Research Article

ARE VALUES A DIFFERENTIATION CRITERION FOR GENERATIONAL COHORTS?

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A B S T R A C T

Values are a cornerstone in the study of an individual as these are the very force behind an individual's ideologies, viewpoints and ultimately action. For a very long-time scholars have differentiated between generational cohorts on the basis of the birth years and a difference in the shared values of each cohort, which are believed to stem from the common events that a cohort share. The present study aims at understanding the shared and unshared values among three generational cohorts- Baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Yby clustering the reported values based on thematic analysis and then exploring the importance of these values for each generational cohort by looking at the strength of the value in each cohort. This leads to the understanding of similarities and differences in values across cohorts. For this purpose, a total of twenty-four research articles were reviewed. The research findings indicated that there are overlaps amongst cohorts on values pertaining to rewards and there exists no clear distinction amongst cohorts simply based on the values. The practical implications of this study spans across different fields of study ranging from a theoretical insights to more practical uses in dealing with a multi-generational workforce.

INTRODUCTION

Values and Generational cohorts have been a part of psychological and sociological studies since decades. In fact, values are considered cornerstone to the field of social psychology and rightly so, because values are the key to understanding human behavior, at least in part. Generations on the other hand have been a part of scientific and academic repertoire since 1920s, tracing it's origins back to the works of sociologist Karl Manheim titled The *Problem of Generations*.

What are Values?

Values are the standards by which individuals evaluate and define the importance of something in their life, and that guide their behaviors towards some 'end state' (Perrewe & Hochwarter, 2001). Rokeach (1968) suggests that a value is "a centrally held, enduring belief which guides actions and judgments across specific situations and beyond immediate goals to more ultimate end-states of existence." According to Lyons, Duxbury, and Higgins (2007), 'values are enduring but not immutable. They are learned during an individual's formative years and remain fairly consistent over the life course.' This understanding of values is empirically verified by various researchers who reported that values are lifelong, enduring and relatively resistant to change (Rentz and Reynolds, 1991; Rentz, Reynolds, and Stout, 1983; Meglino & Ravlin, 1987, 1989 and1998; Rokeach, 1973).

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Values are useful indicators of an individual's decisions and actions (Rokeach, 1973) and thus they are important indicators of an individual's choices, motives, decisions and behaviors such as job decisions (Judge & Bretz, 1992; Lofquist & Dawis, 1971); perceptions and problem solving (Ravlin & Meglino, 1987).Examples of values include loyalty, individualism, relationship orientation, leisure, materialism etc. As values form the core of an individual's life and thus the basis of a society, it is inevitable to take this as a variable for research and study.

What are Generational Cohorts?

A generation can be defined as a group of people of similar age in a similar location who experienced similar social, historical, and life events (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Mannheim, 1972) and a Cohort refers to a group of individuals born at the same time who are *presumed* to be similar as a result of shared experiences. Only chronological proximity to events and other drivers of difference are assumed to distinguish them from other cohorts (Parry and Urwin, 2011). Foster (2013) suggests that an understanding of generations as identifiable social groups now dominates, with the term applied to birth cohorts (Macky, Gardner, & Forsyth, 2008; Meriac, Woehr, & Banister, 2010). As these cohorts are based on membership in an age group that shares collective memories during formative years of life (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010), the shared experiences serve as the basis of categorization of generations (e.g., industrialization, fundamental changes, cataclysmic events, and tragedies) and differentiate one generation from another (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998)because

they have a profound effect on the attitudes, values, beliefs, and expectations of generational groups (Abramson& Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart, 1977, 1990; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). There are various categorizations of Generational cohorts available in literature (eg, Strauss and Howe, 1991; Smola and Sutton, 2002) and there also exists literature on culture-specific categorizations (eg, Srinivasan, 2012; Hole, Zhong and Schwartz, 2010) but a widely used categorization is offered by Smola and Sutton (2002). They categorize generations into three categories, namely, Baby Boomers (born 1943-1960), Gen X (born 1961-1980) and Gen Y (born 1981-2000). This categorization is very popular amongst researchers because it is representative of many other categorizations offered over time, and secondly the researchers in academia have a consensus on the birth age range used in this categorization. For these reasons, this particular categorization has been adopted for the present study.

The Relationship between Values and Generational Cohorts

Values are the guiding force behind actions and behaviors in individuals. The development and inculcation of values is widely dependent on the time period, social, political and economical context and also the environment in which the individual is raised as a child. As generational cohorts are most commonly classified on the basis of year of birth, cohorts share common traits and values by virtue of shared experiences of a socio-political environment within a particular historical context (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Generational studies usually involve comparisons based on values perceived at a particular chronological age, for example, how today's youth differ from the youth of previous generations (Smola & Sutton, 2002) and thus arguments and discussions around contrasts between older and younger people's outlooks, perceptions and values are born (Dries, Pepermans, & De Kerpel, 2008;Meriac, Woehr, & Banister,2010). Researchers have also reported that national culture has a significant influence on generational values, attitudes, work ethic and behaviors (Parry and Urwin, 2011; Angeline, 2011; Egri and Ralston, 2004). For example, Egri and Ralston (2004) compared generational cohorts and personal values between the U.S. and China and found significant differences between the corresponding cohorts from the two national cultures. On similar lines, Rupnow (2011) reported that values like loyalty, trust, cooperation, reciprocity, humility, benevolence, hardworking, and ambitiousness, which are considered some of the traditional characteristics of Korean culture, are being challenged as younger generations are increasingly influenced by Western culture. Evidence also argues that global traumatic events may facilitate the development of a global generation (Edmunds and Turner, 2005). However, a sect of researchers argue that it is not imperative for individuals of a generation to share same values. For example, researchers have reported that differences in values within a single generation can result from other factors including gender (Wallace, 2006), age, life stage, or career stage (Arnett, 2010; Carlson & Gjerde, 2009; Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003) and academic achievement (E. Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons 2010). This view essentially suggests that human development is punctuated by different life stages that involve unique cognitive, emotional, and behavioral experiences (Levinson,1980), and differences in attitudes or values thus can be explained by the nature of jobs held, current life cycle or even personality (Hart, Schembri,

Bell, & Armstrong, 2003).There is evidence which suggests that there exist few generational differences in a variety of traits, attitudes, and behaviors such as egotism, self-enhancement, individualism, self-esteem, locus of control, hopelessness, happiness, life satisfaction, loneliness, antisocial behavior, time spent working or watching television, political activity, the importance of religion, and the importance of social status (Trzesniewski and Donnellan, 2010). In view of this mixed evidence, Deal, Altman and Rogelberg (2010) rightly commented that findings regarding a particular generation is 'confusing at best and contradictory at worst'.

Rationale

As established earlier, values are the core of one's life and decisions thus, their importance for understanding a cohort is unparalleled. The differences that are observed in generational cohorts can be traced back to the underlying values and assumptions of individuals. It has been reported that failure to recognize these differences can lead to negative organizational outcomes such as intergenerational work place conflict, misunderstanding and miscommunication, poor working relationships, reduced employee productivity, poor employee well-being, lower innovation, and fewer organizational citizenship behaviors (Adams, 2000;Bradford, 1993; Dittman, 2005; Fyock, 1990; Jurkiewicz,2000;Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola & Sutton, 2002;Westerman & Yamamura, 2007; Yu & Miller, 2003). The values approach to motivation also assumes that people will be motivated by activities and outcomes that they value (Maslow, 1943; Pinder,1997), thus making values the starting point for better communication and less intergenerational conflict. Additionally, it is also interesting to understand the values which have either remain unchanged or have changed drastically over generations as this directs towards the points of convergence between generations and moreover as attracting appropriate people for recruitment in workplaces and as topics of exchange inter-generationally. The present study thus aims to identify reported values associated with each generational cohort in literature and then understand the importance of each value for each generational cohort and also to collectively look at how the strength of these values have changed over generations.

METHOD

Aim

1. To identify values associated with three generational cohorts (Baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Y)reported in the literature.
2. To understand the importance placed on each value by all the three generational cohorts- Baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Y.
3. To identify and explore patterns of association and disassociation between generational cohorts based on the identified values.

Design

The present study used a step-wise approach to understand the Values related to the three Generational cohorts (Baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Y) available in the literature. Firstly, research articles were retrieved from various reputed sources including Taylor & Francis online, Wiley online Journals, Oxford journals, Springer, PsycNet, Jstor, Research Gate, Routledge, Sage journals etc. Only the journals with an Impact factor of "1 & above" were chosen for the present study. The

keywords used to search for relevant research articles included 'Values of generations', 'Generational cohorts and values', 'Differences in values of generations', 'Values of Gen X', 'Values of Baby Boomers' and 'Values of Gen Y'. This process yielded a total of 35 research papers. After a preliminary analysis of these papers, a total of 24 articles were retained for further analysis. Only those articles were retained which talked about either the values of different generational cohorts or the differences and similarities in the values of generational cohorts. Once the values for each cohort were identified from literature, the resultant data was subjected to Thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of data analysis in qualitative methodology which entails identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning (or "themes") within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is different from other qualitative methods of data analysis like content analysis which is a general term for a number of different strategies used to analyse text (Powers & Knapp, 2006). Thematic is a systematic coding and categorizing approach used for exploring large amounts of textual information unobtrusively to determine trends and patterns of words used, their frequency, their relationships, and the structures and discourses of communication (Mayring, 2000; Gbrich, 2007). The thematic analysis of the present data yielded five categories of values, which are- *Attitudes towards work, Attitudes towards organization, Attitudes towards family and friends, Personality related values and What constitutes rewards.* These themes made it easy to compare each generational cohort on corresponding values. The next step in analysis was to compare the strength of each value across cohorts and understand how these values differ in each cohort which was accomplished by reviewing literature on the same in terms of strength of each value for different cohorts as reported by researchers over time and locations. Lastly, a comparative analysis was done amongst cohorts to look for patterns of associations and disassociations from these specified values to understand the motivators and demotivators for different cohorts.

Research Findings

Values related to different Generational cohorts

In order to understand the differences in values of the three cohorts, the various values associated with each cohort as identified by decades of research, can be clustered into five groups- *Attitudes towards Work, Attitudes towards Organization, Attitudes towards Family and friends, Personality related values and What constitutes Rewards* (Refer to Table I).

Attitude towards work entails the values that are directly associated with tasks and processes related to work and about the work itself (eg, hard-work, feedback, team-work, meaningful work etc.). *Attitude towards organization* refers to values towards the organization as a whole and not the individual employer or supervisor until mentioned so specifically (eg. includes loyalty, questioning rules etc.). *Attitudes towards Family and friends* covers values associated with family and friends in comparison to work (eg. Career vs family orientation, prioritization of career vs family etc). The category of *Personality related values* outlines some characteristics of the people of the cohort in terms of their personality (eg. Individualistic, overachievers, fast learners and so on). The last category i.e. *What constitutes Rewards*

talks about tangible and intangible things that the cohort consider as reward (like power, recognition, material rewards etc.). Each group talks about reported traits of the three generational cohorts as found by various researchers over time. For instance, the group Attitudes towards Work reports that Baby Boomers had a high work ethic, they had high commitment towards their job, Gen X was more outcome focused and desired meaningful work and Gen Y was found to lack work ethic, but desired meaningful work.

Table I *Thematic analysis of values across generational cohorts*

	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Gen Y/ Millenials
Attitude towards Work	High work ethic High commitment to job Hardworking & Driven Detail oriented Highly involved Self-reliant Good at consensus building and mentoring	Outcome focused Desire feedback Complain about it all Desire flexibility and fun Want interesting work Multitaskers Best work alone Like technology Pragmatic	Lack work ethic Desire meaningful work Value diversity Work harder than Gen X Lifelong learners Less formal Team-workers Tech-savy Multitaskers Ambitious workers
Attitude towards Organization	Respect for authority Follow and respect rules Loyal to the organization and employers	Distrustful of organizations Lack loyalty towards employer Low tolerance to rules and bureaucracy	Trust authority Little value for tradition and conformity Less loyal to employer Question rules
Attitude towards Family and Friends	Career is everything	Family oriented Work family balance is important Give importance to personal goals	Family = happiness Value leisure Prioritize family & friends
Personality related Values	Workaholics Career is identity Not open to change Positive Relationship oriented Overachievers High on self enhancement values (achievement, hedonism & power)	Individualistic Self-reliant Risk takers Open to change Skeptical Success minded Competitive Low on self enhancement values	Independent High self esteem Narcissistic Open to change Fast learners Optimistic Impatient Self-confident Expressive Need open communication
What constitutes Reward?	Power Position Authority to make decisions Public recognition Tangible rewards	Recognition Tangible rewards	Recognition Acknowledgement Material & financial success

Comparison of each value across cohorts

This section looks at the strength of each value for each cohort. For the ease of understanding, the five groups identified earlier like *Attitudes towards work, Attitudes towards family and friends* etc were retained for further analysis (Refer to Table II).

In the category of *Attitudes towards Work*, the value of Self-reliance has been found to be consistently high across all the three cohorts, some other values including Desire for Interesting work, Team-work, Multitasking and being Tech-savy have been found to increase from older generational cohorts to the newer ones. Values like work ethic, outcome focus and desire for feedback witness a decline in newer generations. It is interesting to note that there are values which

were considered less important by Baby boomers, had completely disappeared in Gen X but resurfaced in Gen Y with a high strength, like having a learning attitude and being ambitious.

In the category of *Attitudes towards Organizations*, very interesting findings surfaced as most of the values in this category (Respect towards authority, Following rules, Loyalty towards organization) were at their peak strength in Baby Boomers and then reduced in strength in Gen X and Gen Y cohorts. Traditionalism however, was high amongst Baby Boomers, unreported or extinct in Gen X and resurfaced in low strength in Gen Y.

From the category of *Attitudes towards Family and Friends,* it is evident that generations have started valuing leisure more over time as this value has increased in strength consistently with each new cohort. The value of prioritizing family and friends over work has been on a high in both Gen X and Y, however it started off with a low strength among Baby boomers.

Personality related values, is one of the most interesting categories in the study as this gives a brief idea about these three cohorts and how they changed over time. On one hand, values like Workaholism, Overachievement and Self-enhancement showed a decline from Baby boomers to Gen Y, values like Individualism, Risk-taking, Expressiveness and Openness to change increased from older to younger generations. Competitiveness, as a value was on an all-time high among Baby Boomers and Gen X, but Gen Y appears to have mellowed down on this one whereas, Optimism, seems to be a common trait among Boomers and Gen Y. Patience however is a value which represented itself in Boomers, completely disappeared amongst Gen Xers but have resurfaced in Gen Y in low strengths.

The final category in this classification is of *What constitutes Rewards?* And surprisingly things do not seem to change much in this aspect. All the three cohorts highly value Recognition and Tangible, material rewards. Gen Y has also added Acknowledgement to the list of rewards which had been absent in previous generational cohorts.

Table II *Strength of different values across cohorts*

Values/ Cohorts	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Gen Y
Attitudes towards Work			
Hard-work	High	Moderate	High
Work ethic	High	-	Low
Job commitment	High	-	-
Detail oriented	High	-	-
Outcome focused	-	High	Moderate
Desire feedback	-	High	Moderate
Complainers	Moderate	High	-
Self-reliance	High	High	High
Want interesting work	Low	High	High
Team-work	Low	Low	High
Multitasking	Low	High	High
Tech-savy	Low	Moderate	High
Pragmatism	Moderate	High	-
Learning attitude	Low	-	High
Ambitious	Low	-	High
Attitudes towards Organizations			
Respect towards authority	High	Low	Low
Follow rules	High	Low	Low
Loyal to organization	High	Low	Low
Traditional	High	-	Low
Attitudes towards Family & Friends			
Prioritize family	Low	High	High
Value leisure	Low	Moderate	High
Personality related Values			
Individualistic	Low	High	High
Workaholics	High	Low	Low
Overachievers	High	Low	-
Self enhancement values(Achievement, Hedonism & Power)	High	Low	-
Risk taking	--	High	Moderate
Openness to change	Low	High	High
Optimism	High	Low	High
Competitiveness	High	High	Moderate
Patience	High	-	Low
Expressiveness	Low	-	High
What constitutes Rewards?			
Value Recognition	High	High	High
Value Tangible rewards	High	High	High
Value acknowledgement	-	-	High

Points of convergence and divergence among cohorts based on their values

This section of the findings engages with the similarities and differences amongst the three cohorts based on their values. As can be observed from Table II, the most striking finding is that all the three cohorts- Baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Y have consistently placed a high value on Recognition and Material & tangible rewards, indicating that generational gap has not placed much role in this aspect. All the three cohorts also place a high value on self-reliance, indicating that it is a prized value even today. However, there seems to be a pattern between the ideologies regarding leisure and family time. It has been found that Baby Boomers were workaholics and prioritized their work over family and friends. This trend has changed among the other two cohorts as they have placed a high value on prioritizing their family and valuing leisure. Furthermore, the data suggests that the cohorts significantly differ on their attitudes towards their organization. Baby boomers were highly work oriented, followed set rules and hierarchy and were loyal to their organization but the other two \generations did not follow the same path. Gen X and Gen Y appear to be more easy-going team-workers, multitaskers and devoted towards interesting and meaningful work rather than the organization itself. Boomers were more traditional in their attitude, whereas Gen Xers and Gen Yers are more open to change.

DISCUSSION

Listing and understanding values and value systems can be the key to understanding civilizations, cultures and societies. More interestingly, it is the key to predicting behavior, as can be discerned from the present study. The findings of the present study clearly indicate that there exists a gap in our understanding of values and their associations with each cohort. Clearly, there is no concrete distinction between cohorts on the basis of values, as believed by many scholars (Lyons and Kuron, 2014). For example, all three cohorts were found to consider recognition and material rewards valuable. It can be argued that this similarity among cohorts can also be a result of other variables like the need to provide for the family, or to plan a world tour or to save up for post-retirement plans. This is in line with what value theorists posit when they suggest that, individual values can be meaningfully understood only when placed into a larger value system (Emmons, 1999; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992, 1996; Vinson, Scott, and Lamont, 1977). Thus, it is the need of the hour to shift our focus, as researchers, from the common and distinct values

among cohorts to the underlying causes for holding the value in itself and also towards understanding the complex web of values that an individual is wrapped into. This could also unveil whether classifying the generational cohorts on the basis of the year of birth is a flawless method or do we need to ditch this type of categorization to look for better alternatives. This is also in line with previous researches which question the categorization of generational cohorts on the basis of birth years, believing that people born in the same year would share similar values (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

On the other hand, there are certain values that the three cohorts differ on strongly like loyalty towards organization, respect for rules and authority, valuing leisure. It is argued that the Baby Boomers were more uptight in their attitude towards work and organizations. They respected authority, had a very strong work ethic and in a nutshell, their work was their life, thus they were workaholics and overachievers. The newer generations started moving away from these ideologies as they started questioning. The work ethic still existed but meaningful work was looked up to, thus a decline in competitiveness. These cohorts wanted to engage in continuous learning and thus desired feedback, they aspired for a balance between their work and family and valued company of friends and family. These findings point towards a plethora of research work spanning over decades which strongly believes and suggests that these differences amongst generational cohorts are rooted in their socially, politically and historically unique experiences (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Macky, Gardner, & Forsyth, 2008). The mixed findings, which are in accordance with previous researches (Becton, Walker and Farmer, 2014) can also be interpreted in the light of the fact that chronological age is at best a proxy measure(not a causal variable) for issues influencing work-related outcomes (Kanfer & Ackerman,2004;Warr, 2001). Thus, a more rigorous approach towards understanding the needs and viewpoints of individuals belonging to different cohorts is required to finally be able to look at the causal factors behind having a particular set of values.

CONCLUSION

Values are what makes one what they are. They are the building blocks of an individual and for this reason, values have been consistently studied and researched upon across disciplines. The findings of this study have clearly indicated that values can not be used as a categorization criterion for generational cohorts as the evidence of similarities and dissimilarities across cohorts is though abundant, but inconclusive. We, as researchers thus, face a huge challenge to step away from the conventional methods of understanding generational cohorts and values and invest future resources in finding novel paths to discovering the studying values as individual constructs and as a whole system in individuals. Furthermore, the causal factors for adhering to certain values across cohorts and moving away from other values should be understood in order to better understand generational cohorts.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that there is no black and white categorization on whether the generational cohorts are similar or completely distinct. Thus, upcoming researchers should consider focusing on exploring the issues from a new vantage point.

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