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## Why We Study Generations

Yoshie Nakai

*Eastern Kentucky University*

The focal article by Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) shed a light on the current status of generational research at work that often treats generation as an age grouping variable. Although the authors primarily focused on the applicability of research findings to the current workforce, I believe the benefits of studying and understanding generations should not be limited to this purpose. The goal of this commentary is twofold. First, I would like to revisit the concept of generation and the purposes of studying generations at work. Second, given the problems with generational research presented by Costanza and Finkelstein, I would like to propose potential actions that we can take.

### Idea of Generations

Generation is a socially constructed concept. The original conceptualization of generation is inherently different from a classification of younger and older workers based on an individual's chronological age. Mannheim (1952) discussed the society comprising a continuous succession of age cohorts in which each cohort shares a common historical and cultural process. In order for generations to emerge, the group of individuals who exist at the same “location” of time, culture, and development would share an experience of some historical events. That is, they live in the same historical period, are bounded

Yoshie Nakai, Department of Psychology, Eastern Kentucky University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Yoshie Nakai, Department of Psychology, Eastern Kentucky University, 108 Cammack Building, 521 Lancaster Avenue, Richmond, KY 40475. E-mail: [yoshie.nakai@eku.edu](mailto:yoshie.nakai@eku.edu)

by a similar set of values and societal norms, are similar in chronological age, and share a common incident in the history. In defining generations by individuals' chronological age, Mannheim (1952) noted, "The sociological phenomenon of generations is ultimately based on the biological rhythm of birth and death. But to be *based* on a factor does not necessarily mean to be *deducible* from it, or to be implied in it" (p. 292). This warning is reendorsed by Costanza and Finkelstein over 60 years later.

How the shared experience of historical events impacts individual members is unclear. I believe that this is what the focal article authors argued as a lack of theory for generational differences. What seems necessary first is a validation of the current generational boundaries. Schuman and Scott (1989) asked 1,410 adults in the United States to identify the historical events between 1930 and 1985 that impacted their lives and found a considerable variability of events recalled by different age cohorts. For instance, the assassination of John F. Kennedy was most frequently raised by those who were in their late 30s to 40s in 1985 but not among older cohorts. Two wars, World War II and Vietnam War, were also recalled frequently as influential historical events. While those who were in their early 20s to 30s at the time of survey raised the Vietnam War, World War II was more frequently mentioned by those who are older than age 45. Interestingly, this particular difference mirrors the distinction between the Traditionalists and Baby Boomers. On the basis of the findings, Schuman and Scott (1989) proposed the idea of "generational imprinting": that historical event(s) experienced when the individuals were in their teens and early 20s are more likely to be recalled as critical in their lives.

### **Purposes of Studying Generations**

There seem to be three general purposes to utilize a concept of generation. Researchers could use a generational framework (a) to identify group differences in the current workforce with a cross-sectional approach; (b) to distinguish age, period, and cohort effects in the work-related variables with a longitudinal approach; and (c) to document the work-related experience of a key age cohort in the society. Although this is not an exhaustive list, I will organize the rest of my commentary around these purposes.

### ***Group Differences in the Current Workforce***

Costanza and Finkelstein raised the issues with inconsistent empirical findings regarding generational differences in the workforce and a danger of overemphasizing generationally based stereotypes. The basis of the discussion largely stems from the research studies conducted for the purpose of identifying differences among currently present generations. First, as cautioned by the previous researchers (i.e., Mannheim, 1952), we should not

be surprised by an absence of profound differences for every generation. Some generations are more different than are the others. Four generations that coexist in the current U.S. labor force portray a snapshot of the continuous series of age cohorts that existed in the past and will continue in the future. The values are often transmitted from generation to generation. Thus, coexisting generations are more likely to share the same values and characteristics. Second, because generation is socially constructed, the issue that the U.S. classification of generations is not applicable in other cultures seems to be reasonable. Each society has unique historical experiences, and the emerging generations could vary in defining age range. However, such novel historical events might be rare. There may not be the generations that are clearly distinctive without a presence of such incidents (Mannheim, 1952; Schuman & Scott, 1989). Third, the current conceptualization of the U.S. generations can be validated. Similar to Schuman and Scott (1989), we can evaluate whether generations could be differentiated by their recall of influential historical events.

#### ***Longitudinal Study of Generations***

The difficulty in separating the effect of age, period, and cohort effects in the cross-sectional research could be alleviated by utilizing a longitudinal study. Generations could be followed over time. Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) studied a cohort effect by comparing the current Generation Me (Millennials or Generation Y) to other cohorts when they were young (i.e., high school seniors). The researchers concluded that overall these cohorts were more similar than different. The more recent cohorts of high school seniors reported less trust, more cynicism toward the schools and government, and strong expectations to pursue higher education. The present effort of studying generations, a specific generation such as Millennials, or a cross-sectional comparison of multiple generations could provide a basis for future studies. For example, what we learned about retirement among Baby Boomers could be compared with when Generation Xers or Millennials retire. Without longitudinal investigations of generations, we cannot confidently reject the idea of generational differences.

#### ***Study of Key Age Cohort Over Time***

We can depart from an idea that everyone needs to belong to a generationally based group and included in generations research. Age range involved in defining each generation could be more fine tuned. A key age cohort that has a significance for the society could be studied. For instance, in Japan, the Baby Boomer generation is more narrowly defined than Baby Boomers in the United States. Individuals who were born between 1947 and 1949 are called *Dankai no Sedai* or *Dankai* Generation and studied extensively

(i.e., Asao, 2007). Dankai refers to “a large chunk,” and it is how this age cohort is represented in the country’s population. The Dankai Generation was larger than the previous or the following age cohorts in number, and their retirement was considered as having a significant impact in the Japanese labor force. Each society might be interested in the unique age cohorts. The terrorist attack on September 11 is often raised as a recent historical event shared by many Americans. On the basis of the idea of generation imprinting (Schuman & Scott, 1989), those who were in their teens to early 20s at the time of event may identify it as more influential in their life.

### Conclusion

The focal article provided a valuable moment for us to reflect on the generation research in industrial–organizational psychology. Mannheim (1952) discussed a similarity between an idea of generation and social class. Since then, the idea of generation has evolved and spread into the workplace. Although recognizing a danger of relying on group stereotypes to describe individual differences based on the current research findings, I believe it is too early to cease the investigations of generation altogether. Alternatively, my recommendations are set around the conceptualization of generations and investment in the longitudinal efforts:

- Recognize that not all generations would be distinct, and the distinctions will emerge at the workplace.
- Validate the boundaries of each generation by the historical events that have impacted an individual’s life.
- Use more focused definitions of generations that are relevant to a specific society.
- Keep track of the generations over time to identify the cohort effects in generations.

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