

Generational categories: A broken basis for human resource management research and practice

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Abstract

This provocation challenges the use of generational categories as a valid and useful basis for the development of human resource management (HRM) research and practice. We present two provocations. First, that a focus solely on year of birth as a driver of attitudes, values and behaviours is wholly inadequate. Second, we go beyond existing empirical challenges to argue that any approach to the study of generations that focuses solely on generational categories should be abandoned. We consider the theoretical basis for generations, together with specific examples from empirical studies to show how the current reliance on largely unsubstantiated categories leaves even longitudinal studies unable to make an effective contribution to this field. We draw on cross-disciplinary insights to consider the implications for academic research and for HRM practice, showing how the current approach limits the usefulness of findings and suggesting a potential way forward.

KEYWORDS

age, context, generations, millennials, validity

Abbreviations: APC, age, period and cohort; HAPC, Hierarchical Age-Period-Cohort; HRM, human resource management.

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Practitioner Notes

- This paper presents conceptual and empirical arguments as to why the use of generations in research and practice is misleading.
- We suggest that the current use of year of birth only as a predictor of values, attitudes and behaviours is inadequate as these depend also on individual differences such as gender and nationality.
- We suggest that the current use of generational categories such as Generation X, Millennials and so forth, is inappropriate and might lead to stereotyping of particular age groups.
- Inductive studies and analysis of long-term contextual trends might provide a more appropriate way of examining changes in attitudes and values over time.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over recent years, we have heard a lot about generations and the differences between them. This is particularly true in relation to Millennials: you only have to open a management magazine, or attend a management conference, to be told how dramatically different Millennials (born roughly between 1981 and 1999) are compared to the generations (such as Generation X and Baby Boomers) who have come before them. The idea of differences between generations has dominated academic research since the turn of the century, with human resource management (HRM) scholars adopting this generational lens in relation to recruitment (e.g., Joyce & Barry, 2016; Smith, 2008); training and development (e.g., Berl, 2006; Rastorfer & Rosenof, 2016); career development (e.g., Benson et al., 2018; McDonald & Hite, 2008); rewards and working arrangements (e.g., Carlson, 2004); and leadership style (e.g., Valenti, 2019). This literature generally advises segmentation of the workforce according to generational categories so that HRM practices are designed with these different groups in mind. For example, Gilbert (2011) suggests a series of approaches for engaging Millennials.

The increasing attention paid to generations has been accompanied by a growing number of studies that question the validity of empirical evidence for generational differences (e.g., Costanza et al., 2012; Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; S. T. Lyons & Kuron, 2014; S. Lyons et al., 2015; Parry & Urwin, 2011, 2017; Rudolph, Rauvola, et al., 2020). In particular, studies note a lack of consistency in the characteristics ascribed to generational categories and inconsistencies in generational cut-off points. The failure to distinguish empirically between age, period and generational/cohort effects is a long-standing critique of generational studies (Rhodes, 1983; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017) and a continuing focus of debate across literatures (Bell & Jones, 2014; Luo & Hodges, 2015). Despite these concerns, the use of generational labels such as 'Millennials', 'Generation X' and 'Generation Z' to categorise individuals and make claims about their shared generational behaviours and attitudes continues to pervade HRM (Brant & Castro, 2019).

In this paper, we move beyond the methodological critiques contained in the extant literature. We suggest that, while the idea of generational differences is able to draw on a sound theoretical framework (e.g., Edmunds & Turner, 2002; Eyerman & Turner, 1998; Mannheim, 1952; Schuman & Scott, 1989) and recent empirical research is beginning to address many of the methodological limitations of previous work (Rudolph, Rauvola, et al., 2020), the use of generational categories based solely on year of birth as a basis for both research and HRM decision-making is fundamentally flawed. Until this is accepted, a consistent approach that provides valuable insights into the dynamics of generational change is not possible. We present two specific provocations.

First, focusing solely on year of birth as a driver of attitudes, values and behaviours is wholly inadequate. Evidence suggests that people's experiences (and the development of their attitudes and values) depend not only on the time in which they grew up, but also 'how' they experience this context (Mannheim, 1952; Schuman & Corning, 2017). This depends on characteristics such as gender, social class, education and ethnicity (Cutler

et al., 2015); as well as the part of the world in which they grew up (Giuliano & Spilimbergo, 2014; Parry & Urwin, 2011). This over-simplified approach ignores the fact that the emergence of generational differences in values and attitudes, due to the process of social and economic change over time, is a dynamic and complex process with a variety of complicated interactions.

This over-simplification has allowed a focus on groups such as Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials to dominate research and practice. Our second provocation goes beyond existing empirical challenges that question the validity of these specific categories, to suggest that questions over the validity of specific generational categories are symptoms of a wider problem. Rather than joining others to argue for discarding a 'generational perspective' completely (Rudolph, Rauvola, et al., 2020), we endorse the retention of a generational perspective, but provoke that an approach to the study of generations that focuses solely on generational categories (however defined) should be abandoned. Thus, our second provocation builds on existing challenges to the dominant research and practice paradigm (e.g., Buscha et al., 2013; Campbell et al., 2017; Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Parry & Urwin, 2017; Rudolph, Costanza, et al., 2020) to explain why a focus on generational categories limits insight and leads to the misreporting of findings. Using empirical examples (e.g., Twenge & Donnelly, 2016; Twenge et al., 2010) we show how such an approach curtails our ability to understand the impact of contextual change on individuals' attitudes and values through time.

We develop each of these two provocations in turn. First, we turn to the theoretical basis for generations to consider the almost exclusive focus on year of birth and why this is not sufficient for examination of the links between socio-economic change and differences in the values and attitudes of individuals. Second, we consider studies of generational difference, to show how the current reliance on categories that have not been effectively substantiated leaves even longitudinal studies unable to make an effective contribution and further provoke that any investigation of generations that focuses solely on categories is inappropriate. Finally, we consider the implications of these two provocations for academic research and for HRM practice, suggesting a potential way forward.

2 | PROVOCATION 1: THE FOCUS ON BIRTH YEAR AS THE ONLY BASIS FOR ATTITUDE SHIFT

We first review the theory behind the idea of generations and consider how this relates to the common operationalisation of generations as being dictated by year of birth only. Mannheim (1952) defined a generation as a 'social location', rather than a concrete group of people who are physically proximal to each other. This social location is made possible by the continuous transition from generation to generation, so that members of any one generation can only participate in a temporally limited section of the historical process. This description has some relevance to subsequent approaches (e.g., Riley, 1987; Ryder, 1965), as to be considered members of a generation, individuals need to at least share a temporal location in history. One interpretation is therefore that a generation is bounded by the fact that they grew up at the same time and thus share common experiences and memories during their formative years that lead to the development of common attitudes and values (e.g., Schuman & Scott, 1989). This interpretation has been key in driving an almost exclusive focus on the categorisation of individuals into specific generational groups based wholly on year of birth.

To see why a focus on year of birth as a sole driver of generational differences is inappropriate, it is important to understand the assumptions that this focus makes in relation to the development of values and attitudes within generational cohorts. First, it assumes that everyone born in the same cohort has common experiences and memories. Indeed, Mannheim makes it clear that, while members of a generation are partly defined by their date of birth (locating them in a particular cohort and therefore common location in the historical dimension of the social process), they must also participate in common experiences, so that a concrete bond is created between members of the same cohort; allowing them to share 'an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences' (p. 306). This would suggest that individuals who have different

experiences due to their location, or other aspects of their social environment, will have potentially differing values and attitudes, despite being born at the same time.

For instance, it makes little sense to propose that individuals growing up in the 1980s in the USA would share common experiences with those growing up at the same time in China, where there is a focus on the 'post-1980s generation' (Gao, 2015). As Mannheim (1952) suggested, we would not expect those in Prussia in 1800 to share generational location with young people in China at the same time. Generally, studies that have explicitly considered the potential for different generational groups within different locations (e.g., Papavasileiou & Lyons, 2015; Parry et al., 2012) have found differences between countries, or have suggested different generational groupings in different countries (Egri & Ralston, 2004; Marcus et al., 2017; Papavasileiou & Lyons, 2015). Therefore, empirical research has not supported the notion of common experiences across countries.

In the modern context, there is an argument that certain events have a pervasive impact, as the growth in media and communications technology means they are experienced globally (Edmunds & Turner, 2002). However, for all members of an age cohort to develop similar attitudes, they would have to experience these events in the same way during their formative years and develop similar memories of this event. Evidence that these events are experienced equally by people in all age groups on the other hand, would suggest a period (rather than cohort/generational) effect (Jennings & Zhang, 2005).

The development of collective memories depends on aspects such as whether an event is of national concern, if it is personally important to an individual or whether it is reinforced in some way by formal and informal commemorations (Schudson, 1992). For example, studies of the relationship between recessions (that are personally impactful) and the formation of beliefs do find that economic hardship experienced in early adulthood impacts the formation of beliefs, compared to a lack of impact from any such experiences after the age of 40 (Giuliano & Spilimbergo, 2014). A recession is likely to impact across groups of young people within a geographic location, but this may not be true of all events and therefore collective memories. More importantly, the way in which individuals experience even common events such as recession, will be different so that the values and attitudes formed as a result of this may not be the same. Empirical evidence suggests that people's experiences (and the development of their attitudes and values) depend not only on the time and location in which they grew up, but also 'how' they experience this context: and this depends on individual differences based on characteristics such as gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity (S. T. Lyons et al., 2014). For example, research suggests that individuals' experiences of a single historical context, and thus their attitudes and values, will be influenced by gender (Parker & Chusmir, 1990); ethnic group (Griffith, 2004); and education (Schuman & Rogers, 2004).

According to Mannheim (1952) and his followers, there are two essential elements to the term 'generation'. First, a common location in historical time and second a 'distinct consciousness of that historical position ... shaped by the events and experiences of that time' (Gilleard, 2004, p. 108). The formation of a generation is therefore based on a complex combination of birth cohort and shared experience of historical and political events, collective culture (Mannheim, 1952) and the competition for resources (Edmunds & Turner, 2002; Eyerman & Turner, 1998), which is driven in part by individual differences. We suggest that the current simplistic understanding of a generation as being defined only by birth year ignores this second element and presumes that the experiences of those born in a certain period are similar regardless of their location or demographic characteristics. This conceptualisation is therefore overly simplistic, as it relies solely on year of birth and ignores other aspects that shape an individual's experience.

3 | PROVOCATION 2: THE CATEGORICAL APPROACH TO GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCE

Our second provocation builds on two existing and widely shared critiques of generational research. First, that this research relies on largely unsubstantiated categories of individuals, such as Baby Boomers, Generation X and

Millennials. Reviews of this literature have shown not only that the years bounding the generational groups are inconsistent but also that the characteristics ascribed to each group and the differences between each group are not found consistently across studies (see, e.g., Costanza et al., 2012; Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Parry & Urwin, 2011; Rudolph, Rauvola, et al., 2020). Rather than debating inconsistencies in the birth years used to define generational categories as previous work has done, we question here the reliance on generational categories per se.

A second existing challenge is that the continued proliferation of cross-sectional 'generational' studies (e.g., Magnin & Manzoni, 2020; Peretz et al., 2020) contributes little if anything to understanding of generations (Parry & Urwin, 2011; Rudolph, 2015; Rudolph, Rauvola, et al., 2020; Twenge et al., 2010); these studies have often been omitted from meta-analyses for this reason (Jin & Rounds, 2011). Studies that compare the values and attitudes of different age groups at one *period* in time are not able to say whether any differences are simply due to *age/life-stage* differences between respondents; as opposed to differences that would remain if responses were captured across older and younger *cohorts* at the same age. The failure to separately identify *age*, *period* and *cohort* (APC) effects is an ongoing challenge across disciplines, even when more advanced statistical methods and exceptionally rich data are available to researchers (Debiasi, 2018; Mason & Wolfinger, 2001; Rhodes, 1983; Rudolph, Costanza, et al., 2020; Schulhofer-Wohl & Yang, 2011; Twenge & Donnelly, 2016); therefore, the suggestion that any findings from cross-sectional studies are 'generational' in nature is incorrect. We move beyond these critiques to show how the use of *any* a priori assumption regarding generational categories needs to be avoided, whatever the data and method used.

Consider studies that have addressed the challenges of cross-sectional research by including a time dimension in their approaches (e.g., Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge et al., 2010; Twenge & Donnelly, 2016). These represent a substantial improvement of method but still adopt the implicit assumption that a distinct generational category will occur every 20–30 years, without any real evidence that this is the case or consideration of the events that might drive such a change (Parry & Urwin, 2017). Indeed, Mannheim noted that 'whether a new generation style emerged every year, every 30, every hundred years, or whether it emerges rhythmically at all, depends entirely on the trigger action of the social process' (p. 310). We suggest that, even in these studies, the continued use of an a priori categorical framework is problematic because the very existence of these categories (or any categories in fact) is largely unsubstantiated.

For example, the study by Twenge et al. (2010) examines the work values of US high school seniors in 1976, 1991 and 2006. Comparing the values and attitudes of those aged 17 and 18 years in 1976; with those of the same age in 1991 and then 2006, Twenge et al. (2010) identified a trend increase in the value placed on leisure and a less pronounced decline in social/intrinsic values amongst this specific age group, over these three time periods. The data collected across time in this study allow some distinction between differences in values and attitudes caused by ageing and/or life stage and generation, thus addressing key limitations of previous cross-sectional studies. However, the value of these findings is limited by the fact that the periods during which the data were collected (1976, 1991 and 2006) are replaced by categorical labels (Boomers, Generation X and Generation Me respectively), therefore any changes in attitudes over time are reported as categorical rather than continuous.

This leads to a misrepresentation of findings, interpreted as being categorical in nature, when the research is more supportive of continuous trends over time. In this case, Twenge et al. (2010) do not engage in important discussions about the extent to which such trends are potentially driven by period or cohort effects, because they are forced to report findings in an overly simplistic categorical framework. Interestingly, the same authors (Campbell et al., 2017) later arrive at similar observations; noting that trends in their (later) data tend to be relatively linear (or curvilinear) rather than showing clear cut offs between categories. However, despite this, they adopt generational categories for 'ease of presentation' and 'consistency with common discourse on the topic' (p. 131).

To illustrate the confusion that lies at the centre of generational research, let us consider the approaches that longitudinal studies would need to take to substantiate the existence of such generational categories that in

the above studies are assumed a priori. First, taking a deductive approach would require development of specific hypotheses, identifying clear differences in the shared experiences of a particular cohort of individuals growing up during a particular time period when compared to the experiences of previous and subsequent cohorts/generations; and then testing the extent to which this causes a distinct (categorical) difference in the set of collective memories and therefore values they hold. Scholars who have focused on researching collective memories in different cohorts (e.g., Schuman & Corning, 2017; Schuman & Rogers, 2004; Schuman & Scott, 1989) have emphasised the need for a significant social or societal event with fixed temporal boundaries to produce a clear demarcation between cohorts in relation to collective memories and thus attitudes. We suggest based on this significant body of literature that in order to see clear differences between generational categories, rather than an evolution of attitudes and values over time, one would expect the nature of their experience to be dramatically different due to the existence of a defined time-limited event, such as a significant recession (Giuliano & Spilimbergo, 2014; Schwandt & von Wachter, 2019), or the Covid-19 pandemic that is occurring at the time of writing. Conversely, we might not expect such a strong and systematic demarcation between groups if such similarities of experience within, and difference in experience between, cohorts (and thus collective memories) do not exist.

This issue is also raised by Campbell et al. (2017, p. 136) who note that abrupt generational shifts would need to be driven by 'significant causal forces that impact all members of a generation simultaneously' or 'significant forces that are transmitted through the generation in a rapid, viral fashion'. They go on to note that, in relation to technology, this would require a rare major technological breakthrough. Based on this analysis, they conclude that recent changes in attitudes are more likely to represent continuous trends over time, rather than clear demarcations between generational categories. To refute this and substantiate generational categories, a deductive approach would require identification of events and experiences hypothesised to drive generational change, and empirical evidence that these caused categorical changes in attitudes (Sackett, 2002).

In contrast, an inductive approach would examine the values and attitudes of different age cohorts over time, with no a priori assumptions regarding the likely categorical or continuous nature of any observed changes. This would allow the data to identify the pattern of generational change over time, and while studies could test for significant structural breaks in the clustering of attitudes and behaviours across cohorts (Buscha et al., 2013), there would be no a priori assumptions regarding the existence of generational categories. The studies we describe above (e.g., Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge et al., 2010; Twenge & Donnelly, 2016) adopt an approach that is in line with this inductive analysis, but then impose a priori assumptions that generational change is only 'categorical' in nature, by choosing to report their findings in relation to pre-existing categories.

We argue that research should not be based on any prior assumption that there are a number of specific generational categories. Going further, we reject any a priori assumption that generational change is necessarily 'rhythmically' categorical in nature, as it is inappropriate without the proper deductive or inductive approaches described above. While it remains possible that some social, economic or cultural events might lead to discrete changes in the values and attitudes of one cohort, when compared to another, any such findings would only be uncovered from studies that analyse changing trends over time and identify clear structural breaks. We argue that the current approach to researching and applying generational categories is an unhelpful combination of deductive and inductive approaches, meaning that the current approach to researching and applying generational categories is invalid and should be stopped.

4 | IMPLICATIONS AND A WAY FORWARD

Having established the challenges to existing approaches in generational research, we now consider the implications of these challenges and suggest a way forward for both HRM practice and research.

4.1 | Implications for HRM practice

Despite the argument that there is no real basis in theory or evidence for distinct generational categories such as Generation X, Millennials or Generation Z, employees are still commonly segmented into these categories and these still appear to be used as a basis for HRM decisions (e.g., Zaslav, 2007). Indeed, many of the major global consulting firms regularly provide advice on how to recruit and retain particular generational groups; advice that is likely to be followed by many HR practitioners. For example, reports suggest that employers should adopt initiatives such as games in the office, early finishes on a Friday, flexible and remote working, enterprise social networking, e-learning and mentoring to retain Millennials (see e.g., KPMG, 2017; PWC, 2011).

One implication of this advice is the potential for decisions relating to HRM practices to be based upon the stereotyping of employees, according to generational categories and the characteristics ascribed to them. Stereotypes can be defined as overgeneralised attributes associated with the members of a social group that are applied to all members of that social group (Hinton, 2000). The prominence of particular stereotypical beliefs, especially those that are regularly reinforced in academic and practitioner media, can cause an individual to focus only on aspects that support these beliefs and to ignore those that do not (Queller & Smith, 2002), as this 'simplicity' (Koenig & King, 1964) helps them to understand and control their environment (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Fiske, 2004). This simplicity and the largely socially sanctioned process of generational stereotyping might be one reason why the use of generational labels continues to be ubiquitous (Rudolph, Rauvola, et al., 2020).

Managers and HRM practitioners may use their (generational) beliefs as heuristics (e.g., Bodenhausen, 1990; Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985; Graffin et al., 2013), resulting in decisions that are potentially based upon a stereotypical understanding of the values, attitudes and expectations of a particular generation, rather than on actual characteristics. As Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) suggest, a reliance on generations might play into people's tendency to categorise individuals based upon their visible characteristics such as age so that, 'when a 24-year-old walks through the manager's office door, "Millennial" may quickly pop into the manager's head along with the associated characteristics about Millennials that the manager picked up from, the media [and] management consultants...' (p. 5). In the case of HRM, there is a danger that stereotypical impressions of generational groups will drive employers to design HRM practices based on the assumption that all Millennials have the same preferences and values and are different from other age groups. This approach not only risks alienating those considered as Millennials who have different preferences and ignores the fact that individual differences such as caring and financial responsibilities might have a greater impact on work preferences than age group but also presents the risk that HRM practices will be biased by stereotypes.

Such stereotyping can lead to discrimination against particular groups (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2007). The potential for stereotyping exists and has been much discussed, in relation to many individual differences, in particular to gender (e.g., Ellemers, 2018), race (e.g., Gaertner & McLaughlin, 1983) and age (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). In the case of generations, any discrimination would essentially be on the basis of age (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015); therefore, employers would potentially be guilty of age discrimination that has been outlawed in many countries.

We would suggest that there are clear implications for HR professionals arising from these concerns over stereotyping and our challenges elsewhere in this provocation. There are clearly questions over whether research that claims to link specific attitudes and behaviours to accepted generational categories has any empirical basis. We would suggest that HR professionals adopt a pragmatic response to the current situation, by continuing to consider the implications of changing attitudes and behaviours identified in these studies; but questioning whether they can be linked to specific generational groups.

Our suggested way forward for academic research in the following discussion, is one that adopts a much more flexible and inductive approach to generational research—the implications for practice are similar. We see genuine value for HR professionals in studies that identify the changing nature of values and attitudes over time, as this provides key insights into the nature and extent of generational diversity. The current state of generational research is problematic, but it can help inform strategies for inclusion—these do not target specific groups but are

informed by a better understanding of the dimensions of difference that drive diversity. There is real value for HR professionals in research that flags what may be changing and how, but a flexible approach to interpreting this evidence need not associate specific characteristics to particular age groups. Better understanding of the changing nature of diversity (generational or otherwise) is essential for effective inclusion policies, but statements on *Generation X want A and Millennials want B* work against this aim.

It is important that HR professionals focus on addressing stereotypes and discrimination relating to generational groups in the same way that they would focus on similar stereotypes relating to age, gender or ethnic group. HRM professionals should therefore move away from designing practices based upon generational categories that promote stereotypes and take a more flexible approach that considers how any changes identified in existing studies can be accommodated to promote inclusion within organisations.

4.2 | Implications for HRM research

The question of whether generations are social constructs, that are 'willed into being' (Rudolph, Rauvola, et al., 2020), as opposed to having empirical support, is an essential part of the evidence base that needs to be developed if we are to effectively address the potential for stereotyping. The lack of reliable evidence to compare the validity of competing explanations limits our ability as researchers to effectively inform HRM practice. Moving forward, we need a better way of distinguishing between changes in attitudes due to age and those that result from long-term changes in the external context; together with consideration of how changes in context—and thus attitudes and expectations—over time might intersect with other individual differences such as location, gender, ethnicity and education. Our approach allows HR professionals some insight into 'what' may be changing but, moving forward, generational research needs to provide insight into the 'how' and 'why'.

To achieve this, we set out a proposed way forward for research on generations. In contrast to commentators such as Rudolph, Rauvola, et al. (2020) and Costanza and Finkelstein (2015), we do not argue for an abandoning of the generational perspective in research. We suggest that existing longitudinal approaches can play an important role in developing a body of research, but only if a more nuanced and flexible approach is adopted. Specifically, our provocation has highlighted the inappropriateness of any prior assumption that generational change is necessarily categorical in nature, and in doing so, the fact that even longitudinal studies tend to misrepresent findings because of this inappropriate categorical framework.

To set out our proposed way forward, we return to the APC challenge in generational research. Commentators such as Rudolph, Costanza, et al. (2020) question whether any statistical model can claim to separately identify APC effects. Rudolph, Costanza, et al. (2020) conclude that, 'the conceptualization of generations as the intersection of age and period makes them impossible to study' (p. 7) and suggest that 'APC effects pose intractable problems for research questions *where APC effects are of interest*' (our emphasis). We suggest that this statement is broadly correct (see Browning et al., 2012) if we wish to adopt common deductive approaches, which test specific hypotheses, such as those that would establish the existence or otherwise of generational categories. However, if, as we suggest here, we move away from such an approach completely, and adopt a more inductive and flexible approach to examining generations, strict identification of APC effects becomes less important. Many researchers across disciplines are able to shed important light on questions that are central to the development of a body of knowledge on generations (Cutler et al., 2015; Giuliano & Spilimbergo, 2014; Schwandt & von Wachter, 2019), as more flexible theoretical constructs do not depend on such strict identification of APC effects.

Even when researchers focus on the identification of APC effects, for example in longitudinal studies outside the field of HRM (Alwin, 1991; Glenn, 1994; Wilson & Gove, 1999; Yang & Land, 2006), they present us with ways forward that would allow categorical (cohort-specific) impacts to emerge from studies but also leave researchers free to uncover changes that manifest in other ways. These studies are described by Frenk et al. (2013) to illustrate development of Hierarchical Age-Period-Cohort (HAPC) models in the investigation of changes in verbal ability

among American adults over time. Each study is essentially an analysis of the trend in verbal ability, with the key challenge being the separate identification of what is driving these trends—cohort, age or period effects. For example, Yang and Land (2006) find that when considering trends in verbal ability over time—cohort effects dominate, there are only modest period effects and highlight that, ‘The cohort effects were bimodal, with an increase in verbal knowledge from the early 1900s to the 1940s and then declining until increasing again in the 1980s’. This last finding exemplifies the nuance of our provocation, in that there seems to be a step change in the verbal ability of cohorts, with those born in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s experiencing declining verbal knowledge compared to the cohorts before or after—these findings hint at a dynamic that may be generational in nature but does not adopt a prior assumption that such dynamics only manifest as ‘categorical’ change.

These examples of research from outside the field of HRM illustrate inductive and flexible empirical approaches that could usefully be adopted in HRM research and provide examples of how such an approach to the identification of APC effects can allow a generational perspective to be retained in research. This does not rule out other perspectives, such as the life-span approaches suggested by Rudolph and Zacher (2015) and Rudolph, Rauvola, et al. (2020), but rather than recommending alternatives to a generational perspective, we argue for a more nuanced approach to the generational perspective itself.

To clarify further, one can see how the findings from approaches using, for instance, HAPC models might potentially give rise to more deductive strands of research—returning to Yang and Land (2006), we can see the potential for other studies to test specific hypotheses relating to any distinct generational differences that emerged during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s that might be related to verbal ability. We argue that this approach represents a pragmatic solution to the problems of generational research, allowing a process of iterative formulation and testing of emerging theories, in order to uncover the dynamics of generational change and difference.

Such pragmatism and flexibility is also needed when considering the role played by other drivers of difference in attitudes, such as the role of location, gender and ethnic group. This move away from a sole focus on year of birth would seem particularly important for multi-national enterprises, with workforces more likely to be from a variety of backgrounds, having had different experiences growing up and therefore developing different values and attitudes as a result. We suggest that Mannheim’s (1952) notion of social location and subsequent scholars’ work on collective memories (Schuman & Corning, 2017; Schuman & Rogers, 2004; Schuman & Scott, 1989) are useful starting points for research that develops a better understanding of how context might affect values, attitudes and expectations.

Our final suggestion is that longitudinal and deductive studies should consider the impact of contextual factors (e.g., digital innovation) individually in the first instance, rather than presuming all contextual trends will follow the same pattern. Twenge et al. (2010, p. 202) note the enormity of the challenge of studying generational differences in their comment that ‘The ideal design for a study of generational differences is a sequential cohort design which begins data collection at a young age and follows several generations longitudinally as they move through their working lives’. Our proposed way forward is a response to this challenge, focusing analysis on specific contextual factors and how they change over time, and then building a body of evidence by drawing together the findings from analysis of a variety of longitudinal datasets across the world.

A clear advantage of this approach is that it is more easily replicated by those engaged in day-to-day questions of practice, as analysis of long-term trends and speculation on the extent to which they will continue into the future provides more useful insight—it is more attainable for practitioners and adopts a flexible approach to the interpretation of findings. For example, one of the authors of this provocation recently undertook such an analysis for a public sector organisation, whereby contextual trends were modelled into the future and the likely impact of these on workforce attitudes and expectations (based upon existing evidence) were proposed. This analysis formed the basis of a review of the organisation’s practices in order to establish whether they were fit for the future should the modelled trends continue as expected. Of course this approach was unable to account for unexpected ‘shocks’ to society such as the Covid-19 pandemic but can provide useful ‘business as usual’ predictions for how attitudes

might progress in the future, while consideration of possible (but less likely scenarios) can also allow planning for the impact of societal shocks.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

In this provocation, we have moved beyond critiques that suggest generational differences are, 'much ado about nothing' (Rudolph et al., 2018) to highlight fundamental problems with the way a generational perspective is currently formulated in HRM research. We build on methodological criticisms based upon the inability of studies to separately identify APC effects (e.g., Parry & Urwin, 2011, 2017; Rudolph, Rauvola, et al., 2020) to first argue against a focus on year of birth as the sole driver of attitude change in generational research and; second, to provide examples to show that the imposition of a categorical approach to generations prevents scholars from understanding the impact of contextual changes on the workforce and considering meaningful individual differences in employees.

In this latter provocation, we show why even longitudinal research studies that address the confound between age and cohort (e.g., Twenge et al., 2010) are still problematic because of the continued use of 'categories' in research. We argue that in practice, this has the potential to lead to stereotyping based on age cohorts and may therefore contribute to age discrimination and prejudice within organisations. It is not yet time to abandon a generational perspective, but a more nuanced approach to its research and application is desperately needed in order to discard the reliance on unsubstantiated categories based upon year of birth.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This paper is based on secondary literature only, so contains no primary data.

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