

Generational Differences in Work Values: A Review of Theory and Evidence

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This paper presents a critical review of the theoretical basis and empirical evidence for the popular practitioner idea that there are generational differences in work values. The concept of generations has a strong basis in sociological theory, but the academic empirical evidence for generational differences in work values is, at best, mixed. Many studies are unable to find the predicted differences in work values, and those that do often fail to distinguish between ‘generation’ and ‘age’ as possible drivers of such observed differences. In addition, the empirical literature is fraught with methodological limitations through the use of cross-sectional research designs in most studies, confusion about the definition of a generation as opposed to a cohort, and a lack of consideration for differences in national context, gender and ethnicity. Given the multitude of problems inherent in the evidence on generational differences in work values, it is not clear what value the notion of generations has for practitioners, and this may suggest that the concept be ignored. Ultimately, it may not matter to practitioners whether differences in the values of different birth cohorts reflect true generational effects, provided one can reliably demonstrate that these differences do exist. However, at present this is not the case, and therefore significant research is required first to disentangle cohort and generational effects from those caused by age or period. The suggestion that different groups of employees have different values and preferences, based on both age and other factors such as gender, remains a useful idea for managers; but a convincing case for consideration of generation as an additional distinguishing factor has yet to be made.

Introduction

Open any management magazine, business consultancy publication or even a national newspaper over the last few years and you are likely to find a reference to the different generations in the population. In these literatures, much attention has been paid to generational differences in consumption preferences (see for instance, Shin 2008; Stephey 2008) or workplace attitudes and behaviours (Alsop 2008; Filipczak 1994; Kupperschmidt 2000; Parry and Urwin 2009).

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Within this practitioner context a ‘generation’ is often very broadly defined as, for example, ‘an identifiable group that shares birth years, age, location and significant life events at critical developmental stages’ (Kupperschmidt 2000, p. 66). The standard approach across Western economies such as the USA, the UK and Australia has been to assume that there are now four generations of Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. Table 1 details the birth-year categorization used in one of the most commonly cited books on the topic (Strauss and Howe 1991, p. 32).

The precise definition of these groups, in terms of the years in which they were born, exhibits some variation between studies. However, in each case the

Table 1. Definitions of generational groups currently in the workforce

Generation	Years of birth	Also known as
Veterans	1925–1942	Silent Generation, Matures, Traditionalists
Baby Boomers	1943–1960	
Generation X	1961–1981	Thirteenth, Baby Busters, Lost Generation
Generation Y	1982–	Millennials, Nexters, Echo Boomers

grouping of individuals within these four generations is motivated by the belief that they each share a different set of values and attitudes, as a result of shared events and experiences. For example, some consider that Generation X saw their parents being made redundant in the 1980s, and this shaped their perceptions of work in a time of economic uncertainty. It is suggested that this led to a tendency for them to see each job as temporary and each company as a ‘stepping stone’ to something else (Filipczak 1994).

The practitioner literature suggests that generational differences in work values influence the requirements for all aspects of people management: recruitment (Charrier 2000), training and development (Berl 2006; Tulgan 1996); career development (Ansoorian *et al.* 2003; McDonald and Hite 2008), rewards and working arrangements (Carlson 2004; Filipczak 1994) and management style (Losyk 1997; Tulgan 1996); as well as having the potential to cause serious conflict within the workplace (Karp and Sirias 2001). As a result of these supposed differences in tastes and preferences between generations, management consultancies and professional bodies now commonly offer advice on how best to manage generational differences at work.

Even a brief consideration of the heritage of these four generational categories raises concern over the evidence base on which this ‘management fashion’ (Abrahamson 1996) has been built. For example, the categorization of a post-war baby-boom generation was originally driven by considerations of demography, while in the UK the term ‘Generation X’ can be traced back to the commissioning of Jane Deverson to write a *Woman’s Own* magazine article in 1964. On top of this mixed heritage is the fact that systematic evaluations of the theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence for generational differences are rare. Lyons *et al.* (2007) suggested that ‘despite the popularity of this topic, there has been relatively little

academic work either to confirm or refute popular stereotypes’ (p. 339). Indeed, our search of the literature found that the last comprehensive review conducted in this area was by Rhodes in 1983. The purpose of our review is to examine whether this interest in generational differences in one particular area – that of work values – has developed from a sound theoretical basis and a valid empirical evidence base.

In her review, Rhodes (1983) suggested that ‘age-related’ influences in work values could be considered as constituted of ‘cohort effects, age effects and period effects’, suggesting, for instance, that age effects are developmental in nature and are caused by psychosocial or biological ageing. These are different from ‘cohort effects’ which arise as a result of the impact of environment or experiences. As Rhodes suggested, if differences in work-related attitudes were due to age effects, one would expect younger adults to become more like older adults as they age. If, however, differences were due to cohort (or generational) effects, one would expect these attitudes and the differences between age cohorts to remain relatively stable.

Rhodes (1983) did not explicitly focus on generational difference. In fact, among the literature that she draws upon, only Baltes (1968) explicitly deals with ‘generations’. However, in suggesting that age-related influences on work values could be considered as constituted of ‘cohort effects, age effects and period effects’, Rhodes sets an excellent baseline from which to build the present study.

The first stage in this review is a detailed discussion of the theoretical basis for ‘generations’ (distinguishing generational, cohort and maturation effects); followed by a critical review of the academic literature which might provide empirical evidence for the existence of generational differences in work values. Ultimately, our goal is to document the theoretical and empirical heritage for generational differences, clarify a framework for the analysis of generations and reconsider the present-day practitioner context in light of our findings. We conclude with a commentary on the value of generations as a means of segmenting the workforce, and suggestions for the future of research in this area.

Theoretical origins of generations

Rhodes (1983) provides a clear chronological starting point for our review of empirical evidence.

However, when considering the origins of generational theory, we must first go back further in time.

Sociological foundations

While many modern commentators are unaware of its heritage, consideration of generational difference can be traced back to the 1950s, and has its early origins in sociology, most notably in the work of Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), who discussed the ‘problem of generations’ in his seminal paper (Mannheim 1952). Mannheim (1952) emphasized the importance of generations as a guide to understanding the structure of social and intellectual movements. He defined a generation as being similar to the class position of an individual in society in that a generation is not a ‘concrete group’ (i.e. its members do not have mental or physical proximity or any knowledge of each other) but is a ‘social location’. Mannheim suggested that the existence of generations is made possible by five characteristics of our society: (1) new participants in the cultural process are emerging; (2) former participants are continually disappearing; (3) members of a generation can participate in only a temporally limited section of the historical process; so (4) cultural heritage needs to be transmitted; and finally (5) the transition from generation to generation is continuous.

Members of the same generation share the same year of birth so have a common location in the historical dimension of the social process. This limits them to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them to a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience. However, Mannheim dictates that individuals cannot be members of the same generation simply because they share a year of birth. They must definitely be in a position to participate in certain common experiences so that a concrete bond is created between members of a generation and so that they share ‘an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences’ (p. 306).

According to Mannheim (1952) and his followers, there are two important elements to the term ‘generation’. First, a common location in historical time and, secondly, a ‘distinct consciousness of that historical position . . . shaped by the events and experiences of that time’ (Gilleard 2004, p. 108). The importance of this second element is clearly emphasized in the work of Turner and colleagues (Edmunds and Turner 2002; Eyerman and Turner 1998; Turner 1998) and also by recent academics who have

focused on the concept of ‘collective memories’ (Holdbrook and Schindler 1989, 1994; Schuman and Scott 1989). This body of work has suggested that people who are in adolescence or young adulthood during particularly significant national or international events will form a shared memory of those events which will affect their future attitudes, preferences and behaviour (‘generational imprinting’). Schuman and Scott (1989) found that, when asked to recall events from the last 50 years, Americans gave similar events (e.g. Vietnam, World War II), but these collective memories were somewhat superficial unless the individual had actually experienced the events.

In another extension of the approach of Mannheim, modern-day sociologists have widened their focus from consideration of the impact that historical events may have in defining a generation, to an examination of cultural elements such as affinities with music or other types of popular culture. For instance, Mannheim’s theory of generations has been refined by Turner (Edmunds and Turner 2002; Eyerman and Turner 1998; Turner 1998), who defined a generation as a ‘cohort of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus and lifestyle . . . [and] has a strategic temporal location to a set of resources as a consequence of historical accident and the exclusionary practices of social closure’ (Turner 1998, p. 302). In his definition, Turner borrows the concept of ‘habitus’ from Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of culture (Bourdieu 1977). Encompassed in this is the idea that members of a generation share a collective cultural field (of emotions, attitudes, preferences and dispositions) and a set of embodied practices (of sport and leisure activities) (Eyerman and Turner 1998). Holdbrook and Schindler (1989, 1994) suggest that nostalgia and pop culture have a greater impact on generational differences, with people being most prone to socialization of music (at around age 23), film stars (at 14) and clothes (in young adulthood). Generations therefore build solidarity through shared cultural symbols such as music or fashion (McMullin *et al.* 2007). McMullin *et al.* (2007) also extended this suggestion to include computing technology as a marker of culture through which generations may be formed.

Eyerman and Turner (1998) develop this further, focusing on the idea that a generational cohort has strategic access to collective resources and, by excluding others from access to these cultural and material resources, maintains its cultural identity. This proposition is also in keeping with Bourdieu’s

treatment of generations as being a result of conflict over economic and cultural resources and of the fact that different generations will see different resources as important, leading to inter-generational conflict such as the anti-youth movement (Bourdieu 1993). Eyerman and Turner (1998) suggested that a generational cohort survives by maintaining a collective memory of its origins and struggles, historical and political events and its leading characters and ideologists. It is mainly this emphasis on the struggle for resources that distinguishes Turner and his colleagues' (Edmunds and Turner 2002; Eyerman and Turner 1998; Turner 1998) theory from Mannheim's work. Generations are seen as becoming politically active and self-conscious when they are able to exploit resources and become politically, intellectually or culturally innovative (Edmunds and Turner 2005).

Cohort analysis

We find that Rhodes' (1983) approach to 'age-related' influences in work values as being constituted of cohort effects, age effects and period effects is a standard approach when undertaking cohort analyses (see for example Mason and Wolfinger 2001). In this literature, a cohort is broadly defined as 'a set of individuals entering a system at the same time' (p. 1), who are 'presumed to have similarities due to shared experiences that differentiate them' (Mason and Wolfinger 2001). For instance, in a situation where one has data on two cohorts of individuals born within two distinct time frames, studies attempt to measure differences in outcomes between the two cohorts at a point (or points) in time. It is generally accepted (Mason and Wolfinger 2001) that any differences between cohorts are due to a combination of these three age-related, period and cohort effects.

These three factors are in fact inter-related and, as Mason and Wolfinger suggest, 'the linear dependency of the three temporal dimensions always creates an identification problem' (p. 1) Less technically, if we carry out the study of two cohorts born at different points in time, it is very hard to distinguish differences between them that are due to true cohort effects, rather than (i) they are different ages when we make our measurements (maturation effects), and/or (ii) we measure the outcomes at particular points in time (period effects). Mason and Wolfinger, drawing on a survey that measured levels of happiness among respondents, underlined how hard it was

to determine whether a certain happiness level among, for instance, the 40–50 age group was due to happiness declining with age, as opposed to any impact of historical events and environments experienced by this cohort, or the fact that one is asking about happiness at a slightly different point in time for each set of respondents. These technical difficulties have not hindered the extent of cohort analysis and, particularly within the UK, social sciences researchers have used data from the National Child Development Survey and the British Cohort Study (which track the lives of cohorts born in 1958 and 1970, respectively) to investigate a range of outcomes (see for instance Blanden *et al.* 2005; Elliott and Vaitilingam 2008).

We return to issues of method in our review of empirical studies, but it is useful to establish whether we have a basis on which to differentiate analysis of cohorts from that of generations that is consistent across these literatures. In her 1983 work, Rhodes focuses on cohorts, but appears to have used the terms cohort and generation interchangeably. In contrast, Edmunds and Turner (2002) distinguish chronological generations or birth cohorts, from social or political generations that form around particular formative experiences. This view seems similar to that adopted by Ryder (1965), who considered the term 'cohort' as a 'more neutral construct' (Gilleard 2004, p. 108). Ryder defined a 'cohort' as 'the aggregate of individuals who experienced the same event within the same time interval' (p. 845) and each cohort as having a distinctive composition and character based upon the circumstances of its unique orientation and history'. In all of this, the key issue is that, when dealing with cohort analysis, there seems only to be a presumption that cohorts exhibit differences in outcomes due to shared experiences (Mason and Wolfinger 2001). In contrast, it would seem that a generation must exhibit such differences in order to be considered as such.

We therefore have an emerging distinction between 'cohorts' and 'generations'. The approach adopted when considering cohorts is first to define the cut-off points of birth date for those being considered and then test where 'outcomes' (including values and attitudes) from this group exhibit particular differences from other cohorts. In contrast, with the theory of generations, one begins from a social, political or economic event; change in resource, demography or other social characteristic and, from this, we need to search for appropriate cut-off points to define a generation. A cohort would only be

counted as a generational group if it exhibited separate and distinct values and attitudes because of its sharing of social, economic and political events, when contrasted to other cohorts. The above approach suggests that a cohort is much more of an atheoretical construct, or that cohorts are acting as 'proxies' or 'samples' of generational categories. To see what we mean by this, let us consider the generational categories used in the practitioner literature as detailed in Table 1.

From the sociological literature, we are able to consider a range of theoretical propositions on what might constitute a generation, but we have very little detail on how such theoretical constructs might be operationalized. One may hypothesize that a certain set of historical events and related cultural phenomena have impacted in a way that creates a distinct generational group, with separate values and attitudes. However, from this literature, it is not at all clear how we would actually allocate individuals to one or other generations, when such allocation is based on concepts of social and cultural 'proximity' (would somebody born in 1961 be considered as a Baby Boomer or Generation Xer?). In contrast, when considering modern-day studies of generation, the *a priori* assumption would seem to be that there are four generations grouped according to birth year. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that the job of proving proximity to historical events, social, cultural and economic phenomena has already been carried out, and the outcome is as depicted in Table 1.

In the next section of this study, we consider the extent to which this implicit assumption can be backed up by empirical fact, when considering work values. We first note briefly how the concept of generations has been operationalized within another domain – that of marketing: one of the first to widely adopt the idea of generations in practice. As we shall see, many of the studies that consider generations and work values take a broadly similar approach to that adopted in the marketing literature.

The use of generations and cohorts in the marketing literature

Age is a factor that has often been used to segment consumer markets in one way or another, whether that be as chronological age, generational cohort or life cycle (Dibb *et al.* 2001; McDonald and Dunbar 1998). In particular, the idea of generational differences has been widely adopted by marketing scholars

and practitioners as a means to segment the consumer population (Noble and Schewe 2003), and the idea that different generations have different preferences has long been considered a potential characteristic on which to target advertising at different groups of consumers (Bradford 1993). There is a close parallel here between the marketing and human resource management literatures, in that generational groups as depicted in Table 1 have been commonly used as a basis on which to make assumptions about a group's values or preferences. Many marketing text books will discuss generations as a basis for segmentation. For example, Kotler and Keller (2006, pp. 235–236) suggested:

Each generation is profoundly influenced by the times in which it grows up – the music, movies, politics, and defining events of that period ... Members of a cohort [generation] share the same major culture, political, and economic experiences. They have similar outlook and values. Marketers often advertise to a cohort group by using the icons and images prominent in their experience.

Looking at the marketing literature, it would seem that generations are defined in a similar way to the definition used by Mannheim (1952) and his followers. In marketing, the use of the concept of generations is an explicit attempt to tap into shared social values and cultural consciousness, often using an association with the very event that is thought to be a driver of such shared values and attitudes. The idea of the impact of nostalgia on generational attitudes and of the socialization of music and film stars is commonly used in marketing. For example, a Mercedes Benz campaign in the 1990s used the Janis Joplin song 'Mercedes Benz' as a way to appeal to that age group (Arsenault 2004). Thus, when marketers consider the four groups of individuals born at different points in history, they are attempting to operationalize a concept of generations, as viewed by sociologists such as Mannheim (1952); and in taking the same approach, so are many studies of generations and work values.

Age and period effects

Having established some distinction between cohorts and generations across the sociological and marketing literatures, we now move on to the theoretical distinction between these and age or maturation effects, and the period effects as suggested by Rhodes (1983). Age effects are changes that affect

people as they ‘mature’, regardless of when they were born, whereas period effects are caused by the fact that people’s values will be affected by the influences that exist at any particular point in time. Polach (2007) extended Rhodes’ argument by explaining that it is not simply when a person was born that governs their behaviour at work, but also their age. Polach suggested that some behaviour can be better explained when thought of in terms of life stages and uses the example of people in their 20s establishing their independence, a career and family regardless of their generation. Polach goes on to propose that a better understanding of how to leverage age diversity in the workforce can be achieved by combining an appreciation of life stages with a generational approach.

As Mason and Wolfinger (2001) underlined, age, period and cohort (generational) effects are likely to be hard to distinguish and, in most cases, they are likely to be closely interrelated. Howe and Strauss (2007) provided an explanation of the complex way in which historical events and moods shape a generation’s members’ lives, in that people’s lives are affected very differently, depending on the phase of life they occupy at the time. Howe and Strauss described this as the ‘Generational Diagonal’ (p. 46). For example, the Great Depression and World War II will have meant challenge, teamwork, trial and sacrifice for young adults (soldiers), a new sense of responsibility and a need for practical leadership for those in their midlife, and tight adult protection for children. This moves away from the idea that generations are formed only by events in their formative years, and towards a view that the different generations continue to be shaped as they grow older. The above discussion is summarized in Table 2.

Work values and workplace diversity

We now move on to the main focus of this paper, that of generational differences in work values. Values define what people believe to be fundamentally right or wrong, so work values apply this definition of right or wrong to the work setting (Smola and Sutton 2002). As Lyons *et al.* (2007) explained, ‘values are enduring but not immutable. They are learned during an individual’s formative years and remain fairly consistent over the life course’ (p. 340). Empirical support for the proposition that work values are life-long and enduring has been provided by Rentz and Reynolds (1991) and Rentz *et al.* (1983) through

Table 2. Cohorts, generations and age

Theoretical constructs	
Generations	A set of historical events and related cultural phenomena have impacted in a way that creates a distinct generational group. The identification of a generation requires some form of social ‘proximity’ to shared events or cultural phenomena
Cohorts	A group of individuals born at the same time who are <i>presumed</i> 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
Age effects	The changing views, attitudes and behaviours of individuals as they mature
Period effects	The (often confounding) impact of environment on values, behaviours and attitudes that one must take into account when attempting to identify generational, cohort or age-related impacts

their finding that people’s preferences for Coca Cola and coffee remained constant over their life-course. Work values have been an area of interest since the work of Weber (1958) on the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE). The PWE arose from the belief that hard work and perseverance would lead to wealth which was, in turn, a sign that one was graced by God. This belief formed the basis for the development of Capitalism (Harding and Hikspoors 1995). It is not the purpose of this paper to examine the development of contemporary work values from the basis of the PWE, save to say that the prominence of the PWE declined and has been replaced by a broader range of work values in keeping with the modern workplace. It is interesting to note that a number of researchers (Furnham *et al.* 1993; Tang and Tzeng 1992) have found a positive relationship between the PWE and age. However, Furnham (1990) has pointed out that other factors such as wealth and conservatism vary with age and that these might affect PWE. Wentworth and Shell (1997) found that younger students actually expressed more belief in the PWE than older groups did.

Moving away from the PWE, Dose (1997) defined work values as ‘evaluative standards relating to work or the work environment by which individuals discern what is right or assess the importance of preferences’. In line with Smola and Sutton (2002), we also adopt this relatively broad definition in our analysis of whether the evidence is supportive of the idea that differences in such work values exist between generational groups. This will allow us to

include studies that have examined generational differences in motivational factors and in more general preferences within the workplace.

There is a wealth of evidence that work values are important influences in the workplace, having an impact on employee's job satisfaction, commitment (Gursoy *et al.* 2008) and general attitudes to work (Chu 2007). At its simplest, generational difference in the workplace can be seen within the wider framework of 'diversity', where it is suggested that the successful management of a diverse body of employees can lead to a number of business benefits (DTI 2004; Subeliani and Tsogas 2005; Urwin *et al.* 2007). Across the diversity literature, differences between groups can be driven by culture, religious belief, issues of discrimination, and within the generational context, diversity is likely to arise as a result of the differing values that the generations bring to the workplace. The literature on harnessing workplace diversity for its business benefit also recognizes that difference and diversity can result in some initial conflict. As a result some practitioner literature on generational conflict (Karp and Sirias 2001) has developed, in a workplace manifestation of the ideas put forward by commentators such as Bourdieu (1993). The belief that generational differences in work values manifest in the workplace forms the basis of the popular assumption made by practitioners and consultants that the different generations need to be managed differently (Gursoy *et al.* 2008).

While generational conflict is interesting as a potential outcome of generational differences in work values, this study focuses on the link between generational or cohort differences and work values, rather than the subsequent link between work values and behaviour, so the literature on generational conflict is not examined in detail. It is worth noting, however, that there is some evidence of a relationship between generational cohorts and employment behaviour (Lippmann 2008), although this is unlikely to be straightforward.

Empirical evidence on generational differences in work values

In our investigation of the empirical evidence for work values, we return to Rhodes (1983) as our starting point, as her review of the empirical literature specifically focused on work attitudes and behaviours. Rhodes (1983) concluded that cross-sectional research studies are insufficient as a way of examin-

ing cohort effects (and, by extension, generational differences). Rhodes suggested that longitudinal and time lag (a comparison of people who are the same age in different time periods) data are needed in order to understand fully whether differences in work values are due to age or cohort (generational) effects or simply present environmental differences (period effects). Rhodes concluded from her analysis of the literature that the studies of the values that she reviewed were generally consistent with a life cycle or career stage interpretation of differences, suggesting that needs and values change with age, but she also noted that most of the studies reviewed used cross-sectional data, making the disentanglement of age and generational effects impossible.

Denecker *et al.* (2008) have more recently summarized the methodological difficulties inherent in examining generational differences in a way that is reminiscent of Rhodes' (1983) concerns. Denecker *et al.* suggested that disagreement in defining generations stems from a number of key conceptual and methodological difficulties. First, there are difficulties in separating the effects of age from cohorts using cross-sectional data (Tuma and Hannan 1984); secondly, even when using panel data, it is still difficult to sort out the age-period-cohort problem, as age, cohort and historical period are confounded (Blossfeld *et al.* 1989); and finally, it is quite possible that identities may be more heterogeneous within cohorts than across cohorts (Giele and Elder 1998), especially as generations are constructed by the media and external forces rather than the cohort members themselves.

We follow Rhodes' and Denecker *et al.*'s example by structuring our review of the empirical evidence for generational differences according to the methodology that has been used. First, we focus on cross-sectional surveys similar to the bulk of studies reviewed by Rhodes. We then look at qualitative work that has been carried out in this area, before seeking longitudinal research that may have more validity in distinguishing between age, generational and period effects. We begin with consideration of the literature since 1983 that relates to Western democracies – mainly the US and Europe – and move on to consider generational differences in other parts of the world, in order to examine whether generations differ within different countries and cultures. It is worth noting that, despite current interest in this area, our search found very little empirical literature on generational differences in work values between 1983 and the late 1990s.

Cross-sectional survey studies

Rhodes (1983) expressed concern that the majority of the literature that she found was based upon cross-sectional survey research. The same was true in our study. A number of studies claimed to have investigated differences between generations, but have actually used a cross-sectional design, making it impossible for them to have done so. For instance, Sessa *et al.* (2007), used a cross-sectional design to survey generational differences in leader values and leadership behaviours, therefore producing results that were more in keeping with a maturational (age) effect than a cohort (generational) effect. This is despite the authors' argument against the use of age as only a linear variable, rather than a categorical variable, which is based on the assumption that the latter captures generational differences

Lyons *et al.* (2007) used the Schwartz Values Survey (Schwartz 1992) to assess differences in values between generations and found significant differences in values between the four generations. In support of generational stereotypes and the research hypotheses, Generation X scored higher on openness to change values and lower on conservation values but, more surprisingly, Generation Y did not differ significantly from Baby Boomers or Veterans on these scales, and actually scored lower than Generation X on openness to change and higher on conservatism. Generations X and Y both scored higher on self-enhancement values than did Baby Boomers and Veterans. Using a similar approach, Cennamo and Gardner (2008) found significant generational differences for work values involving status and freedom, but not for extrinsic, social and altruism-related values. Younger generations placed more importance on status than the older group did, while Generation Y valued freedom-related items more than Generation X or Baby Boomers did. Cennamo and Gardner suggested that the first of these findings may actually be due to the career stage of the older group, as they no longer felt the need to earn status. However, the second finding supported the stereotypical view of Generation Y as valuing autonomy and work-life balance.

Wong *et al.* (2008) compared scores of different generations on the Motivation Questionnaire and found differences in the degree to which generations were motivated by affiliation, power and progression. Generations X and Y were more motivated by progression than were Baby Boomers, Generation Y was more motivated by being in an affiliative workplace

than Baby Boomers were, and Generation Y was less motivated by power than Generation X, which was less motivated by power than Baby Boomers. Wong *et al.* recognized the difficulties in differentiating cohort from other effects, and concluded that the differences they identified were better explained by career stage rather than generational differences. No studies were found explicitly examining the relationship between generations, age and career stage.

Chen and Choi (2008) used a cross-sectional survey to look at generational differences in work values in the hospitality industry and found that Baby Boomers viewed altruism and intellectual stimulation more highly than Generations X or Y did; Generation X ranked security and independence more highly than Baby Boomers or Generation Y did, and Generation Y ranked economic return more highly than Baby Boomers or Generation X did. Generally, Chen and Choi's findings showed that Baby Boomers rated personal growth more highly than younger generations, while Generation Y valued work environment more highly than Generation X or Baby Boomers did. In addition, Generation Y was less concerned about personal growth such as intellectual stimulation and achievement and more about economic returns. Some evidence for generational differences has also been provided through cross-sectional studies of workplace fun. (For a discussion of workplace fun, see Bolton and Houlihan 2009.) Lamm and Meeks (2009) found through a cross-sectional survey of 701 individuals that members of different generational cohorts responded differently to workplace fun, and that generation membership moderated the relationship between workplace fun and workplace outcomes such as job satisfaction and commitment.

The above studies that find differences between generations are problematic because of their use of cross-sectional surveys. There are also a number of studies which have failed to find differences. Jurkiewicz and Brown (1998) investigated the relative importance of 15 work-related factors among 278 public employees, and found that the values held as important by Veterans, Baby Boomers and Generation X were similar. Employees were found generally to want to progress in terms of income, responsibility and influence within the organization. Jurkiewicz and Brown suggested that the generations may indeed be different outside work, but were generic in what they wanted from their jobs. These needs may change with age, but this was true across all generations. Jurkiewicz (2000) conducted a second cross-

sectional study examining work-related differences and similarities between Generation X and Baby Boomers in the public sector, and again found that the two generations were more alike than different. Of the 15 factors Jurkiewicz asked her respondents to rate, only three demonstrated differences. Baby Boomers ranked 'chance to learn new things' and 'freedom from pressures to conform' significantly higher than Generation X did. These findings are contrary to Jurkiewicz's hypotheses and to common stereotypes regarding the two generations. Jurkiewicz also found that Generation X ranked 'freedom from supervision' significantly more highly than Baby Boomers did, therefore supporting this stereotype of Generation X. Jurkiewicz concluded that managers would gain better results from developing similar initiatives for all employees rather than segmenting the workforce. This is opposed to the current fashion in both marketing and management which suggests that the different generational segments within the workforce should be treated differently.

Appelbaum *et al.* (2005) investigated the factors that were stereotypically seen as motivating Baby Boomers and Generation X and found that both Baby Boomers and Generation X ranked a high salary and a stable and secure future as the most important motivational factors. This suggests that the stereotypes associated with these generational cohorts were not supportable, and supports the earlier work of Mahoney (1976) that found a substantial core of intergenerational agreement regarding work goals and basic agreement on role-appropriate values. Parker and Chusmir (1990) failed to find differences between generations on the work values that they rated as most important (accomplishment and self-respect) and those they rated as least important (salvation, beauty and national security). However, they did find significant differences on five of the 18 work values, showing that Baby Boomers assigned higher importance to a comfortable and exciting life and social recognition at work, while 'pre-Baby Boomers' (Veterans) placed a higher value on inner harmony at work. It is worth reiterating that it is impossible to be confident that the findings from the studies above were not due to age or maturation effects, as all used a cross-sectional design.

Qualitative studies

Moving away from survey-based designs (but remaining with cross-sectional studies), a number of authors provided more in-depth qualitative studies of

generations. Gursoy *et al.* (2008) used in-depth focus groups to examine the characteristics that defined each generation, and found that the biggest differences were in their attitudes towards authority and the perceived importance of work in their lives. Gursoy *et al.*'s findings supported the common stereotypes around generations. Baby Boomers lived to work and respected hierarchy and authority in the workplace, but were resistant to learning new things and to using technology. Generation X responded to instant gratification, worked to live and expected to be rewarded quickly for good work rather than waiting in line for promotion. They enjoyed a fun working environment, flexible work hours and independence. Generation Y believed in collective action and teamwork, were optimistic, trusted centralized authority, took technology for granted and, like Generation X, liked to keep their career options open. These findings provided strong support for generational differences, but their generalizability must be questioned, as they were based on only ten focus groups including a total of 91 employees. Kunreuther (2003) conducted interviews with three age cohorts of non-profit employees and found that both older and younger people had many of the same qualities, therefore refuting the idea of generational differences. Kunreuther did, however, find some differences between Baby Boomers and Generation X in their motivation to work, their concerns about work-life balance and their views of the future. While interesting as an exploration of possible differences between age groups, these studies have neither the sample size nor longitudinal design necessary truly to establish generational differences.

A number of authors have recently examined the work-related values of Generation Y alone. While these studies cannot provide evidence of the differences between generations, they can provide some useful insights into the values of this single generation. Broadbridge *et al.* (2007) interviewed potential graduate entrants into the retail sector and found that they endorsed values similar to those proposed in the practitioner literature on Generation Y, including working for personal enjoyment and career success, working in a supportive culture and having training and development. Terjesen *et al.* (2007) conducted a similar study using repertory grid interviews, also among university students, and found that members of Generation Y were attracted to organizations that invested heavily in training and development, cared about their employees as individuals, provided clear opportunities for long-term career progression,

allowed variety in their daily work and had a dynamic forward-looking approach to their business. Both of these studies used relatively small numbers (33 and 32, respectively) of university students, so may not be generalizable outside these samples.

Longitudinal research

Smola and Sutton (2002) have provided perhaps the best evidence for generational differences in work values, through their longitudinal study to assess whether there were generational differences in work values and whether these values changed as workers grew older. Smola and Sutton compared levels of desirability of work outcomes, pride in craftsmanship and moral importance of work in 1999 in Generation X and Baby Boomers and with those levels found in 1974. Their results showed that Baby Boomers and Generation X differed significantly in that Generation X had a stronger desire to be promoted more quickly and were less likely to believe that 'work should be one of the most important parts of a person's life'. This is in keeping with the stereotype of Generation X as being more 'me' oriented and less loyal to an employer. However, Generation X was also more likely to believe that working hard was an indication of one's worth, and that they should work hard even when their supervisor was absent. Smola and Sutton found that workers' attitudes change as they mature, but concluded that work values were more influenced by generational experiences than by age and maturation. This study appears therefore to support the proposition that work values differ between generations. However, it is not without its flaws, as different samples of respondents were used in 1974 and 1999, so it is difficult to be sure that this was not due to sample differences or period effects. This study is, however, a step in the right direction, as it does not rely on a cross-sectional design alone and attempts to address some of the issues raised by Rhodes (1983).

Twenge and Campbell (2008) also used a longitudinal analysis of archival data (called 'cross-temporal meta-analysis') to examine the personality traits of Generation Y compared with earlier generations. While this paper focused on personality traits rather than work values, it is worth discussing because their methodological design is a rare example of one that attempts to address both age and period effects. Twenge and Campbell compared archival personality data from different generational groups taken at different time periods in order to

allow an examination of differences in personality by both generation and age or maturation. Twenge and Campbell found that Generation Y had increased self-esteem, narcissism, anxiety and depression, lower need for self-approval and a more external locus of control than other generations. Similarly, Lippmann (2008) used standard age-period-cohort logistic regression techniques in order to separate out the effects of age, period and cohort in his examination of cohort effects on unemployment and re-employment, and found that cohort effect was a better predictor of displacement than age was. No evidence was found, however, of the application of these methodological techniques to studying generational differences in work values.

Summary of empirical evidence

The above analysis paints a problematic picture of the empirical evidence for generational differences. The evidence is at best mixed, with as many studies failing to find differences between generations as finding them. Those differences that are found are not consistent, with a number of authors finding differences that contradict the popular stereotypes of Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. On top of this, we see that the majority of studies have relied on cross-sectional data, so it may be that some of the differences espoused as generational differences can actually be ascribed to age effects as opposed to generational differences. While personality characteristics remain stable, people generally change what they want from their jobs over time, as they progress from pre-graduate employment to career positions, mix family and career interests, and on to retirement. Only one study, that by Smola and Sutton (2002), has found generational differences using longitudinal data but, as the study did not use panel data, even these findings may be based on individual differences or period effects rather than actual generational differences.

In addition to the failure of the above studies to disentangle age and period effects, we could suggest that none of these are actually studies of generational difference. As suggested, in discussing the theoretical basis for study of generations, the literatures that use Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y as generational categories are attempting to operationalize the concept of generations as defined by Mannheim. However, in each case, the authors have divided a sample by age or birth dates and then compared their work values; an approach that is more

Table 3. Summary of definitions of generational cohorts

Author(s)	Definition of generations
Appelbaum <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Baby Boomers 1943–60 Generation X 1961–81
Broadbridge <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Generation Y 1977–94
Cennamo and Gardner (2008)	Baby Boomers 1946–61 Generation X 1962–79 Generation Y 1980+
Chen and Choi (2008)	Baby Boomers 1946–64 Generation X 1965–77 Generation Y 1978+
Gursoy <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Baby Boomers 1943–60 Generation X 1961–80 Generation Y 1981–2000
Jurkiewicz (2000)	Baby Boomers 1946–62 Generation X 1963–81
Jurkiewicz and Brown (1998)	Matures 1925–42 Baby Boomers 1943–60 Generation X 1961–81
Kunreuther (2003)	Under 40 year olds and over 45 year olds (did not label as Baby Boomers, etc.)
Lamm and Meeks (2009)	Baby Boomers 1943–60 Generation X 1961–80 Generation Y 1981–2000
Lyons <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Matures before 1945 Baby Boomers 1945–64 Generation X 1965–79 Generation Y after 1980
Mahoney (1976)	20–30, 30–40, 40–50, 50–60, 70+ (did not label as Baby Boomers, etc.)
Parker and Chusmir (1990)	Pre-Baby Boomer before 1946 Baby Boomers 1946–64
Sessa <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Matures 1925–45 Early Baby Boomers 1946–54 Late Baby Boomers 1955–63 Early Generation X 1964–1976 Late Generation X 1977–1982 Generation Y 1983+
Smola and Sutton (2002)	Baby Boomers 1946–64 Generation X 1965–77
Terjesen <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Generation Y – under 21 years old
Wong <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Baby Boomers 1945–64 Generation X 1965–81 Generation Y 1982–2000

akin to the study of cohorts. As we shall see later, this has important implications for the interpretation of findings from generational studies, in addition to any considerations of method.

The picture becomes more complex when we examine the way in which each author has defined the generations that they are examining. We can see from Table 3 that the majority of studies (with the exception of Mahoney (1976) and Kunreuther (2003)) have compared Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. However, if we

examine the definition of these four generations in terms of birth years, we can see little agreement between researchers on the composition of each generation. Indeed, Giancola (2006) criticized the commonly used boundaries of generations on a number of bases. First, he pointed out that there was little agreement about the beginning of the Baby Boomer generation, with authors dictating this as being 1943 or 1946, depending on whether the author focused on demographics (1946 represented a surge in births) or formative experiences. In addition, some experts have added a fifth generation, the ‘Swing Generation’, as part of the Veteran cohort, and others have commented that those born near the beginning or end of a generation do not resemble those born in the middle, thus casting doubt on the concept itself. In particular, Giancola suggests that, as the Baby Boomer generation covers 19 years, it should be split into smaller groups. The definition of generations is not an exact science, but the fact that different scholars have defined particular generations differently may explain to some extent why there is no consistent evidence for the existence and nature of generational differences in work values. However, it should also be noted that even those studies that do use the same birth years are also not consistent in their findings.

The impact of other individual differences

The suggestion that there may actually be more heterogeneity within a generation than between generations (Denecker *et al.* 2008; Giele and Elder 1998) leads us to another potential issue. Within a single generational cohort individuals will have very different characteristics. For example, would we expect women within Generation X to have values that are similar to men of this generation? Would we expect Xers of different ethnic backgrounds or with different levels of education to be similar? The probability of significant differences within a generation is another aspect that makes the distinction between generations more complex. For instance, Eskilson and Wiley (1999) examined work values within Generation X using a questionnaire, but found little to distinguish this generation from previous generations in their core concerns. They did, however, find some differences within Generation X based on sex and race. Parker and Chusmir (1990) also found significant sex differences in generational characteristics.

Similarly, Lippmann (2008) found distinct differences between male and female cohorts (as well as between ethnic groups) in their experiences after displacement. To date, the impact of gender on generational or cohort differences in work values has not been fully investigated, although some authors have found differences between the work values of men and women in Generation Y (Terjesen *et al.* 2007).

Apart from gender, Griffin (2004) found regional differences in collective memories in his study of the civil rights movement in the US. Griffin found that collective memories of the civil rights movement was stronger in white women living in the south of the US who experienced the struggle, than in white women of the same age living elsewhere. Schuman and Rogers (2004) found an impact of education on collective memories in that learning through secondary education contributed to the content of collective memories. These findings support Denecker *et al.*'s (2008) suggestion that heterogeneity within generations may be as much as between them, therefore adding to the complexity involved in defining generational groups.

The impact of national culture

So far, the studies that we have discussed have been conducted in Western (mostly US) contexts. There has been a tendency in practitioner circles to discuss the American definitions of generations as though they are globally appropriate, or at least appropriate for use across Westernized countries such as the UK and Australia. This is probably because the majority of consultancy-led or practitioner work to date has been conducted within the US. On the surface, as these countries are culturally similar, this may seem valid, but if we consider historical, political, cultural and technological events in these countries, this may give us more cause for concern. For instance, the US literature has suggested that the generations have formed in response to events such as Kennedy's assassination and the Vietnam War – events that are unlikely to have had as great an impact outside the US. Therefore, research on the experiences of generations in the US cannot simply be mapped onto experiences in the UK or other countries. For instance, between the 1930s and 1970s, the UK suffered a period of relative decline, while the US experienced growing influence on the world stage and became a superpower. It would seem unlikely that individuals growing up in the UK and the US during

this time would have experienced life in the same way.

Mannheim's (1952) emphasis on the need for individuals to experience historical events in the same way in order to comprise a generation gives rise to the assumption that generations should be conceptualized as being within a particular national context. Indeed, academic research in this area has been conducted within single countries, based on the political and cultural history of that region. We can suggest, therefore, that the generational structure within different countries will not follow the Western or US model.

Furthermore, it has been proposed in the academic literature that generational characteristics in Eastern countries are not the same as in the West. Indeed, most of the non-Western research on generational differences has been conducted in oriental countries such as China, Japan and Taiwan. Murphy *et al.* (2004) examined cross-cultural age and generational differences in values in the US and Japan through a survey of 1283 US and 209 Japanese respondents. They found cross-cultural differences for 26/36 values, cross-cultural age differences for 30/36 values and cross-cultural generation differences for 23/36 values. Hui-Chun and Miller (2003) used Hofstede's (1991) theory to argue the importance of national culture in management and in the characteristics of employees. They argued that, as Taiwanese culture was very different from Western culture, we should expect generational characteristics also to be different. However, their results (Hui-Chun and Miller 2003, 2005) showed that, in the manufacturing sector, Baby Boomers and Generation X displayed similar characteristics to Western societies. They failed to find any generational differences at all within education.

Ralston *et al.* (1999) examined differences in individualism, collectivism and Confucianism in generational groups in China, using the Schwartz Values Scale. They divided their sample of 869 participants into three generations based upon Chinese history. First, individuals of 40 years or younger who grew up during social reform; secondly, 41–51 year olds who grew up during the Great Cultural Revolution; and, finally, those older than 52 who grew up during communist consolidation. Ralston *et al.*'s results showed that the younger group had higher individualism than the other two groups and that both collectivism and Confucianism were lower in the younger group than in the second group, and in the second group than in the older group. They concluded that the generation

in which one grew up was crucial to understanding the values of Chinese managers.

Egri and Ralston (2004) built on their earlier study by conducting an interesting study comparing generational cohorts in the USA and China. Rather than use the same definition of generations in each country, Egri and Ralston hypothesized that there would be four generations in Chinese society based upon political and historical events in the country – these were the Social Reform, Republican, Consolidation and Cultural Revolution generations – and three generations in the USA – Veterans, Baby Boomers and Generation X. Using the Schwartz Values Scale, Egri and Ralston found clear differences between the US generational cohorts for openness to change, conservation and self-enhancement, but no differences for self-transcendence and clear Chinese generational cohort differences for all four values. More importantly, they found significant differences between each of the US and Chinese cohorts supporting the importance of the national context in the development of generational cohorts and supporting the notion that generational characteristics are specific to a national setting rather than being globally sound.

Outside oriental Asia, Whiteoak *et al.* (2006) used a cross-sectional survey to examine the attitudes and values of 241 UAE nationals from two different age groups (over and under 30). They found that the younger group showed higher individualism than the older group and that the younger group were more positive towards *Wasta* (the use of one's influence or connections to get things done or to obtain a position) than the older group. They also found that younger women had less conservative attitudes towards women at work than older women had, but that there were no differences for men. This last finding also supports the assertion that there is heterogeneity within generations. Whiteoak *et al.*'s study is not strictly about generations, as it compares two broad age groups, rather than considering collective experience in the way described by Mannheim. However, it is a rare comparison of attitudes in different age groups in the Middle East. This study again relies on cross-sectional data.

The idea of differences between countries has also been taken up in the marketing literature, most notably by Schewe and Meredith (2004), who discussed the differences in cohorts in the USA, Brazil and Russia. Meredith and Schewe suggested that some events that have significance in the USA were less significant in other countries. For the USA, they suggested seven cohorts: Depression (born 1912–

21); World War II (1922–27); a post-war cohort (1928–45); leading-edge Baby Boomers (1946–65); trailing-edge Baby Boomers (1955–65); Generation X (1965–76); and the N Generation (1977 to the present day). In Brazil, these cohorts are different, mainly because of their different experiences of World War II and political events in the country, and are hypothesized to be: the Vargas era (coming of age in 1930–45); post war (1946–54); optimism (1955–67); the iron years (1968–79); the lost decade (1980–91); and 'be on your own' (1992 to the present day). In Russia, Meredith and Schewe propose the six cohorts of: the collectivism cohort (coming of age in 1929–40); the great patriotic war (1941–53); the thaw cohort (1954–69); the Stagnation cohort (1970–85); the Perestroika cohort (1986–91); and the post-Soviet cohort (1992 to the present day). Meredith and Schewe do not provide empirical evidence for the existence of these cohorts, but this paper is useful in illustrating how generations may differ across national contexts based on the social, economic and political events experienced.

The evidence above appears to support the proposition that different generations exist in different national contexts. However, it must be noted that these studies are fraught with the same methodological difficulties as those found in studies of Western contexts, as they rely primarily on cross-sectional designs, meaning that generational differences cannot be distinguished from age and period effects. Edmunds and Turner (2005) argued against national differences in generations in their suggestion that globally experienced traumatic events may facilitate the development of global generations, rather than nationally bounded generational categories. They suggest that events such as the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York were experienced in a similar fashion across the world, owing to widespread access to television and the Internet, and that this led to the development of a global generation based around this event. Edmunds and Turner's idea is, as yet, untested, although the impact of globalization is well documented.

It may appear questionable that major world events will have affected all nationalities equally, particularly non-Western societies. For the time being, therefore we can continue to expect generational characteristics in different national contexts to vary, although, as globalization continues to increase, this may not be the case. There is a need for research in this area, both to compare generational characteristics across countries and to examine

Edmunds and Turner's (2005) notion of global generations as the incidence of 'global' events becomes more common. Hui-Chun and Miller's (2003, 2005) finding that significant differences in values existed between Baby Boomers and Generation X in the Taiwanese manufacturing sector which were consistent with the stereotypes commonly used in Western countries may have provided some support for the idea of global generations, and yet their failure to find these differences within education suggests that more work is needed in order to investigate this.

One impact of globalization that is worth considering is that, even within a single country, particularly those with a high level of immigration such as the UK, employees will be of a number of different nationalities. If we cannot subscribe to Edmunds and Turner's idea of global generations, we must presume that employees from different birth cohorts from different countries will have different characteristics, therefore making the process of ascribing work values to particular generations fraught. This may also explain the failure of so many studies to find generational differences in work values if the samples used were not from a single nationality. Indeed, if we consider the effects of nationality, ethnicity and gender as well as age and generational cohort, we may not be surprised that research has often failed to identify homogeneous values that are unique to an otherwise heterogeneous generational cohort.

Conclusions

This paper has provided a critical review of the concept of 'generations' or, more specifically, generational differences in work values, which has been so widely adopted in the management practitioner literature. The notion of 'generations' is one that has a strong theoretical basis in sociological theory and, as such, it may seem logical to propose that generational differences may have an impact within the workplace as well as on other areas of life. Indeed, many practitioners might believe that the differences between generations are self-evident, based upon their experiences of dealing with employees in different age groups.

What can we say though about the actual empirical evidence for generational differences in work values? If the evidence is taken at face value, we could say that it is mixed, as some studies have found differences in work values between generations, while others have not. Many studies have found more areas

of similarity between generations than differences, some that do find differences have produced significant findings of only a small magnitude and have found differences in the opposite direction from that predicted by the commonly held generational stereotypes.

However, the problems with study of generational difference run deeper than the variations in empirical findings and are fundamental enough to question exactly what these studies are testing. First, our review has unveiled difficulties in the operationalization of 'generations' as opposed to 'cohorts'. The sociology literature has suggested that generations cannot be defined based purely on age of birth, and that their formation is based on a more complex combination of birth cohort and a shared experience of historical and political events, collective culture (Mannheim 1952) and the competition for resources (Edmunds and Turner 2002; Eyerman and Turner 1998). Taking this view of generations, one can see that a 'cohort' may possibly be used as a proxy for a generational group, as a well-chosen cohort may be likely to contain a predominance of members from a particular generation who have shared experiences. Despite the fact that the two terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, a cohort is a much simpler and more atheoretical grouping than a generation. Within the wider social science literatures, the use of cohorts is similarly a more simplistic concept. There is often no implied change in attitudes or behaviours as a result of shared birth year – rather, environment and institutional factors are thought to determine shared cohort experiences.

In direct contradiction of this, we have seen from a review of the literature that the approach to the issue of generations in most studies is to take pre-defined cohorts (of Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Y) as representing distinct generations. The *a priori* assumption would seem to be that there are four generations grouped according to birth year, and implicit in this approach is the assumption that the job of proving proximity to historical events, social, cultural and economic phenomena has already been carried out. When we consider the empirical evidence, there is little clear justification for the use of birth-year cut-off points similar to those set out in Table 1.

Researchers in this area may argue that the use of pre-defined cohorts is the only way that generational groups can be operationalized. However, if this is the case, any findings from these studies should recognize such. When carrying out a study that uses exist-

ing cohort categorizations, any evidence that differing values, behaviours or attitudes are not apparent needs to be interpreted carefully. It can mean that either (i) these cohorts are not good proxies for the generations described or (ii) these are the correct categorizations, but that there are genuinely no differences between generations. Because of an a priori assumption that the four cohorts are accurate measures of the generations, all results that reject evidence of any difference in work values are not seen as raising a question mark over the generational categories themselves. What we have is a situation where cohorts are acting as proxies for generations, and any subsequent research is testing at one and the same time the validity of the cohort as a proxy for generation and the possible impacts.

This picture become more problematic if we consider the methodological problems discussed by Rhodes (1983) and Denecker *et al.* (2008), who highlighted the difficulty in distinguishing between age, period and cohort (generational) effects and suggested that cohort effects cannot be identified using cross-sectional studies. Our review of the current literature shows that investigations of generational differences in work values still focus primarily on cross-sectional studies and have therefore not overcome these failings. In addition, the literature has shown that cohort effects may differ across location, culture and other individual differences such as gender. Given the expected heterogeneity among birth cohorts detailed in Table 1, it is not at all surprising that studies of generational difference often do not find similarities within and differences between these cohorts. While one may expect globalization to result in a convergence of experience across cultural/national groups within generational cohorts, any one workplace is increasingly likely to contain employees from a wider diversity of backgrounds.

Even if we were able to overcome the methodological challenges, would we expect to find any homogeneity across men and women, rich and poor, white and ethnic minorities who were born in certain years? When presented like this, it becomes clearer that a modern-day generational analysis must consist of not only a longitudinal study by birth cohort, but also a focus on particular groups, such as women.

Implications for practice

As academics, we can see how important questions such as ‘How has the impact of gender in the work-

place changed through the decades?’ would fall within a definition of generational studies that brings together the concerns of Manheim, with a more modern-day focus on empirical validation. However, within a business practitioner context, there is much less of an incentive to identify results which are specifically ‘generational’ in nature.

Managers may see little to gain from a rigorous dissection of the extent to which any observed differences in work values or consumer preferences are due to age, cohort, generation or period effects. If workers born between certain dates can be shown to exhibit a certain set of values and attributes, the extent to which this is driven by cohort/generation effects (which will endure as this group ages) as opposed to age or period effects (which will be less enduring) is often not important to the practitioner audiences, particularly if they are focusing on short-term planning rather than the long-term picture. In this practitioner context, the use of cross-sectional studies and the lack of distinction between age, cohort/generation and period effects may be less of an issue. However, if this is the case, then studies that use these approaches need to recognize some of this complexity, if a clearer picture is to emerge.

Future research

Future academic research should continue to work on disentangling the effects of age, career stage, cohort and period, while also recognizing that generational analyses may be more appropriately applied to specific groups within cohorts, such as women and ethnic minorities, and within national cultures. We may have a theoretical basis for the notion that generations exist, but currently there is little empirical evidence for this assertion, and this is not surprising, given the lack of alignment between the theoretical foundations and empirical operationalization of terms.

The literature on collective memories has suggested that people within particular cohorts remember similar events, but little has been done to establish the link between this and actual work values or preferences. Research is needed to investigate the link between these collective memories and work values and, moving beyond the scope of this study, also to examine any subsequent impact on actual behaviour. Denecker *et al.* (2008) have proposed a theoretical framework for the link between collective memories and behaviour, but this has yet to be tested.

Consideration of other ‘dimensions of difference’ within the workplace (e.g. gender, ethnicity and national culture) forms the focus of our conclusion. It is consideration of generations only with reference to such additional characteristics (for instance, a certain ‘generation of women’ or ‘first/second generation of immigrants’) that is our suggested way forward for an academic literature which would be aligned with the theoretical foundations identified in sociology (where generations have to be socially ‘close’ to events) and the modern-day focus on empirical validation, with reference to work values (where we must operationalize less heterogeneous groups).

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