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Leadership and generations at work: A critical review

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ABSTRACT

We present a critical review of theory, empirical research, and practical applications regarding generational differences in leadership phenomena. First, we consider the concept of generations both historically and through contemporary arguments related to leadership. Second, we outline and refute various myths surrounding the idea of generational differences in general, and critique leadership theories that have been influenced by these myths. Third, we describe the results of a literature review of primary empirical studies that have invoked the notion of generational differences to understand leadership phenomena. Finally, we argue that the lifespan developmental perspective represents a useful alternative to generational representations, as it better captures age-related dynamics that are relevant to leadership, followership, and leadership development. Ultimately, our work serves as a formal call for a moratorium to be placed upon the application of the ideas of generations and generational differences to leadership theory, research, and practice.

Introduction

In the popular leadership and management literature, the notion that there are demonstrable generational differences in work attitudes, motivation, and behavior is so ubiquitous that it borders upon axiomatic (e.g., Espinoza & Ukleja, 2016; Fitch & Van Brunt, 2016; Grubbs, 2015; Kelan, 2012; Tulgan, 2009). Beyond the popular press, the idea that generational differences exist has also emerged within contemporary leadership theory (e.g., Balda & Mora, 2011; Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Graen & Schiemann, 2013) and empirical research (e.g., Arsenault, 2004; Gentry, Griggs, Deal, Mondore, & Cox, 2011; Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007). For example, a recent article published in *The Leadership Quarterly* decrees, "...millennials are most assuredly different than their predecessors with respect to ideas, behaviors and viewpoints, and ... organizational leaders will have to lead these employees, by necessity, differently" (Anderson, Baur, Griffith, & Buckley, 2017, p. 245).

There are at least three fundamental problems with these assumptions, and indeed with the entire idea of generational differences at large, that are theoretical, methodological, and empirical in nature. First, theories of generational differences are based upon flawed assumptions about the role that "generations" (i.e., represented as higher order, aggregate constructs) play in shaping individual-level outcomes. Second, because we do not possess sufficient methods for studying whether or not generational differences exist, these tenuous theories cannot be empirically tested with necessary or sufficient precision. Finally, across those studies that have attempted to tease apart the effects of generational differences, there is little to no empirical evidence to suggest that such differences exist, or that they manifest as differences in work attitudes, motivation, or behavior (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015, 2017). For example, a meta-analysis of $K = 20$ studies by Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, and Gade (2012) found no appreciable evidence for generational differences in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (see also Stassen, Anseel, & Levecque, 2016, for a systematic qualitative review that arrived at similar conclusions). As a result of these three

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fundamental problems, the scant evidence that does seem to suggest that generational membership influences work outcomes (e.g., Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010) is based upon flawed logic (i.e., the inappropriate conflation of chronological age, contemporaneous period, and/or birth year cohort effects), confounded methodologies, and arguably weak theoretical rationales (Fineman, 2011; Walker, 1993). Notwithstanding the weaknesses of theory and the lack of evidence to the contrary, even if generational differences *did* matter for work outcomes, we would be unable to capture such effects through available empirical methodologies.

In response to the call for papers for the 2018 *The Leadership Quarterly Yearly Review*, the present manuscript aims to "...identify measures, theories, or practices that should be discontinued in the field." Specifically, we argue in the following critical review that future leadership research should abandon the concept of generations, and that we should eschew the notion of "generational differences" as a basis for future leadership theory, research, and practice. In other words, we call for placing a moratorium on the generations concept as it is currently applied to our understanding of leadership. Moreover, based upon and extending previous research in this journal and elsewhere (e.g., Day, 2011; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017b; Walter & Scheibe, 2013; Zacher, Clark, Anderson, & Ayoko, 2015), we explain why a lifespan developmental approach to leadership constitutes a promising alternative to research on leadership and generational differences.

To frame our arguments, we have organized this manuscript around five interrelated goals. First, we review the concept of generational differences, as it is broadly understood, by defining the concept, tracing its historical development, and outlining its contemporary (mis)application to understanding various leadership-related phenomena. Second, we debunk several myths surrounding the idea that generational differences matter in the workplace, and we offer theoretical, methodological, and empirically grounded arguments to this end. Third, we outline and critique leadership theories that have been influenced by popular myths regarding generational differences. Fourth, we review and critique primary empirical studies that have invoked the notion of generational differences to understand leadership phenomena. Finally, we discuss the lifespan developmental approach as a promising alternative way of thinking about and representing the complexities of age and leadership. With these five goals accomplished, we call for a "cease and desist" on the application of the idea of generational differences as an explanatory framework in leadership theory, research, and practice.

Reconsidering the problem of generations

The modern notion of "generations" as distinct units of study emerged within the field of sociology. Beginning in the early twentieth century, sociologists sought explanations for the mechanisms responsible for bringing about large-scale social change (Kertzer, 1983). The agent of such change, according to some, was the natural "churn" associated with over-time dynamics across birth cohorts (e.g., Mannheim, 1952; Ryder, 1965). The argument offered by these researchers was that each successive birth cohort brings their own particular experiences to bear on those problems faced by society. Because each successive cohort is temporally and, thus, historically embedded within a given social context, early formative experiences during childhood were thought to uniquely shape the "shared consciousness" of each generation (Mannheim, 1952). The formation and codification of such a shared consciousness from cohort-to-cohort gives rise to unique and distinguishable features that are broadly characteristic of each new generation. From this thinking, the notion of "generations" as we understand them today emerged. As we will review in greater detail later, the role of history and social context underlies explanations for the emergence of generational differences in leadership in contemporary leadership theory (e.g., Bennis & Thomas, 2002).

While interesting from the perspective of a sociological thought experiment that offers explanations for the mechanisms of social change, the ideas of generations and their unique characteristics have been adopted quite broadly to explain myriad other phenomena—including cross-temporal changes in trait narcissism (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008), preferences for wine packaging (Nuebling & Behnke, 2015), and changes in baseball fandom (Nightengale, 2016). The concept of generational differences has likewise made its way into the domains of IO/OB/HR research over the past two decades (Joshi, Dencker, & Franz, 2011; Smola & Sutton, 2002), and into research concerning leadership, specifically (Arsenault, 2004; Gentry et al., 2011). Recently, however, a general consensus has emerged from systematic qualitative (Stassen et al., 2016), quantitative (Costanza et al., 2012), and critical (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017a, 2017b) reviews of this literature which suggests that generational differences do not have an appreciable influence on work processes and outcomes. While these reviews are by-in-large damning to the concept of generational differences at work, such reviews have not adequately considered the role of generations in leadership processes and outcomes (cf. Rudolph & Zacher, 2017b, a conceptual work that debunks various "myths" regarding leadership and generations). Thus, there is still a notable gap in our understanding of the totality and scope of this phenomenon, which can be explained by the fact that the literature on generational differences in leadership is quite fragmented and largely prescriptive in nature (Anderson et al., 2017). Here, we begin closing this gap by offering a systematic review and critique of leadership theory and research concerning generations that builds upon and extends past conceptual works.

Criticisms of generational differences research

Beyond the general conclusion of literature reviews that generations exert a null influence on various work processes and outcomes, it is important to critique how theories of generations influence the conduct of generational differences research. As suggested by Rudolph (2015), generational differences research most often adopts cross-sectional (i.e., single time point) research designs. To translate theories of generations into operationalized variables, generational differences researchers typically split the continuous variable chronological age into several categories to represent the various assumed generational cohorts present in their data.

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