



UNIVERSITY OF MAURITIUS

in collaboration with

THE AFRICA RESEARCH GROUP, UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

5th International Conference on

'Managing Organisations in Africa' (ARG 2017)

29 - 31 August 2017

Long Beach Hotel - Belle Mare

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Available at:

http://www.uom.ac.mu/images/conference/arg/ARG_ProgrammeFinal.pdf



Website: <http://www.uom.ac.mu/conference/arg/>

ISSN: 1694-3325

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African versus portuguese managers' attitudes toward older workers: an empirical study

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the attitudes toward older workers of African managers, and how these managers make HRM decisions in scenarios involving younger versus older students. We compare African ($n = 154$) with Portuguese ($n = 134$) managers. African ($n = 63$) and Portuguese ($n = 138$) university students are also included to make cultural, social and institutional explanations more robust. The findings suggest that, although African individuals have more positive attitudes toward older workers than Portuguese do, they make more discriminatory decisions in the HRM scenarios. We suggest that this contradiction may emerge from dualities characterizing Africa.

PAPER AIMS

Ageism is "a process of systematic stereotyping and of discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and gender" (Butler, 2002, p. 12). We focus here on ageism toward older people, which has consequences for how older workers are managed (Fineman, 2011), for the older workers' engagement, and for organizational performance (Henkens, 2000; Van Dalen, Henkens & Schippers, 2010). The topic has been studied mainly in Western countries. In this article, we respond to the need to conduct research in the "rest of the world" (Ozkazanç-Pan, 2008), and focus specifically on Portuguese speaking Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries. Such as Kamoche (2011, p. 1) argued, "Africa remains relatively under-researched in the fields of management, organization studies, human resources and international business". Khan and Ackers (2004, p. 1331)

observed that that SSA is “a social context where values, beliefs and actions tend to challenge the notion that Western management practices are universally applicable”.

One particular domain in which Africa differs from the Western relates to ageing and how older people/workers are perceived and treated. Africa is characterized by a dual/contradictory social and cultural context (Kamoche, 2011; Zoogah, Peng, & Woldu, 2015), and such a duality may have consequences for manager’s attitudes and behaviors toward older workers. The extended family system is still common in African countries, where older people play a greater role, both within the family and the society (Aboderin, 2004; Cattell, 2008; Makoni, 2008; Oluwabamide & Eghafona, 2012). In African (traditional) cultures, older persons are to be respected and are encouraged to actively participate in the affairs of their communities (Mangaliso, 2001). However, Makoni (2008, p. 200) argued that “Rapid industrialization and the increase in numbers of aging persons are apparently weakening what were previously imagined to be robust ‘traditionally extended family structure’ which used to cater the elderly and the sick”.

Moreover, Africa is characterized by a “youth bulge” (a “demographic bonus”; Sippel, Kiziak, Woellert & Klingholz, 2011), where the demographic transition (i.e., the population ageing, as initiated decades ago in other contexts) is still at its infancy. This reality may foster negative biased attitudes and behaviors toward older workers, who are eventually considered (a) as an obstacle for the entry of young people into the labor market, (b) a “burden” to a “young society” or (c) a segment of population whose traditional values and habits are less compatible with the requirements of a more modern management (Blunt & Jones, 1992; Cooper, 1987; Dia, 1996; Khan & Ackers, 2004; Kiggundu, 1989).

This study explores empirically how African managers respond to that *ambivalent* context in terms of their HRM decisions. Before proceeding, two assumptions are made. First, by “Africa” we mean Sub-Saharan Africa (Makoni, 2008). Although North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa shares several similarities (Bentahar, 2011), North Africa is predominantly Arab, and most people identify more with the Middle East than they do with the rest of the continent. Several international institutions include North Africa (together with Middle East) and Sub-Saharan Africa in different regions (Schwab, 2016). Second, although Africa cannot be considered as socially, culturally, politically, and economically homogeneous, a certain degree of uniformity in Sub-Saharan may be identified in terms of industrial development, the ethos of post-independent imperatives for economic growth, and the “African thought system” (Kamoche, 1993, 1997, 2011).

The paper aims to answer the following questions: (a) How do African managers respond to these contradictions? (b) What attitudes toward older workers they develop? (c) How do they make HRM decisions when they have to select among an older versus a younger candidate? (d) In comparison with managers from Portugal, a Western country, do African managers develop more or less positive attitudes toward older workers? (e) Are African managers comparatively more or less discriminatory when making HRM decisions?

METHOD

Samples

We have collected data from both managers and university students in Portugal and in African countries to explore if eventual differences between the attitudes and behaviors toward older workers of individuals from Africa versus Portugal come from deep, cultural reasons.

Managers’ samples. One hundred and fifty-four (response rate: 27%) African middle and top managers (from Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe) participated (42% female; 77% operating in the services sector, the others in industry). Mean age was 36.9 years (SD: 8.81), and mean tenure on the job was 6.0 years (SD: 5.39). Five percent had 12 schooling years, 64% had a university degree, and 31% had a master’s degree

or a PhD. One hundred and fifty-four (response rate: 39%) Portuguese middle and top managers participated (25% female; 67% operating in the services sector). Mean age was 38.5 years (SD: 5.82), and mean tenure on the job was 7.4 years (SD: 5.64). Two percent had 12 schooling years, 56% had a university degree, and 42% had a master's degree or a PhD.

Students' samples. Sixty-three (response rate: 23%) African university students (from Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe) participated (52% female; 14% master students, the others undergraduate students). Mean age was 27.6 years (SD: 8.79). Forty percent studied management, the others studying engineering (41%) and courses such as architecture, biology, mathematics, and psychology (19%). One hundred and thirty-eight (response rate: 22%) Portuguese students participated (69% female; 11% master students, the others undergraduate students). Mean age was 26.4 years (SD: 9.59). Eighty-five percent studied management, the others studying engineering (4%) and courses such as biology, new communication technologies, and mathematics (11%).

Measures

Four scenarios involving younger versus older candidates were presented to individuals, and they were used to measure dependent variables. The first scenario referred to selection between a younger versus an older individual. The second scenario related to selecting workers to participate in training, the older worker being described as more motivated to the training. The third scenario was included to test if the managers' attitudes predict their decisions in a situation where the company, to reduce costs, aims to dismiss an older versus a younger worker (the older being described as having higher performance). The fourth scenario differed from the first in that the older applicant/worker was described in the fourth scenario as being female (the younger as male).

Attitudes toward older workers. The attitudes toward older workers were measured through 20 items suggested by Rego, Vitória, Tupinambá, Cunha, & Leal (2017), embracing five dimensions: (1) adaptability, (2) value of older workers' competencies for organizations, (3) organizational conscientiousness, (4) social capital and generosity, and (5) performance. Those authors found that the five-factor model is valid across Portuguese and Brazilian samples. We performed confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to test the five-factor model suggested by those authors. The model fitted the data well for the Portuguese samples (managers and students), while it did not fit the data satisfactorily for the African samples.

Thus, in order to get commensurability across the four samples, we carried out several exploratory analyses (principal component analysis). After removing eight items with high cross-loadings or which the respective factor presented very low reliability (<0.60), a three-factor model with 12 items emerged, explaining 58.27% of variance. The first dimension, "Conscientiousness and performance" represents behaviors related to both in-role and extra-role performance. In the original five-factor model (Rego et al., 2017), these items loaded into two different factors (conscientiousness and performance). The contents of the other two dimensions are similar to those suggested by Rego et al. (2017). The second and the third dimensions represent "social capital and generosity" and "adaptability", respectively.

CFAs upon the data of each sample (LISREL; maximum likelihood estimation method) tested the three-factor model. A reasonably well-fitted model emerged for the four samples, the fit indices being less satisfactory for the African students' sample. All Cronbach Alphas except one (0.63) are higher than 0.70.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows that, across the four samples, the attitude of "conscientiousness and performance" is positive, while the attitude of "social capital and generosity" is moderately positive, and the attitude of "adaptability" tends to be more modest (with exception of African

students). Table 1 also shows that older workers tend to be discriminated in HRM decisions. In fact, when both the younger and the older candidates are described the same way (scenario #1), a significant majority of individuals (managers and students) select the older one (binomial test: proportions are different from 50% in the four samples; $p < 0.05$). Discrimination is not higher when the older worker is described as being female (scenario #4). Another evidence of discrimination is that, even when the older worker is described as having more positive qualities (scenarios # 2 and #3), a significant number of participants in the study preferred the younger worker.

Table 1. Attitudes toward older workers and decisions in scenarios – comparing African versus Portuguese participants

		African managers (n=154)	Portuguese managers (n=134)	African students (n=63)	Portuguese students (n=138)
Mean scores (SD)					
Conscientiousness and performance		5.58 (1.07)	5.34* (0.95)	5.84 (0.85)	5.49* (1.03)
Social capital and generosity		4.69 (1.12)	4.36* (1.08)	4.75 (1.34)	4.33* (1.03)
Adaptability		3.77 (1.39)	3.74 (1.18)	4.50 (1.38)	3.86** (1.18)
Percentage of individuals who chose the older (O) versus the younger (Y) worker					
Scenario #1: Hiring the O versus the Y worker (both having the same education)	Y	72.1%	59.7%	73.0%	60.1%
	O	27.9%	40.3%	27.0%	39.9%
<i>Chi-square (comparing the African sample with the Portuguese one)</i>			4.91*		3.12
Scenario #2: Selecting the O versus the Y worker for a training program (the O one being more motivated)	Y	47.4%	17.9%	33.3%	20.3%
	O	52.6%	82.1%	66.7%	79.7%
<i>Chi-square (comparing the African sample with the Portuguese one)</i>			27.91***		3.99*
Scenario #3: Selecting the O worker (to stay in the company) and dismissing the Y worker (to reduce costs) (the O one showing higher performance)	Y	31.8%	14.8%	57.1%	31.9%
	O	68.2%	85.2%	42.9%	68.1%
<i>Chi-square (comparing the African sample with the Portuguese one)</i>			9.84**		11.52***
Scenario #4: Hiring the O (female) versus the Y (male) worker (similar CVs)	Y	71.4%	52.8%	55.6%	52.2%
	O	28.6%	47.2%	44.4%	47.8%
<i>Chi-square (comparing the African sample with the Portuguese one)</i>			9.55**		0.20

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 1 also suggests that the attitudes toward older workers of the African individuals (both managers and students) tend to be more positive than those of the Portuguese individuals. One possible explanation could be differences (in terms of age, gender, schooling, tenure, background, and sector) between the African and the Portuguese samples. For this reason, we tested the predictive value of being African versus Portuguese for the three attitudes, after controlling gender and age (all participants), being a student of management (students), and

schooling years, tenure in the job, and sector (managers). The findings show that being African versus Portuguese predicts a small amount of unique variance of one attitude of managers (social capital and generosity) and two attitudes of students (conscientiousness and performance). African versus Portuguese participants develop less positive attitudes toward older workers.

The findings (Table 1) also indicate that the percentage of individuals who select the younger worker is always higher within the African samples than within the Portuguese samples. To test if being African versus being Portuguese predicts the decisions in the four scenarios, hierarchical regression analyses (binary logistic) were carried out. Table 2 shows that, after including control variables (gender, age, schooling, tenure on the job, sector) and the attitudes toward older workers, being African versus being Portuguese predicts unique variance of the managers' decisions in the four scenarios. These findings are replicated among the students' participants for the first three scenarios, although the amounts of predictive unique variance are lower. In short, in spite of the African participants having more positive attitudes toward older workers than the Portuguese individuals do, the African individuals discriminate older workers more.

Table 2. How being African versus Portuguese predicts attitudes toward older workers and decisions in scenarios (managers' samples) (the 1st step, which includes control variables, not shown)

	Scenario #1 Hiring the older worker (c)		Scenario #2 Selecting the older worker for training (c)		Scenario #3 Selecting the older worker (to stay in the company) and dismissing the younger worker (to reduce costs)		Scenario #4 Hiring the older (female) versus the younger (male) worker	
	2 nd step	3 rd step	2 nd step	3 rd step	2 nd step	3 rd step	2 nd step	3 rd step
Gender (a)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.16 (0.27)	0.23 (0.61)	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.14 (0.20)	-0.29 (0.77)	-0.21 (0.51)	-0.39 (1.55)
Age	0.05* (5.95)	0.05* (5.38)	-0.08*** (13.29)	-0.10*** (16.85)	-0.01 (0.17)	-0.02 (0.41)	0.05* (5.15)	0.05* (3.84)
Schooling	0.02 (0.01)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.31 (1.82)	0.17 (0.56)	0.06 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.11)	-0.40 (2.89)	-0.62* (5.91)
Tenure on the job	0.02 (0.38)	0.01 (0.24)	0.06 (3.50)	0.05 (2.84)	0.01 (0.06)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.03)
Sector (b)	-0.18 (0.34)	-0.12 (0.15)	-0.05 (0.03)	0.03 (0.01)	0.26 (0.65)	0.35 (1.09)	-0.21 (0.45)	-0.12 (0.13)
Conscientiousness and performance	0.16 (1.20)	0.22 (1.98)	-0.22 (2.46)	-0.14 (0.94)	0.16 (1.13)	0.21 (1.79)	0.44** (8.85)	0.55*** (11.77)
Social capital	0.10 (0.73)	0.16 (1.70)	-0.04 (0.12)	0.09 (0.44)	-0.09 (0.49)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.11 (0.75)	0.00 (0.00)
Adaptability	0.30* (6.55)	0.30* (6.30)	0.29* (6.27)	0.30* (5.89)	-0.22 (2.94)	-0.22 (2.96)	0.13 (1.25)	0.13 (1.14)
Being African versus Portuguese (c)		-0.69* (5.71)		-1.58*** (26.61)		-1.17*** (11.44)		-1.18*** (13.93)
Cox & Snell R^2	0.11	0.12	0.10	0.17	0.02	0.06	0.11	0.16
R^2 change	0.05	0.01	0.04	0.07	0.02	0.04	0.05	0.05
Nagelkerke R^2	0.15	0.17	0.12	0.24	0.03	0.09	0.15	0.22
R^2 change	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.12	0.02	0.06	0.07	0.07

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Values are the estimation coefficients. Between parentheses: Wald's statistic.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Three main findings are worth discussing. First, the five-factor model proposed by Rego et al. (2017) to measure the attitudes toward older workers is not validated in our sample of African managers and students. It is possible that Africa presents idiosyncratic social, cultural and economic challenges that induce individuals to see older workers through specific lens that differ from those used in other contexts. The second most relevant finding is that, although individuals see older workers as endowed with positive qualities, a significant number of individuals are inclined to discriminate older workers, i.e., they prefer to select a younger versus an older worker even when the older one is described as having better qualities (from a managerial point of view). This empirical pattern was found in both the Portuguese and the African samples, and amongst both managers and university students. Thus, the finding indicate that ageism is not exclusive of Western countries with ageing populations. The third most relevant finding, perhaps the most significant one considering the scarcity of studies about the topic in Africa, portrays a paradoxical conceptual landscape: compared with the Portuguese participants in the study, African managers and students have more positive attitudes toward older workers while, at the same time, they discriminate older workers more. It seems that African managers respond to the *ambivalent* context (as described in the literature review) with an *ambivalent* stance. On the one hand, some elements of the traditional cultural, social and institutional context may induce African individuals to develop more positive attitudes toward older workers. On the other hand, other elements of the rational-economic western paradigm (Kamoche, 1997) may incline African individuals to younger versus older candidates. It is possible that African managers, influenced by modern western theories and approaches (i.e., “shaped and influenced by colonial ideology and capitalist modes of production”; Khan & Ackers, 2004, p. 1332), align with managerial perspectives that see the traditional African social system (where elderly are respected, and where older workers are less likely to assume the organizational role as centric in their lives) as perverse to good management practices (Dia, 1996; Khan & Ackers, 2004; Kiggundu, 1989).

The study is not exempt of limitations, future studies being necessary to clarify issues brought out by our research. First, only individuals from Portuguese speaking African countries and from Portugal were included in the study. Second, the size of the four samples, mainly the sample of African students, is small. Future studies should include larger samples, compare managers operating in different organizational contexts, sectors and hierarchical levels, and compare students from different backgrounds. The third limitation is that the study includes convenience samples, which may have several consequences for the validity of the findings. Fourth, the scenarios used to measure behavioral variables cover a reduced number of managers' decisions toward older workers. Future studies should include scenarios involving other, more complex decisions. Fifth, our study involved decisions within hypothetical instead of real situations. Future studies should consider *real* situations, rather than *hypothetical* ones, and test how managers *actually* react toward that *reality*. Sixth, the instrument for measuring the attitudes toward older workers covers a limited range of dimensions. Future studies should continue to explore the issue through including attitudinal dimensions (e.g., intellectual abilities and ethical skills) missing from the Rego et al.'s (2017) framework.

Despite these limitations, our study answers to a challenge by Zoogah et al. (2015, p. 79), who noted that “one important part of the world – Africa – has remained essentially off researchers' radar screen (Jackson, 2004)”. The findings corroborate Kamoche (2011, p. 1) who argued that “it is not surprising that Africa is often cast as a land of contradiction, unrealized”, and Walsh (2015, p. 1), who argued that “Africa remains a complex place”. The study contributes to a better understanding of this under-researched, complex, and

contradictory context, regarding a topic that, over the next years, will become increasingly important: ageing and ageism in Africa. Ageist behaviors may collide with the traditional African social system and mindset. This collision may have perverse consequences for the legitimacy of companies within communities and the whole society. Within a global context characterized by an increasing number of open economies, the misalignment between the management practices and the African idiosyncrasies may make it difficult to companies operating in Africa to remain competitive.

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