The discursive construction of ‘generations’ at work: Process and practice amongst web-based organizational actors

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We explore the discursive construction of a prominent concept in the area of age at work, namely ‘generations’. In contrast to existing research focusing on particular chronological age-based categories (e.g. older workers), we unpack ‘generations’ as part of a wider project that aims to map the language of age at work, examining the construction of age discourses, particular concepts and the relationships between them. Our aim here is to develop an understanding of the ways in which emerging media are implicated in the processes of discursive construction of ‘generations’ within current debates about age and work.
Our study is situated in the growing area of e-research. Despite the growing influence of discourse analysis in the field of organization and management studies, (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011) there appears to be little engagement by discourse analysts with the internet (Mautner, 2005; Pablo & Hardy, 2009), which is the particular methodological orientation adopted in our study. Our approach utilises a variety of tools (e.g. Nexis, Google Alerts and Twilerts) to identify a range of web-based data (blogs, twitter, websites) thus enabling consideration of different forms of ‘bodies of texts’ (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004: 636).

It has been suggested that many aspects of work and working life are in part constructed through and by ‘media spectacle’ (Tan, 2011: 169). There have also been calls for a new research agenda on generations given the notion of global generations defined by electronic technology that transcend national and temporal boundaries (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). These perspectives make it both possible and desirable to examine the concept of ‘generations’ without locating the research participants within a ‘traditional’ organizational context.

Even a brief look at the popular press indicates the emergence of potentially influential discourses regarding a ‘lost generation’ of young unemployed, inter-generational equity, and the characteristics of different generations, particularly with respect to their role in work organizations. Specific generations, termed variously Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials, have entered everyday and workplace vocabulary. Fear of a ‘lost generation’ is cited as prompting the UK Government’s £1 billion package aimed at tackling youth unemployment through the creation of work and training placements (Ecclestone, 2011). Generational tensions emerge as ‘young’ and ‘old’ are constructed as mutually exclusive in the labour market yet these serve to deflect from structural explanations for a lack of jobs. A recent spate of books blames Baby Boomers for the current problems of younger generations (Beckett, 2010; Boorman, 2010; Howker & Malik, 2010; Willetts, 2010) through e.g. re-shaping the labour market in the former’s interests. Practitioner-orientated research has been quick to capitalise on the idea of generation-derived characteristics (Logan, 2008).
Within sociology, work by Mannheim (1927/1952) and Bourdieu (1993) has introduced concepts of ‘entelechy’ and ‘habitus’ as tools for understanding taken-for-granted aspects of shared generation experience. Many organizational studies have taken generational differences as an established starting point for research into variables of managerial interest such as work ethic and values (Meriac, Woehr, & Banister, 2010; Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010; Smola & Sutton, 2002) or have used a particular generation (e.g. ‘Millenials’) as the target for investigation (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010). Others point out the considerable conceptual and methodological limitations where large scale survey methods are deployed to map differences in variables across (much disputed and poorly defined) generational divides (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010; Macky, Gardner, & Forsyth, 2008; Parry & Urwin, 2011).

Critical/discursive research in respect of ‘generations’ is embryonic. There has been some analysis of how Baby Boomers are constructed as a ‘problem’ generation (Phillipson, Leach, Money, & Biggs, 2008) and of how discourses of inter-generational equity are susceptible to political and ideological manipulation (Duncan, 2008). Other promising lines of inquiry have applied discourse analysis methods to explore how groups who fall within a so-called generation define themselves (Williams, Coupland, Folwell, & Sparks, 1997), exploring processes of identity construction including the use of discourses of denigration and blame in relation to others. Technology at work has been explored as a basis for generational formation with technological affinity by generation and discourses of difference emerging as themes (McMullin, Comeau, & Jovic, 2007).

This study builds on critical/discursive approaches. The voices we follow in the emerging media are a variety of web-based organizational actors including campaign and lobby groups, labour market intermediaries, job seekers, government, professional bodies, employers, charities, academics, recruitment and management consultants, and the press. The genres of discursive resources used to ‘know’ and construct generations include statistics, attributes and case stories which are used in the following processes of construction.
Statistics (e.g. employment rates and periods of unemployment calculated with reference to cohorts based on chronological markers) operate as a technology of expertise, to construct different groups and comparisons between them. Statistics are thus deployed to create categories of identity and are the basis for establishing them as mutually exclusive ‘generations’ within the labour market. Attributes (characteristics or forms of behaviour such as work motivation and technological know-how) are used to establish taxonomies of generations through an essentialising and homogenising discourse. These taxonomies are worked up to commodify both ‘generations’ and expert knowledge about them as products or services marketable to employer organizations (e.g. ‘How to manage Millennials’). Case stories, primarily narratives about individual members of a generation, often involving the repudiation of a prevalent stereotype, are used as concessions, a reflexive practice to make the writer/speaker appear self-critical and thus to be trusted as a fair judge, versed in all sides of an argument. Concession through such case study is deployed as a discursive device to prepare the ground for, and embed new constructions of, ‘generations’ (Whittle & Mueller, 2011).

The aim in this paper is to examine the process and practice of web-based organizational actors in the discursive construction of ‘generations’. Our contribution is to enhance understanding of how emerging media are implicated in this construction and to locate this analysis within wider debates about age and work.

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References


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