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1 Commentary

2 **Generational Differences Are Real and Useful**

Q1

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11 We propose that generational differences are meaningful despite some theo-
12 retical and methodological challenges. We will address five main issues: op-
13 erationalizing generations, measuring generational differences, theoretical
14 models of generations, mechanisms of generational change, and the impor-
15 tance of science versus stereotypes.

Q2

16 **Operationalizing Generations**

17 We define generations as groups of individuals born during the same time
18 period who experience a similar cultural context and, in turn, create the cul-
19 ture (Gentile, Campbell, & Twenge, 2013). Our cultural psychological per-
20 spective is somewhat different from the classic sociological perspective (e.g.,
21 Mannheim, 1952) or even the more typical industrial–organizational per-
22 spective (Lyons & Kuron, 2014) in that we posit that generations shape cul-
23 tures and are not simply shaped by them. In other words, we believe there is a
24 dynamic, mutually constitutive relationship between generations and culture
25 (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

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1 With this definition, classifying someone as a member of a generation is
2 relatively easy to do: All you need is a birth date and a place. The challenge
3 comes in defining the generational boundaries. There is no agreed on year
4 for the beginning or end of generations; instead, the years tend to be range
5 bound. So, for example, Generation X might start in 1962 or 1965, depending
6 on the definition of Generation X. Second, there is no clear measure of shared
7 culture. Typically, culture is measured at a country level. Most research on
8 generations is done in and is applied to the United States, and it is risky to
9 generalize beyond those borders.

10 In short, generations are fuzzy social constructs, just like race, gender,
11 ethnicity, and life itself (hence the debates over abortion and end of life care).
12 As with any social construct, boundaries are debated and demarcations will
13 change over time and circumstance. For example, Facebook now has dozens
14 of ways of labeling gender rather than the traditional two. Still, most would
15 agree gender is a useful construct in the social and behavioral sciences. Gen-
16 der, like generation, is just a somewhat fuzzy construct. Race is similar. We
17 have one set of race constructs in the United States—and these have changed
18 over time—but other countries have a different set. For example, someone of
19 Sumatran descent could be considered “Asian American” or “Native Hawai-
20 ian or other Pacific Islander,” in the United States but would be considered
21 “coloured” in South Africa.

22 **Measuring Generational Differences**

23 Measuring generational differences is both simple and challenging. There are
24 two common methods. First, generations can be compared cross-sectionally
25 on any variable in a one-time survey. For example, you could compare peo-
26 ple born between 1945 and 1965 (Baby Boomers) and people born between
27 1965 and 1980 (Generation X) to determine a generational difference. An-
28 other approach is to compare generations cross-temporally using samples
29 of individuals at the same age at different time periods. For example, you
30 could compare 18-year-olds in 1965 (Baby Boomers) with 18-year-olds in
31 1988 (Generation X) to determine a generational difference.

32 The challenge, however, is teasing apart different sources of variance that
33 underlie the generational differences found using these approaches. Variance
34 can come from age, time period, and cohort/generational factors. Cross-
35 sectional data capture both age and cohort variance but not time period;
36 cross-temporal data capture both cohort and period variance.

37 Usually researchers on generations are interested in the latter two. Thus,
38 relying on cross-temporal data, such as that found in large national surveys
39 like Monitoring the Future or uncovered in cross-temporal meta-analysis, is
40 preferred because it controls for age effects.

1 To capture all three sources of variance you need data that contain both
2 cross-sectional and cross-temporal elements such as a multiage sample col-
3 lected over many years. For example, the General Social Survey (GSS) has
4 sampled U.S. adults since 1972. Specialized statistical techniques based on
5 hierarchical linear modeling can separate age, cohort, and period effects in
6 GSS data (Twenge, Campbell, & Carter, 2014; Yang, 2008). However, even the
7 GSS is limited as it covers most of the adult lifespan only for Boomers. The
8 study started too late (1972) to capture the Silent or “Greatest” generations in
9 their young adulthood and has not gone on long enough to capture the older
10 adulthood of GenXers or Millennials (born after 1980). In addition, multi-
11 age, over-time studies like the GSS are rare and limited in the constructs they
12 have included.

13 Fortunately, more datasets have collected responses cross-temporally on
14 like-aged samples. In these cases, time period and cohort changes are the
15 one and the same; they cannot be separated. For example, children’s names
16 have become more unique (Twenge, Abebe, & Campbell, 2010), empathy
17 has declined (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011), work–life balance is more
18 favored (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010), and anxiety and stress
19 have increased (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012).

20 We argue that both period and cohort variance are meaningful for un-
21 derstanding generational change. Generational change might be considered
22 a combination of time period plus cohort effects. For example, young gen-
23 erations can be heavily influenced by the next-oldest generations. Bob Dy-
24 lan, Jerry Garcia, and the Beatles (all born between 1940 and 1943) were
25 not Boomers, but they are associated with the generation. Steve Jobs was a
26 Boomer and the founders of Google were GenXers, yet they have shaped
27 the Millennial generation. Because each generation is formed in a specific
28 time period often shaped by the existing, older generations, eliminating this
29 period effect might amount to throwing out the generational baby with the
30 cultural bathwater.

31 Most cultural change is likely driven by both time period and co-
32 hort/generational effects. For example, people of all ages might become more
33 individualistic (a time period effect), but a cultural shift toward individual-
34 ism would affect young people the most because they have never known a
35 less individualistic culture (a generational effect). People of all ages eventu-
36 ally used Facebook, but young people used it first, and the youngest have
37 never known a world without it. Thus, cross-temporal data can capture cul-
38 tural change, and it may not matter if generational and time period effects are
39 fully separated. To use another example, work–life balance is now more fa-
40 vored (Twenge, Campbell, et al., 2010). If this is partially or completely a time
41 period effect, it affected both Boomers and Millennials, but it likely affected
42 Millennials more because they have never known the previous culture with

1 less emphasis on work–life balance. Even if this trend is purely a time period
2 effect, with an equal shift among both Boomers and Millennials, Boomers
3 may resent Millennials enjoying work–life balance privileges Boomers only
4 obtained after many years of work experience. Thus generational factors may
5 come into play even if the changes are due primarily to time period.

6 In sum, generational change can be measured. The major concern is
7 teasing out age effects, and this can be done empirically with cross-temporal
8 data. Teasing apart period and cohort effects from each other, however, is
9 more often than not impossible—especially when discussing the current
10 generation of young adults whose future remain unwritten—and this teasing
11 apart might not be necessary.

12 **Theoretical Models of Generational Differences**

13 There are three prominent models of generational change. The first is Strauss
14 and Howe's (1991) cyclic model. This model rests on cyclic models of eco-
15 nomic changes established by Kondratieff, often called K-waves or economic
16 seasons. Economic cycles begin as expansive or greed based, become overex-
17 tended, and then become contractive or fear based. Generations should
18 follow these patterns and cycle from expansive generations like the Baby
19 Boomers to civic-minded generations who clean up the mess (the Greatest
20 Generation or Millennials—separated by three generations).

21 The second model is the modernization model that states that cultures
22 are going through a process of modernization consisting of increasing indi-
23 vidualism, tolerance, and civic engagement (e.g., Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).
24 The theory argues that societies develop in fairly predictable stages with a
25 generational progression to a harmonious and civically engaged individual-
26 ism exemplified by the Scandinavian countries.

27 The final model is a rising extrinsic individualism model (e.g., Twenge,
28 Campbell, & Freeman, 2012). This model predicts that generations will
29 evolve toward more extrinsic self-focus (e.g., narcissism, materialism), less
30 civic engagement, less trust, more self-expression, and less inward focus (e.g.,
31 finding a meaningful philosophy of life).

32 These three models share some predictions but diverge on others. So, for
33 example, the prediction of higher civic concern among Millennials is consis-
34 tent with both the cyclic models and modernization models but in contrast
35 to the rising extrinsic individualism model. These differing predictions can
36 be described and tested with data ranging from attitudes and values to voting
37 patterns.

38 **Mechanisms of Generational Change**

39 If the link between cultural markers and individual attitudes and traits is
40 a mutually constitutive system, understanding generational change means

1 understanding cultural change: As culture changes so do the generations
2 of individuals born into that culture.

3 So, what changes a culture? This is a very large question, but, very gen-
4 erally, there are three schools of thought. One holds that technology—from
5 the stirrup to the Internet—plays a major role. Modern democracy, for ex-
6 ample, owes a large debt to the long bow and the printing press. A second
7 model focuses on cultural contact—cultures change (or don't) as they con-
8 tact other cultures (Simonton, 1997). So, for example, the archetypal Hawai-
9 ian cultural artifact—the ukulele—is actually a Portuguese import. And the
10 potato—a cultural touchpoint for Idaho and Ireland—was originally from
11 South America. Third, there is the idea popularized by Strauss and Howe
12 (1991) that major upheavals such as wars or economic changes are the driv-
13 ing force behind cultural change.

14 From our reading of the data, most generational changes seem grad-
15 ual rather than abrupt, suggesting that culture is changing as a result of the
16 first two forces rather than the later. There are important exceptions to this,
17 however. For example, the Baby Boom was a direct outcome of World War II,
18 which fits the description of a major upheaval. Similarly, the Great Recession
19 in the United States has had an apparent effect on certain attitudes (Park,
20 Twenge, & Greenfield, 2014; Twenge et al., 2014). For example, Twenge et al.
21 (2014) found that trust in others was at an all-time low in 2012 and that this
22 was largely a period effect.

23 **The Importance of Science Versus Stereotypes**

24 Much of the work on generations has been plagued by a reliance on weak
25 data or anecdote. This fact does not make work on generations meaningless,
26 especially now that better empirical data do exist. The key is operating on
27 the basis of data—and ideally data from multiple and converging sources that
28 include individual personality and attitudes, cultural products and practices,
29 economic data, and sociological data. This type of data on generations is
30 rapidly accumulating, which is good news for the field.

31 One oft-expressed concern is that talking about generations is an act of
32 stereotyping. This is both true and untrue. It is true that any study com-
33 paring human groups—men, women, ethnic groups, leaders, service work-
34 ers, nurses—can be considered stereotyping. In almost every case there is
35 variance within the group on traits of interest, and in most cases the vari-
36 ance within the group is larger than the variance between groups (e.g., Zell,
37 Krizan, & Teeter, 2015). The same is true of generational differences.

38 However, the term stereotype is sometimes used to suggest an ill-
39 informed and negative description of a group not based on data. In this sense
40 of the word, work on generations is not stereotyping. Generational studies

1 focus on obtaining an accurate understanding of social groups, and this un-
2 derstanding will, in almost all cases, contain positive and negative traits.

3 Those who criticize the description of the Millennials, for example, of-
4 ten state that the description is not unique to the Millennials and is nega-
5 tive. This criticism is often accompanied by a quote about youth attributed
6 to Socrates or Hesiod that apparently shows that people always have com-
7 plained about youth. However, the best we can tell from searching the texts
8 of Plato (Socrates left no written record) and Hesiod is that these quotes
9 are apocryphal and were not actually written by these ancient philosophers.
10 Even if we accept that older people have “always” complained about younger
11 people, this does not undermine research on generational differences. First,
12 generational studies typically examine what young people say about them-
13 selves not what older people say about them. Second, if cultural changes
14 are linear and have continued for many decades or even centuries (such as
15 the increase in individualism), then these observations may have “always”
16 been true, with the younger generation “always” more individualistic than
17 the older generations. Similarly, Millennials are not unique in their traits
18 per se because they often continue previous trends, but they do differ on
19 average from Boomers and GenXers in several traits, behaviors, and atti-
20 tudes (Twenge, 2014). In addition, the description of the Millennials, like
21 that of any generation, is both positive and negative. On the negative side
22 are higher levels of narcissism and an inflated self-opinion; on the positive
23 side are higher levels of tolerance and diversity (Twenge, Carter, & Campbell,
24 2015) and low levels of most forms of physical violence.

25 **Conclusion**

26 Generations do exist. They are fuzzy social constructs like many others in
27 the social sciences, but they are as real as race and ethnicity. Generational
28 differences can be measured if the right data are available. Some differences
29 are large, especially for more behavioral data such as baby names and tech-
30 nology use and for attitudes such as tolerance for different lifestyles, where
31 effect sizes can reach close to a standard deviation (Twenge et al., 2015). Dif-
32 ferences in personality traits tend to be small to moderate. Several competing
33 theoretical models of generational differences can be tested and used for pre-
34 diction, and mechanisms for generational change are proposed. In general,
35 technological growth, cultural contact, and major economic and martial up-
36 heavals should have some influence on culture and therefore generations.

37 We do not contend that all members of a generation are the same. How-
38 ever, ignoring valuable information regarding *real* differences observed be-
39 tween groups of individuals at risk of stereotyping or overlooking other valu-
40 able information is misguided. In any study of group differences, there will
41 always be outliers and exceptions. Research by no means claims to explain

1 the whole story for every subject within the given population. However, that
2 does not justify ignoring the average differences. The goal of all research is
3 to help explain phenomena. If we do not attempt to make meaningful dis-
4 tinctions between people and predict behavior, we may as well resign from
5 research entirely. Generational groupings have proven to be a useful tool in
6 explaining difference among people.

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