home that penalize women at work, a paper which, in turn, will help me craft new, management-inspired approaches to tackle this issue empirically.

3.c. How does this stream of research advance theory? To address gender inequalities in career outcomes, management scholars have focused primarily on social dynamics occurring at the workplace. Comparatively, management scholarship on gender dynamics at home—and how they impact outcomes at work—is more limited, which is unfortunate for multiple reasons. First, labor economists have shown that, to fulfill their extra domestic duties, female workers work fewer hours; carve extra flexibility into their professional schedule; choose less demanding and financially rewarding careers; incur more frequent career interruptions; and seek part-time jobs at a higher rate than men. Taken together, these factors account for a larger portion of the modern gender pay gap than does gender discrimination in the workplace, the most widely studied gender topic in management scholarship.

Second, as post-industrial societies enter the era of the gig economy and work-from-home arrangements are gaining wide popularity, boundaries between personal and professional lives are fading. Considering dynamics at home is therefore more important than ever to understand how individuals operate at work. Finally, the division of domestic labor represents perhaps the single most universal example of dyadic coordination between individuals. Seen through this lens, it is an issue for which OB scholars have tremendous—albeit, indirect—expertise. From group dynamics to dyadic negotiations, our field is rich in practical tools that might help alleviate the gender imbalances at home that deeply impact women’s outcomes at work. I plan to build on this knowledge to address this issue.

CONCLUSION

My work looks at the psychological consequences of large demographic changes such as the aging of the workforce and women’s growing contribution to their household’s income to address underexamined issues of intergroup inequalities in society and at the workplace. In doing so, I aim to broaden our understanding of what constitutes organizationally relevant issues of diversity. Given the opportunity, I would love to pursue this academic endeavor at your institution.

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