Generational Perceptions and How They Affect Workplace Experience

Lauren M. Wachowicz

Abstract

This research examines how Baby Boomers and Generation Y perceive one another and how that perception has affected their intergenerational workplace experience. This study consisted of 40 subjects, each of whom completed a survey with a positive/negative word association and a modified Rochester Interaction Record to rate their workplace interactions; the surveys looked at perceptions and interactions within and between generations. The positive/negative word association showed that there was an interaction between perceptions of each generation, where both cohorts associated more negative words with Generation Y. Overall, the results indicated a negative perception of Generation Y both between and within generations, while respect was also given to the Baby Boomers both between and within generations.

Introduction

Diversity has new meaning in the workplace. Up to four generations can be found working alongside each other right now; the Veterans, born 1925-1943, the Baby Boomers, born 1944-1963, Generation X, born 1964-1979, and Generation Y, also called Millennials, born 1980-2000 (Boychuk Duchscher & Cowin, 2004; Jorgensen, 2003; Widger, Pye, Cranley, Wilson-Keates, Squires, & Tourangeau, 2007). According to Davis, Pawlowski, and Houston (2006), Baby Boomers and GenXers made up approximately 80% of the work force in 2002. Generation Y was only approaching the workforce at the time this study was conducted. Now six years later, many have completed their bachelor and masters degrees and are entering into careers in this diverse workforce in droves.

Researchers have extensively studied the differences in the Baby Boomers and GenXers, carefully dissecting the personality traits, the educational standards, the social constructs of their formative years, and then finally looking at the similarities and differences in the generations. To the astonishment of many of the researchers, the Baby Boomer and GenXers are actually more similar than different in their values on work and work motivators (Davis, et al., 2006; Jorgensen, 2003; Jurkiewicz, 2000; Yang & Guy, 2006). It has been suggested that differences found in the workplace between Baby Boomers and GenXers are simply age and the needs of each stage of life (Davis, et al., 2006). As both of these birth cohorts, Baby Boomers and GenXers, are currently holding similar workplace values, they face a new generation to compete with: Generation Y. As the oldest of the cohort turn 29 this year, they will soon be a significant part of the workforce; however, there is very little research on their role in society and in the workplace.

Twenge (2006), author of *Generation Me: Why today's young Americans are more confidant, assertive and entitled—and more miserable than before*, states that Generation Y is a "self-important" group. They were raised in a society where self-esteem was valued above all else; and have been told since birth about how special they are and how if they just "believe in themselves" they will be successful. The fact that this generation had been born during a time of extreme prosperity in the United States factors into their idyllic state of mind when it comes to the realities of life (Boychuk Duchscher & Cowin, 2004). Generation Y is less centered on society's ideas and values. It reflects in their choice of words and demeanor with authority figures, such as bosses and

professors (Twenge, 2006). Generation Y has few boundaries in what they will say or do because they lack that social pressure to conform. They are not narcissistic, but rather just self-involved, aware of what they want and believe that they can get it if they want it bad enough. This generation has lived through one of the most economically stable times in history, has gained more technical knowledge earlier on than any other generation, and has grown up in a politically correct multi-cultural world (Boychuk Duchscher & Cowin, 2004). Generation Y tends to seek closer, amicable relationships with co-workers and peers and this often translates into a "go teamwork!" mentality. The technological advances in this generation have allowed for intellectual multitasking to be the standard rather than the extreme; in this sense they expect to be in constant contact with the world at all times through the internet and other technologies that connect the globe. McCann and Giles (2006) contend that those in the younger generations that perceive older generations as important and helpful in the workplace report less communication avoidance with superiors. Jorgenson (2003) contends that this generation is knowledgeable technologically, adaptable in the workplace, and able to utilize their independent spirits to network and collaborate to complete tasks. Generation Y has been found to have different attitudes and drive than their older counterparts in the workplace (Taylor, 2005). Generation Y expects also to hold a role in decisions in their workplace, they expect that their opinions are appreciated and valued, and will often require praise and reward to function well in the workplace (Boychuk Duchscher & Cowin., 2004). Furthermore, these unique individuals will be looking to their superiors to help mentor and guide them with instruction that is clear and will want them to give them step-by step directions. However, they often possess little social skill in the workplace, due to their casual attitudes and their frank manner of speech (Boychuk Duchscher & Cowin, 2004; Twenge, 2006).

The Baby Boomers grew up in a different era when people knew what it was to sacrifice for their way of life. Born fresh off of a war where rations were predominant and to parents who very vividly remembered the Great Depression, the Baby Boomers have seen a lot of change over the last fifty years in the way of technology, economics, and social policy (Boychuk Duchscher & Cowin, 2004). Their rebellion and questioning of authority began the individualistic movement; they took great strides together in groups, such as, the civil rights and feminist movements (Boychuk Duchscher & Cowin, 2004; Twenge, 2006; Yang & Guy, 2006). The Baby Boomers associated their generation as a group that found their identity through hard work, promotion, and self-gratification (Busch, Venkitachalam, & Richards, 2008; Yang & Guy, 2006). The Baby Boomers are expected to be a major part of the work force through 2015 (Boychuk Duchscher & Cowin, 2004). They find their identity in their work and are expected to work past the traditional retirement age. Boomers also find achievement in material possessions and in status symbols, such as the corner office and having assistants (Boychuk Duchscher & Cowin, 2004). Jorgenson (2003) lists additional traits of the Baby Boomers as being loyal to their companies, wanting to have a long-term career within a single company, and a belief that success is a product of hard work over time. While these were the positive traits portrayed, the fact that Baby Boomers have to care for their aging parents and family was seen as a challenge to their commitment to the workforce. Busch, Venkitachalam, & Richards' (2008) study found Baby Boomers to be able to work in a pre-structured workplace easier and often held back both ideas and praise unless they were warranted, and valued their time outside of their 40- hour week, while Generation Y had very idealistic views about their workplace. They were excited about sharing ideas and opinions, often were quick to praise and wanted to be involved with their projects and feel ownership. These fundamental ideas affect interaction between the two generations, because of all the generations in the workplace,

Baby Boomers may have the hardest time accepting this new outspoken generation that embodies Generation Y.

The two generations will have to prepare for a diverse workplace where young, idealistic employees and older, more experienced employees must overcome generational ideals and expectations to form a productive workplace. McCann and Giles (2006) suggest that different birth cohorts communicate in ways that are biased to their own generation, which would significantly affect a working relationship if one can only communicate effectively to part of their co-workers. To further complicate communication and working relationships in general, many Baby Boomers have older children, often close in age to Generation Y (Jorgenson, 2003). Research on age bias reveals that there is often discrimination of older workers (Gordon, et al., 2001). On the other hand, Reddy (1983) states that differences in attitude are not due of age alone and are more dependent on environment from which the workers came. Davis, et al. (2006) also suggests that environment plays a role in workplace perceptions; that specific historical events may shape a generation and cause them to adopt similar beliefs or that certain generations received training that another did not; i.e. Generation Y may have received more training in computers and associated programs than the Baby Boomers did. Jurkiewicz (2000) states that all age groups stereotype another and then assess a judgment of what mental and physical abilities they possess based on age. Perhaps this is a factor in the ways that the two generations interact. All of these things may play into why the generational differences matter and how they will affect a generation's perception of another, as well as the experiences that they share in the workplace.

There are several hypotheses that accompany this study. First, that the Baby Boomers will identify more positive words, therefore a more positive perception, and associate higher interaction ratings within their own generation, indicating a more positive experience. Second, Generation Y will identify more positive words, therefore a more positive perception, and associate higher interaction ratings within their own generation, indicating a more positive experience. Thirdly, that there will be a significant difference in the identification of positive and negative words between the Baby Boomers and Generation Y, exhibiting a bias for one's own generation and a more negative perception of another's generation; with the interaction ratings revealing that workplace interactions are experienced more negatively between the two generations than within each birth cohort.

Method

Participants

Forty –seven participants volunteered to participate in this research. The participants consisted of introductory psychology students, all of whom were born between 1980 and 1990, and friends and family of the researcher who were born between 1944 and 1963. The method of recruitment for the introductory psychology students was from an online site that offered opportunities to participate in research; friends and family were recruited through a letter inviting them to voluntarily participate in this research. Three surveys had to be removed from the survey for incorrect generational participation, such as from the Veterans and Generation X. There were 19 participants from the Baby Boomer generation and 25 from Generation Y, for a total of 44 participants in the study. There were 31 female participants (70%), 18 from generation Y and 13 Baby Boomers, and 13 male participants (30%), 7 from Generation Y and 6 Baby Boomers. The racial make-up of the

participants was largely Caucasian (89%), with low African-American (5%) and Hispanic (7%) participation. The work status of the participants had 48% (21) working full-time, 39% (17) working part-time, and 14% (6) unemployed or retired.

Materials and Procedures

After obtaining consent, participants were asked to complete three pages of surveys. The surveys took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The first was a demographic survey asking for year of birth, work status, and basic demographics, like race and sex. The next two pages contained an identical word association survey and a modified version of the Rochester Interaction Record (Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977); they asked the participant to choose the words they associated with each generation and to rate their experiences with Baby Boomers and then again for Generation Y. The word association survey contained 48 words, 24 positive and 24 negative, such as tardy, friendly, eager, and competitive. Participants were asked to identify which of the words they associated with each generation. The modified Rochester Interaction Record, asked participants to rate specific experiences such as "Not Respected/Respected" and "Not Supportive/Supportive" in the workplace. Responding 1 on the scale would indicate not respected or not supportive, while a response of 9 would indicate respected or supportive. Both generations completed these two surveys for each of the generations, one for the generation they represented and one for the generation they did not.

Results

The number of positive and negative words selected was summed and the mean was identified for each generation. Means were obtained for each generation both about their own cohort and the other cohort. A 2 (cohort) x 2 (valence) x 2 (generation) repeated-measures ANOVA (analysis of varience), a statistical measurement to determine significant differences, on the positive/negative word association showed significance. The Generation X Valence interaction showed that both of the cohorts viewed Generation Y differently than the Baby Boomers, $F(1,42) = 36.55, p < .001$ (see Figure 1).

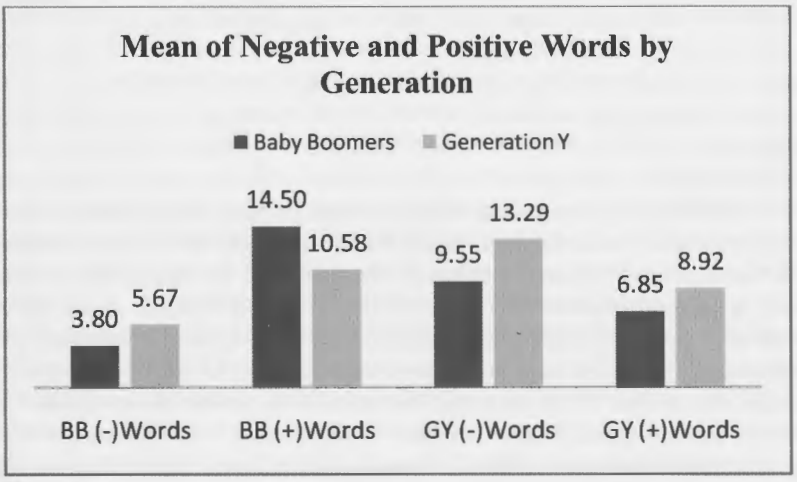

Figure 1.

Post-hoc Tukey tests, a statistical testing method used to determine statistical differences in multiple groups, showed the following significant interactions: Baby Boomers had more positive words selected about them by both generations (M =12.36) than Generation Y did (M =7.98), $p <$ .05. Generation Y was assigned more negative words by both cohorts (M =11.59) than Baby Boomers were (M =4.82), $p <$ .05. Additionally, Baby Boomers had significantly more positive words assigned than negative words, while Generation Y had more negative words than positive words, $ps <$ .05. These results indicate that Baby Boomers and Generation Y were in agreement in their perception of each generation. After repeated-measures ANOVA on the experience scales, only one topic was statistically significant. Respect was rated higher for the Baby Boomers by both Generation Y (M=7.44) and the Baby Boomers (M=7.00), $p <$.05. There were no significant results in the other experience categories, suggesting that the interaction in the workplace between generations was not significantly affected by perceptions of the generations (see Table 1).

Table 1 Means of Experience Scale

	Baby Boomers rating Baby Boomers	*Generation Y rating Baby Boomers*	*Baby Boomers rating Generation Y*	*Generation Y rating Generation Y*
Enjoyable	7.05	6.46	6.60	6.17
Supportive	7.00	6.88	6.15	5.67
Influential	6.60	6.33	5.15	5.33
Liked	7.15	6.67	6.90	5.96
Respected	7.00	7.46	6.25	5.21
Accepted	7.35	7.33	6.60	6.17
Free to Express Ideas	6.95	6.17	7.00	6.83

Discussion

Both generations had similar perceptions of both cohorts. The Baby Boomers were more respected and had more qualities assigned to them. Generation Y were assigned more negative traits by not only the Baby Boomers, but their own cohort group. The workplace experiences, however, did not reflect any bias in lieu of generational perceptions, other than respect being assigned to the Baby Boomers who had more positive words associated with their generation. This result was not what was hypothesized. It was interesting to see that the cohorts did not reflect any real negative bias against Generation Y in the workplace interaction portion of the survey, even though there was a significant consensus among both cohorts that the least desirable traits were more commonly associated with Generation Y. A study by Arsenault (2003) concluded that there were differences in the needs of the generations and that they needed to be recognized as diversity issues. In this study, there are obviously differences in the perception of each of the generations; however, it is these differences do not seem to affect the everyday interactions in the workplace.

It could be possible that life experience can explain why the perception did not affect the experience. Baby Boomers are more secure in their careers at this point in their lives. They have pensions and status and decent pay right now. In comparison, Generation Y is in the typical entry-level positions that the youth culture usually enters the workforce in and encounters the same obstacles. One obstacle is job scarcity within the job market today, not only for good jobs with

benefits and pay, but as of recently any job at all for persons with little work experience. This is especially true if those in the generation have less education (Miller & Simon, 1979). It is also possible that the Baby Boomers gave Generation Y the benefit of being young, so they did not rate their experiences with them so negatively because they see them as "paying their dues" at this point in their careers. Generation Y may have been very hard on themselves knowing that they are not in the career they had hoped to be but instead find themselves unhappy in a position that just pays the bills.

Because this study was conducted using introductory psychology students there was a bias toward entry level blue collar workers, whereas the Baby Boomers all had the time to complete a degree and find work within their educational field. It would be beneficial in the future to expand this research to include participants of diverse educational backgrounds, to see if there is really such a negative perception about Generation Y or if this is a byproduct of the type of job they hold while students in college. Other limitations of the study were sample size and time allowed for completion. If there were a larger sample size perhaps there could have been more than just introductory psychology students included in Generation Y. It may have been beneficial to include more of Generation Y who has already completed their degrees and hold careers. If there were more time in the study, it may have been possible to have found more sensitive tests of experience and interaction.

Application of this research in today's workforce would seem to indicate that Generation Y, perceived as lacking the professional traits necessary for the workplace, is looking up to the Baby Boomers, who are perceived as having many positive workplace traits, for direction and guidance. Generation Y has respect for them and obviously are not overly confident in their own work ethic. A study of nurses in Canada showed that the Generation Y employees often sought out positions in teaching hospitals where they could receive additional coaching and mentoring from more experienced nurses (Widger, et al., 2007). Jorgenson (2003) also states that Generation Y thrives on mentoring and seeks further skill development. It may be in the best interest of some companies to begin a mentoring program from within. Work ethic can be learned, especially if someone has to be accountable to a co-worker that they think very highly of; they will be more aware of disappointing that person and most likely strive to please them.

There are generational differences between these two cohorts and it is clear that how these generations see themselves may influence how others perceive them. While this study did not indicate that perceptions relate to workplace experience, there may be research needed into whether a generation with positive perceptions of themselves would influence any correlation between generational perspective and workplace experience. Other future research could involve a more in-depth study with Generation Y only, looking at whether they are employed at a job, which "just pays the bills" or a career, in which they plan to stay and really invest in their work. This type of study could help clarify whether or not Generation Y is really as down on their generation as it is represented in this study. Another study that could come out of this is looking at aging between the generations and the positive effect, whether that plays a role in the reporting of experience and perception.

References

Arsenault, P.M. (2004). Validating generational differences: A legitimate diversity and leadership issue. *The Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 25,* 121-141.

Boychuk Duchscher, J.E., & Cowin, L. (2004). Multigenerational nurses in the workplace. *Journal of Nursing Administration, 34,* 493-501.

Busch, P., Venkitachalam, K., & Richards, D. (2008). Generational differences in soft knowledge situations: Status, need for recognition, workplace commitment and idealism. *Knowledge and Process Management, 15*, 45-58.

Davis, J.B., Pawlowski, S.D., & Houston, A. (2006). Work commitments of Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers in the IT profession: Generational differences or myth? *Journal of Computer Information Systems, Spring,* 43-49.

Gordon, R. A., Rozelle, R.M., & Baxter, J.C. (2001) The effect of applicant age and accountability on perceptions of female job applicants. *The Journal of Psychology, 123,* 59-68.

Jorgensen, B. (2003). Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y? Policy implications for defense forces in the modern era. *Foresight: the Journal of Futures Studies, Strategic Thinking and Policy, 5*, 41-49.

Jurkiewicz, C.L. (2000). Generation X and the public employee. *Public Personnel Management, 29,* 55-74.

McCann, R.M., & Giles, H. (2006). Communication with people of different ages in the workplace: Thai and American data, *Human Communication Research, 32,* 74-108.

Miller, P.Y., & Simon, W. (1979). Do youth really want to work: A comparison of the work values and job perceptions of younger and older men. *Youth & Society, 10,* 379-404.

Reddy, K.S. (1983). Generation Gap: Attitudes of the youth and adults towards authoritarianism. *Journal of Psychological Research, 27*, 45-47.

Taylor, J. (2005). The next generation of workers in Australia: Their views on organizations work and rewards. *International Journal of Human Resource Management, 16*, 1919-1933.

Twenge, J.M. (2006) Generation Me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled, and more miserable than ever before. New York: Free Press.

Wheeler, L. & Nezlek, J. (1977) Sex differences in social participation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 45*, 943-953.

Widger, K., Pye, C., Cranley, L., Wilson-Keates, B., Squires, M., & Tourangeau, A. (2007). Generational differences in acute care nurses. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Leadership, 20,* 49-61.

Yang, S. and Guy, M., (2006) GenXers versus Boomers: Work motivators and management implications. *Public Performance & Management Review, 29,* 267-284.

Lauren is a senior majoring in Psychology. This paper was written for Dr. Schult's P429 Developmental Psychology class.