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# Intergenerational resource tensions in the workplace and beyond: Individual, interpersonal, institutional, international

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ABSTRACT

The workforce is rapidly aging. Already at record highs, labor force participation rates of both over-55 and over-65 age segments are expected to nearly double in the immediate future. The current chapter describes how these sweeping demographic changes necessitate both the unprecedented utilization of older workers and intergenerational collaboration, but also present the danger of heightened generational tension. We describe the specific risk factors for such tensions, highlighting the presence of generational boundaries at multiple levels: (a) individual, (b) interpersonal, (c) institutional, and (d) international. Drawing from our own work and relevant management literature, we then identify three broad domains within which intergenerational tensions are particularly salient at each of these levels: active Succession tensions over enviable resources and influence (e.g., employment), passive Consumption tensions over shared asset usage (e.g., healthcare) and symbolic Identity tensions over figurative space (e.g., cultural fit) (SCI). We conclude with suggestions for potential interventions, and major open areas for future organizational research, both of which should focus on how to maximize the utility of unprecedented intergenerational collaboration.



Although not universally known as a founding father of the Internet, Brian Reid might as well be considered one. After all, he has spent the better part of his life dedicated to developing the web's fundamental building blocks, such as conducting foundational Internet-related research as a Stanford professor and working integrally in developing the prominent early web search engine AltaVista. Later, in 2002 and at that time over 50 years of age, Reid was fortunate enough to land a operations manager position at Google – yet another internet hot spot – a seemingly apt capstone to his seminal career in the industry.

Nevertheless, this later chapter did not go as planned. Instead, it presented some unexpected and unprecedented hurdles. From his younger co-workers and supervisors, derogatory labels ("old man," "old fuddy duddy") and dismissive remarks ("too old to matter," "not a cultural fit") grew common, and Reid found himself struggling to fit in to the new culture of his lifelong trade. Eventually things came to a head: Reid was laid off by then-30-year-old CEO Larry Page, Reid countered with an age-discrimination lawsuit, and the case became publically emblematic of Silicon Valley's broad "ageism problem" (Nathanson, 2014; Scheiber, 2014).

Silicon Valley's uniquely out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new culture aside, such stories are becoming increasingly common in the modern workplace. On a macro level, the workforce has aged at an unprecedented rate (56% growth in over-55 labor force participation from 2002 to 2012; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013); at the same time, work-related age discrimination charges have also steadily risen in recent years (a 45% increase from

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1999 to 2014; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2015). On a micro level, employers increasingly need to accommodate up to four generations in the workplace, which presents new challenges (Lieber, 2010; Twenge, 2010). Thus, the increasingly older and intergenerational workplace certainly portends increased opportunities for intergenerational collaboration, but also heightened, pragmatic risk of intergenerational friction, as Brian Reid's case illustrates.

Understanding the nature of generational tensions also comprises largely under-investigated theoretical territory. Organizational scholars have long examined subtle, potentially volatile workplace surface-level "faultlines" (i.e., subgroup divisions formed along race, gender, age, or other social categories; Lau & Murnighan, 1998). These investigations have unearthed the potential of these subtle fissures to undermine certain elements of group-based productivity (e.g. team learning, psychological safety, and collaboration across faultline divisions; Lau & Murnighan, 2005) while aiding others (e.g., creativity; Nishii & Goncalo, 2008). However, investigation of faultlines from an *intergenerational* perspective per se has attracted relatively scant attention. Although age is sometimes cited generally as a source of faultline tension (Bezrukova, Jehn, Zanutto, & Thatcher, 2009; Gratton, Voigt, & Erickson, 2007), precisely how and what types of tensions form between generations remains a largely unanswered organizational behavior research question (Joshi, Dencker, & Franz, 2011).

To this end, this chapter addresses the specific roots, manifestations, and potential interventions of such generational strain in the workplace. The first portion discusses the initial *theoretical* seeds of these tensions: the key theories explaining how age-based perception and generational identity potentially sow the seeds of such tension at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and international levels. The second part focuses on the *practical* seeds of these tensions: particularly shifting age dynamics of the workplace, and how potential tensions are progressively more common as a result. The third section identifies the specific *types* of tensions that exist between generations, and the types of resources that drive them – active *Succession* of enviable resources, passive *Consumption* of shared resources, and symbolic *Identity* resources (SCI; North & Fiske, 2013a,b) – and describes how the tensions emerge at a similarly multi-level fashion. The fourth section discusses existing *interventions* for these types of tensions, and provides suggestions for developing organization-specific interventions going forward. In the final sections, we conclude with broader suggestions for future research in explicating both the theoretical and practical seeds of generational tensions in the workplace.

## Theoretical seeds of generational tension: Age perception and generational outlook

### *Individual level: Age and generation are formative categories in making sense of ourselves*

Although age, race, and gender are three fundamental dimensions with which people rapidly categorize themselves and others, race and gender have gained significantly greater research attention across various disciplines (North & Fiske, 2012). This is especially peculiar, given that age comprises categories that every single living person eventually joins, provided sufficient lifespan.

Closely related to age is *generation*, which formative work in sociology defines as a social group that shares a common point in time and a "distinct consciousness" stemming from foundational events of that time (Mannheim, 1928/1952). Similar to the relatively scant attention given to age, the concept of generations within organizations has also been largely neglected by organizational researchers, although recent work does issue a call for more work in this realm (Joshi et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the dearth of generation-focused scholarship is again surprising, given a plethora of common narratives pitting generations against one another in and out of the workplace (e.g. "Boomers versus Millenials"; Winerip, 2012). Moreover, with age, people tend to strongly identify with their own generation, even more than age per se (Weiss & Freund, 2012; Weiss & Lang, 2009).

A major imperative for research on generational dynamics in the workplace is that it is increasingly multi-generational. Currently, the labor force features predominantly four distinct generations (Lieber, 2010; Twenge, 2010): The Silent Generation (a.k.a. Traditionalists, born roughly 1925–1945), Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Generation X (born 1965–1981), and Generation Y/Millennials (born 1981–2000). The picture stands to become even more complicated soon, with "Generation Z" – those born around 2000 – fast approaching working age (Levit, 2015).

### *Interpersonal level: Age-based categorization is a fundamental process in making sense of others*

In a closely related vein, age-based social perception – how we perceive others on the basis of their age – is most often investigated through the lens of age-based prejudice and discrimination, or "ageism" (Butler, 1969). Resembling the topic of age more broadly, ageism is vastly understudied compared with racism and sexism (North & Fiske, 2012). One reason for this is that age-based stereotypes are typically more socially condoned than other types of stereotypes—to the point that many overlook ageism as a form of prejudice altogether (Nelson, 2005).

Ageism is peculiar in the first place, as noted, being the one form of bias that is a potentially universal experience: Every single living person eventually joins each age group, provided sufficient lifespan, and as such is at risk for being the target of this form of prejudice, eventually. But rather than generating sympathy, the opposite appears to be true: The pressure to deny one's own aging is strong, to the point where older people themselves dis-identify as "old," likely as a means of protecting themselves from negative stereotypes and anxieties over getting older (Weiss & Freund, 2012; Weiss & Lang, 2009).

Where does categorization of elder others come from? A few key theories help explain. A *terror management* explanation casts older adults as living, breathing reminders of mortality – given their advanced age – which drives younger people to identify more strongly with similar (and