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"Texting in their pockets": Millennials and rule violations in the hospitality industry

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ABSTRACT

This article takes a communication perspective to examine rule violations among Millennial employees. Rule violations are treated as a focal concern because they provide insight into how organizations socialize Millennials into their culture and how Millennials make inroads toward transforming the organization. Twenty-five managers in the hospitality industry were interviewed to learn about their perceptions of Millennial employees. Three categories of organizational rules are examined: policies regarding cell phone use, policies regarding requesting time off, and civility. These themes are explored with respect to how normative and code rules coalesce in order promote assimilation and change. The findings also point to the implications that new generational cohorts have for collective assimilation and change for the organizational culture and the concomitant implications for managers.

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As the workforce changes, so too does the hospitality industry. Organizational cultures experience varying degrees of change, whether due to minor policy alterations or to more seismic shifts. Significant shifts occur as a new generational cohort enters the workforce. Richardson and Thomas (2012) address the challenges experienced by the hospitality industry in retaining these younger employees. One step toward retention involves learning about problems associated with Millennial entry into organizations. This study examines how Millennials are perceived as assimilating to and resisting organizational culture by examining the areas in which hospitality managers identify rule violations among Millennial employees. Identifying which rules are violated and how those rule violations are understood and handled by the organization highlights the interplay between "old" and "new" in organizational culture and offers insights into the ways that organizations can adapt amidst the evolving workforce of the 21st century.

Currently, four generations may be working side by side in organizations, including Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. It is critical to understand these generational cohorts in order to comprehend how differences among them affect workplace perceptions and behaviors. Millennials are the newest generation to enter the workforce and are the focus of this study. Actual years delineating generational cohorts are disputed, assigning Millennials birth years spanning from 1978 to 2000 (see Kultalahti & Viitala, 2014; Kuron, Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng, 2015; Marcinkus Murphy, 2012). Millennials are operationally defined in this study as those born between the years 1982 and 1994.

Millennials comprise the first generation to grow up with readily accessible technology, such as computers and the Internet, and are viewed as "more reliant" on technology for communication (Trees, 2015, p. 119). They are also known for their perceived ability to multi-task with various technological devices. Millennials are credited with being confident and valuing education (Suh & Hargis, 2016). At work, Millennials are said to appreciate frequent feedback (Trees, 2015) and personal attention from managers (Westerman, Bergman, & Bergman, 2012). Millennials also seek a clearly defined career pathway and prefer a "work-life balance" (Kuron et al., 2015; Maxwell, Ogden, & Broadbridge, 2010; Tews, Michel, Xu, & Drost, 2015).

Among their less positive characteristics, Millennials are said to

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crave jobs that are fun and that involve ample praise and rewards (Tews et al., 2015). They are described as demanding, impatient, and lacking in job loyalty (Suh & Hargis, 2016). Westerman et al. (2012) studied the high levels of narcissism among this generation, noting patterns of variation among college majors. Kersten (2009) made powerful claims about Millennials in the workforce. Although not based on any identifiable scholarly research, he asserted that Millennials are "likely to possess a host of interpersonal pathologies and behavioral maladaptations that have been linked to threatened egotism including violence and incivility" (p. 70). Millennials have also been described as sheltered and protected by "helicopter parents". Hershatter and Epstein (2010) said managers usually want "to take off the Millennial water wings, throw them in the deep end, and see if they drown" (p. 218). With these negative attributes often associated with this generation, it becomes interesting to consider the reactions of hospitality managers to Millennials and their rule violations when entering the workplace. To lay a foundation for understanding the role of rule violations in organizational life, we provide a brief overview of organizational culture and assimilation, and rules.

1. Organizational culture and assimilation

Organizational culture is unique to each place of business (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). It distinguishes the way people operate and occurs naturally to the people within the culture. According to Eubanks and Lloyd (1992), organizational culture results when members share patterns of expectations, beliefs, and values. Culture is simultaneously "confining and facilitating" (Keyton, 2005, p. 18). Communication, both positive and negative, influences the organizational culture. The aim of this study is to examine how broader cultural forces, such as the introduction of new generations, holds implications for developing and maintaining that hospitality climate.

In order to study organizational culture, certain organizational elements must be considered. Elements include key symbols (Keyton, 2005), rituals (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983; Martin, 2002), stories, performances (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983), artifacts (Keyton, 2005), and rules, which serve to establish normative behavior and help new employees to assimilate (Stohl, 1986). Because the symbols, stories, artifacts, and expectations for normative behavior are likely to vary across industries, to help to more clearly examine organizational culture, one industry, hospitality, served as the focal context for this research.

Organizational assimilation is significant because it examines how people integrate into their workplace culture (Keyton, 2005). Members learn the organization's "reality" and begin to understand their roles (Jablin, 1987). They become familiar with the organizational rules. Two processes are involved in organizational assimilation: socialization and individualization (Hess, 1993; Jablin, 1987; Kramer, 2010). Socialization occurs when the "organization attempts to influence and change individuals to meet its needs," (Kramer, 2010, p. 3). The organizational insiders try to influence the newcomers (Wanous, 1992). With interactions influencing socialization, it is interpersonal in nature. Individualization occurs when organizational members begin to alter their roles and environment within the organization to fulfill their needs and values as an organizational member in their place of work (Jablin, 1987). Individualization can span from small acts, such as decorating one's workspace (Hess, 1993; Kramer, 2010) to larger practices such as customizing one's work schedule (Kramer, 2010). The two (socialization and individualization) are considered a "dynamic, interactive processes" (Jablin, 1987, p. 693), impacting one another. Kramer (2010) expanded on the relationship between the two parts of assimilation by stating that they are in frequent tension with one another. As in the case of rules, the focus of this study, socialization would involve teaching newcomers the rules, and individualization would include how newcomers adapt to the rules.

2. Communication rules

People follow various communication rules that coincide with a particular context. According to Jabs (2005), "rules surround us and fill our communal world" (p. 265). Rules frequently appear in human interaction and provide a set of meanings and/or norms for given situations. Two types of communication rules exist. Scholars refer to these as code (constitutive) and normative (regulative) rules (Carbaugh, 1990; Harris & Cronen, 1979). Code rules "specify patterns of meaning" through symbols during interaction (Carbaugh, 1990, p. 139). They assist in socially constructing shared meaning in certain contexts. Code rules are developed conversationally and provide the meaning behind a rule (Carbaugh, 1990).

Conversely, normative rules guide appropriate action in a particular context. People are expected to coincide their behavior with the larger cultural norms and are evaluated in return. These rules prescribe what people "should" do. Normative rules follow a top-down implementation due to the established, appropriate norms of the culture. It is through social interaction that people learn rules instinctively and simply (Jabs, 2005), which teach them what they ought to do in particular situations (Schall, 1983). It is important to realize how peoples' diverse experiences can lead to differing opinions on what is deemed an appropriate behavior and rule (Schall, 1983; Shimanoff, 1980). In summary, code rules focus on the coordination of meanings and presume that there are social and cultural patterns for sense making, while normative rules center around proper models of behavior (Carbaugh, 1990).

As reviewed earlier, certain cultures construct unique sets of rules (Schall, 1983). Communication rules have been studied in the organizational context (see Cushman, 1977; Gilsdorf, 1998; Jabs, 2005; Schall, 1983). As with any culture, rules exist in organizations to guide the behavior of the people in it and create shared meanings (see Gilsdorf, 1998; Harris & Cronen, 1979; Kramer, 2010; Schall, 1983). People quickly learn the obvious rules of the organization in which they work. For example, Jabs (2005) referenced employees acting professionally when asking supervisors for a raise as well as not using curse words in workplace dialogue. Other organizational rules are harder to discover. According to Gilsdorf (1998), "some organizations give employees excellent guidance on how they expect them to communicate; some organizations give little or none" (p. 173). The rules may or may not be written, formal, explicit, specific, or positively implied.

Because the Millennial cohort is the newest to join the workforce, it becomes interesting to consider how they become socialized and individuate *vis a vis* an organization's rules. This study addresses the following research question and sub-questions:

1. Within the hospitality industry, which organizational rules do managers believe Millennials are violating?
   a. Which rules are strongly enforced (assimilation)?
   b. Which rules violations are allowed (individualization)?

Further, due to the prevalence of literature on current problems with incivility in the classroom but an absence of scholarly discussion of incivility in the workplace, we also ask the research question:

2. Within the hospitality industry, do managers believe Millennials violate rules of civility?

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