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THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION AND THE MILITARY

by

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Biography

Lieutenant Colonel Steve Boatright is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. Prior to this assignment, he was Air Force Element Commander and Joint Special Operations Command Support Team Chief at the Joint Information Operations Warfare Center at Lackland AFB, Texas.

He was commissioned in 1995 from the US Air Force Academy with a degree in Behavioral Psychology. His numerous assignments in the Air Force include service as F-16 Weapons Officer at Hill Air Force Base, F-16 Weapons and Tactics Instructor at the US Air Force Weapons School, Congressional Liaison to the Appropriations Committees, Junior Executive Officer to the Air Force Chief of Staff, and Commander of the 35 Fighter Squadron, Kunsan AB, South Korea. Colonel Boatright is a Command Pilot with more than 2300 hours in the F-16.

Abstract

There is an abundance of information addressing Millennials entering the workforce and the potential conflict that generational differences can bring, but much of it is drowned in myth. This paper makes takes a critical look at the Millennial generation entering the military today and concludes that their transition to the military won't be as dramatic as popular media might lead you to believe. Longitudinal studies of Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers are more similar than different with regard to work attitudes. In addition, roughly half of incoming recruits are military dependents and have grown up with a socialization process that doesn't mirror their civilian counterparts. Finally, the military's up or out policy has placed Generation X in the senior leader positions across the military, and differences between Generation X and Millennials are much less dramatic than the differences between Millennials and Baby Boomers.

Introduction

Millennials are entering the officer and enlisted corps at a rapid pace. More than one in three American workers today are Millennials, and in 2015 they passed Generation X to be the largest segment of the American workforce, and they are rapidly becoming the largest generational segment serving in today's military.[1] A quick glance at popular media would lead one to believe that there are, and will continue to be, significant problems as this generation enters the military. In this paper, it is argued that the degree to which the generations differ isn't as extreme as suggested, and the problem is even less dramatic in the military, where Generation X continues to ascend to senior leader positions and a significant number of incoming recruits are Millennials who grew up as military dependents.

Generations in the Workforce Today

The Sociology of Generational Studies

Generations could be thought of as a group of people moving through time, with each generation bringing with it a distinct sense of self. This distinct sense of self, also labeled as your "peer personality" by sociologists, is the set of collective behavioral traits and attitudes that become evident throughout a generation's lifecycle.[2] It starts when a person is born, and through socialization with family, friends, community, and environment, it develops and matures. An individual might share many, some, or none of the traits within their generation, but they do share the same age location in history, and all are influenced by that generation's collective mindset.[3]

The three generations in the contemporary American workforce are Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. In an effort to simplify the problem, birth year cutoffs for each generation have been identified, and the basic taxonomy

Generation	Birthyear	Age in 2016
Silent Generation		
Baby Boomer	1943-1960	56-73
Generation X	1961-1981	35-55
Millennial	1982-2003	13-34

Table 1. Generational Buckets[4]

developed by Strauss and Howe is depicted in Table 1. Although there is no absolute standard, these dates are representative of what most social psychologists use in the study of generational differences. They are a handy reference, but the downside of the year groups is the dates are merely a rough hack, and draw dividing lines where technically none exist.[5] There are gradual changes between the generations, and the year groups aren't a "cultural wall" that separates them.[6] Even with these flaws, the generational categories do serve a useful purpose as they help

identify the major events and the context that influences each generation's identity and priorities. Changing contexts as individuals grow and mature along with life experiences have a profound impact on the individual.[7]

Barriers to Coherent Studies of Generations

There are two major concerns with regard to the study of generational differences, and they are the media and how differences are studied. Popular media makes an objective review of the generations difficult. Their portrayal of generational differences fuels opinions and impressions, but primarily consists of anecdotal evidence, subjective perceptions, and individual interviews.[8] It doesn't help that media is driven by its bottom line, and the over-sensationalizing of these differences helps fuel profits.

The second concern to the study of generational differences is the research design. Typically, when research is accomplished, there is an overreliance on what social psychologists call cross-sectional designs that limit the ability to separate generational effects.[9] Cross-sectional studies tend to lead to erroneous conclusions because they look at people of different ages at the same point in time. When you look at different generations in this method, it is impossible to determine what variable drives the differences, because it doesn't isolate the biases of age effect (variation due to development and experience) and period effect (differences due to historical events of a certain time) when trying to determine the impact of generational effect (differences due to shared experiences of the same group).[10] Longitudinal studies, which account for age effect, are critical, but not as common. These studies focus on a certain age, but at different points in time in an effort to rule out biases associated with age and life stage.

Generational Differences Evident In Personality and Work Attitudes

The differences in identity and priority among generations are not a new phenomenon, nor are the misperceptions the older generations have of any younger generation.[11] Generations clearly have problems understanding each other, and intergenerational issues exist as one generation uses its value framework to judge the attitudes and actions of another. These differences are quite often the instigators of contemporary debate and even controversy just as it has in the past.[12]

The interplay of peer personalities and cross-generational relationships among generations shows interesting trends.[13] Each generation affects the coming of age experiences of others. How children are raised affects how they later parent, how students are taught affects how they later teach. Not surprisingly, how youths come of age shapes their later exercise of leadership.[14] The stresses within generations occur when individuals behave in ways that peer personalities don't necessarily allow.[15] Stress between generations occurs for a variety of other reasons, and according to research, the perceptions of older generations on the younger generation has remained fairly consistent.[16] In addition to the obvious differences in the use of slang and other language variations, the younger generation has been consistently considered as entitled, difficult to interact with, and overly service focused.[17] But these differences are more often an issue with age at the time of the survey versus generational differences.[18]

When looking at personality, according to Kowske and Rasche, several traits have been increasing in college students across several successive generations. Neuroticism, self-esteem, extraversion, and external locus control have all steadily increased.[19] These increases are seen in multiple research studies, but some disagreement remains. One of the biggest limitations is that social science research in this area isn't representative of the generation as a whole. Most of the

research was based on data from college students attending traditional four-year universities, and it doesn't fully represent the entire population of Millennials, especially those who choose not to go to college right out of high school and rather attended vocational training, entered the workforce, or even joined the military.[20]   In addition to not being representative of the Millennial generation, these differences don't readily manifest themselves in the workplace.[21]

With regard to work attitudes, the results have been mixed as well, but most report that generations are more similar than different.[22] As the Center for Creative Leadership has shown, there are many myths surrounding the Millennial generation in the workforce.[23] They have found that the characteristics that identify Millennials are related more to age and life stage than true generational difference.[24] One area that is fairly consistent and significantly reported on is the centrality of work to one's life and values at work. If one were to believe the stereotypes of the millennial generation, it would appear that they have a lower work ethic based on their desire for more flexible schedules, balanced work/life relationship, and time off.[25] The available empirical research doesn't support this stereotype and what popular media is presenting.[26]

In 2002, Smola and Sutton wrote an article for the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* comparing work values between Boomers and Generation X. In their longitudinal study, they acquired research data from 1974, and then utilized the same questions in 1999, and polled not only Generation X but Boomers as well to see how the Boomers' values and opinions might have changed in 25 years. Their results were mixed. When Generation X was coming of age in the work environment, there should be no surprise that they wanted higher salaries sooner, flexible work arrangements, and reported a strong desire to be promoted more quickly.[27] These reports are almost identical to responses of Millennials early in their career. They want to be paid well and work in a supportive environment.[28]

But, the centrality of work for Boomers, or how important work is to their lives, was based on obligation. That coincides with cross section comparisons between Boomers and Generation X that have found that Boomers had lower job involvement.[29] Stated simply, Boomers were more likely to be committed to their job due to feelings of obligation and remained at their job due to the high costs of leaving, while Generation X was more committed to their job due to altruistic behaviors.[30] Boomers worked because they *had* to, not because they *wanted* to. Although the reasons for being motivated to work (the "why") might differ between Generation X, Millennials, and Boomers, they all share a similarity, the fundamental want and need to work (the "what").

Ironically, when it comes to pride in craftsmanship, it was Generation X who was more likely to respond that a worker should do a good job even when the supervisor wasn't around.[31] And although Millennials have a higher voluntary turnover rate than Generation X or Boomers, when it comes to intentions and desire, they have a lower desire to find another job than Boomers or even Generation X.[32] Millennials are just as committed to their organizations as were older employees at the same level in the organization.[33] The nature of today's marketplace requires them to always have a plan to move from one job to another due to the more transient nature of today's labor market.

The other area of work centrality that has had considerable research is work-life balance. Jean Twenge, in her book *Generation Me*, claims the largest generational difference appeared in the importance of work and work life balance.[34] In her and her colleagues' time-lag analysis, more Millennials said they "worked to live" unlike Boomers who "lived to work."[35] For example, in 1976, when Boomers were high school seniors, 74% of them said they expected work to be central to their lives, but only 66% of the 2012 high school seniors (Millennials) felt

that way.[36] Although she didn't provide any Generation X data, one can assume, as reported by

Kowske and Rasche, that the data is linear (and data does suggest an upward trend across

generations with regard to the importance of enjoyment and happiness).[37] But once you consider

the difference of 8% over three generations, it may be statistically significant, but not necessarily

practical for driving change, and more research and understanding is required. Ironically, when

it comes to hours worked, there is no difference between Millennials and Generation X at the

same age and, contrary to popular media portrayals, Generation X and Millennials actually

worked longer hours than Boomers when they entered the workforce.[38]

It is also noteworthy that Millennials reported higher job security than Generation X or

Boomers. Most social psychologists argue that these differences are due more to the work

environment that the two generations are operating within. The loss of pensions witnessed by

Generation X and lower job security due to the more fluid nature of today's labor market could

be driving these differences, as opposed to simply generationally developed preferences.[39] In

addition, there could be different explanations used by the different generations to define their

context. For example, in the eyes of a Millennial, job security may mean surviving the next

downturn or recession, not a twenty-five year career and a pension.[40]

Generational Differences in the Military

Military Recruits Today

The military could be thought of as both social and work environment. Although it

shares many obvious work attributes of the civilian sector, the profession of arms is set apart

from civilian society in part because of the acculturation and socialization processes that

continues throughout a military career. On the surface, joining the military might seem like a

tough transition for the Millennial generation, and while that may be true, the reality is Millennials that join the military do not represent a cross-section of American society, nor their generation.

Social and family relationships have also become strong predictors in identifying who is likely to serve in the contemporary US military.[41] There is a strong southern military tradition; with the South accounting for over 40% of new enlistees. In contrast, New England is the most underrepresented.[42] Data also shows that both officer and enlisted active duty service members come disproportionately from high-income neighborhoods.[43] As the military continues to downsize, the lack of generational representation will become even more pronounced.[44] The strongest evidence for this separation comes from enlistment data. During a random sample of 880 Air Force Basic Training enlistees in 2015, 429 (49%) of the respondents had a mother or father that served or is still serving on Active Duty in the military.[45] Although it is incorrect to argue the case for generational determinism, it is clear parents exert a high degree of influence on the key values of their children.[46] These military dependents entering the service bring with them an entirely different perspective and cultural background than their non-military peers, whether they lived on a military installation or off base.

Growing up as a dependent on a military installation, they are bound to have a strong sense of community and military familiarity, since families are clustered in a "village" culture of support.[47] Work, family, commerce, and schooling bind all members of these tightknit communities into a self-contained, social structure.[48] For those who live off base, these aspects might vary, but in the towns near our nation's largest military bases, it is often hard to tell where the military ends and the civilian world begins, and regardless, the off base family has access to

the base and its services, to include family support, social activities, athletic and art programs, adequate housing, and access to health care.

The family makeup of the military member is also non-representative of the larger society. John Grubbs in his book *Leading the Lazy* states there are three subsets of Millennials. The first is comprised of young people raised by single mothers who are often working to make ends meet.[49] Although there are some single parent homes in the military, that is much less common than in the civilian community (in 2003, 6.2% of military were single parent, while the national average was 27%).[50] Although there are deployments and hardships that the military community has to deal with, these are overcome by the strong sense of community that is found on and near military bases. These factors all add up to a significant difference in the norms, social networks, and relationships between adults and children. In turn, these have a direct impact on the child's upbringing, their perspectives, and subsequently set them apart from others in their peer personality group.[51]

On the other end of the spectrum lies Grubbs' second group, the subset of Millennials that are raised by over-involved "helicopter parents."[52] Although there is a potential for this to be an issue with military families, its prevalence will be less than society in general because parental practices are a direct reflection of the community they conform to and that community's expectations of its members.[53] In military communities, which are cultures of narrow socialization, there is a greater "normative" pressure for parents to demand obedience, conformity, and performance from their children, and as they grow into adulthood that family socialization remains important, and distinct from the rest of society.[54] In addition, the single parent families that live on base can take advantage of the higher level of security that is difficult to replicate in the civilian world. In this environment, children are able to demonstrate and

exercise independent action and thought, and are able to take advantage of available on-base social programs. Finally, with the high rates of deployments over the last few decades, many military families experience frequent separations which make it difficult to establish a "helicopter parent" environment, since a parent is required to be consistently present.

The final subset of Millennials according to Grubb are those that lie between the single parent families and helicopter parents, and they, according to Grubb, have the right balance of nature and nurture to work in any organization.[55] It is here where most military families lie, and these families are generally characterized by a stable, predictable, socioeconomic community which tends to spill over to the rest of life.[56] This all translates to almost half of incoming military members bringing with them distinct values, histories, enabling a smoother transition to the military than a majority of their peers.

This smoother than portrayed transition is further facilitated by the fact that todays' volunteer force is older, more career oriented, and more family oriented than at any time in history.[57] It has become so distinct from American society that it is argued that today's military is gradually becoming a separate "warrior class," very different from the society it is supposed to protect.[58] The concept of demographic metabolism argues that as a new generation is born, social forces or agents of socialization (like laws, mores, schools, and families) introduce the child into the society in which they now belong.[59] And this is evident today as incoming military members enter single, marry younger, and tend to remain married more than their civilian counterparts.[60] The family friendly policies of the military has encouraged family formation and growth, and this constant exposure to military life has led to an intergenerational transmission of service, and the rate of volunteer enlistment from high school graduation is now twice as high as that of the civilian sector.[61]

Generation X In Senior Leadership Positions

The other concept that is often overlooked, especially in the military with its "up or out" policies, is Generation X now serves in senior leader positions in the Air Force. While a majority of generational studies are written by Boomers, the fact that Generation X is now serving in significant leadership roles in the Air Force makes the impact of Millennials not nearly as dramatic.

Mandatory retirement for the rank of colonel is thirty years time-in-grade. At the start of 2016, there were 3,299 colonels in the Air Force and 289 General Officers.[62] With the majority of line officers getting commissioned at age 23 upon completion of college, this is the first year we'll start to see Generation X reach mandatory retirement in significant numbers.[63] Other than the 289 general officers at the top of the Air Force, Generation X dominates Air Force leadership (unlike the civilian sector, where Boomers continue to run and lead organizations). And as Millennials rise in the ranks, they will be required to accept and often internalize the organizational norms or suffer the consequences. The nature of the up or out system will help force this conformity, because the system will culturally prevent an individual from hiding outside the organization's norms.

Another aspect some have argued is there is little daylight between Generation X and Millennials. Generation X is much more comfortable with technology than Boomers. And in the words of Peter Hyman, instant internet access to the entire history of pop culture implies that now we all feed from the same "cultural trough," which makes the gaps between Generation X and Millennials even more negligible.[64]

Recommendations

It is clear that there are differences between generations, and the societal context that one is raised in has a lasting impact on the individual. Although the rise of the Millennial generation entering the workforce will generate some friction and issues that will need to be resolved, the overall impact to military and dynamics won't be nearly as profound as it will be in the civilian sector due to the rise of Generation X in senior leadership positions and the fact that a large majority of Millennials entering basic training are not representative of their generation due to being raised as a military dependent as well as the region of the country that they are raised in. For those that due join the military that are more representative of their generation, onboarding programs and continued socialization throughout the military career become crucial.

If an organization hired someone from another culture, it would seem natural to assess their skill-sets, identify their strengths and weakness, and augment where appropriate.[65] As part of acculturation to the new organization, leaders would go out of their way to explain the "unwritten rules," so job expectations were clear. The same analogy holds true for different generations. They bring with them different skills, motivations, and desires that previous generations might not be familiar with, and onboarding programs are more than useful to ensure they are a valued member of the organization, understand the expectations that the military has of them, and help them adjust to the organizationally expected social and performance norms.[66] Regardless of the generation, onboarding programs are essential.

As the civilian sector is developing programs to bring Millennials into the workforce, the foundation is already there in the military; its basic training has been the most crucial step in bringing any generation on board. It is possible to find the perfect recruit, but he or she will still

lack some of the skills needed to succeed, and this is especially true in the military. Basic

training lays out the expectations, behaviors, and competencies that must be achieved.

It is in basic training that new recruits learn not just about the military, but how to follow.

The historic goals of Basic Military Training was to meet manpower requirements, provide

orderly transition from civilian to military life, and perform initial processing of the new

recruit.[67] Modern basic training has evolved to encompass much more. As the name implies,

recruits are still taught the basics of military hierarchy and deference patterns, dress and personal

appearance, emphasis on honor and duty, and a sense of camaraderie, but more importantly they

are taught organizational culture and personal discipline.[68] It is an intense seven weeks of

military socialization and this onboarding process is crucial to success; just as crucial as when

Generation X came of age or the Boomers arrived on scene (albeit from a draft).

More importantly though, it is the first in a series of career-long socialization agents.

Training programs for specific positions and career paths, professional military education, and

the mentoring that individuals receive throughout their career all continue to mold individuals

and socialize them to military life.   Through this socialization process, senior leaders will also

learn what differentiates them from those entering the military, and the key to the future success

will be understanding the differences. As Martin and Tulgan stress, beneath the stratification of

age diversity, there is common ground.[69] Millennial's needs are very similar to Generation X's

needs, and in reality, not that far from what Boomers want. How those needs are expressed

might be different, and the personalities and language might be different, but interests remain

fairly consistent.

In their book *Managing the Generation Mix from Collision to Collaboration*, Martin and

Tulgan highlight seven strategies for developing best practice management habits.[70]

1. Get to know your team and their experience, knowledge, and skills
2. Identify the individuals near and long term goals
3. Pay attention to working styles (communication type, format, deadlines, etc.)
4. Become a take-charge leader
5. Intervene when needed (and let subordinates know when they aren't performing up to standard)
6. Become a coaching style manager who facilitates results instead of dictates results (enable and support subordinates)
7. Reward high performance

The irony is these concepts are valid regardless of what generation you are leading, and sound similar to even the most basic squadron commander's course. Regardless of generational differences, leaders need to lead.

Conclusion

Moving forward, all serving in the military need to understand there are differences between the generations, but there is also common ground. Generational stereotyping is socially acceptable, but not necessarily accurate. The lack of data and overreliance on opinion and conjecture make the subject challenging. One must never forget that there is more variability within a generation than there is between generations.[71] Although how needs are expressed from one generation to the next might be different, there seems to be more commonality than difference. When it comes to military enlistment and commissioning, these differences are further reduced because the environment has its own culture and there is more intergenerational consistency in views. To remain a successful institution, the military needs to continue evolving its basic military training to achieve its mission of acculturation, and this might require some accommodations for the different generations as they enter the military. Finally, after graduating basic training, the military needs to continue its process of mentoring and socializing the member throughout his or her career.

As Jennifer Deal argued, "Fundamentally, Millennials want to do interesting work, with people they enjoy, for which they are well paid – and still have enough time to live their life."[72] This, as she continues, "Makes Millennials pretty much like the rest of us."[73]

Notes

1. Fry, Millennials surpass Gen X.
2. Strauss, *Generations: The History*, 32.
3. Ibid., 8.
4. Ibid., 36.
5. Twenge, *Generation Me,* 5.
6. Ibid., 6.
7. Deal, "Millennials at Work," 196.
8. Meriac, "Generational Differences in Work Ethic," 320.
9. Deal, "Millennials at Work," 192.
10. Kowske, "Millennials (Lack of) Attitude," 267.
11. Deal, "Millennials at Work," 192.
12. Kowske, "Millennials (Lack of) Attitude," 274.
13. Strauss, *Generations: The History*, 32.
14. Ibid., 32.
15. Ibid., 8.
16. Deal, "Millennials at Work," 192.
17. Ibid., 192.
18. Ibid., 192.
19. Kowske, "Millennials (Lack of) Attitude," 267.
20. Deal, "Millennials at Work," 192.
21. Kowske, "Millennials (Lack of) Attitude," 274.
22. Ibid., 274.
23. Eckert, "Generation Y: Attitude," 24.
24. Ibid., 22.
25. Deal, "5 Truths About the Millennial Force."
26. Kowske, "Millennials (Lack of) Attitude," 267.
27. Smola, "Generational Differences: Revisiting," 376.
28. Eckert, "Generation Y: Attitude," 23.
29. Kowske, "Millennials (Lack of) Attitude," 267.
30. Ibid., 267.
31. Smola, "Generational Differences: Revisiting," 376.
32. Kowske, "Millennials (Lack of) Attitude," 267.
33. Eckert, "Generation Y: Attitude," 23.
34. Twenge, *Generation Me,* 265.
35. Ibid., 265.
36. Ibid., 265.
37. Kowske, "Millennials (Lack of) Attitude," 267.
38. Deal, "Millennials at Work," 193.
39. Eckert, "Generation Y: Attitude," 24.
40. Kowske, "Millennials (Lack of) Attitude," 275.
41. Watkins, "Who Serves in the U.S. Military," 7.
42. Ibid., 7.
43. Ibid., 13.

44. Pew Research Center, "The Military-Civilian Gap."
45. Rylander, to the author, e-mail.
46. Dalton, "Reassessing Parental Socialization," 430.
47. Smrekar, "It's a Way of Life," 173.
48. Ibid., 173.
49. Grubbs, *Leading the Lazy*, 11.
50. Smrekar, "It's a Way of Life," 175.
51. Ibid., 175.
52. Grubbs, *Leading the Lazy*, 12.
53. Arnett, "Broad and Narrow Socialization." 619.
54. Ibid., 619.
55. Grubbs, *Leading the Lazy*, 12.
56. Smrekar, "It's a Way of Life," 175.
57. Kleykamp, "The Military and the Transition," 190.
58. Zucchino "US Military and Civilians."
59. Kowske, "Millennials (Lack of) Attitude," 286.
60. Kleykamp, "The Military and the Transition," 190.
61. Ibid., 193.
62. Air Force Personnel Center, "Air Force Personnel Center."
63. Air Force Personnel Center, "Air Force Personnel Center."
64. Hyman, "Bring Back the Generation Gap," 1.
65. Lancaster, *When Generations Collide*, 150.
66. Bauer, *Onboarding New Employees*.
67. Wamsley, "Contrasting Institutions of Air Force Socialization," 413.
68. Lovell, "A Comment on Wamsley's," 440.
69. Martin, *Managing the Generation Mix,* 93.
70. Ibid., 94.
71. Deal, "Millennials at Work," 198.
72. Deal, "5 Truths About the Millennial Force."
73. Ibid.

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