Exploring Generational Identity: A Multiparadigm Approach

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This paper reviews the emerging literature on generational identity, an individual's awareness of his or her membership in a generational group and the significance of this group to the individual (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010). It explores potential research questions related to generational identity using a multiparadigm approach in order to illustrate the potential and relevancy of generational identity as a topic worthy of further research. Through the examples presented in this paper the importance of understanding generational identity using multiple perspectives is highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

With the growing popularity of identity as a research topic in the field of organizational behavior (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008), researchers are increasingly interested in how individuals define themselves through social groups. Self-categorization and social identity theories explain that people classify themselves to impose order on the social environment and to make sense of who they are (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). In doing so, they identify with particular social groups through perceiving a sense of oneness with them (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

While self-categorization theory has typically explained positive in-group bias and negative out-group bias in terms of demographic characteristics such as race or gender (Brewer, 1979; Tsui, Xin & Egan, 1995), individuals' self categorizations clearly go beyond these demographics. An important yet neglected categorization is generation. In fact, given the increasing age diversity in contemporary organizations, it is likely that one's membership in a generational group will be even more salient as a basis for one's identity. *Generational identity* is defined as an individual's awareness of his or her membership in a generational group and the significance of this group to the individual (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010).

Because the study of generational identity is a new and developing field, it is important to study it in many different ways in order to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to propose several ways in which generational identity can be studied. Since the study of generations is a relatively new area in organizational behavior, theories on generational identity need to be developed and the utilization of more than one paradigm will create more robust theories (Gioia & Pitre, 1990) that will help to increase our understanding of the factors that contribute to the development and salience of generational identities. This paper briefly suggests ways in which each of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) four paradigms might contribute uniquely to broadening an understanding of this topic. From there, it provides concrete examples of methods that might be utilized in two distinct paradigms (grounded theory for the interpretivist and discourse analysis for the radical humanist approaches) in order to broaden our understanding of generational identity. The paper first begins with a brief summary of existing—albeit limited—work on generational identity.

GENERATIONAL IDENTITY

Interest in generations has been growing in the workplace so much that the term "generational differences" has become a buzzword and many organizations feel the need to offer training in this area to their employees (SHRM, 2005). Furthermore, many practitioner-oriented publications have focused on the issues of generations in the workforce. One example of such an issue is that, as older employees continue to work longer instead of retiring and younger employees join the workforce, members of various generations are forced to communicate and function together despite having different expectations and motivations (Zemke, 2001). Additionally, the fact that a mainstream publication like Business Week ran four articles on the topic in their 2008 special issue is evidence that generational issues are an important recent concern of businesses. Such mainstream and practitioner-oriented publications often focus on differences between generations and on stereotypes associated with specific generations (for example that members of Generation Y are lazy or that members of the Baby Boomer generation like stability). Given the interest in the topic of generational differences within the business community, it is important that generational issues be studied by researchers more rigorously.

Drawing from studies in sociology and anthropology, recent research has advanced the study of generations as being part of individuals' identities. Specifically, Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio (2010) have identified three facets or aspects of generational identity. The first is a cohort-based identity whereby individuals enter into an experience (such as starting work at an organization or beginning an education) at the same time. The second is an age-based generational identity whereby common experiences outside of work, roughly defined by birth year can create an identity for individuals. Third is an incumbency-based generational identity where individuals define their identity based on the skills, experiences, attitudes, and knowledge that result from occupying a particular role for a certain period of time (such as the fourth CEO of an organization being labeled the "fourth generation").

This framework expands the concept of generational identity from more practitioner-oriented publications which focus primarily on age and experiences. Other work has examined differences in values that might exist between generations. Using an age-based perspective, researchers identified that values tend to be similar among members within each generation, labeled as Generation Y (also known as the Millennial generation born between 1979 and 1994), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1978) and Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) (Smola & Sutton, 2002). For example, members of Generation X are most likely to value extrinsic rewards more than members of other generations; the importance of leisure has increased with each subsequent generation; and social and other intrinsic values are actually less important for Generation Y than for Baby Boomers (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). Other studies suggest that differences in values between age-based generations are more a function of maturity or length in the workforce (Twenge & Campbell, 2008) and that differences between generations might exist but not necessarily in the stereotypical ways reported by popular media and management literature (Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008; Macky, Gardner, Forsyth, & 2008).

If, however, as many of the above studies suggests, there are differences in values between generations based on age, it is possible that differences in values also exist between generations when defined according to the cohort and incumbency-based approaches as well. Therefore, because values might be perceived to be similar by members within generations (thus potentially increasing the possibility for those individuals to share a sense of identification or oneness with a social group) it is appropriate that identity theories be applied to the study of generations in the workforce. Two theories of identity that shed light on this and that are useful to the study of generations are self-categorization and social identity theories.

Often, individuals who are members of certain groups define themselves to an extent in terms of their group membership (Chrobot-Mason & Ruderman, 2004). This phenomenon has been explained by social identity theory. Social identity theory states that that people seek to classify themselves (Tajfel & Turner,

1985) and that social identification is defined as an individual's perception of oneness with a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). It is therefore reasonable to believe that individuals may seek to classify themselves with a particular age group, cohort, or level of experience within a particular role. This occurs because they perceive oneness with one of these generational classifications on the basis of congruent values between member and generation.

Social identification stems from four things: (1) the categorization of individuals into being members of groups, (2) the distinctiveness and prestige of the group (known as the in-group), (3) the salience of out-groups (members not in the in-group), and (4) the factors associated with group formation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). If individuals view that they are members of a generational group, then they may come to define themselves in part by the values and characteristics generally espoused by those groups. Social identity theory also argues that social identification leads to activities congruent with the group identity and can contribute to stereotypical views of both the in-group and out-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This might help to explain barriers to communication between members of different generations (Smola & Sutton, 2002). Note that for generational identification to occur, members need to perceive in-groups and out-groups as being important, meaning that members perceive benefits of identifying with a generation while highlighting differences that exist between other generations.

According to Turner and Giles (1981), social identity theory presumes that an individual's self-concept exists because of her or his knowledge of being part of a larger group such as when an individual closely defines her or himself by being a member of a generation. Furthermore, the attachment of value and affect by members to groups (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008) makes the group's salience stronger. It is plausible that individuals might attach emotion to a particular generation especially when they perceive that the values between members (and themselves) are similar.

Self-categorization theory is a related theory (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008) and postulates that categorization fulfills two basic human needs: inclusion and differentiation (Brewer & Brown, 1998). It is related to social identity theory because both theories explain one's place in society and state that people compare themselves against other in- and out- group members. Self-categorization theory, therefore, implies cognition whereby people classify themselves and others into groups such as members of a particular age-based, cohort, or incumbency-based generation.

In- and out- group comparisons can be important in the workforce as both positive in-group bias and negative out-group bias can exist. Examples of positive in-group bias include perceptions that members of the in-group are more trustworthy, honest, and cooperative (Brewer, 1979; Tsui, Xin & Egan, 1995). Examples of negative out-group bias include lower trust, fewer interactions, decreased respect, and less support (Tsui, Xin, & Egan, 1995).

With respect to the functioning in organizations with members of various groups, the social categorization perspective (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998) further suggests that functioning can be impaired as a result of adverse social categorization processes stemming from differences between organizational members. Therefore, in- and out- group organizational members are classified on the basis of differences, which might include generational diversity. There are two types of diversity in which people use to classify such differences. In a review by Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, and Jundt (2005), the researchers distinguish between surface-level diversity (such as age) and deep-level diversity (such as differences in values, thoughts, and attitudes). Both of these types of diversity might include elements of generations (age and values specifically). The authors state that, while surface-level diversity is critical in predicting effectiveness at early stages of working together, its influence eventually is reduced as deep-level diversity becomes a more important factor. An example of this could occur within the context of a team consisting of members of Generation X, Generation Y, and Baby Boomers. In the early stages of team development, effectiveness might most be impacted because of differences in age. However, as the group continues to work together, the values of team members become more important. If one's generational identity is salient, then she or he might adopt those values considered to be typical of one's generation. To the extent that these values conflict with others' values, such deep-level diversity will eventually have a greater impact on the team's effectiveness.

But, individuals do not solely define themselves by one group in which they belong; for example, individuals might define themselves as members of a department within an organization as well as a larger social group such as a particular generation. As suggested by Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006), personal identity boundaries can overlap with those of group identities. Individuals can also pull from multiple groups in which they belong as well as multiple roles they fulfill in order to define themselves. Kreiner et al. further suggest that boundaries within individuals and between individuals and groups can be permeable and flexible so that one's identity can fluctuate. Therefore, a member of a particular generation might not define him or herself as such in all situations and this generational identity can overlap with other identities that are also salient to the individual.

From this discussion, it is apparent that much work needs to be done toward understanding generational identity and its implications for organizational behavior. While social identity theory and self-categorization theory can serve to inform research in this area, scholars believe that new understandings of generational identity can be developed by using a combination of such existing theories and the framework for understanding generational identity described above. For example, one recommendation from the literature on generations is to pull from multiple perspectives in order to better understand this phenomenon (Joshi et al., 2010). Looking at generational identity from multiple perspectives will help researchers to identify vastly different research questions. Examples might include: Do perceived generational stereotypes affect perceived organizational membership? How do individuals construct generational differences within organizations and with what effects? How does language construct or reinforce generational identity? Are there power differences that exist as a result of promotion structures based on years of experience or organizational cohort?

The questions that can be asked and the way that the researcher understands generational identity are influenced by the researcher's paradigm. Given the importance of identifying multiple research questions that are relevant to practitioners and the need to explain phenomena occurring within organizations, I propose the utilization of multiple paradigms in the study of generational identity. In order to understand the options that researchers have in investigating generational differences, a discussion of paradigms is important. Therefore, the following section highlights the concept of paradigms and focuses on Burrell and Morgan's (1979) paradigm typology.

BURRELL AND MORGAN'S FOUR PARADIGMS

The preceding discussion proposed the need for using multiple paradigms in order to gain a better understanding of the concept of generational identity. In order to further clarify this proposition, this section will discuss the nature of science in terms of using theories, explain how paradigms can be used to strengthen theories, and summarize and define typologies of paradigms.

According to Karl Popper's philosophical stance (1985), the aim of science is to find satisfactory explanations of phenomena through the use of fundamental laws. Such laws are approximations of "truth" used to explain the nature of the world. These laws can be viewed in terms of theories that can be developed or tested from the perspective of a researcher's particular paradigm. Although extensively written about by Kuhn (1970), his concept of a paradigm was somewhat vague and a major criticism of his work is that he had up to 21 definitions of what a paradigm is (Arndt, 1985). Some definitions of paradigm include one's world view, theoretical lens, or perspective but the most important aspect of a paradigm is that it influences what questions a researcher asks about the world (Kuhn, 1970). It is for this reason that scientists and philosophers have created various typologies of paradigms in order to classify different perspectives that researchers might utilize to understand the world.

One such classification scheme was introduced by Burrell and Morgan (1979) and consisted of four main paradigms. The first is the functionalist perspective which is most rooted in rational explanations and examines phenomena by looking for the existence and support of the status quo, social order, and consensus. This view can be seen at work in publications where hypotheses are advanced and subsequently tested using methods such as experiments or surveys. The second, the interpretivist paradigm, examines phenomena as emerging social processes. Since the assumptions that underlie this view are vastly different, interpretivists will ask different types of questions regarding the phenomenon under study and will seek to answer them using different methodologies than functionalists such as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) whereby researchers interact intimately with individuals in the field not to test hypotheses but to develop a new theory based on localized knowledge. The third paradigm is the radical humanist paradigm. Studies in this area tend to focus on power struggles, emancipating those that are marginalized, and often rely on methods that are descriptive in nature such as ethnography (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1992) and discourse analysis (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). The fourth and final paradigm is the radical structuralist paradigm. This paradigm focuses on power differences that arise from the structures inherent in organizations.

While the above discussion focuses on Burrell and Morgan's four paradigm typology (1979), it should be noted that other paradigm typologies do exist. Furthermore, though the above typology has been accepted by many scholars, it is not without its critics (see Deetz, 1996 and Choudhury, 1987 for examples). The main point of this paper, however, is not to criticize Burrell and Morgan's (1979) paradigms nor to debate whether or not these truly capture all of the perspectives currently operating in organizational research. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to suggest that multiple viewpoints can aid in the understanding of generational identity in organizations. The next section discusses some of the benefits of using multiple paradigms to help in this regard and focuses on specific examples from the interpretivist and radical humanists paradigms.

MULTIPARADIGM APPROACH TO GENERATIONAL IDENTITY

Researchers in the field of organizational studies tend to rely on the assumptions of one particular paradigm in conducting their research. Similarly, many topics within the field of organizational studies are often studied from the perspective of only one paradigm. However, several scholars argue that most topics within the field would greatly benefit from researchers drawing from multiple perspectives in order to understand different aspects of the phenomena in question. Gioia and Pitre (1990), for example, argued that utilizing multiple paradigms can help build richer theories within topics. Such an approach is crucial to developing areas (such as generational identity) so that multiple perspectives can be drawn upon to strengthen the theoretical conversation in order to increase understanding and minimize new fields from becoming overly biased toward a select few researchers' perspectives. Strategies for how to manage topics with multiple paradigms have been advanced (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989 and Lewis & Keleman, 2000 for example) with the purpose of raising the conscientiousness of researchers by highlighting issues that might potentially be ignored by other paradigms. Multiparadigm research can be used to look at aspects of a phenomenon through multiple perspectives and methods that can only occur by being deeply immersed in the topic.

Regardless of what strategy is chosen to manage multiparadigm research, using multiple paradigms inherently allows researchers to gain a better understanding of a topic, especially those which are in early phases of development. Because the topic of generational identity is early in its development, it is crucial that researchers draw from multiple paradigms in order to understand its nuances. Table 1 summarizes examples of how generational identities might be examined by each of the above four paradigms.

Theory building from a functionalist perspective begins with selecting a topic, identifying issues, and asking appropriate research questions that fit in with the paradigm's assumptions (Gioia and Pitre, 1990). Researchers in this paradigm typically review the literature to determine what is known about the topic and where there might be a gap in knowledge by pulling relevant theories and variables with the ultimate purpose to formulate and test hypotheses.

TABLE 1
MULTIPARADIGM APPROACH TO GENERATIONAL IDENTITY

RADICAL HUMANIST PARADIGM **Example Research Question:** How does language construct or reinforce generational identity? **Example Method:** Discourse analysis to determine patterns of interaction that highlight power dominance **Goal of Theory Building:** Understanding the relationship between language and generational identity	**RADICAL STRUCTURALIST PARADIGM** **Example Research Question:** Are there power differences that exist as a result of promotion structures based on years of experience or organizational cohort? **Example Method:** Examine existing official and unofficial documents including employee testimonies **Goal of Theory Building:** Challenging the power structures that marginalize certain generational identities
INTERPRETIVIST PARADIGM **Example Research Question:** How do individuals construct generational differences within organizations and with what effects? **Example Method:** Participant observation of/interviews with members from multiple generations to discover differences **Goal of Theory Building:** Exploring the nature of generational identity and the strategies individuals use to manage it	**FUNCTIONALIST PARADIGM** **Example Research Question:** Do perceived generational stereotypes affect perceived organizational membership? **Example Method:** Surveys of individuals from multiple generations to test for significant differences in variables of interest **Goal of Theory Building:** Measuring the extent to which generational identity is related to other organizational constructs

An example of how this process can be used in the study of generational identity can be viewed when asking the research question of whether perceived generational stereotypes affect perceived organizational membership. When asking this question, the researcher will want to predict whether future perceived negative interactions between generations will discourage certain generations from perceiving strong membership within an organization. The functionalist will use hypothesis testing in order to determine if the theory is supported, falsified, or should be refined. As such, one potential hypothesis that could be tested is: "Members of younger generations (such as Generation Y) who perceive negative stereotypes about their generation from more senior generations will not have high perceived organizational membership."

To test this hypothesis, the researcher would most likely use a survey instrument given to a sample of organizational members in younger generations with items related to their perception of generational stereotypes as well as the three dimensions of perceived organizational membership: need fulfillment, mattering, and belonging (Masterson & Stamper, 2003). This is certainly not the only example of how theory building might occur using a functionalist viewpoint. This one was selected for illustrative purposes, however, because it is related to the different values that generations might place on work (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). For example, if those that identify with Generation Y value voicing their opinion in an organizational context, it might be because they feel that they have a contribution that they can make. If, however, members of other generations do not value their opinion, Generation Y members might have less of a sense of mattering and, thus, lower perceived organizational membership. Obviously, other hypotheses can be advanced from theories of generational identity in order to understand the variables that cause individuals to identify within organization and the consequences that this identification has within an organizational setting.

> *Proposition 1: The functionalist role is to test hypotheses based on theories of generational identity. This, then, should occur following development of theories from other paradigms such as the interpretivist or radical humanist views. Studying generational identity from a functionalist perspective will provide a refinement of theories and an elaboration of variables that will show the antecedents and consequences of identification with generations.*

The steps using the radical structuralist paradigm (Gioia & Pitre, 1990) begin with selecting a topic based on the paradigm's assumptions and articulating a theory based on how the topic might be an example of a grand theory. Data collection involves examining historical evidence based on the given grand theory and analysis is composed of arguing that the instance being examined can validate the theory. Radical structuralists also seek to identify the structural sources of power and conclude by determining how the structure should change. The main goal of theory building from this perspective is to identify sources of power and attempt to change the structure through revolutionary practices.

A potential research question from this paradigm might be: are there power differences that exist as a result of promotion structures based on years of experience or organizational cohort? This question seeks to determine whether or not power and control are evident in human resources practices that might systematically marginalize members of a certain generation. In order to determine this, researchers might examine existing HR documents, employee testimonies, and other official and unofficial documents regarding the promotion structure within an organization. As such, researchers and practitioners both would be interested in determining whether or not generational identities are highly salient within organizations. If they are, they might be able to analyze how members of a "controlling" generation imposes structural order on an organization's promotional policies as a result of negative stereotypes that they perceive in members of other generations. From this perspective, theory development should conclude with an understanding of where power exists and how it can be leveraged within organizations with the purpose of creating revolutionary structural change. Like the example given above regarding the functionalist paradigm, this is again one of hundreds of questions that a radical structuralist could ask about generational identity. However, it is presented here as an example due to its practicality and relevance to the organization. In terms of being practical, documentation surrounding promotion policies should be relatively easy to obtain from organizations. In terms of relevance, organizations that continuously examine their HR policies for fairness would most likely be those that have a strong and dedicated workforce.

> *Proposition 2: Studying generational identity from a radical structuralist viewpoint is crucial to understand the practicality of how organizational structures, policies, and processes marginalize members of certain generations. From this perspective, we gain tangible evidence of how structures inherent within organizations create power struggles between members of generations.*

Both functionalist and radical structuralist researchers would approach generational identity by asking different questions as briefly illustrated above. The remainder of this paper will focus on the two paradigms not yet addressed: the interpretivist and radical humanist. These will be the focus for several reasons. First and foremost is that what little work has been done has been primarily under the guidance of the functionalist paradigm in that it is based on hypothesis testing using survey results (Smola &

Sutton, 2002 and Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010 for examples). Second is that the radical functionalist paradigm focuses on power as it relates to structure. While this paradigm will certainly be useful in the future, it will be difficult to examine structural issues as they relate to generational identity until more is known about generations in organizations. While theories can be strengthened using each paradigm, research using this paradigm will greatly add more depth to how generational identity might affect power structures by building upon theories initially originating from interpretivist and radical humanist viewpoints. Third is that, because both the interpretivist and radical humanist paradigms focus on social processes and generational identity (as it is suggested here) is a social phenomenon, the assumptions from these paradigms would be useful early on in the study of the topic. Fourth (especially for the interpretivist researcher utilizing grounded theory) is that these paradigms draw on methods suitable for creating an initial model or theory (Suddaby, 2006) which can then be tested and expounded upon by researchers from other paradigms.

> *Proposition 3: Research on generational identity has been lacking the perspectives of the interpretivist and radical humanist paradigms. Because both of these paradigms focus on social phenomena and can be used to build initial theories, immediate research on generational identity must be done using these perspectives. This will guide and strengthen future research on generational identity from the other perspectives.*

In data collection using the interpretivist paradigm, researchers identify specific cases of a phenomenon and question informants to determine what is important and relevant to them within a particular context. Analysis involves coding transcripts of conversations, formulating and evaluating relationships between concepts discussed by informants, developing tentative theories from these relationships, and finally reviewing literature to see whether it elaborates existing theory or creates an entirely new theory. The process ends when the researcher writes up a substantive theory to illustrate how the relationships uncovered fit together with what has already been known.

An example of how this process can be used in the study of generational identity is through the use of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) where theory is built during an emerging process using first-hand observation and often interviews. A potential research question (again, out of hundreds of potential questions) is: "how do individuals construct generational differences in organizations and with what effects?" In building a theory, the researcher will draw from personal observations of social processes in the field in order to develop a brand new theory or advance substantial extensions of currently accepted theories.

For the research question advanced above, researchers can pursue observations in at least two ways. The first would be for the researcher to gain entrance into an organization where managers have reported difficulties between generations working together and communicating with each other. Such phenomena would suggest both that the salience of generational identities within the organization is high and that such identities create barriers between members of different generations. By closely observing individuals in the field, researchers can study interactions among organizational members and witness firsthand how people identify with their generation and treat others of another generation. Observations would most likely be more useful if the sample being observed consists of members from various organizations. Because it might be difficult for researchers to gain access to and have time to observe multiple organizations, the second method could perhaps be more practical.

The second way that researchers can pursue observations would be by considering a population to study and then selecting a sample of individuals from various organizations and of various generations. From this sample, the researcher can interview each of the individuals. The questions discussed in the interview should get to the heart of the research question in order to get information that will create understanding about the generational identity phenomenon from an interpretivist perspective. After these interviews are transcribed, researchers will code the conversations and identify trends and themes that occur. It is quite possible that some of the participants will reply with like responses that will show similarities in responses so that themes and theories can be analyzed.

If some responses are similar, researchers will be able to build theories based on the interviews because experiences are not completely unique despite differences of perspectives and organizations. It is possible, then, that the theories can be refined and further developed through hypothesis testing from the functionalist perspective. Furthermore, since we are gaining a greater understanding of the phenomenon through the interpretivist paradigm, it is now possible to use the radical structuralist paradigm to examine how generational identities and differences create and reinforce structures within organizations.

> *Proposition 4: Using grounded theory from an interpretivist perspective will develop new theories of generational identity by examining social trends within organizations. These social trends will provide starting points for understanding the development and prevalence of generational identity and stereotypes.*

The radical humanist perspective is focused on understanding power differences as they are created and maintained through language. An appropriate methodology for studying generational identity from this perspective would again require interviews or textual analysis of documents. Again, one of many example research questions that a radical humanist might ask is: how does language construct or reinforce generational identity? The point of asking this question is to determine how generations are given meaning as a result of how they are talked about. As such, discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002) would be a helpful approach to understanding generational identity from this perspective.

While not yet used extensively in organizational studies, the application of discourse analysis is growing within the field and its relevance toward the discipline is becoming more widely recognized (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). For example, researchers have analyzed how discourses within society and organizations create expectations for managers to possess “competency” in their roles in order to contribute to organizational well-being (du Gay, Salaman, & Rees, 1996) and the role that language has for leaders to be able to successfully organize and manage a group of people (Fairhurst, 2010).

These example studies of organizational phenomena using discourse analysis imply that language is used as an interpretive repertoire whereby people both describe events as well as account for and formulate meanings of those events (Wetherell, 1998). In much the same way that researchers used discourse to study the competency of managers and effectiveness of leaders, researchers can also use discourse to examine how generational identities are created and reinforced.

One way that this can be done is by examining the language used in corporate training events and practitioner-oriented publications such as *Business Week* (2008) and SHRM’s *Generational Differences Survey* (2005) among others to examine the similarities of how characteristics of members of each generation are talked about. In order to examine how this language affects individuals within organizations, researchers can interview a sample of the workforce to discuss their views of their and others’ generations. In doing so, the language that they use can be compared with the language of the publications in order to determine how much such publications influence and reinforce peoples’ beliefs about their generational identities.

A second way that discourse analysis can be used does not begin with examining publications to identify discourses that are related to generational identity. Instead, researchers could examine multiple organizations similar to the way which was suggested in the interpretivist paradigm above. However, the difference here would be to focus on language. Researchers could determine the generation that holds the most power in organizations by identifying the language that is used to talk about members of that generation as well as other social cues. Once identified, researchers could determine the discourses or language used by this generation to describe other less powerful generations. Then, such discourses and language usage could be compared to the language used by members of other generations in how they describe themselves. The level of similarity between the discourses used by members of the generations would show how much the language used by the controlling generation would create or reinforce generational identities within the organization.

Proposition 5: Studying language regarding how generations are talked and written about using methods such as discourse analysis from a radical humanist perspective will show differences in how generations are discussed. By examining these differences of rhetoric, we will understand how generational identities and stereotypes are socially created, reinforced, and marginalized.

CONCLUSION

Due to the importance of generational issues in business as highlighted earlier in this paper and the lack of much research done so far in this area, there is a definite gap that needs to be filled in the literature. Furthermore, what little work that has been done so far has been done using a survey-based approach to hypothesis testing drawing from the functionalist paradigm. This has caused the empirical research that has been published thus far to be very limited in its understanding of generational identity.

This paper has illustrated several fruitful ways in which research in generational identity can be expanded using varied paradigmatic perspectives. It is important that one paradigmatic lens not dominate research on this topic so that robust theories drawing from multiple paradigms can be developed. Particularly, this paper has offered several concrete examples and suggestions for how generational identity can be studied from a variety of perspectives. The contribution of this paper, then, is to make valid practical suggestions for how the academic community can gain from the study of generational identity using different approaches, specifically the interpretivist (grounded theory) and radical humanist (discourse analysis) early on in this topic's development.

The purpose of this paper was not to advance specific research propositions. Indeed, to do so would be problematic before more interpretivist research can be conducted in order to develop theories. As a starting point, interpretivist research can provide researchers with propositions to test in studies to come. Future research, then, should be focused toward developing and testing propositions from each paradigmatic perspective as a result of theories that will (and are) beginning to emerge. As a starting point, the research questions posed here might be closely examined to begin to utilize each of the four paradigms. However, it is crucial that additional research questions be developed from each perspective. Because generational identity is a developing topic, researchers would be well served by nurturing its growth by applying as many paradigmatic lenses as possible in order to develop theories which should then be tested.

Practitioners would also greatly benefit from a better understanding of generational identity. For example, from the approaches suggested above, managers can understand how generational differences might manifest themselves as power struggles (radical structuralist perspective), a search for meaning (interpretivist perspective), through language (radical humanist perspective), or how such differences might affect other organizational outcomes (functionalist perspective). Popular publications have been talking about generations for years through the use of broad generalities and stereotypes. A more academic approach that might either support or show discrepancies in such practitioner-oriented literature would greatly help managers implement more effective strategies and programs for managing the interactions of multiple generations.

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