

The generation game

Concepts of Baby-Boomer, Gen X and Gen Y can create more heat than light

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Abstract

Purpose – *Explores the limited value of concepts such as Baby-Boomer, Generation X and Generation Y and advances the view that life course is more valuable.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Examines how young adults in Britain, born between 1975 and 1982, conceptualized the notion of work-life balance as they were about to leave university and enter full-time paid employment.*

Findings – *Reveals that the notion of individual choice strongly underpins young adults' conceptualization of work-life balance and expectations of work-life balance support; while young British and Asian adults largely considered it to be a matter of individual choice, there were variations in their preferences for how to prioritize their impending employment and personal lives; and four emerging patterns of work-life balance orientation preferences were found – balancer, careerist, career-sacrificer and integrator.*

Practical implications – *Provides support for the argument that the work-life balance perceptions of young adults who would belong to the so-called Generation Y cannot be generalized and simplified as being either work-centric or life-centric. The picture is a lot more complex given the diversity within this group of young adults.*

Social implications – *Highlights how, instead of looking for generational differences (or age-related differences) which can be divisive, it is more useful to look at the issue of multi-generations in a broader way.*

Originality/value – *By using a life-course approach instead of a generational approach, is able to take into account how past transitions have shaped the way work-life balance was discussed by the young adults and how anticipated future transitions were expected by the young adults to change their needs and therefore expectations of employer and government support.*

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On 30 June 2014 the statutory right to request flexible working was extended to all employees in Britain. The Government argued that this would enable “a cultural change in the way men and women are viewed in the workplace”. It places a statutory duty on employers to consider all applications, regardless of whether the applicant currently has caring responsibilities.

Although the right to request is a light-touch approach, the extension is a shift in public policy that goes some way to challenge the outdated but persisting assumption that work-life balance issues apply only to certain groups of people, such as working mothers and carers.

For the past 10 years I have been advocating that research and policies need to go beyond confining our understanding of work-life balance experiences to working parents, who represent only one of many demographic cohorts of the workforce. The composition of today's workforce is diversifying in a number of ways, including age, gender, disability, ethnicity and nationality. In the UK there is increasing recognition that such changes present new challenges for organizations and government, where "all are struggling to understand and respond to the consequences of far-reaching changes within the population, the labor market and society as a whole" (Williams and Jones, 2005, p. 3).

In light of changing demographics in the labor market it is no longer apt to assume that workers have similar needs and expectations from work and outside of work or to assume that their needs remain constant over the life course. This is why policy changes such as the extension of the right to request are positive and exciting and why I am delighted to contribute this piece on the special issue's theme of workforce diversity.

The generational approach: a useful but limited starting point

I conducted a qualitative study on young adults in Britain, born between 1975 and 1982. I explored how the young adults conceptualized the notion of work-life balance at a point of transition in their lives, just as they were about to leave university and enter full-time paid employment.

I conducted interviews and focus groups with two groups of young women and men: those who were born and brought up in Britain and those who were born and brought up in an Asian country and were studying for their degree in Britain. Given the strong Anglo-American origins of the concept and mainstream theories of work-life balance I wanted to understand how cultural norms shaped the way young adults talked about work-life balance and the kind of work-life balance support (policy and practice) they expected to receive once they were in work.

By focusing on a specific age group – the participants were aged between 21 and 28 at the time of the study – it can be argued that I adopted a generational approach to the study. In the early stages of the research, I was buying into the Baby Boomer versus Generation X-Generation Y rhetoric of generational differences at work. The assumption underpinning this popular but largely uncritical approach is that Baby Boomers tend to be more work-centric whereas Gen X and Gen Y are more dual-centric or family-centric (Families and Work Institute, 2004). As I progressed in the research and embarked on the analysis of the young adults' accounts I realized that, despite its popularity, this explanation was insufficient and simplistic.

The need to go beyond the generational approach

In a critical review of generational differences in work values, in which work-life balance tends to crop up as a key work value among Gen X and Gen Y, Parry and Urwin (2011, p. 79) argued that while this is a “popular practitioner idea...the academic empirical evidence for generational differences in work values is, at best, mixed”.

Two key problems were identified. First, the notion of generations has a strong basis in sociological theory, much of which has largely been ignored by adopters of the generational-difference approach. As a construct, it tends to be used interchangeably with age and birth cohort, which are related to but distinct from generation. The effects of age and birth cohort are subject to change over time and experience whereas generational effects are more stable. In other words, it is more than being about when a person was born. It “represents a unique type of social location based on the dynamic interplay between being born in a particular year and the socio-political events that occur throughout the life course of the birth cohort, particularly while the cohort comes of age” (McMullin et al., 2007, pp. 299–300).

Secondly generational-difference studies tend to be cross-sectional in design. This implicitly assumes that there is homogeneity in generational groupings and ignores important social-demographic differences, such as gender, ethnicity and cultural and national contexts.

The life-course approach as an alternative

Therefore instead of drawing on a generational approach to make sense of my data on young adults, I turned to a life-course approach. Life-course research “studies people’s individual lives (their trajectories and experiences) within a framework of reference to structural contexts and social change, paying explicit attention to the powerful connection between individual lives and the historical and socio-economic context in which lives unfold” (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, Smithson, & Lewis, 2014). The approach acknowledges the distinction between generations and birth cohorts and the young adults in my study belonged to a particular birth cohort at the time of the study. The concept of transitions is key in a life-course approach. In particular it was the transition from being university students to full-time workers in Britain that helped to contextualize the participants’ talk of work-life balance at that point in time.

Key findings from the research were that:

- the notion of individual choice strongly underpins young adults’ conceptualization of work-life balance and expectations of work-life balance support;
- while young British and Asian adults largely considered it to be a matter of individual choice, there were variations in their preferences for how to prioritize their impending employment and personal lives;
- four emerging patterns of work-life balance orientation preferences were found – balancer, careerist, career-sacrificer and integrator (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya & Lewis, 2011)

This provides support for the argument that the work-life balance perceptions of young adults who would belong to the so-called Gen Y cannot be generalized and

simplified as being either work-centric or life-centric. The picture is a lot more complex given the diversity within this group of young adults.

The study also looked at the young adults' expectations of employer and government work-life balance support. It found that:

- the majority had a low sense of entitlement to such support;
- although most participants demonstrated an awareness of the business case for employers to adopt work-life balance initiatives, the majority questioned their effectiveness;
- there appeared to be a stronger sense of entitlement to individual choice, as indicated by their discussions of not wanting external work-life balance support to be imposed on them for fear that employers would end up dictating how they should manage their work-life balance;
- in terms of government work-life balance support, the participants felt disconnected from what the government could do for them as young adults;
- the majority were unaware of specific public policies related to work-life balance and this was the case for both the British and Asian young adults.

Given that most of the existing organizational and public policies on work-life balance were focused on working parents at the time of the research it becomes clear why this low sense of entitlement to external support existed among the young adults.

My study acknowledges the transient nature of the young adults' conceptualization of work-life balance. By using a life-course approach instead of a generational approach I have been able to take into account how past transitions have shaped the way work-life balance was discussed by the young adults and how anticipated future transitions were expected by the young adults to change their needs and therefore expectations of employer and government support.

Conclusion

Studies that have looked for generational differences in work values are useful in highlighting the issue of diversity in the work-life balance needs of workers of different age groups. In part, they have enabled researchers like me to conduct work-life balance studies with people who are not yet working parents.

It is important, however, to recognize that, in existing generational-difference studies, the diversity within a generation group becomes lost in the search for differences between age groups. Instead of looking for generational differences (or age-related differences) which can be divisive, I believe it is more useful to look at the issue of multi-generations in a broader way.

As I have shown in my study, transitions, rather than age or birth year, shape conceptualizations, perceptions and expectations of work-life balance. A process approach, such as a life-course approach, is better for studying variations in work-life balance perceptions and for understanding why existing policies work or fail in eliciting the intended change in social norms and in behaviors at the individual, family, organization and social levels.

Note

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