
Generational identification: Fact or fiction in leadership?

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Generational identification: Fact or fiction in leadership? - Summary

The intersection of identity, generations and leadership is receiving widespread attention both in the academic field and in organisational practice. As there are purportedly four generations in the labour market and organisations and their employees 'feel' identifications and disidentifications in the workforce, a systematic exploration seems promising. However, most previous empirical findings have been either weak, or even contradictory. This has led to increasingly loud criticism in recent years – but barely to a decline in interest in the topic. Against this background, this paper is about leaving the well-trodden paradigmatic tracks. It aims to present a critical perspective and is intended to stimulate thought. The following question is explored: Can organisational leaders profit from a workforce divided on the basis of their identifications – *divide et impera*?

Word count: 1990

Background and further development of this paper

This developmental paper is a segment of a bigger project that I am currently working on – my doctoral thesis. In my research I critically examine intergenerational differences in leadership meaning and behaviours. To do so, I explore how generational identities are socially constructed over time, which sub-identities influence leaders of different generations and what role generational identity plays in organisational leadership in practice. The empirical study is still ongoing, and I currently find myself in the process of iterative data analysis. Reflexivity and paradigmatic open-mindedness are important pillars of my research and have inspired this developmental paper, in which I dare to look beyond my main constructionist/interpretivist paradigmatic approach and theorise generational identity in organisations from a critical perspective.

Until the discussion/presentation at the conference I would like to further improve the structure and preciseness of my submission. I am considering to briefly introduce identity theorising traditions. Furthermore, I will include some of my own soon available empirical findings.

1 Introduction

The topic of generational diversity and identity in the workplace remains highly current and is of strategic importance for organisations (Malik and Shahid, 2024; Wang and Duan, 2025). Leadership in such a setting comes with unique challenges which need to be recognised, understood and addressed (Urlick, 2022). Nevertheless, the concept of ‘generations’ is a contested one (Ravid, Costanza and Romero, 2025). Scientific criticism includes the issue of confounding variables, weak or even wrong empirical evidence and ‘myths’ surrounding the topic – and yet it remains omnipresent in the workplace and is frequently used to explain different day-to-day observations (Rudolph *et al.*, 2021). Even critical researchers do recognise that people believe in and use generational identities (Ravid, Costanza and Romero, 2025). How can it be, that this belief in ‘generations’ is so prevalent in the organisational discourse and to a lesser extent in academia, despite the beforementioned (and at least partially) justified counterarguments?

To answer this question, it is noteworthy that intergenerational relationships are frequently connected to the theme of identity conflict (Drury and Fasbender, 2024; Joshi, Dencker and Franz, 2011; Richards, Becker and Stollings-Holder, 2024; Wang and Duan, 2025). It has been argued that associated differences bear the risk of lowering employee and management engagement and *vice versa*, that the successful management of such can lead to a more positive work culture and higher levels of engagement (Mahmoud *et al.*, 2021). Organisations can draw on a variety of strategies to tackle intergenerational diversity to avoid or at least reduce conflict (Malik and Shahid, 2024).

Both the emergence of conflicts based on generational identities and the organisational need to tackle them seem logical and straightforward. But: Are we asking the right questions? Already in the ancient Rome some leaders followed a strategy of “*divide et impera*” – divide and rule (Ish-Shalom, 2021; Rabello, 2024). And even today – 2000 years later – this approach has not become obsolete, but seems to be of increasing relevance for today’s (geo-)political leaders (Bäcker and Rak, 2022; Geri, 2024). This is also true for the domestic sphere, for left-wing politicians and right-wing politicians alike – the key word here is ‘identity politics’ (Pande, 2025). Making policy on behalf or against cohorts with a presumably shared identity has become common, may it be strengthening the rights of people who identify as LGBTQI+ or announcing mass deportations of people with a Hispanic identity. In fact, populists around the world resort to this principle (Novais, 2024; van Beek, 2022). The European political landscape is not immune to this development either. The Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) or the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands are examples of the new populist right, for whom ‘unity’ is not a top priority on the agenda – a concerning development.

So why shouldn’t company leaders also use this logic? It might be naïve to assume that generational identities simply develop over time and that all organisations are interested in taking countermeasures to tackle generational conflict. Rather, a critical researcher may wonder: Can organisational leaders benefit from generational tensions in their workforce and do therefore appreciate or even foster such division?

2 Theoretical foundations

2.1 Critical research paradigm

It is fundamentally important for researchers to be self-reflective with regard to their philosophical assumptions and the research paradigm within which they situate their work (Omodan, 2024; William, 2024). Most (quantitative) business and management researchers belong to the objectivist/functionalist side of the paradigmatical spectrum, to whereas qualitative research is frequently associated with subjectivism/interpretivism (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). However, some scientists advocate another paradigmatical stream: The critical/transformational one, which advocates a different perspective on the matters of knowledge construction and individual participation in the process (McKee, 2022). It is concerned with social issues at various levels (e.g. social, economic, political) and the resulting consequences such as social oppression or conflict (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). It is particularly interested in power relations and bringing change, rather than just describing the status quo (Ashgar, 2013). Guba and Lincoln (1994) who are commonly understood as the founders of the critical approach in qualitative research define the aim of such inquiry as:

“(...) the critique and transformation of social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender structures that constrain and exploit humankind, by engagement in confrontation, even conflict” (p. 113).

So why should we pay attention to the critical research paradigm? Because the approach has been mostly neglected in identity research in the past (Brown, 2019). That was at least a shortcoming, I would even call it a mistake. Critical researchers ask completely different questions than constructionist or positivist ones, potentially leading to valuable new findings. While a positivist researcher might be interested in observing or measuring generational identities and differences, a constructionist may try to find out how they develop through social interactions over time. A critical researcher asks: Who might benefit from differences between generations? Are employers interested in keeping up tensions to their own benefit? How can this be resolved? From a critical perspective it could be assumed that organisations purposefully try to divide their workforce for reasons of power and control.

2.2 Divide and rule

In an economic sense the theory of *divide et impera* or divide and rule roughly refers to the idea that a single agent exploits differences between the members of a group and abuses their coordination problems (Posner, Spier and Vermeule, 2010). Interestingly, very similar approaches can be found in literature, which was part of the standard repertoire of company executives until only a few years ago: Sun Tzu's “*The Art of War*” and Machiavelli's “*The Prince*”. Therefore, it is not very surprising that Case and Maner (2014) found proof of corresponding leadership behaviour in business. They discovered that some leaders would divide and thereby weaken their own teams to safeguard their own position of power. Fostering such division based on identity/intergenerational conflict can be a veritable option.

2.3 Intergenerational conflict in organisations

The topic of intergenerational conflict has received widespread attention in academic circles as a direct consequence of ever more generations being in the workplace together (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2022). There have presumably never before been four generations

(Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z) in the workplace simultaneously (Lewis and Wescott, 2017). Potential issues are manifold and can have very distinct causes. Urick *et al.* (2016) tried to address the different types of conflict empirically, identifying three distinct categories: Value-based tension, behaviour-based tension and identity-based tension. Of most potential for this evolving research stream is the third category.

2.3.1 Value- and behaviour-based tension

Urick *et al.* (2016) found that intergenerational conflict can be rooted in contrasting values concerning such topics as openness towards change, religion or politics. Valickas and Jakštaitė (2017) discovered further dissimilarities with regard to organisational loyalty (which decreases with every generation), differences in work motivation (e.g. competitive salary vs. calm job environment) as well as deviating demands towards one's superiors. One potential cause of behaviour-based tension is technological change, as resilience and change dynamics differ between generations (Moore *et al.*, 2024). Other reasons for such tension include differences in communication and the discussion of 'earned vs. entitled': While older generations may feel that they had to work hard for what they achieved in life, younger generations expect to also get / achieve these things without putting in as much work and retaining a healthy work-life-balance (Urick *et al.*, 2016).

2.3.2 Identity-based tension

The third and most relevant category of intergenerational tension has its roots in the intersection of generations and identity. Despite not finding clear patterns, Urick *et al.* (2016) raise the idea of some generations being potentially more collectivistic and others being more individualistic. What they did find proof for is the salience of one or more identities: The younger generations understood themselves to be defined through multiple different identities, to whereas they stated that work identity was apparently most important for the older generations. Participants from the older generations understood both their own cohort and younger generations to define themselves through multiple identities.

2.3.3 Evaluation

The introduced categories of generational differences in organisations are highly useful. However, I am left with mixed feelings regarding the meaningfulness of related previous research. Urick *et al.* (2016) talk about "younger generations" and "older generations" in their study, with the samples only comprising people born between 1976 and 1987 respectively 1934 and 1965. The latter seems especially questionable: One may wonder how an age range of 31 years within a single sample can possibly allow for the prioritisation of a generational identity over the myriad of other possible identifiers an individual could adopt or have imposed upon themselves. Valickas and Jakštaitė (2017) utilise a more granular age classification – which should, by the way, only ever be seen as a means to an end in generational research – but solely rely on a quantitative survey. It is questionable whether such a 'distant' and one-dimensional approach can do justice to the complexity of generations.

Furthermore, there are several other aspects that require consideration. Hierarchical role identities / occupancy could be one of them: Younger generations will eventually try to get into powerful positions within their organisations, which are often (still) occupied by workers from older generations (Joshi, Dencker and Franz, 2011). But the fight for

scarce resources does not stop here – monetary matters could also lead to issues. The more demanding younger generations are monetary-wise, the less an organisation might be able to spend on its older employees.

3 Potential benefits for organisations

So, how could organisations profit from the beforementioned tensions/conflicts? A main argument could be what all companies in a (neoliberal) capitalist system care about: Reducing cost and increasing profits. In times of scarcity, older generations may speak in favour of short-term contracts and the reduction of retirement benefits for people new to the company to whereas younger people may argue that older senior employees produce the highest (salary) cost and should be laid-off (Joshi, Dencker and Franz, 2011). One might think of it this way: If employees from all generations come together and organise resistance – realising their class/socio-economic identification and for example founding a union – they can apply much more pressure on their organisation to refrain from wage cuts or redundancies. If they however work against each other, it is easy for an organisation to target a specific generation, when having the support of other generations to do so. Or they make a “generous” offer at the cost of all generations – e.g. cutting retirement benefits for newcomers and laying off some senior employees without having to expect strong resistance.

Another reason could be that rivalry between groups may lead to higher levels of engagement and people trying to outperform each other. If for example the younger generation was given a real chance to take away powerful positions from older occupants, this could lead to a willingness of working longer, harder and more efficiently – on both sides.

However, the main intention is probably what already the Roman empire, the British empire and so many others had in mind as well: Increased levels of control. The more the cohorts focus on their differences and fighting one another, the easier they can be steered by their organisations.

4 Conclusion

(Generational) Identities may be purposefully abused by organisational leaders. From a critical point of view, organisations have incentives to foster such tensions rather than resolve them: Monetary- and control-wise. Yet, it should not be forgotten that such strategies come with major risks. If the own workforce becomes too divided, this bears the potential to completely cripple business operations. Divisions in the workforce may lead to reduced levels of trust and collaboration, but also higher levels of sickness and turnover. It may be summarised as follows: Organisations and their leaders can benefit short-term but will suffer long-term. Nevertheless, it seems like a good idea to keep the critical approach to generational identities and cohort-differences in mind, even when situating one’s own research in a different paradigm.

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