

Fire All the Boomers: How Generational Labeling Legitimizes Age Discrimination

Cody B. Cox and Gary Coulton
Texas A&M University San Antonio

Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) make a number of important observations in their exploration of how generation-based differences are understood by academics and practitioners. The absence of a unifying theory, the lack of a clear pattern of findings, and the conceptual ambiguity about generational membership have all limited the utility of generational membership to researchers, while the practice of describing large groups of individuals in generational terms has become enormously popular outside of academia. Certainly, there are several topics that are popular among the public and widely used by businesses despite being viewed negatively by academics; however, there is some danger in the widespread perception that group differences between individuals of different ages can be explained by generational membership. Although it might be tempting to consider these generational stereotypes as simply innocuous misperceptions supervisors may hold, they may, in fact, be quite harmful. The purpose of this article is to further expand on the potential for these stereotypes to be harmful for older and younger employees.

The authors rightly note that, although age discrimination is prohibited by law, discrimination based on generational membership is not explicitly prohibited. However, it is important to note that age discrimination has become more difficult to prove in recent years, following the *Gross v. FBL Financial Services, Inc.*, decision (Biskupic, 2009). Following that decision, even if a plaintiff in an age discrimination suit can demonstrate that age played a role in an adverse decision, the plaintiff must prove that his or her age was the only reason for the adverse decision, placing a higher burden of proof on age discrimination lawsuits than in other discrimination lawsuits (CBS News, 2009). Moreover, the authors note that although older individuals are offered some protection by Age Discrimination in Employment Act, Millennials (who are too young to qualify for legal protection) are not, raising the uncomfortable question of what happens if an employer makes a decision affecting a younger employee based on what they think they know of Millennials.

Cody B. Cox and Gary Coulton, College of Arts and Sciences, Texas A&M University San Antonio.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cody B. Cox, Texas A&M University San Antonio, One University Way, San Antonio, TX 78224. E-mail: ccox@tamusa.tamus.edu

Stereotypes about Millennials, Boomers, Generation X, and other groups are very common. The authors note that several stereotypes have emerged for members of various generational groups, such as the belief that Baby Boomers are stressed and materialistic and Millennials are technologically savvy yet cynical. These traits are thought to emerge from experiences generational cohorts have within their historical contexts that produce stable individual differences that exemplify cohort members. Despite the lack of empirical evidence that such events predict individual differences, there is widespread acceptance of generational differences, and, as the authors note, numerous books and articles encourage supervisors to look for these generational differences to understand individual differences in the workplace (e.g., Hicks & Hicks, 1999). Thus, supervisors may attribute the behavior of employees to generational differences despite the lack of empirical justification for doing so.

The act of explaining individuals' behavior as a function of various causes has been well explored using attribution theory. Attribution theory argues that the cause to which a behavior is ascribed predicts the reaction to the observed behavior (Weiner, 1991). Specifically, when observing behavior, raters identify the cause of the behavior and then consider whether the cause of the behavior was within the person's control (i.e., controllable), likely to reoccur (i.e., stable), and due to factors related to the person or the situation (i.e., internal). Recent research on the role of causal attributions in the workplace indicates that target age is a key predictor of the attributions raters make for a target's performance. Rupp, Vodanovich, and Crede (2006) had participants read a vignette about either an older or a younger shipmaster who had demonstrated cognitive issues and an inability to perform the physical aspects of the job. They found that raters were more likely to ascribe these failures to stable causes for older adults, and these attributions mediated the relationship between age and willingness to demote or transfer the older employee. In contrast, Erber and Long (2006) demonstrated that when older and younger targets committed the same error (either forgetting a meeting or working slowly), raters felt less sympathy and more anger toward younger targets because they attributed their poor performance to lack of effort or attention (controllable causes) rather than to mental or memory difficulties (uncontrollable causes). As a function of these attributions, raters reported less sympathy for the younger targets. Recent research has also explored whether rater age might moderate the attributions made for a target's poor performance (Cox & Beier, 2014). In that study, older raters were more inclined to attribute the errors of younger targets to stable causes than younger raters were, and younger raters were more likely to attribute the performance of older targets to stable causes than older raters were. What was particularly concerning about this finding was that attributions to stable

causes were negatively associated with the belief that a target could benefit from training. Thus, there is consistent evidence that attributions for poor performance vary as a function of the age of the target and the rater, and these attributions predict how the rater responds to the poorly performing target.

Thus, it is concerning that generational differences represent another uncontrollable, stable attribution managers and supervisors can make for their employees performance. If managers believe that an employee is not technologically savvy or is insufficiently committed to the organization as a function of the employee's generational membership, then the manager may be less inclined to provide employees with opportunities to succeed because they attribute the behavior to a stable, uncontrollable cause (generational membership) rather than a cause that is more malleable (e.g., lack of training, inexperience).

In addition to influencing how younger and older workers are viewed, there is also the danger that these individuals may come to adopt these beliefs themselves. A considerable amount of research indicates that the attributions individuals make for their health outcomes—that is, whether individuals attribute poor health to their habits (a controllable, unstable cause) or their age (an uncontrollable, stable cause)—predicts their health outcomes in later years (for a review, see Levy, Chung, & Canavan, 2011). Given the important role that self-efficacy for learning plays in willingness to participate in training (Maurer, 2001), the fact that stereotypes about Boomers—that Boomers are less technologically capable than other generations—is troubling. Older employees, even those with positive attitudes toward aging, may decline opportunities to develop if they attribute their lack of skills to their generational membership (e.g., attributing lack of computer skills to lack of access to computers when growing up). Again, the relative accessibility and acceptability of these stereotypes has the potential to negatively impact older employees' workplace experiences if they believe the stereotype themselves.

In addition, the authors note that legislation prohibiting generation-based discrimination is very unlikely, which is unfortunate as there is also considerable evidence that prohibition by law leads individuals to believe that making employment decisions based on those stereotypes is neither permissible nor appropriate. Barron (2010), for example, found that antidiscrimination legislation promoted more positive attitudes toward homosexuality (see also Barron & Hebl, 2010). More recent work extended this research to age discrimination and demonstrated that awareness of legislation protecting older workers predicted more favorable outcomes for those workers; likewise, awareness of court decisions reducing those protections (i.e., *Gross v. FBL Financial Services, Inc.* [Biskupic, 2009])

predicted more negative attitudes toward older targets (Cox & Barron, 2012). It is possible that, given the current legislation protecting older workers, an enlightened supervisor might resist the temptation to ascribe behavior to age. However, in light of the wealth of literature supporting such stereotypes and the absence of legislation addressing the issue, the supervisor may feel that ascribing behavior to generational membership is perfectly suitable.

Costanza and Finkelstein's summary of the issues is well-written, but their exploration of potential dangers of using generation-based categorizing—particularly without consistent use of the terms or a theoretical understanding of how historical events shape individual differences—seems understated. These stereotypes may provide supervisors with an attribution for poor performance that predicts important outcomes for the target and reduces their access to training opportunities. Worse still, if older adults attribute their errors to causes such as generational membership, then they may be disinclined to pursue opportunities for development that may improve their performance. Thus, generation-based stereotyping should be abandoned not just because of the lack of empirical support but also because these terms provide a socially acceptable stereotype that may negatively impact employees' experiences in the workplace.

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Generational Differences: Let's Not Throw the Baby Boomer Out With the Bathwater

Elissa L. Perry

Teachers College, Columbia University

Frank D. Golom

Loyola University Maryland

Jean A. McCarthy

Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick

Although we agree with Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) that current research has failed to find consistent evidence of actual generational differences and that this research is limited methodologically, we suggest that at least some of these limitations could and should be addressed by future research before any firm conclusions are drawn. Further, the authors make an important but empirically untested assumption that generational stereotypes exist. We discuss why it is important to rigorously test this assumption. Finally, the authors assert that generational stereotypes are being “sold” as business strategy to organizations and managers and that they should be neither sold nor used in the workplace. However, the authors’ recommendation is based on the premise that individuals acquire stereotypes from others

Elissa L. Perry, Teachers College, Columbia University; Frank D. Golom, Loyola University Maryland; Jean A. McCarthy, Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elissa L. Perry, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 West 120th Street, New York, NY 10027. E-mail: ep248@tc.columbia.edu