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Generations at Work: Don't Throw the Baby Out With the Bathwater

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Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) are correct to highlight the dangers of using generationally based stereotypes in organizations. Although popular, these stereotypes are related to a stigmatization based on group membership that can be pernicious and discriminatory. Costanza and Finkelstein are also correct in their assessment of the state of the literature on generational effects: theory and research is woefully lacking. Indeed, a recent review of research on generations at work characterized this research as descriptive and neither theoretical nor empirical (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Yet, as pointed out by Costanza and Finkelstein, the idea of a generational identity is salient and even appealing to many people. Why would this be if it were completely devoid of psychological import? People seem to resonate with the idea that, to some extent at least, they are a product of their generation.

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In this article we argue that the concept of generation provides a means to understanding how people process experiences within a cultural context. As such, consideration of generation is important to the development of self-concept, which in turn affects the development of attitudes, knowledge, and values. Although we agree that research on generations is problematic in its current state, we assert that it is too soon to jettison the psychological importance of generations in industrial–organizational (I-O) research without risking throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

On the most basic level, theory and research on generations suffers from definitional issues. Costanza and Finkelstein point out that generation is typically defined as variance associated with chronological age, historical period, and cohort. Unfortunately, when age, period, and cohort are used to operationalize generation, they are necessarily confounded with it. It is thus unsurprising that generation adds no incremental prediction above and beyond these variables in research studies. In a recent review of generation research and theory, generation was defined more theoretically as people born within the “same historical and socio-cultural context, who experience the same formative experiences, and develop unifying commonalities as a result” (Lyons & Kuron, 2014, p. 140).

Shared experiences are complex phenomena to study; indeed, they vary not only by age and historical period but also by individual factors (e.g., race and gender) and environment. Consider a few examples. Many in the United States and around the world with access to television witnessed Apollo 11 landing on the moon and watched the first spacewalk. Regardless of age or region of the country, this shared experience likely affected a generation’s ideas about science, technology, and the universe. Concurrent events related to the civil and equal rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States also impacted ideas about fairness, equality, and humanity for those experiencing them firsthand. Interpretation of these experiences, however, was somewhat dependent on an individual’s gender, race, and environment (e.g., the region of the country in which they lived) among other things. More recently, the unemployment rate of youth in many European countries is expected to affect work-related attitudes at a critical developmental period—entry into the workforce. In Spain, where the unemployment rate for youth is currently over 50% (and has been for a number of years), young educated workers unable to find jobs are called the “lost generation” (Homs, 2013). The shared experiences of this lost generation are likely different from their working Spanish counterparts even though they are the same age and of the same cultural background.

In summary, defining generation relative to shared experiences necessitates a more context-dependent consideration of the generation construct than has been previously scientifically considered. As Costanza and

Finkelstein suggest, examining the effect of generation on development, behavior, and performance is more complicated than employing broad generalizations about the expected shared experiences of people of a certain age. But, even if scientists could develop meaningful theory and measures of the construct of generation as shared experience, would it be a useful endeavor? Costanza and Finkelstein highlight the perils of this approach, particularly for practitioners in selection contexts. We agree that it is generally inadvisable for organizations to offer opportunities to some people over others based on age-related assumptions about shared experiences. But we also encourage broader thinking about how the shared experiences of a generation might influence the development of a person's self-concept (i.e., self-perceptions that influence behavior; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Further, we encourage the investigation of how a person's generational identity (their self-concept related to shared experiences) influences the development of intellect, values, and attitudes. Research investigating adult intellectual development has highlighted the importance of nonability factors, including self-concept, for directing attentional resources to acquire knowledge in both academic and nonacademic domains (Ackerman & Beier, 2006; Beier & Ackerman, 2001, 2003), and that knowledge acquired through experience—shared or not—is an important component of adult intellect. Although the impact of shared versus individual experiences has not been explicitly examined in the context of adult development, the impact of generational identity, in terms of its impeding or facilitating adult development, is worthy of further study.

In summary, Costanza and Finkelstein caution that focusing on generation in the selection context will invoke age-related stereotypes. We agree. But generational identity developed through shared experiences likely influences adult development in important ways (knowledge, attitudes, values) and is worthy of scientific investigation. The challenge for I-O researchers is to investigate the generational units (e.g., gender, economics, education) that affect adult development, particularly as related to adult success; the challenge for I-O practitioners is to identify those human resource practices that are most impacted by consideration of generation. These are difficult challenges to be sure, but necessary to make the idea of generation scientifically and practically meaningful. This is the baby—worth saving in our opinion—in the proverbial bathwater.

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An Alternative Approach to Understanding Generational Differences

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Background: The Traditional Approach

According to Costanza and Finkelstein (2015), the definition and measurement of generational membership could be two major problems inherent in the literature on generational differences. So far, researchers have defined generation in terms of groups of people belonging to the same cohorts, age groups, and experience of certain common events (Joshi, Dencker, & Franz, 2011). In this vein, generational difference is operationalized mostly as a categorical variable, and most researchers assign participants into generational categories based on date of birth. For instance, people born in 1958–1959 and 1973–1974 are typically divided into Boomers and Gen X, respectively (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010).

We argue that a strictly age-based, categorical approach to generational difference could be problematic for two main reasons. The first problem is

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