

No matter the distance? A theoretical framework of age-diverse friendship effects

Ulrike Fasbender, PhD^{1,*}, Lisbeth Drury, PhD², Bernadeta Goštautaitė, PhD^{3,4}, Anita C. Keller, PhD⁵, Michela Vignoli, PhD⁶, Tabea Wolf, PhD¹

¹Business and Organizational Psychology, University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart, Germany

²Birkbeck Business School, Birkbeck College, University of London, London, United Kingdom

³ISM University of Management and Economics, Vilnius, Lithuania

⁴Vilnius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

⁵Department of Psychology, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

⁶Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science, University of Trento, Rovereto, Italy

*Corresponding author: Ulrike Fasbender, Business and Organizational Psychology, University of Hohenheim, Wollgrasweg 49, Stuttgart 70599, Germany (ulrike.fasbender@uni-hohenheim.de).

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Abstract

Friendship is the most transformative form of high-quality intergroup contact, with the capacity to build solidarity, foster cooperation, and bridge divides. Age-diverse friendships, in particular, offer unique opportunities to connect people of different ages, yet their role in work and non-work settings requires further theorizing. We thus develop a theoretical framework of age-diverse friendship effects that explains how such effects extend beyond the dyad to influence organizations and society at large. Building on intergroup contact theory, the taxonomy of transfer effects, and research on other-oriented processes, we propose that age-diverse friendships generate spillover effects at 3 levels: from individual friends to the broader age group (primary transfer), from age groups to other social groups (secondary transfer), and toward more general liberalization effects that transcend group boundaries (tertiary transfer). Central to these transfer effects are empathic concern and perspective taking, which enable friendships to foster prosocial behavior in work and non-work contexts. We further theorize that the extent and direction of these primary, secondary, and tertiary transfer effects depend on 2 boundary conditions: age distance and semantic distance. Our theoretical framework positions age-diverse friendships as a powerful vehicle of social change, with the potential to not only reduce tensions but also to strengthen intergroup cooperation and address broader societal challenges.

Keywords age-diverse friendship, intergenerational friendship, workplace relationships, intergroup contact, transfer effects

Friendship dances around the world, bidding us all to awaken to happiness.

—Epicurus, Greek philosopher (341–270 BCE)

Many societal and economic challenges are shaped by how different social groups relate to one another, including age groups (Drury & Fasbender, 2024; North & Fiske, 2015; Urlick et al., 2017). Friendship, as the most powerful form of high-quality intergroup contact, is a voluntary, affectively meaningful, sustained, reciprocated, and dyadic relationship (Hartup & Stevens, 1997), making it unique in reducing such tensions. When members of different social groups develop a friendship, they learn about the other group, generate affective ties, and potentially change their behavior toward them (Pettigrew, 1998). Given the realities of global population and workforce aging, age-diverse (intergenerational) friendships—typically between individuals with an age difference of at least 10–15 years (Dietz & Fasbender, 2022)—are particularly

relevant. Importantly, age-diverse friendship is conceptually distinct from mere exposure to a different-aged person, as it implies a meaningful interpersonal bond that is not solely determined by organizational requirements.

We focus on the work context because people spend a substantial amount of their time working. For example, in the European Union, employees work on average 57,342 hr over their lifetime (Enste et al., 2023). Moreover, the workplace is a hub for people of different ages to meet and interact with each other (Fasbender & Drury, 2022). In many areas of social life—such as sports clubs, educational institutions, and residential communities—people are often grouped with others of a similar age. This tendency toward age segregation means that meaningful interactions between people of different ages can be rare, limiting mutual understanding and reinforcing age-related stereotypes (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005). In contrast, the workplace is one of the few remaining societal

institutions that brings together people across a wide age spectrum in sustained, goal-oriented collaboration. As such, it has the potential to serve as a vital context for intergroup contact, in which people of all ages work side by side (Drury & Fasbender, 2024; North & Fiske, 2012). Research indeed shows that age-diverse friendships at work can enhance younger and older employees' motivation to cooperate with each other (Fasbender & Drury, 2022).

While a vast amount of research has examined intergroup contact in relation to other social categories, in particular race/ethnicity (Davies et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), our understanding of age-diverse contact—and particularly age-diverse friendships—remains limited (see review by Dietz & Fasbender, 2022). Much of that research circles around prejudice reduction and improvement of intergroup attitudes (Apriceno & Levy, 2023; Burnes et al., 2019), overlooking actual behaviors directed toward outgroup members and beyond (Cameron et al., 2025). The literature also places strong emphasis on improving younger people's attitudes toward older people (e.g., Cadieux et al., 2019; Kwong & Yan, 2022), while largely neglecting the reverse perspective (Schmitz et al., 2025). Lastly, little is known about the processes that explain the outcomes of high-quality age-diverse contact or friendship. Existing scarce studies emphasize identity processes (Cadieux et al., 2019; Fasbender & Drury, 2022). While identity processes are important, they cannot fully explain other-oriented outcomes, such as prosocial behavior—broadly defined as acts that are “generally beneficial to other people” (Penner et al., 2005, p. 366). In work and non-work contexts, prosocial behavior may take the form of *relational-supportive behaviors* (e.g., informational, instrumental, and emotional support; Burmeister et al., 2020; Tews et al., 2013), *collective-moral behaviors* (e.g., collective action to advocate for the rights and fair treatment of disadvantaged groups; Wright et al., 1990), and *superordinate-generative behaviors* (e.g., innovative problem solving generating solutions

with broadly distributed benefits; Jonassen, 2000). Such prosocial or other-oriented outcomes are better accounted for by other-oriented processes (Song et al., 2018), such as empathic concern and perspective taking, capturing the affective and cognitive elements of putting oneself into another's “shoes” (Fasbender et al., 2020; Gerpott et al., 2020). Despite promising insights, the literature in this area remains fragmented and underdeveloped, calling for more integrative and elaborate theorizing to guide future research.

Three theoretical shifts are needed to advance research on age-diversity and friendships: a focus on actual behavior in both work and non-work contexts, the integration of relatively younger and older people's perspectives, and greater attention to other-oriented processes. To advance these shifts, we draw on intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998), the taxonomy of transfer effects (Meleady et al., 2019), and research on other-oriented processes (Fasbender et al., 2020; Gerpott et al., 2020; Song et al., 2018) to introduce a theoretical framework of age-diverse friendship effects (see Figure 1).

Our framework advances prior work in several ways. We conceptualize age-diverse friendships as powerful vehicles of social change that, through other-oriented processes (i.e., empathic concern and perspective taking), extend well beyond the dyad. We suggest that age-diverse friendships generate positive spillover effects at three levels: (a) from the relatively older or younger friend to the broader age-diverse outgroup (primary transfer), (b) from the age-diverse outgroup to other, non-involved outgroups (secondary transfer), and (c) toward a more general liberalization that transcends group boundaries altogether (tertiary transfer). We further advance research beyond attitudinal change by focusing on different forms of prosocial behaviors in work and non-work contexts (i.e., relational-supportive, collective-moral, and superordinate-generative behaviors). Further, rather than

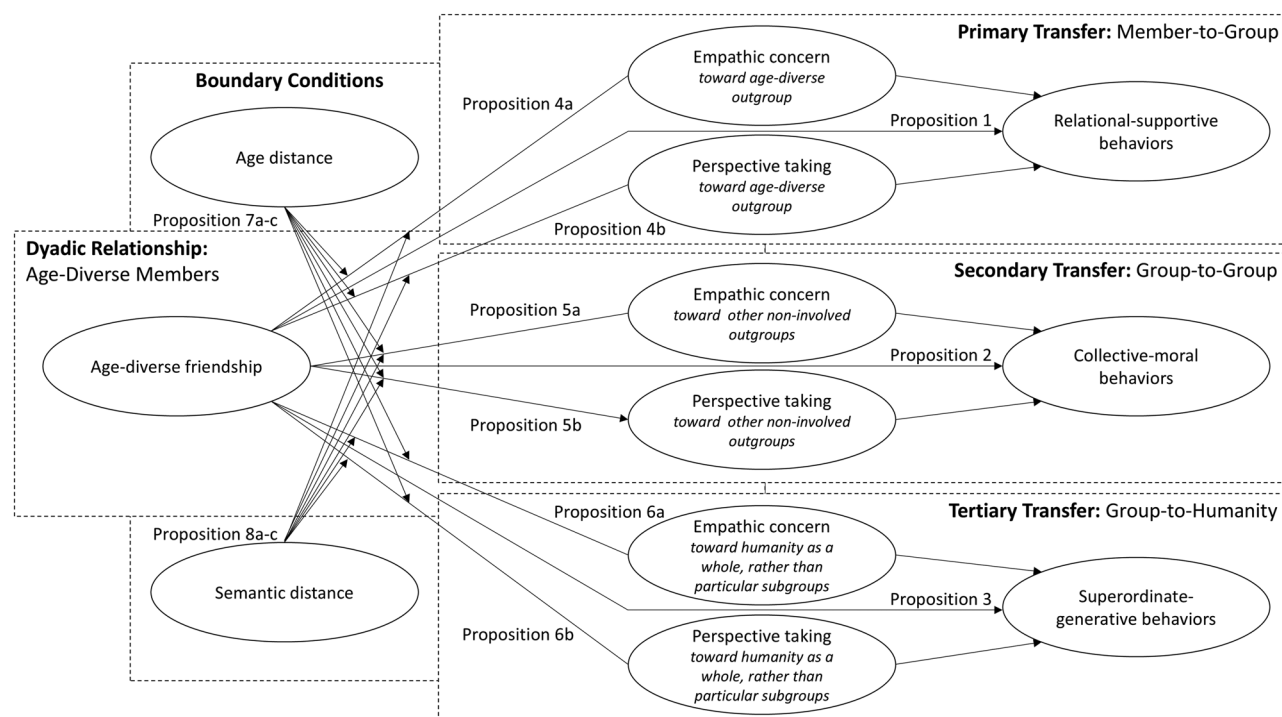


Figure 1 A theoretical framework of age-diverse friendship and its primary, secondary, and tertiary transfer effects.

focusing on one ingroup (e.g., younger adults), age-diverse friendships enable change in all age groups and help the integration of relatively younger and older people's perspectives. Another key contribution is our emphasis on other-oriented processes—empathic concern and perspective taking—as central to understanding how age-diverse friendships generate ripple effects on societal outcomes.

Importantly, our framework highlights two critical boundary conditions that shape the extent and direction of these transfer effects: age distance and semantic distance. Age distance reflects the size of the age gap between friends. Greater age gaps may initially heighten social categorization but also increase the effectiveness of meaningful transfer effects due to heightened sensitivity to possible differences in life circumstances. *Intragroup* semantic distance captures whether a friend is seen as representative of their age group (low distance) or atypical of it (high distance). *Intergroup* semantic distance refers to the perceived semantic distance between different outgroups, with low distance indicating that both outgroups are perceived as similar and high distance indicating that they are perceived as dissimilar. These perceptions determine whether the friendship generalizes to the wider age-diverse outgroup, to other, non-involved outgroups, or prompts broader liberalization effects.

Taken together, our framework highlights how age-diverse friendships at work have the potential to create far-reaching ripple effects—benefiting not only the individuals involved, but also the age-diverse outgroup, other non-involved outgroups, and ultimately society at large. This reminds us of Epicurus' observation that friendship, wherever it emerges, carries the power to awaken us to greater social connection and collective well-being.

From what tears us apart to what brings us together

What tears us apart? Social categorization and social identity

To better understand what tears us apart, social categorization and social identity theory (SIT; [Tajfel & Turner, 1986](#)) offer a useful lens for understanding how individuals form identities based on age group membership, which can lead to intergroup tensions. According to SIT, people categorize themselves and others into social groups—such as younger and older age groups—fostering in-group favoritism and out-group bias ([Swift et al., 2018](#)). These dynamics can give rise to tensions in settings like the workplace, where differing age-related experiences, norms, and expectations may lead to misunderstandings or stereotypes ([North & Fiske, 2015](#); [Urlick et al., 2017](#)). For example, younger individuals may view older colleagues as less adaptable, while older individuals might see younger coworkers as lacking expertise. Such categorizations can contribute to age-based bias and discrimination ([Fasbender, 2020](#)). However, research (e.g., [Drury & Fasbender, 2024](#); [Iweins et al., 2013](#); [Kunze et al., 2011](#)) shows that high-quality contact across age groups—characterized by mutual respect and cooperation—can reduce perceived discrimination and foster more inclusive workplace climates, thereby challenging rigid age boundaries and mitigating intergroup conflict.

What brings us together? Intergroup contact theory

To better understand what brings us together, intergroup contact theory ([Allport, 1954](#); [Pettigrew, 1998](#)) offers a compelling framework for improving relations between individuals from different age groups. Intergroup theory posits that high-quality contact with outgroup members—defined as positive, natural, and cooperative interactions ([Fasbender et al., 2020](#))—can reduce bias and foster more inclusive attitudes. This contact can take various forms, including direct interactions, observing others in intergroup exchanges (indirect contact), or even imagining positive encounters ([Dovidio et al., 2017](#)). Among these different forms of contact, friendship stands out as the most powerful and transformative form of high-quality contact, as it facilitates trust, sustained engagement, and emotional closeness ([Dietz & Fasbender, 2022](#); [Fasbender & Drury, 2022](#); [Pettigrew, 1998](#)). Such relationships promote empathy, reduce intergroup anxiety, and encourage perspective taking, all key psychological processes that underpin improved intergroup relations ([Davies et al., 2011](#); [Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006](#)). In the context of age-diverse settings, intergroup contact's effects are particularly salient: high-quality contact has been shown to weaken age-related stereotypes and reduce different forms of workplace conflict ([Drury & Fasbender, 2024](#)). Furthermore, the benefits of high-quality contact often extend beyond the individuals directly involved, contributing to more inclusive group norms and reducing systemic ageism ([Abrams et al., 2006](#); [Cadieux et al., 2019](#); [Iweins et al., 2013](#)). In sum, high-quality intergroup contact not only bridges perceived age divides but also lays the foundation for solidarity, cooperation, and mutual appreciation.

What carries us forward? A taxonomy of transfer effects

To better understand what carries us forward, we rely on the taxonomy proposed by [Meleady et al. \(2019\)](#), outlining how the effects of intergroup contact can generalize beyond the immediate contact experience. Building on research that high-quality contact across social groups can improve intergroup relations ([Cocco et al., 2024](#); [Paolini et al., 2021](#); [Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006](#)), Meleady and colleagues introduce a taxonomy of three distinct transfer effects that illuminate how contact with one outgroup individual can shape intergroup attitudes, and even general cognitive functioning.

Primary transfer

High-quality contact with one individual can generalize to all outgroup members, particularly if that person is perceived as representative of the group (lower intragroup semantic distance). Intergroup contact can thus shift attitudes not only toward the involved person but also toward the outgroup more generally, with spillover effects beyond the original context ([Pettigrew, 1997](#)). Meta-analytic evidence supports the primary transfer in terms of reduced prejudice across various outgroups, including age, but also ethnicity/race, people with physical or mental abilities, and sexual orientation ([Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006](#)).

Secondary transfer

Positive attitudes developed through contact with one outgroup may extend to other, non-involved outgroups, particularly when these outgroups are perceived as similar (lower intergroup semantic distance). This process reflects how attitudes are organized in associative networks, where changes to one node can influence attitudes toward conceptually proximal others (Harwood et al., 2011; Pettigrew, 2009). The effectiveness of secondary transfer in terms of reduced prejudices has been robust for various outgroups, including ethnicity/race, people with abilities, and sexual orientation (Vezzali et al., 2021), with little evidence on age groups (for an exception, see Cameron et al., 2025).

Tertiary transfer

Beyond attitude generalization, intergroup contact can lead to broader cognitive shifts—such as enhanced cognitive engagement and openness to diversity. These tertiary effects are more likely when contact partners deviate from existing group schemas (higher intragroup semantic distance), thereby prompting deeper cognitive engagement and less reliance on categorical thinking (Hodson et al., 2018; Meleady et al., 2020). Initial evidence for the tertiary transfer, in terms of egalitarian viewpoints or political attitudes, exists for some groups, such as contact with international students, ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities (Friehe et al., 2025; Meleady et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2023).

Toward a theoretical framework of age-diverse friendship effects

Building on foundational theories of social identity and social categorization (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), and the taxonomy of transfer effects (Meleady et al., 2019), we develop a conceptual model that outlines the core psychological processes and behavioral outcomes of age-diverse friendships. Specifically, we present a theoretical framework of age-diverse friendship effects that captures how such friendships contribute to reducing intergroup boundaries, fostering inclusion, and promoting prosocial engagement across age groups, other non-involved groups, and beyond. While our model centers on the workplace—where age-diverse interactions are both common and consequential—it is designed to apply across a variety of social contexts, including educational, community, and familial settings.

Our framework elaborates three distinct levels of generalization through which age-diverse friendships exert their effects: member-to-group (primary transfer), group-to-group (secondary transfer), and group-to-humanity (tertiary transfer). For each level, we specify the affective and cognitive processes that explain why and how the effects of a single friendship can extend beyond the dyad. Importantly, we also identify key boundary conditions that influence the strength and direction of these processes. These include age distance—the relative age gap between the individuals in the friendship (cf. Dietz & Fasbender, 2022)—and semantic distance—including the perceived representativeness of the friend in relation to their broader age group (intragroup semantic distance) and the perceived similarity between two different social groups (intergroup semantic distance; cf. Meleady et al., 2019).

Member-to-group generalization: primary transfer to age-diverse outgroup

High-quality contact with one befriended age-diverse person can generalize to all outgroup members (cf. Pettigrew, 1998). In the workplace, age-diverse friendships can thus benefit not only the individuals directly involved in the relationship (e.g., an older worker befriended by a younger colleague), but also non-involved members of the same outgroup (e.g., older colleagues more broadly). These effects extend beyond the immediate relationship and can spill over into other domains of life (cf. Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). For example, prosocial tendencies nurtured in the work context may also influence behavior in family or community settings, and vice versa. What is particularly impactful about age-diverse friendships is not only their potential to change attitudes (Davies et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), but also to promote tangible behaviors. We argue that such friendships foster relational supportive behaviors that provide direct, observable benefits to identifiable others in one's immediate environment (cf. Pearce & Amato, 1980)—including informational support (e.g., sharing knowledge or advice; Burmeister et al., 2020), instrumental support (e.g., assisting with tasks; Tews et al., 2013), and emotional support (e.g., providing encouragement; Tews et al., 2013)—directed toward age-diverse outgroup members. These behaviors can be directed not only at the age-diverse friend (Fasbender & Drury, 2022) but also at other age-diverse outgroup members (i.e., individuals of a different age who are not directly part of the friendship; Davies et al., 2011).

Proposition 1: Age-diverse friendships promote relational-supportive behaviors (e.g., informational, instrumental, and emotional support) toward age-diverse outgroup members in work and non-work contexts (primary transfer).

Group-to-group generalization: secondary transfer to non-involved outgroups

High-quality contact with one befriended age-diverse person can extend beyond the directly involved individuals and their respective age groups. Building on this insight, we argue that age-diverse friendships can also generalize to entirely different, non-involved social groups, such as people with a migration background or individuals with chronic health conditions or disabilities. This group-to-group generalization process—known as secondary transfer (Pettigrew, 2009)—represents an important route through which age-diverse friendships may reduce wider societal biases and foster broader intergroup solidarity. What is particularly impactful about secondary transfer is its capacity to promote tangible, inclusive behavior toward outgroups that have not been part of the original friendship experience. We propose that age-diverse friendships foster collective-moral behaviors that promote the welfare, fair treatment, and inclusion of broader social groups beyond one's immediate interaction partner, such as collective action (Wright et al., 1990). Past research has shown that intergroup contact can foster collective action (e.g., supporting the rights of marginalized or disadvantaged groups; van

Zomeran et al., 2008) in support of outgroup members, including ethnic minorities (Kotzur et al., 2019; Tropp et al., 2021) and sexual minority groups (Reimer et al., 2017). For example, Vezzali et al. (2023) demonstrate that high-quality contact with immigrants predicts collective action intentions toward immigrants, which in turn generalize to a wide range of outgroups, including those considered Roma people, gay and lesbian people, individuals with disabilities, and obese people.

When it comes to age groups, de Paula Sieverding et al. (2024) found that high-quality intergenerational contact among older adults was associated with greater political solidarity with younger generations, reflecting a form of collective action. Furthermore, Cameron et al. (2025) found that meaningful intergenerational contact can support both younger and older people's confidence in social action, such as contributing to the community and "making the world a better place" (p. 6). Importantly, we argue that such collective-moral behaviors can generalize to entirely different, non-involved social groups (cf. Pettigrew, 2009). In this way, age-diverse friendships may inspire individuals to take a public stance in support of the rights and inclusion of other groups, such as people with a migration background or individuals with disabilities. These collective-moral behaviors can emerge in both work and non-work domains. For example, individuals who experience a meaningful friendship with an age-diverse colleague at work may be more likely to speak up against various forms of discrimination at work, but also support the inclusion of people with disabilities in community settings or share knowledge and resources with migrant coworkers. Along these lines, age-diverse friendships may also lead people to participate in or support civic initiatives, policy reforms, or workplace efforts aimed at enhancing social inclusion for groups not directly represented in the friendship.

Proposition 2: Age-diverse friendships' effects transfer to other, non-involved outgroups in respect of collective-moral behaviors (e.g., support for the rights of these groups) in work and non-work contexts (secondary transfer).

Group-to-humanity generalization: tertiary transfer to all humans

While age-diverse friendships can positively influence relational-supportive behaviors toward age-diverse outgroup members as well as foster collective-moral behaviors toward other, non-involved social groups, their effects can also extend to a more abstract and inclusive level of generalization, resulting in superordinate-generative behaviors. This third level, known as tertiary transfer, refers to the broad psychological changes that occur when individuals move beyond group-based thinking and develop more flexible, egalitarian worldviews (Meleady et al., 2019). In this context, we propose that high-quality age-diverse friendships may foster both affective and cognitive liberalization. The latter describes the process by which individuals "stop thinking in boxes" and instead engage in active, complex, and inclusive thinking (Hodson et al., 2018); it could be enhanced by close and positive relationships with the outgroup (Fuochi et al., 2024). Affective liberalization, in turn, reflects the broadening of

emotional concern and social identification to include all people, resulting in more universal compassion and belonging.

What is novel and impactful about affective and cognitive liberalization is their combined potential to enhance societal cohesion by transforming how individuals conceptualize and emotionally relate to social diversity. In fact, it has been shown that intergroup contact is linked to egalitarian mindsets and consequent responsible environmental attitudes and behaviors (Meleady et al., 2020). Furthermore, a study by Lu et al. (2017) showed that intercultural relationships, both in terms of friendships and romantic relationships, promoted creative performance, workplace innovations, and entrepreneurship, suggesting that contact with diverse others could lead to "out of the box" thinking.

Building on this logic, we propose that age-diverse friendships—especially those that involve higher semantic distance—challenge prior expectations and may facilitate superordinate-generative behaviors that benefit others across group boundaries by generating solutions, practices, or innovations with broadly distributed benefits, often without direct contact with ultimate beneficiaries (e.g., innovative problem solving). Individuals begin to address challenges with broader, more inclusive reasoning, thus generating broadly distributed benefits beyond specific group boundaries (Jonassen, 2000). Innovative problem solving can occur in both work and non-work domains. When experiencing meaningful friendships with much older or younger colleagues, employees may be more likely to develop inclusive solutions to workplace dilemmas or contribute to collaborative efforts that transcend age or other social group lines due to affective and cognitive liberalization. Beyond the workplace, such friendships may enable individuals to approach societal issues in non-work settings—such as climate change or refugee support—not through narrow ingroup lenses, but from the perspective of shared humanity (Wölfer & Foroutan, 2022).

Proposition 3: Age-diverse friendships' effects transfer to humanity in respect of superordinate-generative behaviors (e.g., innovative problem solving) in work and non-work contexts (tertiary transfer).

Underlying processes linking age-diverse friendship to prosocial behavior

To explain why such primary, secondary, and tertiary transfer occur, we propose that two interrelated psychological processes account for the extension of prosocial tendencies from age-diverse friendships beyond the dyad: *empathic concern* (affective) and *perspective taking* (cognitive). Empathic concern captures the affective process of experiencing other-oriented feelings of compassion, sympathy, and concern for another person's welfare (Davis, 1983) and has been demonstrated to be a pathway through which intergroup contact can reduce prejudice beyond the initial interaction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Perspective taking is "an active cognitive process of putting oneself in another person's 'shoes' to imagine the world from their point of view" (Fasbender et al., 2024, p. 1) and has been linked to more inclusive, less category-bound perceptions of outgroups (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Much of the previous work has focused on attitudinal outcomes toward social groups other than age-diverse

groups, or neglected the underlying processes. In the present framework, we extend previous insights by theorizing how affective and cognitive processes underpin actual prosocial behavior across three levels of generalization.

In the context of primary transfer, Tam et al. (2006) showed that intergenerational contact enhanced empathy, which in turn fostered more favorable attitudes toward older adults more broadly. Furthermore, Çakal et al. (2021) demonstrated that intergroup contact with disadvantaged immigrants in Cyprus, Romania, and Israel predicted stronger social change motivations through increased perspective taking toward the respective outgroups. Following on this, we propose that age-diverse friendships via these processes can also increase actual prosocial behavior. Empathic concern and perspective taking cultivated through meaningful age-diverse friendships are expected to generalize to age-diverse outgroup members, thereby promoting relational-supportive behaviors (e.g., informational, instrumental, and emotional support) toward these age-diverse groups.

Proposition 4: Affective and cognitive processes explain the primary transfer effects of age-diverse friendships. Specifically, (a) empathic concern and (b) perspective taking toward age-diverse outgroup members explain why age-diverse friendships promote relational-supportive behaviors toward these groups.

In secondary transfer, these same processes may extend beyond age categories to other, non-involved outgroups. For example, empathic concern can generalize to groups perceived as semantically similar in different ways (e.g., from the outgroup of older people to the outgroup of people with disabilities; Fiske et al., 2002). Supporting this, Giovannini and Vezzali (2011) found that Italian teachers' intergroup contact with immigrant parents predicted greater support for social policies favoring immigrant children via increased empathic concern. In the same year, Vezzali and Giovannini (2011) showed also that school students' intergroup friendships with immigrant children were indirectly associated with improved attitudes toward people with disabilities, via perspective taking toward immigrant children. In this light, we propose that empathic concern and perspective taking are central to explaining why age-diverse friendships can foster broader societal engagement and moral support for other, non-involved outgroups.

Proposition 5: Affective and cognitive processes explain the secondary transfer effects of age-diverse friendships. Specifically, (a) empathic concern and (b) perspective taking toward other, non-involved outgroups explain why age-diverse friendships promote collective-moral behaviors toward these groups.

In tertiary transfer, empathic concern and perspective taking are proposed to operate at a higher level of abstraction, reflected in affective and cognitive liberalization. On the affective side, age-diverse friendships may foster global empathic concern rooted in inclusive self-expansion processes such as common ingroup identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) or identification with all humanity (McFarland et al., 2012). On the cognitive side,

cognitive liberalization reflects increasingly generalized perspective taking that promotes nuanced evaluations of complex issues and reduces reliance on group-based heuristics (Hodson et al., 2018; see also Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Together, these liberalized forms of empathic concern and perspective taking provide a basis for understanding why age-diverse friendships may ultimately promote superordinate-generative behaviors, such as innovative problem solving that yields broadly distributed benefits beyond specific group boundaries.

Proposition 6: Affective and cognitive liberalization processes explain the tertiary transfer effects of age-diverse friendships. Specifically, (a) empathic concern and (b) perspective taking extend toward all humans, explaining why age-diverse friendships promote superordinate-generative behaviors.

Boundary conditions: age distance and semantic distance

Our framework identifies two boundary conditions shaping the extent to which age-diverse friendships generate transfer effects: age distance and semantic distance.

Age distance

Age distance refers to the size of the age difference between friends (cf. Dietz & Fasbender, 2022; see also Suh & Kim, 2025). We argue that the positive effects of age-diverse friendships are most pronounced when there is a substantial age difference between colleagues. From previous research on age-inclusive leadership (De Boom & De Meulenaere, 2025), we know that with increasing age difference between leaders and employees, age-inclusive leadership had a stronger effect on intrinsic work motivation. Additionally, Burmeister et al. (2018) demonstrated that greater age distance was linked to a more positive perception of age-inclusive HR practices and a more positive age-diversity climate, suggesting a heightened sensitivity to age-related differences. It is therefore not implausible to assume that the positive impact of age-diverse friendships becomes stronger for friends with increasing age distance.

The moderating role of age distance can be explained by social identification processes. Demographic characteristics like age often form the basis for categorizing oneself and others into social groups (Chattopadhyay et al., 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Such surface-level attributes are easily observed and processed during social interactions (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), unlike deep-level characteristics such as personality or values, which require knowing another person, at least to some extent (Jansen & Searle, 2021). Consequently, age distance between colleagues can trigger social categorization processes, which often result in negative workplace experiences and attitudes (Jackson et al., 1991; Shore et al., 2003; Tsui et al., 1992) and create social distance, making age-diverse friendship a powerful tool for overcoming social tensions in work and non-work contexts. Specifically, we argue that age-diverse friendships broaden individuals' horizons and promote empathic concern and perspective taking more effectively as the age distance between friends

increases. This principle should hold across the different levels of transfer.

Regarding primary transfer (i.e., member-to-group generalization), we argue that increasing age distance strengthens the positive effects of age-diverse friendships on empathic concern and perspective taking toward other age outgroup members. Differences in age are typically associated with differences in life circumstances, shaped by age-graded and history-graded influences (Baltes et al., 1980). Such differences become more apparent as the age gap between friends widens. Consider an employee who befriends a colleague who is 15 years younger. Through meaningful interactions, the employee may develop a greater awareness of the unique challenges and social contexts that characterize their colleague's age group. Extending this logic further, imagine that the same employee befriends a colleague who is 30 years younger. Due to the greater age difference, they may notice even more pronounced differences in lifestyle, attitudes, and experiences. This could promote greater compassion and emotional responsiveness toward other age groups in general (i.e., empathic concern) while also enhancing the ability to understand the world from these groups' viewpoint (i.e., perspective taking). We thus propose that greater age distance between friends amplifies the positive effects of age-diverse friendships by sensitizing people to possible differences in life circumstances, preparing them to put themselves into the shoes of age-diverse outgroup members more generally. With increasing age distance, the effects of age-diverse friendships on empathic concern and perspective taking toward age-diverse outgroup members should thus be strengthened, ultimately leading to prosocial behavior toward these groups.

Proposition 7a: Age distance moderates the effects of age-diverse friendships on (a) empathic concern and (b) perspective taking toward age-diverse outgroup members, indirectly strengthening relational-supportive behaviors toward these groups: The effects are stronger with increasing age distance between age-diverse friends.

With respect to secondary transfer (i.e., group-to-group generalization), we apply similar reasoning. Age-diverse friendships provide access to diverse views and perspectives that may even be complementary to one's own, and this diversity becomes more pronounced as age distance increases. The greater the age gap between friends is, the more likely they are to encounter different worldviews shaped by distinct historical periods and developmental challenges. Becoming more sensitized to other age groups' life circumstances may foster a more general awareness that other outgroup members—not only people of different ages—also operate within unique circumstances and face distinct challenges. We thus argue that greater age differences between friends highlight possible group differences more strongly, which enables a greater expansion of awareness of the life circumstances and perspectives of other outgroups more generally. Specifically, we propose that an increasing age distance amplifies the effects of age-diverse friendships on empathic concern and perspective taking toward other, non-involved groups, ultimately leading to collective-moral behaviors toward these groups.

Proposition 7b: Age distance moderates the effects of age-diverse friendships on (a) empathic concern and (b) perspective taking toward other, non-involved outgroups, thereby indirectly strengthening collective-moral behaviors toward these groups: The effects are stronger with increasing age distance between age-diverse friends.

Regarding tertiary transfer (i.e., group-to-humanity generalization), we extend our reasoning to affective and cognitive liberalization processes (i.e., empathic concern and perspective taking toward all humans). The greater the age difference between friends, the more powerful their friendship is in challenging each individual's prior expectations. To illustrate, an employee's assumptions about their older colleagues may be rooted in familial experiences or societal stereotypes about aging. When befriending a colleague who is 15 years older, the employee may start rethinking their attitudes toward their colleague's age group. However, if the same employee also befriends a colleague, who is 30 years older, their friendship can create pronounced dissonance between existing schemas about aging and the reality of their colleague's individuality (cf. Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). This dissonance challenges rigid categorization processes. Hence, the greater the age distance in an age-diverse friendship, the greater its power to challenge more deeply entrenched assumptions, which may enable individuals to engage in more inclusive identification processes (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) and thinking patterns (Hodson et al., 2018). We thus propose that age distance acts as a moderator, amplifying the effects of age-diverse friendships on empathic concern and perspective taking toward all humans, ultimately leading to superordinate-generative behaviors.

Proposition 7c: Age distance moderates the effects of age-diverse friendships on (a) empathic concern and (b) perspective taking toward all humans, indirectly strengthening superordinate-generative behaviors: The effects are stronger with increasing age distance between age-diverse friends.

Semantic distance

Semantic distance refers to the perceived representativeness of a contact partner for their social group (intragroup semantic distance) or the perceived similarity between two different social groups (intergroup semantic distance; cf. Meleady et al., 2019). In other words, it captures how closely individuals link the contact partner to a wider group identity or how conceptually related two different groups appear to be. Semantic distance has been shown to influence whether and how the effects of intergroup contact generalize beyond the immediate contact situation (Harwood et al., 2011; Meleady et al., 2019).

In the context of primary transfer, there is some empirical evidence for the strengthening role of prototypicality in intergroup generalization (Brown et al., 1999; Harwood et al., 2017). For instance, Brown et al. (1999) found across two studies that positive attitudes toward an outgroup were more likely to generalize when intergroup contact involved members perceived as prototypical, highlighting the moderating role of membership salience as an indicator for low semantic distance. Similarly, in the context

of age, [Harwood et al. \(2017\)](#) demonstrated that perceptions of an outgroup partner's "fit" with their age group moderated the effects of imagined intergroup contact: positive interactions with prototypical older partners increased intentions for future contact with older people, whereas positive interactions with atypical older partners could actually reduce such intentions.

Following on this, we argue that the effects of age-diverse friendships are more likely to generalize from an individual friend to their broader age group when the friend is seen as prototypical of that group (i.e., low intragroup semantic distance; [Meleady et al., 2019](#)). For example, when an employee's older friend at work is perceived as having characteristics, values, or experiences typical of older workers in general, positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward that friend are more likely to extend to older colleagues more broadly (*cf.* [Pettigrew, 1998](#)). In contrast, when the older friend is perceived as atypical for their age group, these positive effects are less likely to generalize. This is because individuals who deviate from the perceived group prototype (higher intragroup semantic distance; *cf.* [Meleady et al., 2019](#)) are more likely to be subtyped, meaning they are placed into a narrower, exceptional category that leaves attitudes and behaviors toward the broader outgroup unchanged ([Hewstone, 1994](#)). Taken together, we propose that age-diverse friendships are particularly effective for primary transfer when the involved different-aged outgroup members are perceived as prototypical representatives of their broader age group (i.e., lower intragroup semantic distance).

Proposition 8a: Semantic distance moderates the effects of age-diverse friendships on (a) empathic concern and (b) perspective taking toward age-diverse outgroup members, indirectly shaping relational-supportive behaviors toward these groups: The effects are stronger if involved different-aged outgroup members are perceived as prototypical for their age group (lower intragroup semantic distance).

In the context of secondary transfer, the positive effects of age-diverse friendships may extend from the befriended partner's age group to other, non-involved social groups when these groups are perceived as conceptually similar to the friend's age group (i.e., lower intergroup semantic distance; [Harwood et al., 2011](#); [Meleady et al., 2019](#)). What is important here is that it concerns how the intergroup semantic distance is *perceived* by individuals ([Harwood et al., 2011](#); [Meleady et al., 2019](#); [Pettigrew, 2009](#)). For example, an individual who has a close friendship with a relatively older colleague may also perceive people with chronic health conditions or disabilities as facing similar challenges—such as marginalization, underestimation of abilities, or barriers to full participation in the workplace ([Cuddy et al., 2007](#)). When such parallels are salient, positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward the older friend can more readily generalize to these other groups (*cf.* [Pettigrew, 2009](#)). In contrast, when non-involved groups are perceived as dissimilar from the friend's age group (i.e., high intergroup semantic distance), these secondary transfer effects are less likely to occur. Without perceived conceptual overlap, positive experiences with a relatively older colleague, for instance, may remain confined to age-related contexts and fail to translate into support for other disadvantaged groups. This aligns

with the idea that lower intergroup semantic distance facilitates the spread of positive attitudes across group boundaries, whereas higher intergroup semantic distance limits such generalization by reinforcing categorical separations ([Meleady et al., 2019](#)).

Empirical evidence supports the importance of perceived similarity in enabling secondary transfer. For instance, [Harwood et al. \(2011\)](#) found that attitudes toward one outgroup can generalize more effectively to other outgroups when the outgroups are seen as conceptually closer. Similarly, studies on the secondary transfer effect ([Pettigrew, 2009](#)) suggest that conceptual associations between groups in an individual's experience act as a cognitive bridge, allowing the benefits of intergroup contact to extend beyond the original contact target. Supporting this argument, [Van Laar and colleagues \(2005\)](#) found that inter-ethnic roommate contact did not generalize from contact with White students to other (secondary) ethnic groups, including minority groups such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos; however, attitudes did generalize from contact with one ethnic minority to the two other minority groups. These findings imply that fostering perceptions of similarity between age groups and other disadvantaged groups may be a powerful lever for promoting broader social inclusion. Drawing on this evidence, we propose that age-diverse friendships are particularly effective for secondary transfer when the non-involved groups (e.g., migrants, people with chronic health conditions, or disabilities) are perceived as similar to the different-aged outgroup involved in the friendship (i.e., lower intergroup semantic distance).

Proposition 8b: Semantic distance moderates the effects of age-diverse friendships on (a) empathic concern and (b) perspective taking toward other, non-involved outgroups, thereby indirectly shaping collective-moral behaviors toward these groups: The effects are stronger if non-involved groups are perceived as similar to the different-aged outgroup (lower intergroup semantic distance).

In the context of tertiary transfer, which entails broader affective and cognitive liberalization, the effects of age-diverse friendships may be enhanced when the befriended individual is perceived as atypical of their age group (i.e., high intragroup semantic distance; [Hodson et al., 2018](#); [Meleady et al., 2019](#)). In such cases, the friendship serves as a powerful counter-stereotypical experience that disrupts existing mental schemas about the group ([Dwertmann et al., 2023](#)). This disruption can stimulate more flexible thinking, encourage individuals to question entrenched stereotypes, and foster inclusive perspectives that transcend specific group boundaries ([Meleady et al., 2019](#)). Cognitive flexibility can be enhanced in several ways. [Crisp and Turner \(2011\)](#) proposed that encountering diversity that defies expectations can lead to generalized cognitive flexibility. Similarly, [Sassenberg et al. \(2022\)](#) suggested that spontaneous processing can produce stereotyping and biases, but these can be reduced by activating flexible mindsets. For example, in the work context, when a relatively younger employee forms a friendship with a relatively older colleague who defies common stereotypes—perhaps by demonstrating high adaptability to new technology, openness to novel ideas, or unconventional career paths—this experience may prompt the younger employee to reconsider their assumptions

about not only older workers but also other social groups. These counter-stereotypical encounters can expand perspective-taking and empathic concern to all humans, thereby promoting generalized egalitarian mindsets and openness to diversity (Hodson et al., 2018). Conversely, when the friend is perceived as prototypical of their age group (i.e., lower intragroup semantic distance), the interaction may simply reinforce existing group schemas. While such friendships can still yield primary transfer benefits, they are less likely to stimulate the kind of broad, schema-challenging cognitive shifts required for tertiary transfer.

Empirical work on intergroup contact to support this reasoning is yet to come. Conceptual work on cognitive liberalization (Hodson et al., 2018) suggests that higher intragroup semantic distance—through exposure to atypical outgroup members—encourages deeper cognitive engagement and reduces reliance on category-based processing. Similarly, Meleady et al. (2019) argue that atypical exemplars can catalyze generalized openness by weakening rigid group distinctions. These conceptualizations suggest that tertiary transfer is most likely to emerge when age-diverse friendships provide novel, counter-stereotypical experiences that push individuals beyond traditional age-based categorizations.

Proposition 8c: Semantic distance moderates the effects of age-diverse friendships on (a) empathic concern and (b) perspective taking toward all humans, indirectly shaping superordinate-generative behaviors: The effects are stronger if involved different-aged outgroup members are perceived as atypical for their age group (higher intragroup semantic distance).

A final remark concerns what we refer to as the *paradox of prototypicality*, which emerges when jointly considering our Propositions 8a and 8c. At first glance, these propositions may appear contradictory: whereas prototypical outgroup members (i.e., lower intragroup semantic distance) strengthen primary transfer effects (Brown et al., 1999; Harwood et al., 2017), atypical outgroup members (i.e., higher intragroup semantic distance) strengthen tertiary transfer effects (Hodson et al., 2018; Meleady et al., 2019). This raises the question of whether age-diverse friendships lead to a progression of transfer effects (from primary to tertiary), or whether they instead entail a divergence in outcomes depending on how the outgroup member is perceived.

We argue that this apparent contradiction reflects a fundamental tension inherent in intergroup contact processes. Specifically, prototypicality and atypicality activate different—but coexisting—pathways of generalization (Brown et al., 1999; Harwood et al., 2017). When a different-aged friend is perceived as prototypical of their age group, the friendship reinforces category-based processing and facilitates generalization to the broader age-diverse outgroup (primary transfer). In contrast, when the friend is perceived as atypical, the interaction challenges existing schemas and weakens category boundaries, thereby fostering cognitive and affective liberalization (tertiary transfer). Importantly, these processes are not mutually exclusive; rather, they vary in *relative strength* depending on the perceived prototypicality of the age-diverse friend. Thus, prototypicality does not eliminate tertiary transfer, nor does atypicality eliminate primary transfer—it shifts the balance between them.

This perspective suggests that transfer effects should not be understood as a linear progression (from primary to secondary to tertiary), but instead as a system in which the three levels of transfer effects are differently activated (Hodson et al., 2018; Meleady et al., 2019). In this sense, the paradox of prototypicality reflects a trade-off between category-based generalization and category-transcending transfer effects.

Discussion

We set out to broaden our understanding of age-diverse friendships by developing a theoretical framework for understanding age-diverse friendship effects. We propose a theoretical framework showing how such friendships extend beyond the dyad to influence organizations and society through three transfer effects: from individual friends to their age-diverse outgroup (primary), from age groups to other, non-involved outgroups (secondary), and toward humanity beyond group boundaries (tertiary). These processes, driven by emphatic concern and perspective taking, can foster prosocial behaviors in work and non-work settings, with their strength shaped by age distance and semantic distance. Based on our theoretical framework, we discuss several implications for future research and practice.

Implications for research

We first outline methodological recommendations for testing our propositions and, second, a broader research agenda that moves beyond our model.

Methodological recommendations for testing the model propositions

Research on age-diverse workplace friendships to test the propositions outlined here may employ a variety of different research designs and analytical methods (see Table 1). To test the propositions related to the primary, secondary, and tertiary transfer, experimental studies are well-suited. For example, experiments can be designed in which participants recall or imagine experiences of age-diverse (vs. same-age) friendships and report their responses to various (past) prosocial behavior outcomes, such as helping behavior or collection action (Drury et al., 2023). Experiments may also be helpful to capture behavioral outcomes of age-diverse friendships that go beyond helping, such as innovative problem solving at work or outside work (e.g., to find solutions for organizational or societal complex situations and dilemmas). Experimental designs (both vignette studies and field experiments or organizational interventions) may also be useful to test the mechanisms that link age-diverse friendships to empathic concern and perspective taking. For this reason, the recommendations of Aguinis and Bradley (2014) on experimental vignette studies, as well as those of Truxillo et al. (2015) on intervention research, may prove particularly useful.

Furthermore, field studies may be beneficial to test the impact of age-diverse friendships and their implications inside and outside work, given the external validity of these designs (Wang et al., 2017). Surveys focusing on individuals and their actual experiences of age-diverse friendships may be an insightful starting point to explore how such friendships influence behaviors in different life

Table 1 Example study designs to test the propositions of age-diverse friendship and its primary, secondary, and tertiary transfer effects.

Methodological aim	Design	Examples	Propositions
Establish causal effects	Experiment (online or lab)	- Manipulation of contact as direct (e.g., recall) or imagined scenario - Video vignettes showing age-diverse vs. same-age friendships - Behavioral measures of prosocial behaviors (e.g., donations) - Dilemmas of societal challenges to capture superordinate-generative behaviors, such as innovative problem-solving (i.e., amount, scope, creativity)	P1–3
Test real-world experience and generalizability across contexts	Individual longitudinal survey	- Self-reported age-diverse friendship experiences - Actual prosocial behavior across time, work/non-work contexts, and groups (e.g., migrants, people with chronic health conditions or disabilities)	P4–6
Examine relational and dyadic mechanisms	Dyadic survey	- Age-diverse worker pairs report on self, other, and relationship - Mutual empathic concern, perspective taking, and prosocial behaviors - Actor–Partner Interdependence Models (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006) to disentangle processes for relatively younger and older workers	P7, 8
Capture structural and indirect effects	Social network	- Prevalence, reciprocity, and strength of age-diverse ties in organizations - Quantitative (e.g., number of ties) and qualitative (e.g., centrality, reflecting the influence of a node) indicators of network position and link to age-diverse friendship - Role of indirect contact (i.e., friends-of-friends) - Structural (e.g., availability, reachability) and psychological (e.g., capacity for new ties) aspects as predictors of age-diverse friendships.	P7, 8

Note. The table highlights primary links; all designs may inform multiple methodological aims and propositions. *P1–3 (condensed)* = age-diverse friendships promote positive effects across work and non-work contexts, from relational support for age-diverse outgroup members (primary transfer) to collective-moral behaviors toward non-involved outgroups (secondary transfer), and superordinate-generative behaviors to humanity (tertiary transfer). *P4–6 (condensed)* = empathic concern and perspective taking drive the primary, secondary, and tertiary transfer effects of age-diverse friendships across relational, collective-moral, and superordinate-generative outcomes. *P7 (condensed)* = age distance moderates how age-diverse friendships translate into empathic concern, perspective taking, and prosocial behavior. *P8 (condensed)* = perceived intragroup and intergroup semantic distance moderates the extent to which age-diverse friendships show primary, secondary, or tertiary transfer effects.

domains (beyond work context) and to other, non-involved outgroups, such as people with a migration background or individuals with chronic health conditions or disabilities.

Research designs and analytical methodologies that capture social relations and dynamics are also well-suited to test the propositions by sampling dyads and social networks. Dyadic studies (e.g., [Fasbender & Drury, 2022](#)) can be used to investigate whether the experience of age-diverse friendship is reciprocal, which mechanisms lead to prosocial behaviors in different contexts and to which non-involved groups, and whether these processes are similar for relatively younger and older employees. For this design, researchers recruit unique pairs of workers (i.e., relatively younger and older employees who regularly work together with a certain degree of mutual interdependence and common goals) and collect information about the self, the other, and their relationship (see also [Tse & Ashkanasy, 2015](#)). These data can be analyzed using methodologies that leverage the information of the dyad, such as the actor-partner interdependence model ([Kenny et al., 2006](#)). For practical examples of such modelling, see [Burmeister et al. \(2020\)](#) or [Fasbender et al. \(2021\)](#).

Another promising approach to capture the proposed social dynamics is via social network analysis ([Wölfer & Hewstone, 2017](#)). People may have relationships with multiple others, and these relationships can span across hierarchies, units or departments, organizations, and beyond. Social network analysis investigates these social structures and uses nodes (e.g., employee) and their ties (relationships between nodes) to represent the network. Social network analysis can provide information on both quantitative (e.g., size) and qualitative (e.g., centrality, which refers to the influence of a node in a network) indicators of the network. Applied to our framework, the methodology can be used to investigate the number, reciprocity, and strength of friendships with same and age-diverse others, as well as how much the effects of such friendships extend beyond the involved dyad (e.g., indirect contact links). In addition, age-diverse friendships may position individuals as *brokers* between otherwise separate friendship cliques, thereby shaping how trust, influence, and information flow across age-based subgroups in the wider network ([Tasselli & Kilduff, 2018](#)). The four-step approach by [Agneessens and Labianca \(2022\)](#) may

prove helpful for collecting survey-based social network information in organizations.

Future research agenda beyond the proposed model

There are several promising directions for future research that go beyond our theoretical framework and the propositions outlined in this article.

Features of contact and friendships

One important avenue to investigate is the features of contact and friendship that shape transfer effects. Aspects such as exposure (e.g., frequency, indirect versus direct), reciprocity versus one-sidedness, friendship strength and quality, and the scope of the friendship (i.e., work-related only or extending to other life domains) are likely to play an important role in the transfer effects proposed in our framework. For example, some employees may consider a colleague a close friend but limit their conversations to the work domain rather than discussing with the friend issues from other life domains, which may influence the breadth of transfer effects other than work with the friend (e.g., Casper et al., 2025). Workplace hierarchies and different functions with inherent inequality in relationships may hinder the formation and maintenance or change the functioning of the friendship (Colbert & Bono, 2016). A systematic examination of these features would advance the understanding of when and how age-diverse friendships yield broader outcomes.

Antecedents of age-diverse friendships

To date, little is known about how people understand, build, and maintain friendships with people from another age group (Dietz & Fasbender, 2022; Elliott O'Dare et al., 2019, 2021). Several factors may act as important antecedents and could be examined in future research to inform organizational interventions. At the individual level, differences in how people value friendships at work over friendships outside work (i.e., friendship type preference) are relevant, as they shape how such friendships are developed and maintained as people age (Fasbender & Junker, 2026). In the context of age-diverse friendships, it is also relevant to consider individual prejudice or fear of being a target of prejudice, as such barriers have been found to undermine intergroup interactions (Binder et al., 2009) and thus may make age-diverse friendship formation more challenging, yet not impossible (Davies et al., 2011). At the job level, different work design features (e.g., task interdependence) and leadership (e.g., leader-member exchange) may have unique effects on how age-diverse friendships form in the workplace by facilitating affective (e.g., empathic concern) and cognitive (e.g., perspective taking) friendship processes. Organizations could foster the formation and maintenance of age-diverse friendships by promoting relational work design and supportive leadership, thereby creating opportunities for high-quality interactions between employees of different age groups.

Intersectionality and age-diverse friendship effects

Future research would benefit from adopting an intersectional lens when examining age-diverse friendships and their transfer effects. Age is not a standalone social category; rather, individuals simultaneously occupy multiple demographic positions (e.g., age $\times$ gender $\times$ social class), which may shape the content and salience of stereotypes and the likelihood of experiencing bias

(Cole, 2009; Marcus, 2022). From the perspective of our framework, intersectionality may influence (a) whether age-diverse friendships form in the first place, (b) how strongly empathic concern and perspective taking are elicited, and (c) how far prosocial behavior generalizes beyond the friendship dyad. For example, the same chronological age may carry different social meanings depending on intersecting identities (Drury et al., 2022), potentially affecting perceived semantic distance and whether transfer is more likely to extend to certain non-involved outgroups (e.g., groups perceived as similarly marginalized) rather than others. Accordingly, future studies could examine how age-diverse friendship effects vary across intersectional subgroups and contexts, and whether transfer processes are amplified or constrained when age is coupled with other visible and socially consequential identities.

Outcomes at multiple levels of analysis

While our framework highlights prosocial behavior, including relational-supportive (e.g., informational, instrumental, and emotional support), collective-moral (e.g., supporting the rights of others), and superordinate-generative behaviors (e.g., innovative problem solving) as key consequences of age-diverse friendships, their benefits are likely to extend to other areas. Researchers could pursue the outcomes of age-diverse friendships at multiple levels of analysis that move beyond the ones proposed. At the individual level, age-diverse friendships may enhance well-being, reduce stereotype-threat, and motivate older individuals to remain active in the labor market. At the organizational level, age-diverse friendships may contribute to stronger team cohesion, age-inclusive climates, and higher organizational commitment. They can further support collaboration and creativity in solving unique business challenges, enhancing organizational resilience. At the community level, age-diverse friendships have the potential to counteract age categorization and segregation, enhance intergenerational solidarity, reduce intergenerational tensions, and contribute to more inclusive societies.

Age-diverse friendships in different contexts

Context may have implications for the meaning and functioning of (age-diverse) friendships, thereby shaping their effects on proposed outcomes. At the individual level, more research is needed focusing on the meaning employees assign to high-quality social interactions (e.g., value of socioemotional goals; Carstensen et al., 1999), which may strengthen the effects on other-oriented processes (e.g., empathic concern). At the organizational level, norms and practices play a critical role (Riekhoff, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). Not only can organizations and their leaders function as facilitators of the formation and maintenance of age-diverse friendships, but organizational culture dimensions related to diversity and inclusion, psychological safety, and boundary management may also have implications for how people experience and sustain age-diverse friendships. Finally, at the societal level, aging processes in workplaces are shaped by broader national-level social and economic conditions (Goštautaitė et al., 2025; Shao et al., 2022). Future research could examine macro-level factors, such as policy initiatives (e.g., retirement age) or cultural factors (e.g., cultural narratives around aging), that influence not only the formation and maintenance of age-diverse friendships but also their impact. For example, country-level values such as power distance and individualism/collectivism may influence the meaning of

age-diverse workplace friendships as well as what outcomes they generate across work and non-work contexts.

Practical implications

Our framework also offers practical implications for individuals, organizations, and policy makers that depend, however, on testing the propositions on why and how age-diverse friendships shape prosocial behavior toward others, even beyond members of age-diverse outgroups. For individuals, age-diverse friendships may help employees raise awareness and appreciate the benefits of building ties that go beyond their own age group. Individual-level interventions, such as networking events, may provide opportunities for age-diverse friendships to develop and can foster collaboration and solidarity for all age groups. Employees can also actively seek opportunities to collaborate with colleagues from different age groups and show interest in others' experiences, career trajectories, and life circumstances.

For organizations, the key implication is not only to support age diversity per se, but to create conditions conducive to age-diverse friendships by designing work with opportunities for collaboration across age groups. First, organizations can create structured opportunities for repeated, high-quality interaction across age groups. This includes designing interdependent tasks, age-diverse project teams, and mentoring arrangements that require sustained collaboration (Yakubovich & Burg, 2019). Such structures increase the likelihood that employees move beyond surface-level differences and discover deeper similarities, which are critical for friendship formation (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Second, organizations can facilitate informal interaction spaces and practices, such as shared break areas, office visits, or networking events across age groups that encourage the exchange of personal experiences. These settings can enable self-disclosure and socioemotional connection, which are foundational for friendship development (Draper et al., 2008). Third, organizations can support perspective-taking and empathy-building practices beyond facilitating conditions for age-diverse friendship development, for example, through interventions that explain the nature and relevance of empathic concern and perspective-taking in everyday work and across age groups (Fasbender et al., 2020). Organizations may also use structured reflection exercises to stimulate employees' affective and cognitive processes with regard to their age-diverse colleagues (Song et al., 2018). Such interventions and nudges could strengthen the psychological processes underlying the proposed transfer effects.

For policymakers, the findings highlight the importance of creating institutional conditions that enable meaningful age-diverse contact. Policies that encourage age-diverse workforces, extended working lives, and inclusive employment practices increase the likelihood of age-diverse interactions in the first place. Legislation aimed at reducing agism against any age groups and inequality between age groups (e.g., the removal of arbitrary age limits; WHO, 2021) can help shape more favorable societal norms and expectations, thereby creating spaces in which individuals are more open to engaging in meaningful age-diverse relationships. Beyond the workplace, initiatives that foster intergenerational exchange in communities, education, and civic programs may further amplify the broader societal transfer effects proposed in our model. For example, supporting intergenerational community

projects can create opportunities for developing age-diverse friendships (Elliott O'Dare et al., 2021).

Concluding thoughts

The theoretical framework of age-diverse friendship highlights how close, high-quality relationships between relatively younger and older people can have far-reaching effects beyond the dyad. Drawing on intergroup contact theory, the taxonomy of transfer effects, and research on other-oriented processes, we proposed that such friendships foster prosocial behavior toward age-diverse outgroup members (primary transfer), extend to solidarity with other, non-involved outgroups (secondary transfer), and promote superordinate-generative behaviors that benefit all humans (tertiary transfer). Central to these processes are empathic concern and perspective taking, which enable friendships to function as engines of broader inclusion and cooperation. We further identified boundary conditions—age distance and semantic distance—that shape for whom these effects unfold. Taken together, our framework positions age-diverse friendship at work as a powerful vehicle of social change.

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Author Contributions

Ulrike Fasbender (Conceptualization, Visualization, Methodology, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing), Lisbeth Drury (Conceptualization, Writing—review & editing), Bernadeta Goštautaitė (Conceptualization, Writing—review & editing), Anita C. Keller (Conceptualization, Writing—review & editing), Michela Vignoli (Conceptualization, Writing—review & editing), and Tabea Wolf (Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing)

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