Generation Is a Culture Construct

Kyle E. Brink and Marcel M. Zondag
Western Michigan University

Jeffrey L. Crenshaw
Centrus Personnel Solutions

Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) question whether there really are generational differences in the workplace. They argue that the generation construct is not properly operationalized (often confounding age, period, and cohort factors) and that generational research is atheoretical and plagued by methodological problems. We agree that generational research is largely guilty as charged. We also share their concern regarding the generationally based interventions that are being sold to, and adopted by, managers—interventions that are often little more than fads based on popular myths and folklore. We are also in full agreement with the potential significant harm that can be associated with stereotyping groups of individuals.

Despite our agreement with many of Costanza and Finkelstein's suppositions, we believe they are too quick to dismiss the generation construct based on the lack of confirming evidence—more disconfirming evidence is needed before reaching this conclusion. We also find a number of their arguments to be overly narrow, and conclusions to be overstated, because of the lens through which they are viewing the generation construct. Though they initially acknowledge that generation is, in part, a group-level phenomenon, the majority of their arguments and recommendations treat it mostly as an individual-level phenomenon. For example, they state, "Quite simply, we are suggesting that managers and organizations focus on real individual differences."

Generation as Culture

Although most research regarding generational differences in the context of the workplace has been atheoretical, a foundation for the generation construct does exist. Parry and Urwin (2011) offer an extensive discussion of the theoretical origin, which is rooted in sociology, and they trace the history of the construct back to the 1950s through the independent works of Mannheim, Turner, and Rhodes. In addition to the theoretical origins cited

Kyle E. Brink, Department of Management, Haworth College of Business, Western Michigan University; Marcel M. Zondag, Department of Marketing, Haworth College of Business, Western Michigan University; Jeffrey L. Crenshaw, Centrus Personnel Solutions.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kyle E. Brink, Haworth College of Business, Western Michigan University, 1903 West Michigan Avenue, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5429. E-mail: kyle.brink@wmich.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2015.45 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by Parry and Urwin, we believe Ronald F. Inglehart's (e.g., Inglehart, 1977, 1981) generational replacement theory is also relevant. The extant theory positions generation as a cultural phenomenon. It is conceptually distinct from, but closely related to, and often inextricably intertwined (methodologically) with the constructs of cohort, age,[1] and period (Parry & Urwin, 2011). Therefore, we believe that generation is more properly positioned as a group-level culture construct.

Assuming generation is a cultural phenomenon, it is appropriate for researchers to identify intragenerational similarities (i.e., factors shared among members within a generation) and intergenerational differences (i.e., factors that differ between generations) while also being cognizant of intragenerational variation (i.e., individual variation among members of the same generation). If the generation construct accounts for variance beyond individual differences, then it is a relevant construct.

Costanza and Finkelstein describe several generational myths, which they attempt to debunk through anecdotes that contradict the myths. We tend to agree that most of the generational differences that they provide are, in fact, myths. However, when viewing generation as a cultural construct, the reason we believe these differences are myths is because of the lack of compelling evidence supporting similarities within generations and differences between generations. A few contradictory anecdotes regarding individual variation within generations are to be expected and do little to debunk the myths. The myths must be supported by, or debunked with, scientific evidence.

Culture Versus Stereotype

Costanza and Finkelstein characterize generational differences as inappropriate stereotypes, and they discuss the potential legal and fairness issues that could result from such stereotypes. To the extent that generational stereotypes are inaccurate, we agree that they are entirely inappropriate.[2] However, when viewed as a culture variable, so-called stereotypes may reflect relevant within-generation similarities and/or between-generation differences.[3] As such, real generational differences are no more "generationalist" or "ageist" than national culture differences are "national originist" or "racist." Indeed,

[1] Age is not simply a quantitative variable. As noted by Costanza and Finkelstein, it includes variation related to life stage and maturity. As such, developmental psychology theory is also relevant to the generation construct.

[2] Given that Costanza and Finkelstein stated in an earlier section that generational differences are a myth, we recognize that this may have been an underlying premise for the remainder of their article.

[3] As stated previously, we must also be aware that intragroup variation will exist within all generations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2015.45 Published online by Cambridge University Press

many organizations recognize the importance of understanding cultural differences with respect to national, racioethnic, and gender groups (e.g., in formal diversity or expatriate training programs), as well as the implications of cultural differences with respect to managerial behaviors such as leadership and communication style.

In the "Lessons From the Past" section, Costanza and Finkelstein appear to depart from the multifaceted nature of the generation construct and equate generation with age. They suggest that the use of the generation construct is tantamount to age discrimination and that it might be a misguided attempt to circumvent the law. We certainly do not condone ageist or illegal practices, but we wish to point out that the generation construct is broader and more complex than age; it is overly simplistic to equate "generationist" with "ageist." For example, time-lag designs have found generational differences (or what might be more appropriately described as confounded cohort/period effects) after removing the effects of age (see Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010).

Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with descriptive studies of generations, even if they are atheoretical. In the context of organizational culture, Reichers and Schneider (1990) note that "effectiveness is not an important concept in anthropology, especially in comparative or cultural anthropology; *description* is the issue. That is, the goal of the study of culture is comparison with no implicit or explicit value judgments about which culture is more effective" (p. 20). It is the use of the descriptive findings that could potentially become problematic. Research findings could be used for legitimate organization improvements or misused for discriminatory decisions, so discernment and caution are necessary.

After expressing many legal, fairness, and age discrimination concerns regarding the use of generational stereotypes, Costanza and Finkelstein ironically used the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) as an example of "the importance of paying attention to real and not stereotyped differences." The FAA "limited hires to those between the ages of 20 and 30." Though we will remain silent on the appropriateness of using these age limits, if the FAA continues to maintain this hiring practice, it is worth noting that they would benefit greatly from generation-specific research.

Decades Behind Marketing's Use of the Generation Construct

The marketing field widely accepts the use of the generation construct as a basis for market segmentation (Parry & Urwin, 2011). Not unlike the development the human resource and management fields are experiencing at this time, the construct's initial introduction in the marketing field was characterized by a lack of theoretical development (Claycamp & Massy, 1968). Both supporters and opponents of the market segmentation used anecdotal

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2015.45 Published online by Cambridge University Press

evidence for or against the use of specific consumer characteristics to delineate customers and adapt marketing and sales strategies targeted at the so-created market segments (Dickson & Ginter, 1987). Over time, however, it has been established that there are certain generalizable consumer preferences for different generations (e.g., Holbrook & Schindler, 1996). Consequently, understanding such differences can enhance marketing effectiveness by adapting the message or communication media used, and even by introducing product differentiation for different generations.

Understanding the customer preferences within and between generational cohorts allowed for the introduction of mass customization, offering customers many different options to individualize a product or service offering. Interestingly enough, too much individualization seems to confuse customers, reverting them to more general, or segment-specific, buying behavior (e.g., Huffman & Kahn, 1998), further supporting the argument for market segmentation. As such, marketers seem to have developed both a theoretical and practical understanding of observable and actionable differences based on, among other factors, generation or culture versus excluding or discriminating against consumers based on generation or culture.

Marketing understands the difference between market segmentation and market discrimination. Unfortunately, managers seem to have some difficulty discerning the analogous differences with respect to managing their human resources. Nevertheless, we believe that management/human resource management can utilize the generation construct in manner similar to marketing.

Organizations should make employment selection decisions based on individual differences rather than generational characteristics. Similarly, managers should not allow generational factors to bias their performance ratings or allocation of rewards. However, other workplace initiatives that can significantly impact organizational performance could benefit from identifying and understanding potential generational differences. For example, it would be remiss to ignore generational differences when "marketing" the organization, job, and total rewards to consumers (i.e., job applicants). It would be inappropriate to exclude any generation; but, if there are true generational differences, it is advantageous to tailor the message by generation. It would be remiss to ignore true generational differences when communicating or interacting with subordinates. Indeed, Cox (1993) states that "ignorance of cultural differences is a source of ineffectiveness in the work performance of diverse workgroups. Likewise, a knowledge of a cultural differences in diverse workgroups will enhance work relationships and work-team effectiveness" (p. 128). Given the reality of the multigenerational workforce, it behooves managers to have an understanding of any real generational differences and to appropriately respond to those differences.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2015.45 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Forward Progress

Reichers and Schneider (1990) suggest that constructs evolve through a three stage process. In the first stage, *introduction and elaboration*, the "concept is invented, discovered, or borrowed from another field" (p. 6). The construct is defined, and attempts are made to prove that it exists. It is our opinion that the generational construct has passed through Stage 1—that there is a there there. We believe that the generational construct currently resides in the second stage, *evaluation and augmentation*. During this stage, there are critical reviews regarding "issues such as faulty conceptualization, inadequate operationalization, and equivocal empirical results" (Reichers & Schneider, 1990, p. 6). There are searches for mediators and moderators, efforts to improve measurement techniques, reconceptualizations of the construct, and attempts to overcome the limitations of earlier research efforts. Parry and Urwin (2011) and Costanza and Finkelstein have effectively moved the generation construct into this second stage.

In reviewing the extant research, Parry and Urwin (2011) found that generation is difficult to operationalize and that cohort is often used as a proxy for generation but that researchers did not explicitly recognize this limitation. Costanza and Finkelstein echoed some of the same concerns and called for more theory and stronger research methods (such as cross-classified hierarchical linear modeling). At the same time, Parry and Urwin (2011) recognize that practitioners care about whether changes are occurring throughout the decades, not about whether we can properly attribute these changes to the subtly different constructs of cohorts versus generations. If organizations are to adapt to change, they must know whether changes are occurring. For managers, it matters less whether change is due to age, period, cohort, generation, or zeitgeist. Despite methodological problems, changes will continue to occur and research needs to continue to capture these changes. If researchers do not actively attempt to answer these questions, the popular press will continue to fill the void.

References

Claycamp, H. J., & Massy, W. F. (1968). A theory of market segmentation. *Journal of Marketing Research, 5*(4), 388–394.

Costanza, D. P., & Finkelstein, L. M. (2015). Generationally based differences in the workplace: Is there a *there* there? *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 8*(4), 308–323.

Cox, T., Jr. (1993). *Cultural diversity in organizations: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Dickson, P. R., & Ginter, J. L. (1987). Market segmentation, product differentiation, and marketing strategy. *The Journal of Marketing, 51*(2), 1–10.

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2015.45 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Holbrook, M. B., & Schindler, R. M. (1996). Market segmentation based on age and attitude toward the past: Concepts, methods, and findings concerning nostalgic influences on customer tastes. *Journal of Business Research, 37*(1), 27–39.

Huffman, C., & Kahn, B. E. (1998). Variety for sale: Mass customization or mass confusion? *Journal of Retailing, 74*(4), 491–513.

Inglehart, R. (1977). *The silent revolution: Changing values and political styles among Western publics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Inglehart, R. (1981). Post-materialism in an environment of insecurity. *The American Political Science Review, 75*(4), 880–900. doi:10.2307/1962290

Lyons, S., & Kuron, L. (2014). Generational differences in the workplace: A review of the evidence and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 35*(S1), S139–S157. doi:10.1002/job.1913

Parry, E., & Urwin, P. (2011). Generational differences in work values: A review of theory and evidence. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 13*(1), 79–96. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2370.2010.00285.x

Reichers, A. E., & Schneider, B. (1990). Climate and culture: An evolution of constructs. In B. Schneider (Ed.), *Organizational climate and culture* (pp. 5–39). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Twenge, J. M., Campbell, S. M., Hoffman, B. J., & Lance, C. E. (2010). Generational differences in work values: Leisure and extrinsic values increasing, social and intrinsic values decreasing. *Journal of Management, 36*(5), 1117–1142. doi:10.1177/0149206309352246

Belief in Generational Stereotypes: Why There Is a *There* There

Ronald E. Riggio and Karan Saggi
Claremont McKenna College

Belief in generational differences is nothing new. In ancient times, generational differences were seen as a threat to productivity, and efforts were made to change them. Bertman (1976) writes, "as early as the twenty-fifth century BC, the older generation in authoritarian Egypt had to 'work at it' to mold the younger generation in its own image." Yet, Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) point out that "there is minimal empirical evidence actually supporting generationally based differences" and "no sufficient explanation for why such differences should even exist." One explanation for the prevailing belief in generation-based differences is systematic biases in social perception.

Ronald E. Riggio and Karan Saggi, Kravis Leadership Institute, Claremont McKenna College.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ronald E. Riggio, Kravis Leadership Institute, Claremont McKenna College, 850 Columbia Avenue, Claremont, CA 91711. E-mail: ronald.riggio@claremontmckenna.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2015.45 Published online by Cambridge University Press