Generations, We Hardly Knew Ye: An Obituary

Cort W. Rudolph

Saint Louis University

Hannes Zacher

Leipzig University

Cort W. Rudolph <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0536-9638>

Hannes Zacher <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6336-2947>

Note: This is a preprint version of an in press, accepted manuscript: <https://psyarxiv.com/nrmka>

Please cite as:

Rudolph, C., & Zacher, H. (2022, In Press). Generations, We Hardly Knew Ye. *Group & Organization Management*.

Author Note

Cort W. Rudolph, Department of Psychology, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO (USA). Hannes Zacher, Wilhelm Wundt Institute of Psychology, Leipzig University (Germany). Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cort W. Rudolph, Saint Louis University, Morrissey Hall 2827 St. Louis, MO, 63103, cort.rudolph@health.slu.edu, +1(314) 977-7299.

Abstract

Although popular in the organizational sciences, in the media, and in practice, the concepts of “generations” and “generational differences” have been increasingly scrutinized based on theoretical, methodological, and statistical concerns. Here, we present a short obituary to bid adieu to these troubled concepts, with the hopes of memorializing and “putting to rest” these controversial ideas. We encourage researchers and practitioners to think beyond the narrow scope offered by the idea of generations, adopt a more critical perspective on our science and practice, and learn from the mistakes of the past.

Keywords: Generations, Generational Differences, Critical Review, Obituary

Generations, We Hardly Knew Ye: An Obituary

“A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it. . . . An important scientific innovation rarely makes its way by gradually winning over and converting its opponents: it rarely happens that Saul becomes Paul. What does happen is that its opponents gradually die out, and that the growing generation is familiarized with the ideas from the beginning: another instance of the fact that the future lies with the youth.”

Max Planck (1950, pp. 33 & 97)

Promoting skepticism about “what we do” in the fields of management, organizational psychology, and organizational behavior is important for the continued development of our science and profession (e.g., Rotolo et al., 2017). To this end, ideas surrounding the notion of “generations” have a unique ubiquity and we would argue that they have assumed a form of “functional autonomy” (Astin, 1961). That is, the existence of “generations” and “generational differences” are taken as self-evident in many circles (e.g., in common discourse, in the media, and especially among organizational managers and consultants) and are rarely questioned. This is notable, because we lack a compelling body of evidence that speaks to the existence of generations or the influence of generational differences across a wide variety of the outcomes and processes that we care about as organizational scientists. Our own research in this area has cast doubt upon the validity of generational frameworks for understanding work-related constructs, broadly defined (e.g., Rudolph et al., 2017, 2020; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017). Since we started this work about ten years ago, we have seen some change in thinking around these ideas in the literature (e.g., Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017; Parry & Urwin, 2021). At this point, we must ask ourselves, is it now time to declare these concepts dead? It is clear to us that the generations concept is slowly, albeit steadily, beating a path toward the proverbial empirical dustbin. To advance and perhaps escalate this critical conversation, we take this suggestion a step further here. What follows is our obituary for the concept of generations.

Generations (b. 1927; d. 2022).

Born to functionalists (Manheim, 1927/1952), who sought explanations for social order and the stability of societies, generations were raised among 20th century sociologists as explanations for social change (Ryder, 1965). After a tumultuous youth (e.g., none of its guardians could agree upon its meaning or value; Kertzer, 1983), generations were all-but abandoned as functionalism fell out of favor and gave way to more contemporary paradigms in the social and behavioral sciences (e.g., critical theories, which emphasize the role of power structures for maintaining order within societies; see also Agger, 1991; Bottomore, 1975). Even lifespan developmental psychologists eschewed their meaning and influence (e.g., Baltes, 1968, 1987).

Now orphaned, generations eventually found a home in the organizational sciences, where they were adopted innocently enough to make sense of the changing landscape of work (e.g., Galinsky, 2007; Joshi et al., 2011). At first, this adoption was welcomed; generations and generational differences offered simple and seemingly reasonable explanations for many of the dynamic phenomena we observe at work. Indeed, understanding the complexities of interindividual differences and aging through the lens of generational categories offered a convenient (if not reductive) view of aging at work. Generations provided a heuristic “sensemaking” tool that distilled complex developmental phenomena into easy to understand and communicate qualities of a few groups rather than individuals. Early considerations touted the utility of generational differences to this end and called for enhanced research to investigate their effects (Smola & Sutton, 2002). As evidence about (the lack of) generational differences amassed, questions began to emerge about their cumulative impact (as they often do; Kraiger, 1985). A meta-analysis was conducted to take stock of this literature; its conclusions were

devastating: “The pattern of results indicates that the relationships between generational membership and work-related outcomes are moderate to small, essentially zero in many cases” (Costanza et al., 2012, p. 375). With the seeds of doubt thus sown, the concept of generations came under increasingly intense scrutiny.

First came the methodologists, who re-declared what was long known (Glenn, 1976) — it is impossible to empirically separate the influence of generations (or cohort effects) from age and contemporaneous time period effects (e.g., Bell & Jones, 2013). Next came the empiricists, who proclaimed that the results of generational differences studies do not triangulate with one-another (e.g., Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Finally, the statisticians had their say, noting that every inferential model that we use to study generations offers a different interpretation (Costanza, et al., 2017). Generational differences ultimately succumbed to the rigors of the scientific method, as do many management fads (Abrahamson, 1991). In the end, there was no narcissism epidemic to be concerned with (Stronge et al., 2017; Wetzel et al., 2017), work ethic was found to be cross-temporally stable (Zabel et al., 2017), and there were notable inter-individual differences in intra-generational personal values (Weber & Urick, 2017). Ultimately, even once staunch proponents of the concept began to reconceptualize generations as little more than “fuzzy” social constructs (Campbell et al., 2017, p. 130; Twenge, 2017, p. 6). This was the final straw that ushered in the post-generational era.

Occasionally, a study of generations or generational differences still appears in a top-tier organizational science journal (e.g., Anderson et al., 2017; Holtschlag et al., 2020; North, 2019; Tang et al., 2017; Van Rossem, 2019). There is a fascinating persistence to this phenomenon and a comfort in being able to attribute otherwise complex age-related experiences to vastly oversimplified generational groups. Accordingly, generations are now a “big business” that helps

to sell books, talks, and workshops run by organizational consultants who peddle their expertise in these flawed concepts. The persistence of generations is, to some degree, likewise reinforced by the continued use of generationalized language in scientific papers and in popular media (Rauvola et al., 2019) to (mis)classify people into generational groups (e.g., “Boomers,” “Generation Xers,” “Millennials”). Accordingly, an important step in successfully navigating post-generational science and practice is to strike such imprecise and prescriptive language from our vernacular. To do so, we encourage people to adopt a lifespan developmental perspective on aging at work, which considers age along a continuum rather than in terms of discrete generational categories. Additionally, adopting a social constructionist perspective is useful as it offers that generations and generational differences do not actually exist, but are socially constructed phenomena based on widely-held generational stereotypes and the socially accepted and sanctioned practice of broadly applying generational labels (see Rudolph et al., 2020; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017).

Mannheim’s (1927/1952) original argument for the existence of generations was that, for societies to change, new generations must disrupt existing patterns of thinking. In this spirit, albeit somewhat ironically, we offer this obituary to satisfy similar ends — to disrupt existing patterns of thinking about generations and generational differences. We hope that these efforts serve to reinforce existing calls for a formal moratorium to be placed on generations and generational differences research in the organizational sciences (e.g., Rudolph et al., 2017). We recognize that there exists a strong pull, especially from organizational consultants and the popular business and management press, to keep the idea of generations afloat. The simplistic appeal of generations will be difficult to overcome, however, as science often moves slowly and incrementally. Further embodying Mannheim’s (1927/1952) argument for generations and

paraphrasing the quote that begins this musing, Planck's (1950) principle offers that "science progresses one funeral at a time" (see also Azoulay et al., 2019). In our eyes, based upon the amassed evidence that speaks to the contrary, there really is no debate to be had about the status of generations. Put simply, the time is now to bid adieu to the concept of generations as a means for understanding human behavior. Rest in peace.

References

- Abrahamson, E. (1991). Managerial fads and fashions: The diffusion and rejection of innovations. *Academy of Management Review*, 16, 586–612.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/258919>
- Agger, B. (1991). Critical theory, poststructuralism, postmodernism: Their sociological relevance. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 17(1), 105-131.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.17.080191.000541>
- Anderson, H. J., Baur, J. E., Griffith, J. A., & Buckley, M. R. (2017). What works for you may not work for (Gen) Me: Limitations of present leadership theories for the new generation. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 28(1), 245-260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.08.001>
- Astin, A. W. (1961). The functional autonomy of psychotherapy. *American Psychologist*, 16(2), 75-78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0048324>
- Azoulay, P., Fons-Rosen, C., & Graff Zivin, J. S. (2019). Does science advance one funeral at a time?. *American Economic Review*, 109(8), 2889-2920. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20161574>
- Baltes, P. B. (1968). Longitudinal and cross-sectional sequences in the study of age and generation effects. *Human Development*, 145-171. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1159/000270604>
- Baltes, P. B. (1987). Theoretical propositions of life-span developmental psychology: On the dynamics between growth and decline. *Developmental Psychology*, 23, 611-626.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.23.5.611>
- Bell, A., & Jones, K. (2013). The impossibility of separating age, period and cohort effects. *Social Science & Medicine*, 93, 163-165.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.04.029>

- Bottomore, T. (1975). Competing paradigms in macrosociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1(1), 191-202. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.01.080175.001203>
- Campbell, S. M., Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2017). Fuzzy but useful constructs: Making sense of the differences between generations. *Work, Aging and Retirement*, 3(2), 130-139. <https://doi.org/10.1093/workar/wax001>
- Costanza, D. P., Badger, J. M., Fraser, R. L., Severt, J. B., & Gade, P. A. (2012). Generational differences in work-related attitudes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 27, 375–394. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-012-9259-4>
- Costanza, D. P., Darrow, J. B., Yost, A. B., & Severt, J. B. (2017). A review of analytical methods used to study generational differences: Strengths and limitations. *Work, Aging and Retirement*, 3, 149–165. <https://doi.org/10.1093/workar/wax002>
- Galinsky, E. (2007). The changing landscape of work. *Generations*, 31(1), 16-22.
- Glenn, N. D. (1976). Cohort analysts' futile quest: Statistical attempts to separate age, period and cohort effects. *American Sociological Review*, 41(5), 900-904. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2094738>
- Holtschlag, C., Masuda, A. D., Reiche, B. S., & Morales, C. (2020). Why do millennials stay in their jobs? The roles of protean career orientation, goal progress and organizational career management. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 118, 103366. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.103366>
- Joshi, A., Dencker, J. C., & Franz, G. (2011). Generations in organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 31, 177-205. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2011.10.002>
- Kertzer, D. I. (1983). Generation as a sociological problem. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 9, 125–149. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.09.080183.001013>

- Kraiger, K. (1985). On learning from the past: A meta-analytic fable. *Personnel Psychology*, 38(4), 799-801. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1985.tb00566.x>
- Lyons, S., & Kuron, L. (2014). Generational differences in the workplace: A review of the evidence and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35, S139–S157. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1913>
- Lyons, S. T., & Schweitzer, L. (2017). A qualitative exploration of generational identity: Making sense of young and old in the context of today's workplace. *Work, Aging and Retirement*, 3(2), 209-224. <https://doi.org/10.1093/workar/waw024>
- Mannheim, K. (1952). The problem of generations. In P. Kecskemeti (Ed.), *Essays in the sociology of knowledge* (pp. 276–322). Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1927).
- North, M. S. (2019). A GATE to understanding “older” workers: Generation, age, tenure, experience. *Academy of Management Annals*, 13(2), 414-443. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2017.0125>
- Parry, E., & Urwin, P. (2021). Generational categories: A broken basis for human resource management research and practice. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 31(4), 857-869. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12353>
- Planck, M. K. (1950). *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Rauvola, R. S., Rudolph, C. W., & Zacher, H. (2019). Generationalism: Problems and implications. *Organizational Dynamics*, 48(4), 100664. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2018.05.006>

- Rotolo, C. T., Church, A. H., Adler, S., Smither, J. W., Colquitt, A. L., Shill, A. C., Paul, K. B., & Foster, G. (2017). Putting an end to bad talent management: a call to action for the field of I-O psychology. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*. 11(2), 176-219. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2018.6>
- Rudolph, C. W., Rauvola, R. S., Costanza, D. P., & Zacher, H. (2020). Generations and generational differences: Debunking myths in organizational science and practice and paving new paths forward. *Journal of Business & Psychology*. 36(6), 945-967. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-020-09715-2>
- Rudolph, C. W., Rauvola, R. S., & Zacher, H. (2017). Leadership and generations at work: a critical review. *Leadership Quarterly*. 29(1), 44-57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.09.004>
- Rudolph, C. W., & Zacher, H. (2017). Considering generations from a lifespan developmental perspective. *Work, Aging and Retirement*, 3, 113–129. <https://doi.org/10.1093/workar/waw019>
- Ryder, N. B. (1965). The cohort as a concept in the study of social change. *American Sociological Review*, 30, 843–861. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2090964>
- Smola, K., & Sutton, C. D. (2002). Generational differences: Revisiting generational work values for the new millennium. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 23, 363-382. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.147>
- Stronge, S., Milojev, P., & Sibley, C. G. (2017). Are people becoming more entitled over time? Not in New Zealand. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 44(2), 200-213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217733079>
- Tang, N., Wang, Y., & Zhang, K. (2017). Values of Chinese generation cohorts: Do they matter

in the workplace? *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 143, 8-12.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2017.07.007>

Twenge, J. M. (2017). IGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy--and completely unprepared for adulthood--and what that means for the rest of us. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Van Rossem, A. H. (2019). Generations as social categories: An exploratory cognitive study of generational identity and generational stereotypes in a multigenerational workforce.

Journal of Organizational Behavior, 40(4), 434-455. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/job.2341>

Weber, J., & Urick, M. J. (2017). Examining the Millennials' ethical profile: Assessing demographic variations in their personal value orientations. *Business and Society Review*, 122(4), 469-506. <https://doi.org/10.1111/basr.12128>

Wetzel, E., Brown, A., Hill, P. L., Chung, J. M., Robins, R. W., & Roberts, B. W. (2017). The narcissism epidemic is dead; long live the narcissism epidemic. *Psychological Science*, 28(12), 1833-1847. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617724208>

Zabel, K. L., Biermeier-Hanson, B. B., Baltes, B. B., Early, B. J., & Shepard, A. (2017). Generational differences in work ethic: Fact or fiction? *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 32(3), 301-315. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-016-9466-5>