

## IT WAS GREAT, THEY WERE ALL YOUNG! IS THERE AGEISM IN STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL INTERNSHIP?

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Noting the tendency of students of work and organizational psychology to choose internships among a smaller number of hosting organizations paired with satisfaction with completed internship expressed by the sentence 'It was great, they were all young', we performed qualitative content analysis of students' reflections on age in the context of internship attractiveness. The materials for the analysis were 1) Fifty internship reports and 2) Discussions with students. There was no explicit ageism in students' reports. Students were equally satisfied with mentors from more and less popular organizations. Four categories related to attractiveness of internship hosting organizations emerged: organizational culture, organizational climate, working conditions and mentors' work. As in the case of more attractive organizations they point to 'younger' organizations, as a factor of their attractiveness, they could be discussed as 'clear manifestations of ageism', but also they could be regarded as 'younger generation centeredness', and partly a form of 'covert ageism'. Reflections could also be interpreted as a consequence of students' professional insecurity, need for peer support, ease of communicating with peers and those of similar age. Psychological distance from older generations of colleagues and mentors at work can both be the source of covert and overt ageism. In order to enable students to fully utilize the benefits of internship for their professional development, it is important to work on recognizing and preventing ageism and overcoming generational distances.

*Key words:* ageism, work and organizational psychology, professional internship, organizational attractiveness, young generation centeredness, Serbia

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Diversity at work is accepted as one of the common demands of contemporary organizations. It is considered to be beneficial both for the organization and employees at many levels (Cox & Blake, 1991). For the success of the professional

internship, it is important for students to be exposed to diversity at the organizational level. Diversity brings potential benefits for developing general competences such as decision-making and creative problem-solving that have been proved as valuable for organizational performance. It is also useful for developing professional competences that are embedded in internship mentors' tasks, experience and expertise. Different forms of diversity are challenging for different organizations. However, one of the widespread contemporary challenges comes from profound change in population age and an aging workforce.

Data suggest the employment rate of older workers, the age group 55–64, has been steadily rising from 2005 to 2017 throughout the European countries covered by Eurostat (Eurostat, 2018). Moreover, on the global level, in 2000, for every 10 persons of working age 15–64, there was one person of age 64 and older, whereas it was projected that in 2050 there will be one person 64 and over for every four of working age (Fraccaroli & Depolo, 2008). The trend of workforce ageing is not followed by wider acceptance of older employees. Negative attitudes towards older employees lead to their discrimination at work lowering their employability, increasing the risk of losing their job and difficulties in finding a new one (Fraccaroli, Depolo, Wang & Sverke, 2017). Ageism in general is a stereotype, prejudice and discrimination by an individual of certain age or one age group against other individuals or groups based on their age (Butler, 1969; World Health Organization, 2015). It is expected to be more noticeable in younger than in older people (Bodner, 2009). In society at large, ageism could be found at the level of an individual (e.g. avoiding contact with older people), institution (e.g. lack of care) and society (e.g. age segregation, patronizing language). Ageism can have overt and covert forms (Brownell, 2014). The Centre for Policy on Ageing (2009) defines overt age discrimination as open and observable (usually present at the institutional level) and covert age discrimination as hidden discriminatory actions (usually present at the individual level).

Various authors raise borders of old age and older workers at different points over the life course. In the second half of the twentieth century, the accepted marker of old age was put at 65, which was rather the economical and societal norm (Neugarten, 1974). The United Nations have not defined a standard numerical criterion, but the age of 60 years is an accepted limit for defining older population (World Health Organization, 2015). There is even more diversity in public perception of older employees (Taneva, Arnold & Nicolson, 2016). Moreover, as employees are getting older, their perception of older age and its boundaries changes, moves and expands. The extended lifespan and baby boomer generation retirement were strong impulses for insisting on finer differences among older people (North & Fiske, 2013). There are different kinds of discrimination oriented toward older persons that point to lack of homogeneity among them. Naming the group of people aged 55–75 as 'young-old', Neugarten (1974) described them as having large potential for being agents of social change, having solid health, good education, being relatively affluent, and being under less pressure from work-family balance. Usually people from this group that are still present in the labour market are perceived as some kind of threat to younger employees (North & Fiske, 2013).

The concept of generations refers to groups of people of similar age and who share similar life experience (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017). Though, chronologically defined generational categories are not without limitations, they represent a convenient heuristic for classifying and capturing the complexities of the current workforce and

their work-related experience (Nakai, 2015; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017). Thus, we can describe the contemporary workplace as highly defined by generational diversity with simultaneously present baby boom generation, generations X, Y (millennials) and Z (post-millennials, iGen). The most striking change is probably the succession of baby boomers by millennials which implies a noticeable change in attitudes, values, and work behaviour (Deal, Altman & Rogelberg, 2010). Research shows that millennials are significantly different from previous generations, mostly concerning higher self-esteem, assertiveness and narcissism. Millennials enter colleges in higher numbers comparing to previous generations, but their general knowledge is lower. Concerning the number of working hours, as well as work patterns, no differences were found. There is a widespread belief that millennials use technology significantly differently from the previous generation, but in essence they are more intensively and diversely connected.

A professional internship is a students' first structured experience with the world of work. For millennials it is also the first structured opportunity, outside of school and family life, to meet various generations and exchange knowledge and share experience with them. As much as being the process of entering an organization to learn, it is also the process of bringing generational specificities into the organization. These generational specificities could be exchanged in a structured way through the process of reverse mentoring (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012), a process in which junior employees/interns are connected with more experienced employees to help them bridge the generational gap. These exchanges between two generations could be the platform for knowledge sharing, as well as a threat when it comes to developing and deepening some age-related prejudices and stereotypes.

In societies where the economy is characterized by low economic activity, hostile conditions on the job market and high unemployment rate, these generational 'meetings' could be even more threatening. The present study comes from Serbia, a country characterized by the unemployment rate of 18.2% among the population aged 15–64 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2016); workers aged 15–24 as well as those 65 years and older are represented in the labour market with only 5%. It should be noted that the Serbian economy was characterized by GDP per capita that was among the bottom 6% in 2015, based on European Working Conditions Survey (Eurofound, 2016).

In this study, we want to explore ageism among students, future professionals, that are about to enter their professional fields. We explored the existence of ageism on the example of work and organizational psychology students in the context of their professional internship. Before presenting the research problem, we will briefly present professional internships as the wider context of our research.

## PROFESSIONAL INTERNSHIP FOR WORK AND ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

In the context of the Bologna process of developing a common European educational space, a set of European standards for the psychology profession has been developed (Bartram & Roe, 2005; Lunt, 2005; Lunt et al, 2005; Roe, 2002). Within these changes that were embraced by the University of Belgrade (Serbia), the professional internship for work and organizational psychology students was structured and adapted to meet

the needed standards. The students' professional internship is a compulsory component of the work and organizational psychology studies curriculum on both undergraduate and master level studies at the University of Belgrade (Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Psychology). The purpose of the internship program is to enable students to connect university acquired knowledge with professional practice under the supervision of a practicing work and organizational psychologist, on site mentor. Internships last for one working month at each level of studies. As students can take part in internships during the lectures period, they can agree with the on-site mentor to work part time, e.g. 20 hours per week. Students should carry out their internship within work organizations, human resources and consulting agencies.

Domains that are covered during the internship are chosen in each case among: personnel psychology and human resources management (staffing, recruitment, selection, psychometric and other assessments, performance management, selection interviews, training), career counselling and coaching, organizational psychology (organization design and structure, teamwork, organizational culture and climate, and organizational change and development, employee well-being, organizational surveys, organizational stress management and ergonomics intervention). If students have specific interests in consumer behaviour and marketing, they can take one part of their internship in an organizations' marketing department or market research and communication agencies where they should cover consumer psychology, consumer research, market research and marketing communications, also under the supervision of a psychologist. One of the important purposes of an internship is to get acquainted with the legal aspect of a psychologist's work. Also, the internship is an opportunity to have first-hand experience of ethical issues in practice. Eligible mentors on the internship are psychologists that practice work and organizational psychology on a full-time basis, with a minimum of three years of practitioner experience in the field and who passed all the exams needed for independent work in their field (such as state professional examination or the exam for working in employment services).

## INTERNSHIP PROCESS

The internship process can be portrayed by four major steps. The first one is the preparatory phase in which there are one-on-one consultations with a faculty mentor to whom a student is assigned. These consultations include information about eligible organizations and mentors and preparation for the internship, as well as discussions about students' preferences and career goals. The second one includes finding an organization. In that phase students are encouraged to find the organization by themselves (with faculty mentor's support). If they do not succeed on their own, faculty mentors arrange the internship for them. If students carry out their internship in an organization with more than one eligible mentor, they are often in the position to choose the actual mentor. The last phase includes starting the process in which students actually start their internship.

Students' assignments on internship are the following: to learn, as much as possible, about the psychologist's work role by shadowing their organizational mentor, and helping the mentor in her/his everyday duties. Mentors are encouraged to give students as many individual assignments as possible and entrust them some tasks that they will closely supervise (e.g. to carry out the selection interview, to draft

a report). The mentor is required to provide face to face feedback to the student at least twice on the course of internship and also at the end of internship. The mentor is also required to write a report about the actual contents of the student's activities, on how the student performed during the internship, her/his observations of the student's work, engagement and advancement, as well as advice for further career development.

After the internship, the student is required to write a report, to present it and defend in front of the faculty mentor and other students. The evaluation is based on the quality of the report, as well as the quality of the presentation and defence, and organizational mentor's report. As the report defence is an important professional development step that depends on the students' well-structured and integrated reflections, it is essential that it takes place in the trusting and safe atmosphere in which students feel free to share their opinions openly.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

By reflecting and discussing our overall experience about work and organizational psychology students' internships, we noted the tendency of 'shrinking' of the active part of the base of internship mentors and hosting organizations. Namely, we noted that more students expressed interest in a smaller number of organizations. Some organizations started to become more attractive as internship hosts which could result in less variety in internship experience (in organizational setting, HR work, and psychologist's job) and could further lead to limited opportunities for knowledge sharing among students. When summarizing internship experience from more attractive organizations, one of the main and the most frequent students' impression was 'It was great, they were all young'. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore whether the rising attractiveness of some internship hosting organizations was a (c)overt manifestation of ageism or something else.

This problem is of a wider importance on, at least, two levels. On the level of work and organizational psychology profession, for managing human resources and organizational behaviour processes, work and organizational psychologists are important for defining organizational policies, processes and practices that are open and correct towards all ages. Work and organizational psychologists as well as other professions dealing with employees' wellbeing need to be wary of ageism at work. Otherwise, they could be part of overt, institutionalized ageism with far reaching consequences for all employees. On a wider level, the problem is highly relevant for students and younger people of different professions entering the world of work, as ageism could limit their professional prospects, such as the choice of organization, the choice of job and professional development at work.

## METHOD

### Procedure

In this research we have used archival educational materials. All the materials were previously anonymized with regard to students. We have kept the information about

the hosting organizations and mentors and included it in our analyses, but this information was taken out of the presented results as we also wanted to respect the anonymity of mentors and hosting organizations. The materials for the analysis were fifty internship reports from several generations of work and organizational psychology students (undergraduate and master level) that completed their studies in the period 2013–2017, at the Department of Psychology (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade). Also, we have analysed faculty mentors' notes and comments from the internship defence. The authors of this paper were in the role of faculty mentors. The authors together analysed all the materials.

### Materials and analysis

The required content of the report is broadly defined, which gives space for student's personal expression and further analysis. Nevertheless, in the required structure of the report there are some topics that have to be covered under generally defined subtitles - organization (to present the organization in which they took their internship, e.g. history, structure, culture); the psychologist's job and role; activities which the student followed and took part in; in depth analysis of one chosen work and organizational topic/problem from the scientist/practitioner perspective; general reflections about the internship process (including their future professional development). This makes individual reports highly comparable.

For data analysis we have used qualitative content analysis (Flick, 2014). It is one of the widely used procedures for analysing and reducing diverse textual material (Bauer, 2000) applying categories. In our analysis, we tried to look for the similarities and recurring topics. There were two broader themes that have been in focus of the analysis: organizations and organizational mentors. Concerning the organizations, we have analysed the descriptions of their culture, values and climate. Regarding organizational mentors - we have analysed students' experiences and impressions about the mentors' work role and behaviours toward students (general mentorship style). These emerging topics and patterns were further enriched by analysing faculty mentors' notes. The professional content, as well as covered competencies and skills were not included in this analysis, because they were previously arranged for each internship.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The finding that we would like to list first is that we have not found overt indicators of ageism in students' reports. Age was not listed explicitly as a factor of popularity of internship mentor. It was also not listed as a factor of their internship experience, but there was still 'something in the air', less open, tacit expression of millennials' affinity in 'they were all young organizations'.

Predominantly students expressed high satisfaction with their organizational mentors, mainly based on their professionalism and openness for students. The sentence we could often hear: 'Most important was the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in practice', was shared excitement and gratitude to mentors regardless of their organizations. The experiences and impressions about mentors were rather coherent regardless of their employing organizations, their ownership,

size, economy sector, or whether their role could have been defined as internal organizational expert or external consultant. Thus we were looking for differences in students' experience related to hosting organizations. The strategy in organizing findings was to use two extreme groups of internship hosting organizations based on their attractiveness among students, i.e. more and less attractive organizations (Table 1). We could probably easily classify the majority of hosting organizations as moderately attractive, but it would blur the overall picture and would be less helpful in addressing the research problem.

Organization was the first topic in the analysed material. By analysing characteristics of organizations that students perceived as less attractive, we could conclude that they were mainly traditional, state-owned or in mixed ownership (with stronger state ownership). Employees' career in less attractive organizations could be defined as more traditional, stable and organization-tied (Čizmić & Petrović, 2015; Torrington, Hall & Taylor, 2008). These companies have a more diverse workforce concerning work experience and education (including more lower-level educated employees). There was more diversity among employees based on their age - they employed larger numbers of people aged 55 and older. Organizational mentors were usually older than 45 years. The organizational climate was often authoritarian, with stricter hierarchical structures in which it was difficult for students to find their way. The organizational climate was characterized by tension and stress that stemmed from a lack of resources, money, and bad organizational decisions. Communication was less open, indirect. The overall impression about students' reports from less attractive organizations was that they were stricter, more stereotypical and less vivid. Moreover, students did not express their personal impressions, engagement and enthusiasm. Some keywords that could be distinguished from the reports are: occasional clockwatching, salary-watching, retirement-watching, anti-corruption measures, organizational crisis, expected restructuring, privatization, forced retiring and possible loss of job. Maybe, the most colourful picture that represents less attractive organizations was that psychologists worked with paper files, and even in one case the psychologist had to use a mechanical typewriter. Working space was also traditional - less flexible, with older furniture and older equipment (even the lack of equipment).

Organizations that students perceived as more attractive gave an overall impression of modern organizations. In students' reports more attractive organizations were often described in terms of contemporary organizations. Based on our analysis, we found out that they were mostly privately owned and international. They often had clearly defined mission, vision and corporate values. An employees' career was more contemporary, i.e. dynamic, changeable, flexible (Čizmić & Petrović, 2015; Torrington, Hall & Taylor, 2008), and in constant movement (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005). Thus, there was a higher fluctuation rate in more attractive organizations. The workforce was less diverse in relation to education, with the majority of employees having some university degree. Employees were predominantly younger, with top managers somewhat older, but not older than 55-60 years of age. The organizational mentor was usually younger than 45 years. Organizations were devoted to building a culture and climate of high performance, openness and support. Students experienced the communication in these organizations as more open and direct. The climate was dominated by fast pace, working under time pressure, work overload, longer work hours at some and strict working hours at some. Some keywords in

students' descriptions were: planning, excellence, quality assurance, competitive work environment, company brands, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and cross-functional teams, including more Anglicisms, English originating acronyms and organizational jargon. Maybe, the most vivid picture of more attractive organizations represents psychologists working with HR software, data base, international tests and other tools. The working space was also modern - flexible, open, with up to date equipment and furniture. Our overall impression was that students' reports from more attractive organizations were more personal, vivid, involved, and enthusiastic, with clearly expressed wish to work there ('I would be happy to return there'). They were in accord with the values of millennial generation (Deal, Altman & Rogelberg, 2010).

There were some of the students' insights that were common both for more and less attractive organizations. Students noted problems with space in all organizations - psychologists lack space that would enable the level of privacy needed for their work. Dress-code was also one of the issues that emerged in both groups of organizations. They could all come upon strictly defined dress-code or no dress-code both in more and less attractive organizations. The only difference was 'casual Friday' that was characteristic only of more attractive organizations.

Returning to mentors, students perceived them in both more and less attractive organizations as professional, respected and accepted among managers and employees in the entire organization, as well as among HR colleagues. However, there was a difference in sources of tension and stress depending on their employing organization. In less attractive organizations tension and stress came from the lack of resources, whereas, in more attractive organizations it was caused by time pressure and overload with work.

Table 1. *Illustrative quotes from students' reports about internship in more vs. less attractive organizations*

Less attractive organization	Attractive organization
<i>Organizational culture</i>	
'Organization with authoritarian culture, formal network of communications and relations.'	'Integrity, excellence, equality, transparency, respect for every individual, responsibility in using organizational resources.'
'Employees are simply expected to carry out their duties and follow superiors' orders'	'Company brand is powerful and recognized all over the world.'
'Strict hierarchical structure in which it is difficult for students to find their way.'	'Efficient and successful teamwork as an organizational value.'
	'Strong identification with organization.'
	'Organizational culture could be described as strictly defined, action oriented, with strictly defined procedures.'
<i>Organizational climate</i>	
'Organization stagnates and deteriorates.'	'Organization highly values good interpersonal relations. Employees at all levels are ready for cooperation, they meet each other's needs, listen to each other, freely express suggestions, opinions and critiques. ... There is a strong emphasis on both work
'Negative side - restructuring and downsizing that was not systematically carried out.'	
'There is strong hierarchical structure... Interpersonal relationships among employees are not at a satisfactory level.'	

## Less attractive organization

## Attractive organization

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### *Organizational climate*

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'Employees are not rewarded adequately. Atmosphere is not that good due to inadequate work motivation, higher level of tolerance for lack of order, various forms of high-handedness and lack of responsibility.'

'Employees use sick leave when they cannot carry out given tasks that are beyond their competencies.'

'I have worked in a friendly atmosphere.'

performance and employee satisfaction.'

'Company invests in employees; they have an excellent maternity leave program. They have well developed prevention of discrimination.'

'Sources of satisfaction at work are possibilities for promotion, opportunities for developing experience, wide array of interesting work assignments and events.'

'They organize sports activities, employees can go for yoga, swimming, and other sports.'

'Colleagues' support at the beginning of the internship was of a tremendous help.'

'The thing that has completely impressed me was that I haven't felt for a single moment as a student on internship. On the contrary, all the colleagues treated me as their equal.'

'Students feel pleasant and they develop the feeling of belonging to the organization.'

'I worked in a friendly atmosphere, mostly relying on my mentor. I have learnt a lot from colleagues who were not psychologists.'

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### *Working space, equipment*

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'Lack of larger testing room and interview room'

'Everything is so old. They use a mechanical typewriter.'

'The open space was not personalized. The desks were clear. Only the CEO and legal department have separate offices.'

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### *Mentors*

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'Psychologist is constantly in a situation of being emotionally drained after numerous, repeated arguments with employees that are angry with some managerial decisions.'

'Feeling of fulfilment when psychologist sees that the intervention was helpful for an employee.'

'Positive atmosphere at work, good relationships and solidarity among colleagues are source of satisfaction for psychologists.'

'Psychologist' job is complex and highly responsible. It engages various competences and gives sense of professional fulfilment.'

'My mentor was kind and supportive; my internship was very useful experience.'

'Psychologist in HR is in charge of all dissatisfaction and employees' remarks and always available if they come upon a problem.'

'I have got invaluable experience, as well as trust of my mentors, so I have carried out many work activities without mentors' close supervision and continuous checking. This was a huge responsibility, and I am so grateful to my mentors for that opportunity.'

'Psychologist from HR department contributes a great deal to accomplishing companies goals.'

'When my mentor has some free time at work, she investigates new job market trends, new HR tools, and reads scientific papers from well-established journals.'

All things considered, identification with mentor and internship organization was based on values and behaviour patterns that were characteristic of millennials and younger generations (Deal, Altman & Rogelberg, 2010). Even in organizations in which there were some older employees, including psychologists aged 60 years and older, based on the informal and open climate, we could find 'they were all young' reaction. Even when they were of older age, mentors and employees were perceived as equals, as 'young'. Students felt more at ease to ask questions and expose their lack of knowledge and experience among mentors and colleagues whom they perceived as 'younger', i.e. more open, and closer. Students felt more and better accepted as a result of more intensive interaction with colleagues, spending with them not only time at work or during the lunch break, but also hanging out with them after work (that often happened in more attractive organizations). Students could easily find common language and topics with younger employees.

## CONCLUSION

The main inspiration for this study came from one of the students' overall impressions about their professional internship: 'It was great! They were all young', that we have been hearing repeatedly like a 'broken record' from a number of students. Reflecting on our reactions to that, we came upon the dilemma of whether this was an open expression of ageism, covert ageism or something else.

First, it should be noted that we have not found explicit ageism in students' written reports. Students were equally satisfied with their mentors from various organizations, but there were visible differences in popularity of internship hosting organizations. When we dug deeper into the profiles of hosting organizations based on their attractiveness, a rather clear pattern emerged. Yes, there was 'something in the air'. Students wish to work for and their overall affinity for the fresh breeze coming from 'they were all young organizations' could be a sign of millennials' (less open expression of) ageism.

Analysing differences among more and less popular organizations based on their culture, climate and working space and equipment (Table 1), it unfolded that more popular organizations were perceived as more modern, polished, vivid, active, with a dynamic environment filled with business buzzwords, stressed with workload and time pressures, whereas less popular were perceived as more traditional, more authoritarian, more cautious, more passive and pressed with sharp existence problems. Mentors were perceived as equally devoted and supportive in both groups of organizations. However, perceived differences among mentors were defined by their organizational contexts. 'All were young' context was the one in which students could clearly see themselves professionally in the near future. Bearing in mind the specificities of millennials, their higher self-esteem, assertiveness and narcissism (Deal, Altman & Rogelberg, 2010), the presented findings could be regarded not only as a form of covert ageism, but partly also as 'young generation centeredness'. It is clear that these reflections could be interpreted as a consequence of students' professional insecurity and need for peer support they could more easily satisfy in the 'younger' organizational context characterized by ease of communicating in the fast changing work context and collaborating with peers and those of similar age. On the other hand, larger psychological distance from older

generations of employees and mentors at work can both be the source of covert and overt ageism.

Concerning applied research methodology, it is worth noting that ageism is a methodologically sensitive research topic, especially when it comes to exploring those expressing ageist attitudes. Although the applied research method that was based on a single approach, could have been enriched by intensive interviews and/or focus group discussions, it is highly questionable if application of these techniques could secure relevant and reliable data. In addition, it is more problematic when it comes to highly educated participants, aware of the negative aspects of expressing socially undesirable attitudes.

In conclusion, ageism as a broader, multifaceted social problem, intensified by demographic and workforce trends, demands a comprehensive approach and measures. If students perceive their professional development and future career in more attractive organizations, it is reasonable they want to acquire an internship experience in similar organizations. More attractive organizations are more suitable places to prepare for the modern career (Torrington, Hall & Taylor, 2008), and internship experience from them could help students to be more employable. On the other hand, thinking of work and organizational psychologists as a helping profession, as those who would professionally be in charge of securing all forms of organizational diversity and securing a discrimination free organization, a narrow professional internship experience could be less functional and valid.

However, the presented findings are relevant outside of the context of work and organizational psychology as a profession. Internship in all professional fields should support developing professional competences and ethics that at its core mean openness for all kinds of employees and organizational environments that are free from all sorts of 'isms'. In order to enable students to fully utilize the benefits of internship for their professional development, it is important to work on recognizing and preventing ageism and to overcome generational distances and fully appreciate collaborating with the spectrum of generations.

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