STUDYING GENERATIONAL COHORTS: CONCEPTUAL STANCES AND APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

Generational cohorts are commonly used in marketing to differentiate consumer age groupings. The same approach has been advocated in other business disciplines such as human resource management, where the concept might assist in setting appropriate employee motivators or designing team structures. Articles on generational cohorts regularly appear in the practitioner and popular media. Writers in these genres generally talk about the values and attributes of different cohorts, but rarely discuss the antecedents of cohort values or the logic underpinning cohort start and end years. Generational cohorts also have been addressed in scholarly circles for almost 100 years, mainly in the sociology literature, without ever achieving mainstream research status. This paper discusses some of the concepts underlying generational cohorts, examines the stances adopted by previous researchers, and considers implications for researchers and managers.

INTRODUCTION

While there is a growing stream of research that points to the importance of demographic factors as predictors of organisational and social processes and outcomes (George & Chattopadhyay 2002; Pfeffer 1983; Smith & Peterson 2005), the study of generations is still considered by many to have little scholarly merit. This is surprising, since the concept of a generation has wide currency throughout the world. People talk of the "younger" or "older" generation, using the term to differentiate segments of the population purely on the basis of age, and usually drawing attention to the fact that those from a different generation to themselves adhere to a different

value system, have different attitudes about fashion and music, and have different expectations about life in general. Some scholars, for example Glenn (1977), have pointed to the need for a distinction between the term "generation", which relates to a person's position in the parent-child family structure or hierarchy, and the term "generational cohort" which relates to a group within the population who are of a similar age (Pilcher 1994).

(Biggs 2007) argues that the most notable aspect of generational theory is its unevenness of conceptual development, suggesting that the theory is built upon a few core concepts. Despite this narrow theoretical base, he argues that generational theory promises a richness of thinking across multiple levels of analysis.

This paper discusses two conceptual stances underpinning scholarly examination of generational cohorts. The first conceptual stance emanates from the field of sociology, and is predicated on the notion of cohort defining events as antecedents of cohort values. This approach has been largely accepted (albeit perhaps unconsciously) and adopted by practitioners, the popular media, and scholars. The second conceptual stance, effectively an extension of the first, was first put forward some 20 years ago. This conceptualisation, developed by historians, accepts the importance of defining events, but argues that there is a cyclical pattern to generations. The paper goes on to examine how the repeating cycles concept of generational cohorts can be of use in a business context.

DEFINING EVENTS

Modern scholarly examination of the concept of generations has until recently been largely limited to the sociology literature, and can be traced back to an essay by Mannheim (1952), originally published in German in1928. According to Mannheim, the unity of a generation differs from the unity of other social groupings, such as family, club or organisation, in that there is much less consciousness of belonging to a generational cohort. The generation, therefore, is not a 'concrete' group, and generational cohorts, while materially quite different, are structurally more analogous with another social grouping, that of class. Mannheim put forward a three dimensional generational construction consisting of generational strata (the cohort), generational context (the times) and generational unity (shared values). He was one of the first to argue that experiences during a person's youth have a profound impact upon the beliefs and attitudes that a young person takes into adulthood. This 'defining events' theory asserts that people who are born around the same time, and who grow up together, tend to develop similar values.

According to this theory adults' values will reflect the socio-economic conditions of childhood and adolescence (Inglehart 1997; Rogler 2002), their value systems being determined by the socio-economic factors in shortest supply during adolescence. Consequently, people who grow up during difficult times adopt values such as a desire for security, respect for authority, and the ability to survive. Those who come

to maturity during easier times tend to value individualism, egalitarianism, tolerance of diversity and self-transcendence (Egri & Ralston 2004). This model accepts that some generations will inevitably be more salient than others, the result of the socio-historical moment, and the generational consciousness that it may generate (Biggs 2007; Mannheim 1952)

Notwithstanding the importance of social upheaval, armed conflict, the state of the economy or scientific advances, people are also influenced to varying degree by the broad spectrum of local, national and international events through which they live. They may be affected by national and international events to a greater or lesser extent than people in other countries. Factors which might affect the degree of influence of local rather than global events (or vice versa) include the typical level of education within a country, the existence of a free media, the availability of information from outside the country, and the extent to which a particular event impacts on the individual. Economic or political upheaval at home is likely to be remembered more vividly than economic or political upheaval elsewhere, even if the rest of the world views things differently.

Schewe and Meredith (2004) offer the Second World War as an example of a global defining moment, and the Falklands War as an example of a country specific or regional defining moment. Most people around the world were affected by the first conflict, while the second tended to have limited impact for those not directly involved. Similarly, the Great Depression, the advent of television, the development of the internet, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union are examples of global defining moments, while the 1989 student rally (and its aftermath) in Tiananmen Square, the imprisonment and release of Nelson Mandela, and the legalisation of divorce in Ireland are examples of country or region specific defining moments.

Schuman and Scott (1989) asked a large sample of Americans to list three significant events from the previous fifty years. While the most commonly mentioned events were the Second World War and the Vietnam War, they found that people who were in their mid teens to mid twenties at the time of those two conflicts were more likely to mention them as being of importance to them. The importance of those formative or "coming of age" years was also evident in respondents' recollection of other significant historical events, such as the Great Depression and the assassination of President Kennedy. The centrality of youth or "coming of age" years to the concept of generational cohorts has now been widely accepted by many scholars (Egri & Ralston 2004; Hung, Gu & Yim 2007; Inglehart 1997; Rogler 2002; Schewe & Meredith 2004). The difficulty, of course, lies in the fact that defining events occur all the time rather than in neat, clearly defined intervals, and it is consequently not easy to determine which defining events should be grouped together.

Generational Cohorts in Western Countries

Most of the literature on generational cohorts relates to Western countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Most of these countries have had not dissimilar recent histories from a political, economic and social perspective. They have tended to be involved in the same wars (on the same side), generally shared similar experiences in times of economic downturn, and experienced similar social transitions such as liberal attitudes to sex, widespread use of recreational drugs and access to communication technology, generally contemporaneously. While there is some minor difference in opinion, for example in the labelling of some generational cohorts, the start and end years of each cohort, and the merit of splitting some cohorts into two or more separate cohorts, there is broad agreement in the literature about the cohorts and the values that can be ascribed to them. A synthesis of the literature suggests the following cohort structure.

The Swing Generation (also called the GI Generation) includes people born between 1901 and the mid 1920s. Most of the people who served in the Second World War came from this generation. They are generally considered to be good team players who can achieve great outcomes. They are virtuous but paternalistic. The Silent Generation (a number of names has been used to identify this cohort, but it includes those born between the early 1920s and the mid 1940s) was also shaped by the Great Depression and the Second World War, but members of this cohort were too young to influence either of these great events. The values generally ascribed to this cohort include conservatism, a desire for security, a belief in the importance of conformity, and a highly developed sense of duty (Strauss & Howe 1991; Thau & Heflin 1997). Baby Boomers (those born between the mid 1940s and the mid 1960s) are usually portrayed as being idealistic, optimistic and inner-directed (Kupperschmidt 2000; Loomis 2000). For this cohort it is argued that the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the first lunar landing and the availability of the contraceptive pill were all defining events which occurred during their formative years and which had a life-long impact on their values and attitudes. Generation X (those born between the early/mid 1960s and the early 1980s) is usually described as adaptable, technologically competent and entrepreneurial, but at the same time cynical, sullen, contemptuous, naïve and arrogant (Ferres, Travaglione & Firns 2001; Jurkiewicz 2000; O'Bannon 2001). Gen X has grown up and reached adulthood during a period of extraordinary technological, economic, and social change. The extensive restructuring and downsizing that occurred in the 1990s as Gen X was entering the workforce has forced them to take advantage of new opportunities as they come along, either inside or outside the organisation that currently employs them. Gen X employees are eager to upgrade their skills through training on the job and externally in order to keep themselves "employable" (Tulgan 1995). This sense of maintaining their marketability, in the face of uncertain job futures, may explain why they are generally less inclined to be committed to organisations. On average, Gen X employees will hold six different jobs during their careers, significantly more than their parents typically did. The Millennials cohort, until generally referred to more frequently as Generation Y, consists of those born after the early 1980s. This cohort has not yet attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, but they are generally described as optimistic, smart and cooperative. They tend to accept and trust authority and follow rules to a far greater extent than the two preceding generations (Howe & Strauss 2000).

Generational Cohorts in Other Countries

While a good deal of attention has been given to generational cohorts in western countries, examination of cohorts in other countries has received much less attention. A number of scholars have begun to address this gap in the literature, with recent studies considering cohort structures for China (Egri & Ralston 2004; Hung, Gu & Yim 2007), Russia (Schewe & Meredith 2004), Brazil (Schewe & Meredith 2004), and the Philippines (Perryer & Esteban 2009). If the concept is of value to scholars and practitioners in the west, it seems likely to be of equal value in other societies, notwithstanding the fact that cohort structures around the world will differ (Hole, Zhong & Schwartz 2010).

GENERATIONAL CYCLES

This theory was first put forward by Strauss and Howe (1991), and their ideas were expanded upon in a later work (Strauss & Howe 1997). While generally described as historians, both of these authors have eclectic backgrounds. Strauss is a graduate of the Law and Kennedy Schools at Harvard, has a background in public policy, and more recently has been attracted to the performing arts. Howe has degrees from Yale in history and economics, and has worked in public policy and journalism.

According to Strauss and Howe's theory, history has been marked by a four stage cycle of repeating generational cohort archetypes. In this conceptualisation, which draws on the work of historians and social scientists over an extended period of time (for example Wallace 1956), events shape people, but people also shape events. They define a generation as all those people born over a span of approximately 20 years. The cohort birth years were developed by looking for groupings of around this length of time in which group members encountered critical historical and social events at similar ages. In line with Mannheim (1952), Strauss and Howe (1991) argue that there are dominant generations and recessive generations. Fundamental to the theory is a repeating cycle of crises and subsequent recoveries (which they term 'awakenings'). There are four stages in each cycle, crisis, post-crisis, awakening, and post-awakening, leading on to a new crisis which forms the start of the next cycle. The transition from one cohort to a subsequent cohort is termed a 'turning'. An awakening is analogous to summer, and a crisis to winter, with the other two turnings equivalent to the transitional seasons of spring and autumn. In their later works, the nomenclature for cohort archetypes and transitions is different from their earlier work. For example, the earlier cohort archetypes of 'idealist', 'reactive', 'civic' and 'adaptive' become 'prophet', 'nomad', 'hero' and 'artist' in their later books. Similarly, the turnings of 'crisis', 'post-crisis', 'awakening', and 'post-awakening' later became 'crisis', 'high', 'awakening' and 'unravelling'. For the sake of clarity the earlier terminology is used throughout this paper.

Each stage within the cycle lasts approximately twenty years, with the full cycle being completed in eighty to ninety years. The stage length of around 20 years is based

upon the biological and socially determined stages of a human life, childhood, early adulthood, midlife and old age. The complete cycle is equivalent to one long human life which the authors call a 'saeculum', the Latin word for a long life. Because there is a biological underpinning of the theory, the stage and cycle length has remained relatively constant, and will, according to Strauss and Howe, continue to do so.

Generational Cohort Archetypes

Idealist generations (dominant) are born in a *post-crisis* period when focus is on community. Consequently they grow up as indulged children, come of age as crusaders of an *awakening*, focus on morals and principles in mid-life during a *post-awakening* era, and guide a *crisis* in later life. Reactive (recessive) generations are born during an *awakening* period when young adults are attacking the institutional order. They grow up as under-protected children, and come of age as alienated *post-awakening* adults. They are pragmatic in mid-life through a *crisis* and age as resilient *post-crisis* elders. Civic generations (dominant) are born in a post *post-awakening* period in a period of pragmatism and self-reliance, grow up as protected children, come of age as team oriented optimists during a *crisis*, are confident in mid-life in a *post-crisis* period, and in later life confront another *awakening*. Adaptive (recessive) generations are born during a *crisis* period when the dangerous times lead to community consensus, grow up as overprotected children, come of age as conformists in a *post-crisis* world, are process-oriented mid-lifers cuing an *awakening*, and in later life are thoughtful *post-awakening* elders.

Table 1 shows two generational cycles, including cohort name, indicative birth years based on Strauss and Howe's (1991) cohort structure, cohort archetype, and indicative cohort values. Similarities between this model and the structures put forward by other authors are clearly evident.

TABLE 1: GENERATIONAL COHORTS

Cohort Name	Birth Years	Archetype	Values
Missionary	1860 -1882	Idealist	inner-driven, moralistic
Lost	1883 - 1900	Reactive	anti-custom, cynical
Swing (Veteran, GI)	1901 - 1924	Civic	outer-driven, institutionalising
Silent	1925 - 1942	Adaptive	process driven, hypocritical
Baby Boomer	1943 - 1960	Idealist	inner-driven, moralistic
Generation X	1961 - 1981	Reactive	anti-custom, cynical
Millennials (Gen Y)	1982 - 2000	Civic	outer-driven, institutionalising

New adaptive cohort	2001 – early 2020s	Adaptive	process driven, hypocritical

DISCUSSION

The application of the generational cohort concept in a business context covers a range of business disciplines. From a marketing perspective there are important implications for market segmentation; from a human resource management perspective, the existence of inter-generational differences in attitudes towards such things as work, authority, relationships, and behavioural standards has implications for the selection of appropriate motivators and reward mechanisms, and for the design of team structures.

The 'defining events' approach to studying generational cohorts, building upon the work of Mannheim and other, has been widely applied and is based on almost a century of previous study. While the work of Mannheim and other early shcolars was qualitative, most recent scholarly work has taken a quantitative methodological approach. Researchers have surveyed people to discover whether or not there are differences in values or other variables of interest across cohorts, with varying results. The cohort start and end dates have rarely, if ever, been questioned or explained. Most of the literature has been produced post the Great Depression and the Second World War, and these crises figure prominently in most of the cohort structures. The few scholars who have attempted to determine cohort groupings in non-western contexts (for example Egri & Ralston 2004; Perryer & Esteban 2009; Schewe & Meredith 2004) have of necessity been obliged to start from first principles as it were, identifying which events might have defined a society or culture, and building cohort structures around those defining events.

It is no doubt of value to scholars, practitioners and policy makers to understand the values and attitudes of generational cohorts. It is also valuable to appreciate the events which might have led to those values. Of even greater value though, is a theory which will predict the values and attitudes of generational cohorts into the future. Mannheim's contributes to the former appreciation, and Strauss and Howe to the latter.

Strauss and Howe are widely cited in the academic literature (see for example Coomes 2004; Freestone & Mitchell 2004; Twenge et al. 2008). A check on Google Scholar in March 2011 shows 371 citations for Strauss and Howe (1991) and 873 citations for Howe and Strauss (2000). None-the-less, their ideas are rarely discussed or tested, and their theory has been subjected to criticism from both academic and non-academic sources. This criticism has ranged from concern because their analysis is not based on empirical data, to claims that their work is too vague, and borders on pseudoscience. This seems a little unfair though, as the theory underpinning the writings of Mannheim and others equally lacks an empirical basis. Most of the scholarly work on generational cohorts in the business and management literature

emanates from North America, where it is not uncommon for inductive reasoning to be dismissed as unscientific.

However the work of Strauss and Howe offers the possibility of predicting cohort values, attitudes, and priorities. This has the potential to be of immense value to scholars and practitioners. The Millennial generation is now a significant cohort within the workforce, and will increasingly assume positions of greater responsibility. Understanding how cohort members are likely to view organisational events, and putting in place systems and processes to facilitate those views is preferable to simply investigating and confirming those views with the passing of time. In less than a decade from now a new Adaptive cohort, yet to be given a name of their own, will enter the workforce. Organisations which give some thought to the values of that new cohort will be strategically better placed to take advantage of their unique strengths and weaknesses.

CONCLUSION

The concept of generational cohorts is intuitively appealing, and some scholars argue that it makes a contribution to our understanding a number of important business related issues. Most of the literature on the concept is based on the "defining events" model put forward by Mannheim nearly a century ago. The "repeating cycles" model suggested by Strauss and Howe, while regularly cited is usually dismissed as lacking rigour and merit. This paper argues that further insights might be obtained from a scholarly examination of the "repeating cycles" approach.

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