

Generations at Work:
A Phronetic Approach to Aged and Generational Scholarship

by

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship and the popular press alike assert that, within the workplace and the world, there are distinct generational groups who are hallmarked by fundamental differences. Generational scholarship, undergirded by the priori assumption that generational differences must be managed, has become a well traversed field despite very little empirical evidence to substantiate the claims made about the attitudes, values, and beliefs of these purported generational cohorts. Scholars debate the veracity of generational characteristics, but few have taken critical approaches and noted the absence of theory and meta-discourse in the field. All the while, the over-simplified stereotypes are perpetuated and employed in making fundamental decisions about the lives and work of the old and the young. In this dissertation, I present a grounded qualitative and phronetic study that offers a framework for a more nuanced approach to generational scholarship. Specifically, I employ qualitative methods and take a phronetic approach to examine young professionals' (a) sensemaking of generational constructs and (b) identification/disidentification with generational archetypes. This dissertation reveals the ways in which participants made sense of popular generational archetypes as stereotypes or generalizations that exist in broad contexts of media and culture but are unconsidered in the workplace. Further, in the context of work, participants demonstrated very limited identification or disidentification with popular generational archetypes. Despite this, participants created and enacted generational differences in their workplaces based on age and tenure in the industry through the development of emergent archetypes. Methodologically, this dissertation demonstrates the utility of more emic approaches to

generational scholarship and evidences the need for situated and needs based approaches. Theoretically, this dissertation demonstrates the utility of sensemaking and identification in generational scholarship. Moreover, the insights gleaned from these frameworks illustrate the need for the critical examinations in the field, and meta-discourse about our assumptions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the field of organizational studies, generational scholarship is a relatively new area of research. The foundations of the field were laid by Karl Mannheim (1952) who asserted that individuals are likely to be deeply affected by significant economic, cultural, and political climates and events during their formative years (Mannheim, 1952; Ryder, 1965). Mannheim posited that individuals who shared a social historical context could thus be considered a social group (Longman, 1987; Mannheim, 1952). Generational research received some attention over the course of the following four decades; however, generational scholarship as it exists today found its footing in the early 1990s with the publication of *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584-2069* (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Strauss & Howe's (1991) Generational Theory, by many considered a seminal theory in the field, drew a great deal of attention in both scholarly and popular conversation with its imagining that every 20 or so years, a new wave of cultural contemporaries appear who share attitudes, values, and beliefs. While Generational Theory itself does not appear as frequently as it once did, contemporary generational writing is very much invested in the notion that these generational groups exist, possess particular traits, and present distinct challenges to existing organizations (see Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010; Myers & Davis, 2012; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Thomas, Hardy, Cutcher, & Ainsworth, 2014; Twenge, 2010; Twenge, Campbell, & Hoffman, 2010). Thus, the proliferation of generational difference scholarship has led to the prototypical

generational identity constructs of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials – categories that have become firmly a part of contemporary discourse within not only scholarship and formal organizations but within the home and school.

Work on generational differences has found increasing prominence among organizational scholars over the past several decades. Of late, however, the very notion of generations and the field of generational studies have received an increasing amount of criticism as scholars query the salience of generational characteristics in light of the limitations of empirical data supporting distinctions put forth by the popular press. Some scholars have sought to study the prevalence of these traits and argue that they are either poorly constructed or in some cases not as prevalent as others have reported (see Costanza et al., 2012, Costanza et al., 2015, Edge, 2014; Deal et al., 2010; Lyons & Kuron, 2014 Myers & Davis, 2012; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Parry & Urwin, 2011). The dearth of empirical data to substantiate the notion of generational cohorts has lead others to go even further and argue that there may not be a generational there, there (Lyons & Kuron, 2014 Thomas, Hardy, Cutcher, & Ainsworth, 2014).

While it can be argued that as we age we might indeed adapt our individual orientations, preferences and values, it is by no means clear that this adds up to distinct generational groupings. It may, instead, be due to the graduated and experiential variations that arise during an individual's lifetime. In fact, there is very little conclusive evidence to back up the popular appeal of distinct generational categories, with studies failing to demonstrate the noted attributes of different generations (Parry & Urwin, 2011). Attributing the significance of age in

organizations to generational categories in this manner reduces the complexity of organizing to simplistic clichés, which ‘have their occasional place in everyday shorthand but ... should play no part in the design and execution of workplace policies’ (Fineman, 2011, p. 54) for a number of reasons. (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 1576)

While the debate continues as to whether generational groupings as they are commonly discussed exist or not, generational discourse generated by the field nevertheless leads to individuals being imposed with “age-stereotyped assumptions [that] limit individuals’ discursive and material choices, locking them into age-related subject positions” (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 1577). Young people entering the workforce today are thus faced with coworkers and manager, who, having read about the recent study on Generation Y in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, reach conclusions about who these young people are, and what they can and cannot do. These challenges faced by young people entering the workforce, and similarly older people looking to remain in or exit the work force, are, in essence, the impetus for this dissertation.

As many of the scholars who have offered critiques of the field have noted, the problems with generational scholarship go beyond simply the validity of claims regarding characteristics, but rather the very axiological, epistemological, and ontological nature of the field. For many of these scholars, the field is impaired by the absence of meta-discourse. That is to say, if one wants to make a positive contribution to the field, and to the lives of those affected by ongoing generational scholarship, then one needs to go further than simply trying to disprove the findings of the most recently published study.

Thus, in this project, I set forth to catalyze discussion about the field by moving away from the quantitative and essentialist status quo and instead take a qualitative and phronetic approach to generational scholarship. Accordingly, and in line with criticisms raised by the aforementioned scholars, this project begins by taking a step back and questioning the salience or even existence of generational discourse for those in organizations. Through this dissertation, I hope to develop a new (more positive and forward-minded) tone for the scholarly conversation on generations that addresses the realities of generational narratives in the workforce. As such, this project has two central goals: to garner an emic understanding of how participants understand age and generations in their workplace, and to understand if and how participants identify or disidentify with aged and generational archetypes. In accordance with these goals, and the largely exploratory nature of this project, I will couple two theoretical frameworks in an effort to elucidate salience of generational constructs in the day-to-day lives of those in the world of work; Weick's (1995) Sensemaking and Scott, Corman, and Cheney's (1998) Structural Model of Identification.

Dissertation Preview

This chapter was designed to orient the reader by presenting both the foci and boundaries of this dissertation. In addition, I presented the two central goals of this project and the theoretical framework that will be employed. In Chapter Two, I present a literature review of aged and generational scholarship. I first look to the original conceptualization of generations as a site of sociological study in 1923 and chart the development of the field in the past century. I then move to present a survey of more

contemporary generational scholarship and then detail the critiques made of extant research. In reviewing this literature I outline the contributions that a qualitative, and more grounded approach to aged and generational research could make to the field as a whole. In Chapter Three, I present the four specific research questions that guide the project as well as detailing the theoretical framework of this dissertation. In the pursuit of more qualitative, and grounded research I present Sensemaking and Identification as valuable frameworks in eliciting emic understandings and perspectives. In Chapter Four, I outline the research methods and procedures I employed in the pursuit of addressing this project's central goals and research questions. In this chapter I include specific discussion of the site of study, sampling, participants, researcher role, data collection procedures, and data analysis. In Chapter Five, I explore the findings of this study and consider the meaning and experiences of age to young professionals in media and communications industry in Sydney, Australia. In the first half of Chapter Five, I present the key ways in which participants made sense of aged and generational constructs in the context of their work. In the second half of Chapter Five, I present participants' processes of identification and disidentification with both existing and emergent aged and generational constructs. Finally, in Chapter Six, I present a discussion and conclusion of this study's findings by attending to the research questions, discussing the study's contributions, limitations, and future directions, then offering concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation seeks to establish a new and more grounded approach to generational scholarship. To evidence why this is necessary, the second half of this chapter will present a discussion of current generational scholarship in terms of its foundations, premises, and goals and discuss theoretical and methodological critiques of this work. Prior to this, however, the first half of this chapter will present a history of generational scholarship and consider ways in which scholars have considered aged and generational issues over the past century. Specifically, I will present the conceptual foundations of the area and look to see how different fields of scholarship considered generations before the current proliferation of generational studies.

History of Generational Scholarship

Generational scholarship, as it is typically undertaken today, can trace its roots to Karl Mannheim's (1923) seminal essay, *The Problem of Generations* (Pilcher, 1994). Later republished in 1952, Mannheim asserted that members of a generational cohort could and should be understood as cultural contemporaries and thus scholars should consider age as an important sociological variable in their endeavors. In his essay, Mannheim (1952) worked to consolidate what he believed to be a dichotomy in the field of sociology constituted by two schools of thought; French positivism and German romantic-historicism.

These two schools represent two antagonistic types of attitudes towards reality, and the different ways in which they approach the problem reflect this contrast of basic attitudes. The methodological ideal of the Positivists consisted in reducing their problems to quantitative terms; they sought a quantitative formulation of factors ultimately determining human existence. The second school adopted a qualitative approach, firmly eschewing the clear daylight mathematics and introverting the whole problem (Mannheim, 1952, p. 276)

While these two schools of thought were emblematic of much broader philosophical debates at the time, Mannheim (1952) argued that both were ultimately underpinned by distinct perspectives regarding the nature of time and reality. French positivism assumed a single reality wherein time was external and linear. Thus, by measuring the attitudes and attributes of each generation, and then comparing each generation with those before and after it, one could chart human existence. Mannheim (1952) describes this approach:

They all were anxious to find a general law to express the rhythm of historical development, based on the biological law of the limited lifespan of man and the overlap of new and old generations. The aim was to understand the changing patterns of intellectual and social currents directly in biological terms, to construct the curve of the progress of the human species in terms of its vital substructure. In the process, everything, so far as possible, was simplified: a schematic psychology provided that the parents should always be a conservative force. (p. 278)

Mannheim (1952) argued that the positivistic position of the French was likely related to a national heritage of turning points and notable change, i.e., the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Within this framework, each generation represented the next installment of a culture that was a product of all that came before it. In contrast, German romantic-historicism assumed reality was subjectively lived and that time did not exist outside of an individual's experience of it. Within this framework, a generation was group of individuals who had similar attitudes towards their society in that time and thus had an entelechy of its own (Mannheim, 1952).

Different generations live at the same time. But since experienced time is the only real time, they must all in fact be living in qualitatively quite different subjective eras. Everyone lives with people of the same and of different ages, with a variety of possibilities of experience facing them all alike. But for each the "same time" is a different time-that is, it represents a different period of his self, which he can only share with people of his own age. Every moment of time is therefore in reality more than a point like event - it is a temporal volume having more than one dimension, because it is always experienced by several generations at various stages of development. (p. 282)

Mannheim (1952) looked to consolidate these branches of generational research by presenting a third framework within the sociology of knowledge. Mannheim (1952) argued that generational location "points to 'certain definite modes of behavior, feeling, and thought' (Mannheim, 1952, p. 291), and the formative experiences during the time of youth are highlighted as the key period in which social generations are formed" (Pilcher,

1994, p. 482-483). Generally speaking, this is the premise of and operationalization with which most scholars engage in studies of generations today. In his paper, however, Mannheim (1952) went further and presented four caveats that he argued are fundamental to generational scholarship. The first is that “in order to share generational location in a sociological meaningful sense, individuals must be born within the same historical and cultural context and be exposed to experiences that occur during their formative adult years.” (Pilcher, 1994, p. 490) The second caveat is that a generation does not exist as a concrete group or a community in the same way that an organization such as a family or tribe does. Rather, he argues that a generation should be understood as a social location in a fashion more similar to class, race, or religion (Mannheim, 1952). The third caveat considers the issue of generational consciousness, i.e., the affinity of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Mannheim argues that generational consciousness requires notable common and shared experience. As a part of this, Mannheim highlighted that the rate at which distinct generations appear is closely linked with the rate of change in society. Finally, and arguably most important, Mannheim stresses that “contemporaneous individuals are further internally stratified: by their geographical and cultural location; by their actual as opposed to potential participation in the social and intellectual currents of their time and place; and by their differing responses to a particular situation so that there may develop opposing generational units” (Pilcher, 1994, p. 482-483). This caveat stresses that a generation is not a single amorphous group and highlights the importance of observers considering variation and differences amongst a generational cohort.

Generational scholarship today often ignores not only the complexity of Mannheim's (1952) original conceptualization, but socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-historical discussions more broadly. While generational scholarship is apparent in many fields, often the scope of work in each area is somewhat narrow and there is a distinct absence of meta-discourse regarding their respective paradigms. For example, sociologists have employed the generational cohort as a framework for understanding broader processes of youth resistance and changing social frameworks (Ryder, 1965). Historians have charted the Western tradition of youth and the young as agents of social change and being labeled as problematic when they engage in political movements (Heer, 1974). Ryder (1965) suggested that generational cohorts may be an excellent concept to frame the examination of social change by considering the way that each generation 'metabolizes' the social climate in which it develops.

Successive cohorts are differentiated by the changing content of formal education, by peer-group socialization, and by idiosyncratic historical experience. Young adults are prominent in war, revolution, immigration, urbanizations and technological change. Since cohorts are used to achieve structural transformation and since they manifest its consequences in characteristic ways, it is proposed that research be designed to capitalize on the congruence of social change and cohort identification. (Ryder, 1965, p. 843)

This conceptualization by Ryder (1965) encourages scholars to consider the ways in which individuals are shaped by their particular experience. Moreover, given the prominence of young adults in structural change, many scholars have considered cohort

identification in light of structural shifts in society. The prominent historian and sociologist Fredereich Heer (1974) suggested that one of the few discernible patterns throughout Western history is the way in which the young unfailingly find movements and platforms with which to query the ideology and status quo of the time and are subsequently met by the ridicule and resistance of their older contemporaries. Heer's book, *The Challenge of Youth* (1974), traces a history of youth movements from ancient Greece through to the mid-late 20th century. Heer (1974) discusses the intellectual histories of the middle ages, the Renaissance, the reformation, the French revolution, and European romanticism – all of which, he argues, owe their beginnings to the frustrations and rebellions of the young. As Heer (1974) frames it, one of the few constants throughout western history is “the glimpses of young people in revolt” (Heer, 1974, p. 15). Specifically, Heer draws our attention to the way in which youth throughout history have been treated as a distinct cohort when acting in violations to expectations.

For thousands of years in human history, no one felt impelled to even define youth as a concept...Only when young people began to behave in a “problematic” way, when a distinct contrast between them and their elders became apparent, did the word youth come to be used generically (Heer, 1974, p. 7)

Moreover, Heer (1974) argued that in examining the aforementioned revolutions, we see predictable patterns of criticism from the old as society comes to cast its gaze at the young who repeatedly find themselves to be at “loggerheads as a whole, with an older generation as a counterforce to be denounced as disrespectful, rebellious, and revolutionary” (Heer, 1974, p. 121). Heer (1974) argued that it is no coincidence that we

see the young as prominent faces and leaders of social change – particularly when it comes to notions of work, and discussions of how people should spend their lives.

The industrial society of today demands from everyone the ability to adapt to its technical requirements. Those who cannot pull their weight are eliminated – that is to say, they lose their jobs. Young people tend to object in this regimented way of living. Having seen their fathers enslaved and sucked dry in a lifetime of industrial service, they are not anxious to follow suit (Heer, 1974, p. 123-124)

Throughout his book, Heer (1974) examined the contemporary political landscape of the 1960s and 1970s. Casting his eye on the United States, he discusses the way in which much of the revolutionary action that was happening including the likes of “hippies,” the Civil Rights movement, and second-wave of feminism were not only spearheaded by the young but also branded as anti-American. There is something about the young, he argues, that leads them to push for societal change, and something about the old which is frustrated at these attempts at revolt. Finally, Heer (1974) posited that “it is true that, as youth increasingly takes on the status of a separate social class, the generation war will either supplant or at the least complement the class war” (Heer, 1974, p. 217). This notion is one that found a particular foothold in the fields of gerontology and economics in the 1970s and 1980s. Longman (1987) suggested that where once relationships were maintained between the old and the young within the family due to fiscal prudence (i.e., the old and young were at different points reliant on each other to provide support) this may no longer be the case in the U.S. due to the establishment of the Social Security Fund (SSF). In addition, Longman (1987) argued that as the

American population ages, and the elderly make up more of the voting population, social and economic policy becomes politically divisive as the older population requires notably different social infrastructure from the young. A prime example of how aging populations present new political challenges to society can be found in the public debate in the United States regarding the viability of the SSF as the ratio of workers to beneficiaries becomes increasingly unbalanced (Longman, 1987). For Longman (1987) the implications of the SSF failing to provide financial support for retired Americans is that the old would become disassociated from the young as older generations are no longer being reliant on their descendants (Longman, 1987; Wihbey, 2011). This discussion came to the fore in the field of gerontology during the 1980s. Many scholars began to debate the political ramifications of individuals living longer and posited a time wherein a level of social disconnection between generations may form that would in turn lead to decreased social empathy (Butler, 1975; Davis & Van Den Oever, 1981; Hayes-Bautista et al., 1988; Longman, 1987). Longman (1987) argued that these economic concerns would have long-term political ramifications and predicted a time wherein the old and the young required substantially different social infrastructure (such as medicine and education), that would, in turn, lead to an us versus them discourse and thereby exacerbate generational tensions.

While I would not go as far as to argue that youth have found themselves cast as a separate social class as Heer (1974) or Longman (1987) suggested they might, it is clear that considerations and concerns regarding the role of youth are an enduring narrative in Western history. Moreover, I believe that this history of considering youth is essential

when examining generational issues as it offers some explanatory power in terms of how and why discussions of the youth of today i.e., Millennials, take place as they do.

Section Summary

In this section I have presented of brief history of generational studies in order to draw attention to both the complexity of the original conception of generations as well as the ways in which generational issues were considered prior to the advent of Generational Theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991) and the current interest in generational distinctions in the workplace. Specifically, my intent with this section was to illustrate that the complexity apparent in Mannheim's (1952) original conceptualization, and in earlier considerations of generations, remain largely unaddressed in contemporary scholarship. The consideration of historical, economic, and political concerns should be critical to contemporary generational scholarship because they help us understand the popularity and presence of generational constructs and offer insight into enduring, and perhaps essentialist, critiques of the young. Generational constructs often undergird public discourse critiquing of the young because old(er) members of a social system are typically in authority positions and possess relevant institutional resources. That is to say, generational constructs are in many ways comforting in that they offer us a rational understanding of who we are by presenting us with simplistic cause and effect relationships. Moreover, it seems unlikely that the issues that Heer (1974) notes as being prominent throughout the writings and movements of youth throughout the last 2500 years happen to be nearly identical to the critiques put forward of Millennials today or those put forward of Generation X, 20 years ago. Put simply, there is some degree of

conflation in contemporary scholarship between what it means to be a Millennial and what it means to be young due to the theoretical and methodological complexities of controlling the latter when studying the former. As Bector, Walker, & Jones-Farmer (2014) describe:

Scholars have argued that it is difficult to separate the effects of age and generation (Macky et al., 2008; Twenge & Campbell, 2008), and this is a challenge for all generational research (Parry & Urwin, 2011). For example, including age as a covariate is inappropriate because it has a naturally high correlation with generational cohort (Egri & Ralston, 2004). Further, due to the partial nature of coefficients in statistical models, it is not possible to interpret the effect of generation while holding age constant. (p. 181)

This raises several epistemological issues for scholars today, i.e., where do the critiques of the young end, and where do critiques of Millennials begin? Or, how is a Millennial in the 2010s different from a Gen Xer in the 1990s? These are, of course, the questions that contemporary generational scholarship seeks to answer. Thus, in the following section, I will consider contemporary generational scholarship more closely. Specifically, I will first discuss extant research and then present critiques of this body of research.

Contemporary Generational Scholarship

Generational scholarship as it stands today rose to prominence in the 1990s. The seminal Generational Theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991) posited that there are discrete

cohort groups of individuals born within the span of approximately 20 years who have common beliefs and behaviors due to shared experiences during their formative years. According to Generational Theory, members of a generation would likely have some sense of perceived membership to that generation, due to a shared understanding that these critical experiences. The table below (Table 1) presents a relatively broad overview of the typical attribute associations made with each of the generations currently considered to be present in the workplace.

Table 1
Summary of Generations and Generational Attributes

Generation	Born	Common Descriptors
Traditionalists	1925-1942	Preferring job security over entrepreneurship, cautious, unimaginative, unadventurous, unoriginal, facilitators and helpmates, arbiters but not leaders, causeless, without outward turmoil, inward-focused, sandwiched in between the GI and Boomer Generations.
Baby Boomers	1943-1960	Much heralded but failing to meet expectations, smug, self-absorbed, intellectually arrogant, socially mature, culturally wise, critical thinkers, spiritual, religious, having an inner fervor, radical, controversial, non-conformist, self-confident, self-indulgent.
Generation X	1961-1981	Cynical, distrusting, bearing the weight of the world, fearful, lost, wasted, incorrigible, in-your-face, frenetic, shocking, uneducated, shallow, uncivil, mature for their age, pragmatic, apathetic and disengaged politically, independent, self-reliant, fatalistic, mocking under-achieving
Millennials	1982-2004	Optimists, cooperative, team players, trusting, accepting of authority, rule-followers, smart, civic-minded, special, sheltered, confident, achieving, pressured, conventional.

(Hitchcock, 2012, p. 17)

Howe and Strauss (1991) looked to present a generational retelling of [Anglo]-American history and charted generations as far back as 1433. In doing so, the authors claimed to have discovered an enduring sequence of generational archetypes; Artist (i.e., Silent Generation), Prophet (i.e., Baby Boom), Nomad (i.e., Generation X), and Hero (i.e., Millennial).

Artist generations are born *during a great war or other historical crisis*, a time when great worldly perils boil off the complexity of life and public consensus, aggressive institutions, and personal sacrifice prevail...*Prophet* generations are born *after a great war or other crisis*, during a time of rejuvenated community life and consensus around a new societal order... *Nomad* generations are born *during a spiritual awakening*, a time of social ideals and spiritual agendas when youth-fired attacks break out against the established institutional order... *Hero* generations are born *after a spiritual awakening*, during a time of individual pragmatism, self-reliance, laissez faire, and national (or sectional or ethnic) chauvinism. (Lifecourse Associates: Generational Archetypes, 2016, np)

Generations (Howe & Strauss, 1991) and its Generational Theory received a great deal of media coverage and popularity in the 1990s. Al Gore reportedly sent a copy to each member of Congress and referred to the book as “the most stimulating book on American history that he had ever read.” (Hoover, 2009, np). Generational discourse soon rose to prominence as the popular press and scholars alike began to query the role of

Generational Theory at work (Burke, 1994; Filipczak, 1993; Howe & Strauss, 1993; Lankard, 1995).

While specific references to Generational Theory itself appear far less frequently than they once did, the proliferation of generational difference scholarship has canonized the (a) prototypical generational identity constructs of Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials, and (b) the importance of understanding and managing generational differences. This line of inquiry was, and is, hallmarked by the distillation of difference, underpinned by the notion that “organizations and managers who understand these deeper generational differences will be more successful in the long run as they manage their young employees, finding ways to accommodate differences in some cases and exert constructive counter pressure in others” (Twenge & Campbell, 2008, p. 873). The a priori assumption of this body of literature is that individuals from the same generation have similar “attitudes, preferences and orientations to work” (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 1576). It is this assumption, and the ramifications of the research invested in it, that has led to an increased amount of debate and criticism over the past 25 years. In the following section I will present a detailed discussion of these critiques.

Critiques of Extant Generational Literature

Many scholars have queried the accuracy and utility of generational scholarship given the scant empirical evidence that generational difference, or even generations as we know them, exist. The data that surround Millennials, for example, has been described as “confusing at best and contradictory at worst” (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010, p191). Contemporary generational research paints Millennials as: less likely to display

organizational commitment (Busch, Venkitachalam, & Richards, 2008); having more casual attitudes towards employment (Twenge, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Keith Campbell, & Bushman, 2008); wanting it all (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010); more devoted to personal goals than occupational/vocational/organizational goals (Busch et al., 2008; Hill, 2008; Twenge & Campbell, 2008); narcissistic (Twenge et al., 2008); the most high maintenance workforce in the history of work (Tulgan, 2009); deficient in basic working and communication skills (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011); and deserving of the monikers GenMe, GenY?, and GenWhine (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010; Twenge, 2014). At the same time, several scholars have found the inverse and present Millennials as possessing many positive attributes such as being the most productive and hardworking generation and demonstrating positive or naturally optimistic attitudes (Deal et al., 2010; Tulgan, 2009). Millennials have also been presented as especially entrepreneurial and as active change agents given their digital native status (Blackburn, 2011; Deal et al., 2011; Hershatter & Epstein 2010). In addition, some scholars have suggested that Millennials are open communicators who frequently interact with peers and supervisors (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). To further complicate these data, many studies have had difficulty relating generational characteristics with organizational behaviors and outcomes (see: Becton et al., 2014 Costanza et al., 2015; Deal et at, 2010; Edge, 2014; Kowske et al., 2014 Lyons & Kuron, 2014). As recently highlighted by Costanza et al. (2015), the confusing and contradictory body of research is unsurprising given the fundamental issues in the field that remain unresolved.

The fact is that there is (a) minimal empirical evidence actually supporting generationally based differences (Costanza, Fraser, Badger, Severt, & Gade, 2012; Giancola, 2006; Parry & Urwin, 2010), (b) ample evidence supporting alternate explanations for differences that have been observed (Elder, 1994, 1998; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Ng & Feldman, 2010; Roberts, Walton, Veichtbauer, 2006), (c) no sufficient explanation for why such differences should even exist (Parry & Urwin, 2010), and (d) a lack of support for the effectiveness of interventions designed to address any such differences. If there are perceptions of generationally based differences but little evidence or theory backing them up, what is going on? Are there really any generationally based differences in the workplace? Is there a *there* there? (Costanza, 2015, p. 309)

It is clear that the field of generational scholarship remains troubled by methodological issues of measurement as well as theoretical questions regarding the nature of generations. In the following sections I will address the discussions that exist around both of these concerns.

Methodological Issues. The primary challenge in undertaking studies of generational similarities and differences is knowing whether differences in attitudes, values, and behaviors are a result of generation, age, life-stage, maturation, or environment (Deal et al., 2010). Lyons et al. (2014) refer to these as generational confounds “whereby any purported generational differences might be plausibly explained by age-related effects (i.e., maturation), cohort effects (i.e., formative context) or the

conditions of the historical period in which data are gathered” (p. S142). Several scholars have suggested that large-scale longitudinal and cross-cultural data could conceivably help to disentangle these variables (Deal et al., 2010). To date, however, such work is yet to be undertaken, and the two prominent research designs for examining generational differences at work are cross-sectional designs and cross-temporal designs (Kowske et al., 2014).

In a cross-sectional study, responses from multiple generations are taken at once and then compared and contrasted. Lyons et al. (2014) suggest that this is a very weak form of evidence given its inability to control for confounding variables such as age, life stage, maturation, and environment. In a cross-temporal study, responses are from separate groups of individuals, taken in separate decades for example, are compared and contrasted (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge, 2000; Twenge, 2014). Twenge, in particular, is an advocate of time-lag study wherein data is taken from a similar population of individuals across several decades. In theory, this holds age as a constant and allows an apples to apples comparison (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). While cross-temporal studies are in theory quite promising, they most often rely on published data with inconsistent sampling and measurement because they are drawn from a raft of disparate studies and fields (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Another form of longitudinal data is to consider retrospective accounts, though these accounts are notably susceptible to recall errors (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

Concerns regarding the methodological limitations of the data in accounting for the aforementioned confounds would appear to have been circulating since work in the

field began. For example, as critiques of Generation X began to rise in the scholarly and popular presses in the early 1990s (Burke, 1994; Filipczak, 1993; Howe & Strauss, 1993; Lankard, 1995), so did stories and papers asking whether the noted trends were more about being young than they were being Generation Xers (Burke, 1994; Fay, 1993).

The descriptions of the new generation of young women and men (19 to 29 years) found in the popular literature are, of necessity, broad and sweeping. Such generalizations, by their very nature, do not apply to everyone in this age cohort. The usefulness of these broad descriptions is also limited by a few other issues. First, the portrayals of these groups by various writers contain contradictory features. Second, it was difficult to determine which characteristics are thought to be unique to this particular group of 19- to 29-yr.-olds and which factors are common to youth in general throughout recent history. Third, the descriptions need to take account of fast-moving but significant events in the larger environment (e.g., recession, down-sizing) which may affect attitudes, values, and aspirations.... One must also consider how different these 19- to 29-yr.-olds are from 19- to 29-yr.-olds of previous generations. Youth, historically, might always be a period of being different from the establishment. Some 20 years ago, Hall (1971) talked about a "new breed" of employee. There may actually be less to the Generation X phenomenon than meets the eye. (Burke, 1994, p. 560-561)

Times of particularly pronounced uncertainty can affect some members of a generational cohort differently than others – this is particularly evident in the case of fast-moving but significant events. According to Deal et al. (2010), there are several contexts,

such as that of the Global Financial Crisis, which invariably will have had different effects on different Millennials. They argue that those Millennials graduating college in 2006 would likely have very different expectations and attitudes towards employment and their careers than those who graduated in 2009 due to the economic crisis (Deal et al., 2010). Considering that the economic context in which one enters the workforce fundamentally affects long-term trajectories and earnings (Kahn, 2009), it seems curious that 2006 Millennials and 2009 Millennials remain, for the most part, a single group within generational scholarship. Other contexts that the authors argue would unavoidably affect behavior are workplace, industry, country, and religion. It is entirely possible, indeed probable, that the work experiences and practices of young people differ widely by region, occupation and class, and that the experiences of youth workers in Libya or Canada are likely to be quite different from those in China or Indonesia. This leads to a fundamental problem with longitudinal and cross-cultural data collection; measurement equivalence.

If fundamental differences in generations are a form of cultural differences, it would behoove researchers to pay attention to measurement equivalence among generations in much the same way they do respondents from different countries or cultures. To assume, for example, that survey items mean the same thing to all respondents without demonstrating measurement equivalence can result in faulty conclusions. (Deal et al., 2010, p. 197)

Not only do meanings and understandings differ between cultural spaces, but they are subject to change over time as well. As in the example of Millennials who graduated

during the Global Financial Crisis, the meaning of job security would likely have shifted a substantial in the relatively short space of a few years. Methodologically, such phenomena raise questions for researchers regarding how they make sense of shifting meaning.

Beyond the particular limitations of either cross-sectional designs or cross-temporal designs, there are additional general concerns in contemporary generational research. Social desirability bias is certainly a factor when one undertakes self-report surveying. In the case of work, participants would be aware that particular values would likely be viewed more positively such as preparedness to work overtime. An element of this, of course, is that senior members hold some power in deciding which attitudes, values, and beliefs are positive and which are negative.

Without large-scale, cross-cultural, and longitudinal empirical data, there is simply no way of disentangling confounding variables and thereby reaching clear conclusions about generational characteristics. Unsurprisingly, several scholars have cautioned practitioners and organizations against developing organizational practice based on generational research. Costanza et al. (2012) argue that organizations would be far better served engaging in needs-based assessments with their own employees as opposed to relying on the unsubstantiated generalizations associated with generational membership.

While many scholars who discuss this issue have some sense of what data is required – such as sampling intermittently over a series of decades, around the globe - the

resources required to undertake work that could account for the aforementioned variables falls beyond the scope of even the most generous grants, or even the lifetime of the most long-living scholars. Moreover, even if the resources existed to undertake such a piece of research, it may not be possible due to the way in which meaning and understandings shift and change over time. Moreover, several scholars have suggested that the lack of empirical evidence substantiating generational differences is not due to the absence of data but rather the priori assumption and theoretical underpinnings of the field (Costanza et al., 2012; Costanza et al., 2015; Edge, 2014; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Thomas et al., 2014). In the following section I will present a synthesis of these critiques in an effort to evidence why a more substantial paradigm shift, rather than simply more data, is required.

Theoretical Issues. Several scholars in the past few years have argued that the issues with generational scholarship lie not within the absence of data, but rather the very theoretical underpinnings of the field. One of the foremost criticisms made of generational scholarship is the way in which generational scholarship, by in large, ignores the “rich tradition of generational theory in the social sciences in favor of a purely empirical cohort-based approach to the phenomenon.” (Lyons & Kuron, 2014, p. S151). That is, despite many pieces of generational scholarship beginning their literature review with a citation of Mannheim (1952), almost none of them appear to employ his theoretical framework. Similarly, there is seemingly little interest in considering that derisive generational reports and studies may simply be a modern manifestation of the western tradition of criticizing the divergent views of youth (Heer, 1974). The complexity

and nuance presented in Mannheim's (1952) theoretical framework has been replaced by positivistic fixation often unfitting to the study of complex social constructs. The absence of longitudinal and cross-cultural data, accompanied by an almost total lack of attention to socio-historical, socio-economic, and socio-political factors, has led to an essentialist fixation that offers little more than a description of one generation juxtaposed against another. It is from this tautological tradition that scholars have come to 'know' and converse about Baby Boomers, Generation X'ers and Millennials within the context of work despite the lack of consensus in the field regarding who or what constitutes a generation (Becton & Farmer, 2014; Costanza et al., 2012, Costanza et al., 2015, Edge, 2014; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Thomas et al., 2014). At a basic level, there is some disagreement regarding the birth-year ranges for each generation as well as the monikers employed to describe them. However, what frequently goes unaddressed is the implication of the aforementioned methodological confounds. That is, decisions that scholars make regarding what variables they control for is fundamentally a decision about who is considered a part of a generation, and who is not. Thus, the inclusion or exclusion of variables such as age, life-stage, maturation, and environment are not simple matters. Moreover, Mannheim (1952) drew attention to the folly of cross-sectional approaches given that "generations take shape within a specific socio-historical location, making it inappropriate to super-impose the generational configuration of one society onto another" (Lyons & Kuron, 2014, p. S142). In other words, while cross-sectional approaches may work to compare like-for-like across generational groups, Mannheim (1952) argued that these methods can tell us little given that generations are embedded in their place in time.

This in turn leads me to consider some of the fundamental meta-theoretical issues in the field that by in large, go unaddressed.

Meta-Theoretical Issues. The a priori assumption of generational scholarship that generational differences are real, impactful, and need to be managed goes unquestioned despite little to no empirical evidence that this is the case (Becton & Farmer, 2014; Costanza et al., 2012, Costanza et al., 2015, Edge, 2014; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Thomas et al., 2014). All the while, generational discourse and narratives permeate discussions in the popular press and public spaces in a way that “classifies workers into narrow age-based behaviors and identities, arbitrarily delineates generational groups, and reduces the complex, dynamic and multifaceted nature of individual identities into homogenized, simplified clichés.” (Thomas et al., 2014, 2014, p. 1577) Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) suggest that generational stereotypes are apparent, and tempting, due to their utility as heuristics. In the workplace, generational stereotypes are cognitive shortcuts that allow people to make judgments about others based on the readily available data that is an individual’s apparent age (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015). Stereotypic attributes of a generation are typically somewhat broad (i.e., lazy or hard-working), and thus will invariably be evidenced as true once a member of that generation demonstrates that stereotypic attribute. In this sense, narratives of generational difference serve as a heuristic device for managers looking to understand why their interns act and behave differently than themselves (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015). Of course, the absurdity of generational narratives being employed at work to make managerial decisions can be highlighted if we simply replace the word generational with gendered, racial, or religious.

As Costanza & Finkelstein (2015) point out, the protections afforded by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII, and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 appear to be forgotten if policy making is done under the guise of generations rather than age.

From this perspective, there are important ramifications of those in positions of power laying claim to, and creating policies around, perceived identities of those entering or leaving their organizations (Thomas et al., 2014). Moreover, there is some degree of irony in seeing that the writing of Mannheim (1952), who worked to address notions of class struggles with contemporaries such as Horkheimer and Marcuse, has been appropriated by contemporary scholarship and industry to exert control over the young in the workplace. It is worth noting that while both the old and the young likely face some degrees of marginalization, those under 40 are not specifically afforded legal protection under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 in the USA. Despite this, the bio-essentialistic nature of generational scholarship is an inescapably ageist one that takes great liberties in asserting the identities, natures, and treatments for both young and old in organizations.

There are clear power issues at play in this situation, but few voices in the field have even called for critical generational scholarship at both the theoretical and meta-theoretical level let alone explored these issues in the field (see Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Myers & Davis, 2012; Lyons et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2014 for exceptions). Certainly, the role of generational discourse and the role of generational scholarship demands critical consideration given the claims it makes in regards to the very nature of people.

Bio-essentialized age-stereotyped assumptions limit individuals' discursive and material choices, locking them into age-related subject positions, while the reification of generational groups takes on a form of neo-positivist rationality to what is a socially constructed concept. Despite the lack of empirical evidence, flawed theoretical assumptions and ethical considerations, a social consensus around generational difference has nonetheless constructed an undeniably powerful and persuasive discourse that creates the very thing that it purports to describe (Thomas etl al., 2014, p. 1577)

Generational scholarship appears to be so swept up in its pursuit of constructing generational prototypes that it has forgotten that scholars are simply accumulating perspectives of one generation relative to another. That is to say, the data scholars have on any given generation speaks as much or more to the values, traits, and behaviors of other present generations than it does to anyone who belongs to the supposed generational archetype. In addition, there is a notable absence of discussion regarding the salience and resonance of generational constructs themselves in industry contexts - it is simply assumed that generational constructs are as important in the 'real world' as they are to us as scholars. In sum, I argue that the field of generational scholarship needs to engage in some degree of meta-discourse and consider new theoretical foundations that move away from etic reductionism and differentiation and, instead, emphasize more emic considerations of how those in the working world consider themselves, and those around them.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have presented an overview of generational scholarship to date. In the first half of the chapter I looked broadly at the history of generational scholarship and considered both its original conception in the work of Mannheim (1952) and then went on to consider how these issues have been referenced in other fields. In the second half of the chapter I looked specifically at contemporary generational scholarship and presented several important methodological, theoretical, and meta-theoretical critiques.

Despite Mannheim's (1952) emphasis on considering the complexity of generational cohorts, his caveats appear to go unheeded in contemporary research. I believe that the tautological state of extant generational scholarship amongst organizational scholars is due to the lack of meta-discourse about the complexity of the generational concept and that a grounded reimagining of generational scholarship could offer a framework for a more nuanced conception of generational identity. In the next chapter, I will present a theoretical framework that will guide a more grounded approach to understanding the salience of generational constructs in the day-to-day lives of those in the world of work.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As discussed in Chapter 2, while generational scholarship has increasingly risen to prominence within organizational studies over the past several decades, there remain several core theoretical and meta-theoretical issues that have, for the most part, remained unaddressed. As Lyons, et al. (2014), argue, “The time has come to abandon simple notions of birth cohorts as a source of workplace differences and to develop a more nuanced conception of generational identity and its impact on the workplace” (p. S153)

In an effort to pursue this nuanced conception, in this chapter I outline a theoretical framework for a more grounded, emic approach to generational scholarship that emphasizes the meanings and understandings present in the day-to-day lives of those in the workplace. To do so, I will present Weick’s (1995) conceptual approach to sensemaking as the first theoretical frame as it facilitates an emic approach to both existing and emergent discourse. I believe, however, that it would be somewhat naïve to take an entirely grounded approach given the presence of generational constructs and stereotypes in public discourse. Thus, I will employ a theoretical framework of identity and identification to understand if, how, and why individuals relate to existing and emergent generational constructs. Specifically, I will present Scott, Corman, and Cheney’s (1998) Structural Model of Identification given its emphasis on identification as a complex, multivalent, and contextual process.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a retrospective process of assigning meaning to reduce uncertainty in situations of varying levels of equivocality (Miller, 2014; Putnam & Mumby, 2013; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking, developed by Karl Weick (1995), is commonly defined by seven core properties. Specifically, sensemaking is grounded in identity constructions, is retrospective, is enactive of sensible environments, is social, is ongoing, is focused on and by extracted cues, and is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy.

The first core property of sensemaking highlights its grounding in identity and identification. Weick (1995) argued that who individuals think they are shapes the way they interact in any given social context. Further, Weick (1995) argues that individuals often plan and consider their actions via imagined social interaction wherein individuals consider how others could hypothetically respond. Self-conceptualization – and hence identity – is critical to these imagined interactions. Thus, identity is fundamental to sensemaking as one’s identity shapes interaction

The second core property of sensemaking is retrospection, which “captures the reality that people can know what they are doing only after they have done it” (p. 24). Retrospective sensemaking contrasts with more cognitive approaches in social science that assume thinking precedes (inter)action. That core component speaks to Weick’s (1995) adage of “How can I know what I think until I hear what I say?” (p. 12). In other

words, individuals attribute meaning and generate understandings of action and/or phenomena in reflection.

The third core component of sensemaking is enactment, a process wherein individuals organize experience. Enactment details the way in which people's actions are constrained by their environment. Thus, their actions in turn "produce part of the environment they face" (p. 32). Therefore, individuals are not so much in an environment as they are a part of it, as they produce and reproduce it.

The fourth component stipulates that sensemaking is a process embedded in social environments. Weick (1995) argued that "human thinking and social functioning... [are] essential aspects of one another" (p. 38). That is, it is paramount to understand that human agency and social context perpetually influenced one another. Thus, it is fundamental to consider that individuals' sensemaking as deeply contextual (Weick, 1995).

The fifth core component of sensemaking is that it is ongoing. This component emphasizes the idea that as "people are always in the middle of things" (p. 43), there is no stopping and starting of sensemaking. That is, as participants make sense of themselves and the world around them, these sensemaking efforts inform later sensemaking efforts (Weick, 1995).

The sixth core component of sensemaking is the emphasis and focus on extracted cues that speaks to the notion that individuals are "more likely to see sense that has already been made than to see the actual making of it" (p. 49). In other words, individuals

look to draw on existing, salient meaning and understandings in their sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

The seventh and final core component, sensemaking as driven by plausibility, states that individuals are more likely to look for sufficiency than for accuracy when making sense (p. 56). This component suggests that for individuals, the most optimal solution is that which sits well with them in the moment (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking provides a grounded frame for this project as a whole while drawing attention to the importance of considering cultural context in undertaking generational scholarship. Specifically, I believe that there are two main ways in which an understanding of how individuals make sense of generational constructs in real world settings could make a valuable contribution to the field. First, as discussed in the previous chapter, no data exist that can fully speak to whether or not the role and meaning of generations and generational cohorts varies in different cultural spaces be it a country, region, or even workplace. Second, relatively little work has been undertaken that closely considers the salience of generational discourse and narratives in real-world settings. While the Theory of Generations posits that each generation needs to be accommodated, limited attention has been paid to if and how this happens in practice. In both cases, it stands to reason that asking unprimed participants what the word generation means to them could offer valuable emic insight understanding. Accordingly, I present the first research question:

RQ1: How do individuals make sense of generational constructs?

This research question emphasizes the state of generational constructs as ‘out there’ and potentially known and engaged with to varying degrees by different individuals. In addition, this research question encourages consideration of emergent generational frames. Broadly speaking, generational scholarship typically accepts that generational constructs are not only ‘out there’ but are also influential in the day-to-day lives of individuals in organizations. However, no empirical scholarly evidence demonstrates that generational constructs mean the same thing to those in the workplace as they mean to scholars. Most studies of Millennials are framed with little consideration of the ways in which industries or even specific organizations may have very distinct perceptions, discourses, and meanings for a given generational construct. It stands to reason that an organization’s culture likely influences aged and generational narratives. For example, an organization that places a great deal of emphasis on formal hierarchy or even simply time spent in the organization might possess different interpretations of age or generation than an organization without these values.

Sensemaking is often employed at the individual level where “knowledge is created, maintained, used and recreated through intra-subjective sense-making” (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Jerram, & Treleaven, 2003, p. 101). In other words, it is at this micro, intra-subjective level that individuals make sense of themselves, others, and the world around them. Drawing on Wiley (1988), Weick (1995) argues that it is important to move beyond this level to consider the “three levels of sensemaking above the individual level of analysis. In ascending order they are inter-subjective, generic subjective, and the extra-subjective” (p. 70). Discussion of these levels draws our attention to the way in which

sensemaking at any one level leads to meaning cascading among other levels. In the following paragraphs I will describe each of these levels and offer examples of how meaning cascades.

The inter-subjective level of social reality is that which occurs between concrete individuals: “inter-subjective meanings becomes distinct from intra-subjective meaning when individual thoughts, feelings, and intentions are merged or synthesized into conversation during which the self gets transformed from an I to a we” (Weick, 1995, p. 71). In practice, the inter-subjective level occurs when two individuals make sense together in conversation in the face of uncertainty or equivocality. For example, two individuals in their 50s may witness a young woman espousing values that they do not share. In order to make sense of this young woman’s values, the two individuals converse, drawing on meaning present at other levels of understanding. The conclusion may be that this young woman grew up in a different time and thus had different values – she was of a different generation.

The next level of social reality is that of generic subjectivity, the level of social reality that includes organizations (Weick, 1995). At the level of the generic subjective “concrete human beings are no longer present,” and the self becomes “a filler of roles and a followers of rules” (p. 71). In times of stability, the generic subjective can be understood in terms of scripts, recipes, and ways of doing things. In times of instability or change, however, when these scripts no longer work, “inter-subjectivity once again becomes the focus of sensemaking as different views of the meaning of the change emerge and await new synthesis” (p. 72). As noted by Weick (1995), this is not to say the

generic subjective ceases to exist. Rather, it comes to shape new meanings. It is sensemaking through generic subjectivity that is most pronounced in organizational scholarship, according to Weick (1995), as it is at this level that scholars are often able to understand human agency in organizational settings. It is through sensemaking at the level of generic subjectivity that scholars examine responses and consequences of, for example, technological change in an industry, or structural change in an organization. This level is of great importance to this research project given the way in which generational constructs have typically been framed around the capacities and capabilities of Millennials in their workplace roles. For example, an individual who has been working in a company for 40 years may notice that the company's youngest hires refuse to work overtime and wonder why. This individual deals with this equivocality by considering both the behaviors of the new hires and the behavior of other organizational members. Thus, this individual may make sense of this new behavior by conceiving of generational differences in attitudes towards work. In addition, the individual could draw on interactions with her children of the same age (inter-subjective) while also drawing on the discussions in the media about young employees (extra-subjective).

Finally, the fourth and highest level of social reality is that of the extra-subjective which is where culture most broadly is understood as “an abstract idealized framework derived from prior interaction” (p72). Culture, as the extra-subjective, underpins all sensemaking processes as it exists for individuals as “a reservoir of background knowledge allowing and constraining meaning at all other levels” (Davis, Subrahmanian, & Westerberg, 2006, p59). Knowledge at the extra-subjective level exists out-there and

“is transmitted through language, symbols, metaphors, rituals and stories.” (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Jerram, & Treleaven, 2007, p. 104). Thus, the extra-subjective is constituted by a complex cultural reservoir from which agents draw when making sense at other levels or when undertaking communicative action. The extra-subjective level is fundamental in a project such as this as it is at the extra-subjective level that individuals draw the stereotypic attributes of generational archetypes in discussions of identities. Therefore, it is essential that participants be given the opportunity to explicate their own cultural reservoir on a subject rather than imposing or offering one given the role of the extra-subjective in defining all sensemaking practices.

The utility of ushering in these subjectivities is that they can provide a way of considering how meanings cascade between levels of social reality. For example, “people at work say I’m like X, but I see myself as Y” is an example of the generic butting up against the intra-subjective, which not only allows us some degree of insight into how individuals make sense of themselves and the world around them, but also gives us some degree of insight into sensemaking processes in situ. Put another way, individuals as active agents look to draw meaning from other levels of social reality when making sense. That is, in response to equivocality, individuals look to these layers of their cultural context to find meaning. Thus, I present the second research question:

RQ2: How can meanings about generational constructs be understood as cascading between different levels of social reality in the experience of day-to-day work?

Weick's (1995) sensemaking and levels of social reality provide a frame for this project to explore the realities of generational constructs in individuals' lived experience for two primary reasons. First, individuals' sensemaking processes will permit some degree of emic insight. Second, individuals' sensemaking process may allow an observer to understand how cultural knowledge (i.e., extra-subjective) comes to be thematized, contested, and justified. While sensemaking may provide insight into the *what* of generational identity and identification, it offers relatively little insight into the *how*. Thus, it becomes prudent to consider a theoretical frame to pair with sensemaking that can consider how individuals may or may not associate with these generational constructs. Accordingly, in the following section I present the theoretical framework of identity and identification.

Identity and identification

Identity and identification have, of late, become increasingly prominent heuristics for examining and understanding people within organizational settings (Cheney, Christiansen, & Dailey, 2013). A great deal of research has been undertaken on identity of identification across a number of fields, thus it is unsurprising that the concepts are fraught with ambiguity (Cheney, et al., 2013). In the field of communication, the concepts of identity and identification are often bundled together and treated as one issue; however, it is important that scholars conceptualize them as distinct (Scott et al., 1998; Cheney, et al., 2013). At the risk of oversimplification, a relatively clear delineation can be made to distinguish these concepts: one speaks of the identity *of* an entity and identification *with* an entity. From a communicative perspective, identification is

understood as a socially dynamic process wherein individuals forge, maintain, and cultivate linkages between themselves and identity targets during social interaction. Conversely, individuals can disidentify from identity targets during social interaction. The concepts of identity and identification thus account for human action and agency in social settings as behaviors such as identification and/or disidentification are informed by the values and attributes associated with the identity target (Ashforth & Dutton, 2002). These values and attributes are referred to commonly as stereotypic attributes. In the case of generations, for example, a stereotypic attribute of Millennials is that they are good with computers and technology. Thus, in the context of discussing one's competency with technology, an individual could potentially engage in identification with the social target of Millennials by citing their generational location as the source of their competency.

While the identity/identification delineation given above is useful, it does have somewhat substantial ontological commitments in that it assumes that a more or less stable, or at least discernible, identity exists (Cheney, Christiansen, & Dailey, 2013; Cheney & Tompkins, 1987). In the case of this project, I believe that this assumption is being considered in two important ways. First, it is important to remember that generational narratives and archetypes are prominent and occur throughout academic, industry, and popular media accounts – leading to pervasive “age-stereotyped assumptions [that] limit individuals’ discursive and material choices, locking them into age-related subject positions” (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 1577). Second, this project’s

employment of sensemaking offers insight into participants' perception of generational identity targets. I

Instances of identification/disidentification often are, of course, far more complex than those examples given above may indicate. Accordingly, it is pertinent to employ a treatment of identity/identification that not only considers generational identification in the context of work but also considers other simultaneous and intersecting processes of identification. Thus, in the following section, I present the Structural Model of Identification as it is well suited to this project due to its emphasis on (a) the role of identification as social, (b) the multivalence of identities, and (b) the importance of context when examining identification.

Structurational Model of Identification

Scott, Corman, and Cheney's (1998) Structural Model of Identification (SMI) draws on Giddens' (1994) Structuration Theory. Structuration Theory was developed by Giddens in an effort to overcome the limitations of two dominant schools of social inquiry at the time: objectivism and naturalism.

Rejecting traditional dualistic views that see social phenomena as determined either by objective social structures, which are properties of society as a whole, or by autonomous human agents, Giddens proposes that structure and agency are a mutually constitutive duality. Thus social phenomena are not the product of either structure or agency, but of both. Social structure is not independent of agency, nor is agency independent of structure. Rather, human agents draw on social

structures in their actions, and at the same time these actions serve to produce and reproduce social structure. (Jones & Karsten, 2008, p. 129)

Developed as a response to what he saw as problematic paradigms, Giddens (1984) emphasized the heuristic possibilities and significance of the theory as it “should for research purposes be regarded as sensitizing devices . . . useful for thinking about research problems and the interpretation of research results” (p. 326-327) (as cited in Scott et al., 1998). Scott et al. (1998), recognizing similar paradigmatic issues in the field of identity and identification, developed the Structural Model of Identification in order to make three core contributions to the field. First, the model explained identity and identification in structuration terms as it “better allows us to examine the attachment process as a duality that recognizes identification as both drawing on and (re)creating identity, without unduly preferencing structural or agency-based views of how identification occurs.” (p. 326). Second, the model offered a way of conceptualizing the multiplicity, contextuality, and complexity of identity and identification. Third, the model frames processes of identification firmly within the realm of communication by asserting that identification is the process of creating, maintaining, and cultivating links between individuals and larger societal units through interaction (Scott et al., 1998). This process is understood to occur in human interaction where the process and product of identification are produced and expressed through language.

The model itself is comprised of two core components (modalities), known as the Activation Modality, and the Attachment Modality as reflected in Figure 1.

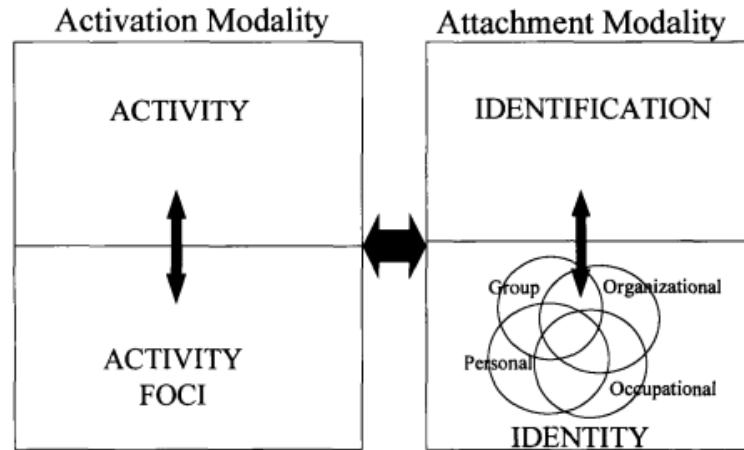


Figure 1. Structural Model of Identification (Scott, et al., 1998, p. 307)

The first modality is the Attachment modality which speaks to the identity$\langle \rangle$identification duality:

This duality treats the available identities an organizational member may have access to as a set of rules and resources (structure) that can be drawn upon in the production of identification (system-level construct) with some corresponding target. For instance, “talking up” one’s work-team involves drawing on one’s work group identity (Scott et al., 1998, p. 307-308)

What is particularly useful about the attachment metaphor is the way in which it emphasizes the plurality, overlap, and intersections of identity. For example, any given individual could, in any given moment, be identifying with several target identities. This multivalence of identities is addressed via a spatial metaphor that details three regions where potentially overlapping and/or unique identities are apparent. The first dimension is that of front and back regions. This dimension, distinguishes identification processes that are well accepted and the norm (front) from identification processes that are atypical

or hidden (back) (Scott et al., 1998). This dimension of the spatial metaphor is important as it draws our attention to the fact that individuals may identify with an organization/group/identity/entity in ways that may not be either officially accepted or even appreciated. The second dimension of the spatial metaphor addresses size and proximity. That is, different identities may be more prominent, limited, pivotal, and/or peripheral to a given individual; moreover, these can be overlapping and occurring simultaneously. The third and final dimension of the structuration model of identification examines timeliness and tenure. This dimension suggests that an identity that an individual has identified with for a long period of time may be more influential or salient for that individual than one that was more fleeting.

The second modality is the Activation Modality that speaks to a situated-action view of identification. Simply put, the activation modality emphasizes the importance of context in understanding identification.

Activities influence the identities that are appropriated and reproduced in identification. Only in particular situations defined significantly by activity and activity foci, will a person identify in particular ways. For example, an engineer on a production team is most likely to identify with that team during group meetings or when an important team-set goal is met; yet the same person may experience more of an organizational identification during a budget meeting or when the company has been awarded a major contract. Conversely, the identification process also influences the very activities in which we are engaged (Scott et al., 1998, p. 323)

The situated action perspective speaks to the activation modality component of the SMI that emphasizes the importance of examining not just what an individual is identifying with and how that identity manifests, but also asking why/what catalyzed or triggered that moment of identification. This offers insight into the different ways in which people identify with different identities in different contexts.

In summary, SMI emphasizes manifest identities and asks us to consider how identities (resources) are drawn on through processes of identification. The focus on identification with identities (plural) is an important part of this theoretical frame as it emphasizes that individuals are unlikely to, in any given moment and context, be identifying with any single identity. Within this project, the SMI framework for identity and identification is valuable in several ways. First, SMI provides a clear framework for understanding the ways in which individuals may identify or disidentify with generational identities. Second, SMI allows a consideration of multiple processes of identification within the context of work. Third, SMI helps us to understand why specific generational, or even age-based, targets may be identified with in some situations and not in others.

Taken with Weick's (1995) Sensemaking, SMI offers considerable utility and explanatory power to this project. Assuming that individuals are aware of understandings, perceptions, and narratives of generations, which purportedly hold a great deal of salience within the context of the workplace, then it becomes important to query how they identify with and/or disidentify from generational identities. Moreover, SMI allows insight into how a generational identity or instance of generational identification relates to other

identities and instances of identification. Furthermore, the emphasis on contextuality helps us understand how and why an individual may identify with a certain target in one context but not in another. In the context of generational research, this is a valuable frame as it allows us to consider the multivalence of individuals' identification processes. Thus, I present my third and fourth research questions;

RQ3: In what ways, if any, do individuals identify or disidentify with generational constructs?

RQ4: In what ways do differing workplace contexts affect processes of generational identification and disidentification?

Chapter Summary

When undertaking interpretive scholarship, it is important to understand that theoretical jumping-off points or lenses are “gleaned from past experiences, research or mentioned in former scholarship (and) serve as background ideas that offer frameworks through which researchers see, organize, and experience the research problem” (Tracy, 2013, p. 28). In a general sense, these sensitizing concepts play an important role in that they indicate, or at least point to, the scholarly conversations the project seeks to take part in. For the researcher employing an iterative approach that oscillates between existing and emergent data, sensitizing concepts drawn from theory play an important role in framing the first oscillations. In this chapter, I have worked to present this project's theoretical foundations and its four guiding research questions. While SMI helps me to theoretically deal with the content of identity/identification, the concept of sensemaking

allows a great degree of insight into the process itself. In sum, I believe these theoretical frameworks allow for complex and contextual generation scholarship that will offer a potential way of dealing with the problem of generations that have persisted for the past century. In the following chapter I will upon both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 and present the methods and methodology for this project.

CHAPTER 4

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

To investigate the research questions presented in the previous chapter, I employed qualitative methods because of their capacity to elucidate the socially constructed contexts that shape individuals' experiences (Flyvberg, 2012; Geertz, 1973; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Spradley, 1979; Tracy, 2013). The phronetic approach I followed is "concerned with practical contextual knowledge and is carried out with an aim toward social commentary, action, and transformation" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2011; Tracy, 2013). Because of this project's grounded, exploratory, and transformative goals, a phronetic approach was well suited for two reasons. First, it offered a framework that specifically emphasizes real world concerns. Second, a phronetic approach emphasizes the importance of grounding an understanding of social phenomena in social and historical context. Taken together, these characteristics of a phronetic approach allowed me to discern what salience generational archetypes have in the lives of individuals as well as the processes through which these generational understandings are developed through social interaction in context. Finally, I actively engaged in an iterative process throughout data collection, analysis, and writing. An iterative process oscillates between "existing theories and research interests on the one hand, and emergent qualitative data on the other" (Tracy, 2013, p. 8) and is pivotal in accounting for the interplay of findings, context, and extant theory. In the following sections I outline the site of study, broader cultural context, and the participants themselves. Following this, I present both my data collection and data analysis procedures.

Site of Study: Young Professional Network

The site for this project was the Young Professionals Network (YPN), a pseudonym, based in Sydney, Australia. YPN is an initiative set up by a larger organization that represents the interests of media communication organizations and industries throughout Australia. YPN caters to individuals with less than five years' industry experience and provides both networking and professional development opportunities in several of Australia's largest cities. YPN members typically gain membership through their employing organization and are able to attend workshops, conferences, and functions throughout the year. YPN divides their members into two cohorts: beginners and masters. Beginners are those with less than two years of experience and masters are those with three to five years of experience. Beginners' events typically emphasize day-to-day core competencies such as time management, presentation skills, negotiating, and decision-making. In contrast, Masters' events typically feature panels from industry experts in which members have open conversations regarding work, life, and professional trajectories. Masters also serve as mentors to beginners at many events and from time to time are guest speakers at events or hosts of Q&A panels.

YPN was an ideal organization for this research project for two primary reasons: it offered access to a cross-organizational sample, and it was a space where participants were primed to consider their age and their personal and professional development. A cross-organizational sample was important given the project's pursuit of understanding generational constructs within the local cultural context. As a network, YPN offers a

space wherein young professionals come together from multiple organizations within the context of being relatively young and new within the industry. A cross-organizational sample was also desirable because it permitted an understanding of meaning and understandings in the industry as whole in this area rather than just that of a single organization. This proved to be a prudent decision because, as I will discuss in the following chapter, organization differed in their aged and generational discourse and narratives.

Site Entry and IRB Approval

In March of 2015 I received approval from the Director of YPN and soon thereafter obtained approval from the Arizona State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the project (see Appendix A). The proposal underwent an expedited review procedure given its categorization as “research on individual or group characteristics or behavior...or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies” (HHS.gov). I received IRB approval on May 4, 2015 and entered the site the following week, on May 11, 2015.

Sampling, Recruitment, and Consent Procedures

For this project, my intent was to develop a theoretical construct sample that mirrored the population as closely as possible (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010; Tracy, 2013). As of 2014 there were 3,056 people working in the media communications industry (59% female, 41% male) with 67% of those residing in Sydney (MFA.org.au, 2014). The

median age of the industry is 29 years with 53% of those in the industry having less than four years' experience (MFA.org.au, 2014). Nearly half of those in the industry work at the implementation level (planning, buying, and selling media) with roughly a quarter working in the area of digital and search media (MFA.org.au, 2014). I believed the theoretical construct sample to be the most appropriate given the goal of this project was to take a grounded approach to examining and understanding generational narratives in the day-to-day lives of these workers.

Recruitment took place at YPN events via an invitation to those in attendance as whole, as well as one-on-one invitations. At almost all events, I was given an opportunity to speak at the start of the seminar to introduce myself as a scholarly researcher and to invite individuals to participate in the project in the form of interviews. In addition to this, I gave invitations to individuals who appeared receptive to or expressed interest in my project during hallway conversations. Those who expressed interest were considered potential participants and were offered a brief overview of the project as well as a business card. I then sent a follow up email that included the invitation letter that detailed the parameters of the project and my contact information (see Appendix B). For those who replied to this email, I organized a time and place to meet. To those who did not reply, I sent one additional email two weeks later. Typically I invited participants to suggest a local café, or some other offsite locale for a formal interview in the week or so following my email invitation. At this juncture I should note that it is culturally customary to undertake meetings in local cafes in Australia. Coffee is something of a currency in this cultural context, and the expectation when meeting someone for the first

time is to take them out for a coffee. Further, given the ubiquity of cafes and the fact that everyone has a favorite haunt, asking to meet at a café was a non-confrontational and comfortable frame that offered ample opportunity for rapport building. While meeting offsite was the preference, eight interviews took place at participants' organizations in a closed meeting room or private office. Each interview began with a formal consent statement in which participants were made aware of the scope of the project and their rights as an interviewee, and then they were asked to give their verbal assent to taking part.

As I became more aware of the landscape at YPN, I was able to pursue specific voices that would best represent the range of vocations and experiences present at YPN (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010; Tracy, 2013). The majority of YPN members worked at media agencies - companies that book, buy, and sell advertising spots. In addition, there was a substantial number of those working in media owner firms (organizations whose spots are bought/sold), creative agencies involved in the development of advertising materials, and full-service agencies. Broadly speaking, I sought a high degree of fidelity in terms of the voices of those in my sample to reflect the array of perspectives in the population. As such, two key adjustments of my sampling strategy were necessary following my first week in the field. The first challenge was the degree of hesitance prospective participants had towards taking part in the study. While this isn't a particularly unique challenge, participants were keenly aware of how small the world of media was in Sydney at roughly ~2000 people. This necessitated some degree of work on my part to emphasize and evidence that my goal was not to dig up dirt about their bosses/organizations.

Certainly, a part of this was due to me having been introduced to the scene by an organization that represents the industry more broadly. Consequently, I relied on snowball sampling until I was known/recognized in the community. A second notable adjustment I had to make in my first few weeks was to pursue male participants more actively. While males represent 41% of the industry, females constitute nearly 75% of the implementation roles, and it is those at the implementation level that were far more likely to be at the YPN events.

Participant Overview

Data collection took place May 11-August 19, 2015. During this time, I attended each YPN event as a full participant and solicited interviews. In total I attended 10 YPN seminars as well as several social functions linked to these events. I undertook 25 interviews with individuals from 14 different organizations (see Appendix C). In addition, I conducted a background interview with the Director of YPN in the hope of garnering a richer and more complex understanding of the operations of the organization.

Fifteen females and 10 males interviewed, mirroring the industry's gender ratio of 59% female and 41% male (2014 Media Federation of Australia Census, 2014). The average age of participants was 25.72 years (slightly below the industries average age of 29 years). All participants had attended university and held at least a bachelor-level qualification. Most participants were Sydney born and raised, bar seven who had grown up in France (1), New Zealand (1), Taiwan (1), United Kingdom (3), and the United States (1). While most participants had entered the workforce straight from university,

roughly a third had spent a year or more living in another country/travelling prior to their employment. Interestingly, almost all participants described “falling into” the industry having only come to learn of it while applying for jobs – as opposed to the media industry having been a long-term goal.

Researcher Role

One of the mandates of interpretive scholarship requires to the scholar to interrogate his or her identity and motivation in the research process. As a New Zealander undertaking research in an Australian context, there were many cultural connections that I was able to employ in building rapport with respondents and encouraging disclosure. While I was a full participant at YPN events, I always introduced myself as a scholar. As such, I made a conscious effort to reduce peoples’ uncertainty regarding my intents and purpose at YPN events. One way that I worked to bridge this uncertainty was to introduce myself as having previously worked in the industry. This discussion often proved valuable in terms of rapport building. Finally, at 27 years old, I was to some degree understood as a cultural insider given my age, appearance, mannerism, and cultural background.

It was pivotal to the success of this project that I carefully considered my background and the goals of this project so as to avoid shaping discourse in an unproductive way. Specifically, as someone who personally experienced some degree of discrimination as a young professional working in advertising, it was important for me to uphold the interviewing stance of deliberate naiveté and provide a space wherein

participants could express their own experiences in their own frames. As one of the core goals of this project was to understand participants' sensemaking processes, I worked diligently throughout my data collection to ensure that participants would define terms and discern meaning in their own words. In practice this meant that I often posed the question "And what does that mean to you?" when participants used specific terminology to describe others and their workplaces.

Data Collection Procedures

Over the summer of 2015, I spent three months in the field and gathered data using two principal methodological tools – field observations and interviews. While interviews were my primary data source, field observation played a key role in contextualizing and honing my understanding of the cultural context. In this section I will outline the procedures for each of these methods.

Observation

Field observation plays an important role in qualitative research as it provides a way of understanding what Tracy (2012) calls the three fundamental elements of human experience: "(a) what people do (cultural behavior); (b) what people know (cultural knowledge); and (c) what things people make and use (cultural artifacts)" (p. 65). With observation, the researcher is able to see the unfolding of rites, rituals, and other relevant behaviors first hand. This is particularly valuable when coupled with interviews during which the interviewer can encourage participants to engage in sensemaking processes about what has been observed.

I attended all YPN seminars during the three-month period I was in the field. In total this included 10 4-hour YPN seminars, an additional industry seminar run by an external organization, and four social events. My broad goal for observational fieldwork was to get a sense of what it means to be a young professional working in this cultural context. As previously discussed, YPN is designed for the professional development of young employees in the field of advertising. In attending their events I was looking to see and hear what issues were salient, and how they were understood and framed in context. There were several key focal points for my observation. First, I was particularly attentive to and interested in YPN in terms of their agenda setting. As an organization designed to (a) respond to the issues pertinent to the industry, and (b) anticipate future needs of its members in the industry, I paid careful attention to the discourse, narratives, and framing used by the organization during NGEN workshops and seminars. Second, I was keenly interested in more casual talk, discussion, and responses of YPN members during seminars. Offhand comments, discussions in small group settings, and conversations during breaks were a valuable site for this.

During my time in the field, I actively took raw fieldnotes during the events and then developed headnotes regarding observations after the fact. As I typed these materials into formal fieldnotes, I engaged in analytic memoing for the purposes of coding as well as my own sensemaking. In addition, I engaged in a form of journaling where I noted my thoughts on and perspectives of the project as a whole after each day of data collection. These reflections were valuable as I moved through my project because they served as a longitudinal record of the project's development and my own thinking. In accordance

with an iterative process that encourages oscillations between existing and emergent data, I was diligent in reflecting upon shifts in the scene, or my own misunderstandings, throughout the research process (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tracy, 2013). This reflexive process was especially important in the early stages of research, as I was able to revise and adapt the initial interview guide.

Interviews

Interviews excel at elucidating the subjectively lived experience of participants from their own point of view (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2014). Interviews encourage an understanding of contextuality and partiality in individuals' lives and experiences and allow us to not only strengthen and complicate existing data (from both the field and extant scholarship) but also to provide a space where new stories and experiences can rise to the fore. For this project I undertook semi-structured, one-on-one interviews in order to elicit information about participants' tacit knowledge and experience. Prior to entering the field, I developed an initial, modular interview guide (see Appendix D) that included three main parts, or stages, of the interview. The modular nature of this guide was important for two reasons, one methodological and one pragmatic. The methodological rationale for this modular guide was that not all lines of inquiry would be applicable to all participants, and so I needed to have distinct stages (opening, generative, directive, and closing). For example, different forms of the interview would likely be required if I was speaking to an individual who worked at a media agency versus someone who worked at a creative agency. The pragmatic reason was that, having had some experience with the industry before, I knew that there were

likely to be time constraints on interviews and while for some interviews I would have an hour or two to talk, there might be others where I would only have 30-40 minutes with the participant. Taken together, the modular guide allowed me to ensure that the framework of the interview was best suited to the specific interviewee and interview context.

In the first stage of the interview, I asked a number of opening questions that primarily worked to get some sense of the participant demographically while also building rapport. One of the main goals of this stage was to establish the tone and narrative framework for the interview. As such, I asked participants questions about the YPN seminar that we had both attended as well as general background questions such as how they came to be situated where they were in the industry. This was an essential foundation of the interview as it framed the discussion squarely within the experiences of the interviewee. In contrast, if I were to lead off talking more generally about aged or generational frames, participants would likely turn to the more abstract stereotypical frames which this project is seeking to avoid imposing. In the second stage of the interview, I asked a series of generative questions that sought to probe participants specifically regarding their early work experiences. In this stage, I asked participants to consider not just these early experiences, but how their experiences had changed since that time and what they might anticipate for the future. This moment of comparing and contrasting allowed participants to establish their own narrative while allowing spaces for self-reflexivity or self-critique in a non-identity threatening way. I also asked about their organization at this juncture. The third stage of the interview featured more directive

questions that sought to ascertain how participants saw and understood themselves. In this stage I began to ask participants questions that specifically included notions of age and generations. Very few participants had already raised aged and generational issues, or even employed the terminology. For respondents who had yet to raise these issues, I asked if they had heard of the term generation and then ask them what it meant to them. This stage served to elicit sensemaking and identification processes without presenting a specific construct. In the closing stage of the interview, I asked general summative questions that considered any lingering thoughts that had not been discussed earlier in the interview.

Throughout all interviews I employed a stance of deliberate naiveté which places the interviewer in a frame of being somewhat aware, but actively seeking participants for their own understanding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010; Tracy, 2013). I also took a *verstehen* approach that emphasized perspective taking and empathy in an effort to understand the position of participants as best I could (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tracy, 2013). In addition, I actively worked to adhere to Tracy's (2012) seven principles of good interviewing: being knowledgeable, gentle and forgiving, sensitive, open-minded, probing, attentive, and interpretive (Tracy, 2013).

Each interview was audio recorded using a Dictaphone. I also took scratch notes during interviews. I transcribed each interview myself within 48 hours. During the transcribing process, I wrote analytic memos that also were typed and stored digitally with the transcripts and notes I had taken during the interview. Each transcript was double checked with the audio tape a week or two after initial transcription to ensure

fidelity. During this double checking process, I again engaged in memoing. In sum the interviewing process produced 255 single-spaced pages of transcripts and 52 single-spaced pages interview notes and memos. All data was imported into NVIVO10 for the purposes of organization throughout the process of coding and analysis.

Throughout the data collection process, I actively worked to make sense of emerging data through my own journaling processes as well as regular discussions with my advisor. As a part of this, there were a number of moments when I adjusted my protocol as I came to realize and discover new lines of inquiry. In the following section I present a more personal, and chronological discussion of my data collection for both the sake of transparency and with the goal to evidence the necessitated adjustments and improvisations.

Data Analysis

As previously discussed, this project is invested in the iterative approach to analysis and its process of oscillating between existing and emergent data. As a part of this, I engaged in the constant comparative method over the three months that I spent collecting data (Tracy, 2013). This iterative approach is distinct from either more etic approaches where the researcher assumes an objective outsider position, or grounded approaches that totally privilege the emergent data. That is to say, data analysis was ongoing throughout data collection and as I reflected on my own positionality.

Throughout the project I analyzed the tangible forms of data including field notes, early interviews, and my own analytical memos. Thus for this project, I engaged in a multi-step

coding and analysis process. This process included two broad cycles of coding comprised of (a) primary-cycle coding, which is predominantly comprised of first-level (descriptive) codes and (b) second-cycle coding which is predominantly comprised of second-level (analytic) codes. As I move through this process, I wrote analytical memos that helped frame and shape codes.

In the early stages of primary cycle coding I began with processes of open coding by simply asking “what is going on here” and working to “open up meaning in the data” (Tracy, 2013, p. 189). In vivo coding (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Tracy, 2013) is often a valuable place to start when looking at the language and vocabulary employed by participants and considering how they use it and what it means to them. A prominent example of this is in organizations where participants discussed the “Young Ones” or new generation coming through. Similarly, participants would often engage in processes of othering and bifurcate the workplace into the “Old School/Mad Men” and themselves. Both of the Young Ones and Old School/Mad Men became codified as did the process of othering. Throughout this stage of coding, I developed a codebook within NVIVO that allowed me to neatly organize these evocative, essence-capturing, and or salient densely textured aspects of the data and allow some amount of insight into the scene (Saldana, 2009).

In the second cycle of coding, I moved to a more analytic frame and began to question how these codes may or may not exist in relation to one another. This began with a process of thematic sampling where I grouped related or dependent codes and then moved on to the hierarchical nesting of these codes, when applicable. Next, I engaged in

negative case analysis where I specifically looked for codes that did not fit with one another or appeared to oppose each other. While negative case analysis is useful to identify coding errors, it is also an excellent opportunity for reconsidering and reexamination. For example, despite participants' othering the Young Ones and the Old School/Mad Men at length, they would then go on to assert that an individual's generation or age was largely not important in the workplace. In this instance, it was critical to consider how and why these labeling processes took place if they were purported to be unimportant. Finally, I constructed an analysis outline in the form of a data document that was presented to, and discussed with, my advising committee.

Chapter Summary

Given this project's exploratory nature, I employed qualitative methods, a phonetic approach and an iterative process. I took both field notes and headnotes during my time in the field that included YPN events, other industry events, and simply time spent in agencies. As interviewing was the principal mode of data collection, I actively took notes during interviews and immediately following interviews. In addition, I transcribed each interview myself during which time I took analytic memos. Throughout my three months collecting data, I frequently undertook journaling in an effort to make sense of my data. All scratch note data was collected in a single journal so as I would be able to not only have all my data in a single place, but be able to retrospectively examine the chronological development of the project. Complete information on these sources of data is included in Appendix E. All data was digitized and imported into NVIVO qualitative data analysis software so as to facilitate organization in analysis. I engaged in

primary and secondary cycle coding via the constant comparative method. In the following chapter I will discuss the findings of this study.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Employing a phronetic approach, I observed and interviewed young professionals in Sydney, Australia to gain insight into the meaning of generations for individuals who fit the demographic profile often associated with Millennials in both the popular press and scholarly literature. In this chapter I will describe and consider the findings of my study as I address each of my four research questions in two sections. The first section of this chapter will address *RQ1* and *RQ2* by considering the ways in which participants made sense of generational constructs. This section will also discuss how generational meaning can be understood as cascading between different levels of social reality. The second section will address *RQ3* and *RQ4* by discussing participants' processes of identification and disidentification with generational archetypes.

Section One: Making Sense of Generations

The grounded approach of this project encouraged me to seek an emic understanding of generations from my participants. Following the theoretical frame of sensemaking, I posed *RQ1: How do individuals make sense of generational constructs?* As discussed in Chapter 3, it is essential to consider that sensemaking processes do not occur in a vacuum. Typically when scholars consider sensemaking, they do so at what Weick (1995) called the intra-subjective level wherein “individual knowledge is created, maintained, used and recreated through intra-subjective sense-making” (Cecez-Kecmanovic, Jerram, & Treleaven, 2003, p. 101). Sensemaking, as a process of assigning

meaning in response to equivocality, relies on knowledge and meaning drawn from three levels of social reality above the individual level of analysis: “in ascending order they are inter-subjective, generic subjective, and the extra-subjective” (Weick, 1995, p. 70). The inter-subjective level accounts for interaction between concrete human beings wherein thoughts, feelings, and intentions are merged via conversation. The generic subjective level accounts for the way in which individuals in organizations act in ways consistent with organization norms. Finally, the extra-subjective level accounts for knowledge and meaning in a particular cultural space and thus is fundamental in allowing and constructing sensemaking at all other levels. Drawing on these concepts, I posed *RQ2*: *How can meanings be understood as cascading between different levels of social reality?* Whereas *RQ1* sought to elicit salient generational archetypes, *RQ2* encouraged active consideration of how these archetypes are employed.

Participants engaged in sensemaking of both popular and emergent generational archetypes. As discussed in Chapter 3, popular generational archetypes are those frequently identified in scholarship and the media. The archetypes commonly employed are Traditionalists, Greatest Generation, Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Y. Interestingly, very few participants spoke of popular generational archetypes unless prompted. Thus in the generative stages of the interview, participants were asked whether they were familiar with the term generation and asked what it meant to them. Notably, there was a substantial amount of variation in their treatments. Accordingly, I explored participants’ sensemaking processes by asking them

to explain how they had become familiar with generational terms and to further consider their framework and understanding of these concepts.

While responses to this generational prompt were quite varied, I identified three themes in the ways that participants spoke of popular generational archetypes and generational discourse more broadly: (i) Generations as stereotypes that exist “out there,” (ii) generational archetypes as useful work tools but not about us, and (iii) generational stereotypes as negative and undesirable. Interestingly, despite participants making sense of generational archetypes as offering little utility in understanding or speaking about individuals in their workplace, they created and enacted aged differences in their workplace. Thus two further themes were identified as participants made sense of generational differences in their workplace, that (iv) Those who are younger are in a different generation, and (v) Those who are older are in a different generation, too. Combining the concerns of RQ1 and RQ2, in the following sections I present findings regarding the sensemaking of generational constructs for each of the five themes. In each of these sections, I will present exemplars of sensemaking for each of these themes and, in turn, consider how we can understand knowledge and meaning cascading in respondents’ sensemaking processes.

Generations as Stereotypes that Exist “Out There”

Most participants made sense of generations as stereotypes or generalizations that existed “out there.” They existed “out there” insofar as generational discourse was undertaken by, or belonged to, others. For participants, generations were typically understood as generalizations or stereotypes about people born at about the same time.

The most prominent spaces where participants had encountered generational discourse in the past were school, university, home, media, and work. For example, when I asked participants what the word generation meant to them, and where they had encountered the term, they would reference the way teachers would talk about the Baby Boomers or the way that stories about Gen Y would appear in the news. The following interview excerpt demonstrates a fairly typical response to the generational prompt.

Steven: So when I say generations what does that mean to you?

Denise: Um well, what does generations mean to me? Well I guess it's a group of people born between a certain time periods, really.

Steven: And where have you encountered this discussion before?

Denise: Oh all the time, I think I feel like I have always been aware of generations, like from primary school, upwards, um, like it's it's just everywhere, it's in pop culture, you'll see you know things that are talked about like hippies or the 60s or the 70s like, things are baby boomers, things are always broken down or often broken down categorized um, by generational things.

Denise's response clearly articulates generations as a way of grouping people in relation to a specific period of time. Moreover, in noting that she has "always been aware of generations" she is drawing on knowledge at the extra-subjective level. Generational discourse is further defined extra-subjectively, as Denise states the way in which "you know things that are talked about." This theme of participants making sense of generational archetypes as a discourse that exists out there, everywhere, is further evidenced in the way Alice responds to the prompt:

Steven: OK so another thing that I am really interested in, is this whole idea of generations, right, are you familiar with that term?

Alice: Yea

Steven: So where have you heard it before?

Alice: Oh well like, I am thinking like gen X, Gen Y, baby boomers, yea

Steven: So where have you heard about it before?

Alice: Everywhere

Steven: Everywhere?

Alice: The news, everyone always constantly refers to me as Gen Y and I'm not Gen Y because I feel like I'm not

Steven: Well technically you are yea?

Alice: Well, no I think Gen Y is 80-6?

Steven: It's approximately, like early 80s, late 90s.

Alice: Yea so if you take my mental age, then I am definitely not in Gen Y.

Steven: So why don't you want to be associated with Gen Y?

Alice: Well everyone always talks about it very selfish, me, me, me, and it's interesting because I do think about the young people here and I think that they are exactly Gen Y but I also think that you can't, and I do this all the time, because I profile people, based on a small sample of numbers, like everything I do, I do call research, you know I take, 5, 10, 100 people and say that they are 100,000 people so, I kind of feel like yes we are in this generation but we are thinking of a sample of people but we aren't talking about everyone.

Steven: Um, and when you say everyone talks about Gen Y or describes them, who is everyone, you said the news?

Alice: Yea its mainly, I would obviously read the news daily and they always refer to someone in my age group being internal, like always.

In this moment, it is clear that for Alice the word generations relates to the popular generational archetypes that exist “everywhere” are employed by “the news” and “everyone” to group people, including herself. This is also a glimpse at the way in which many participants noted that being “referred to” as Gen Y was undesirable. Moreover, this moment with Alice is an excellent example of how meaning about generations can be understood as cascading between levels of social reality. Alice defines Gen Y and generational discourse at the extra-subjective level as located everywhere, and talked about by everyone, then illustrates the way in which that meaning cascades to the level of the generic subjective as she talks about the way that her job requires her to undertake profiling. At the level of the inter-subjective, this moment clearly demonstrates an instance where the I becomes a we and she considers how when talking about generations, “yes we are in this generation but we are thinking of a sample of people but we aren’t talking about everyone.” Alice references times when others have imposed the label of Gen Y upon her and recalls this as a negative experience. Together, this interaction demonstrates the way in which Alice looks to make sense of generational archetypes and generation discourse as her sense of identity conflicts with meaning at the inter-subjective (i.e., the negative experience of being labeled), generic subjective (i.e., knowledge that the archetype doesn’t necessarily describe individuals it is based upon),

and extra-subjective (i.e., the way that the news and everyone always refers to Gen Y as “always refer to someone in my age group being internal, like always”) levels.

As was the case with Alice, the out there-ness of generational discourse was evidenced in the way that participants referenced conversations in the popular press. Many participants talked about miscellaneous stories in the news media and in particular, publications such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Mamamia*, and *AdNews*. One particularly prominent example raised was the recent coverage of Australia’s quinquennial Intergenerational Report. Another way participants were familiar with generational discourse was via the well-known Australian game show *Talkn’ Bout Your Generation* [2009-2012]. The show was a quiz format series where comedians representing Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y would compete in various challenges. Though the show ended its run several years before data collection, many participants referenced it. During our interview, Greg mentioned the show in passing as a context where he had encountered generational discourse in the past, and I prompted him to consider his response to it.

Steven: And do you remember having any specific feelings or attitudes towards that?

Greg: Probably feeling of affinity to the Gen Ys, like they would never win, actually no, actually anger because Josh Thomas [the panelist representing Gen Y] would never win, and they had always do stupid stuff and I am like, come on guys you are smarter than that, stop making us look stupid and try and beat them for once, we aren’t all idiots, actually yea, thank you for bringing that up!

(Laughs), I was like, damn that's right, more annoyance than anything, yea no, apart from that I don't really particularly remember anything Gen X. I was like, that's fun, Baby Boomers, they know all the old questions and stuff like that so no not really outside of that nothing that sparks up much of a memory.

Similar to Greg, most participants spoke rather fondly of the show insofar as it was well known to play up the stereotypes and was produced for entertainment purposes. What is particularly interesting about how participants such as Greg talked about this show is that, for many, it was one of the few spaces in the media where each of the archetypes was clearly defined.

Generational Archetypes as Work Tools, but Not About Us

When asked if generational discourse or discussions arise at work, almost all participants said that it did not “in the environment,” but occasionally the popular generational archetypes were mentioned as in early briefing conversations with clients (i.e., “we want to target Baby Boomers”). It is worth noting, however, that participants often offered the caveat that these broader terms were typically dropped as they drilled down to more specific demographics. Edward's response to the generational prompt is interesting as he noted the utility of generations at work but drew attention to the fact that a generation was more of a classification and did not necessarily infer a type of person.

Steven: So one of the final more broad things that I am interested in, you've used the word generation a few times, and I'm curious as to what the word generation means to you?

Edward: Mhm. It's pretty interesting because all the audience work that we do is Millennials and Gen X and Gen Y and we kind of bucket all these people into these our audiences into these generations, um, the way that I would classify generation is more about mentality than age and I say that because there are a lot of guys here that are quite young that have done quite well for themselves, if it was based on age alone, if we were just talking either Millennials or digital natives or gen X vs Gen Y baby boomers there aren't many of them in the industry, um, it's much, for me it's more about the mentality that you adopt, it's just like, the word tradies¹ here, tradies doesn't infer a particular job anymore, it's about what you identify with because, actually a lot of tradies earn a lot more than white collar workers at least in some segments, it's the same sort of thing we can't start to bucket people into generations but as far as the next generation of mentality the next um you know the next what the next generation um mentality will be irrespective of age because we know anyone can do well at any age.

Edward's response demonstrates a rich and complex sensemaking process.

Edward clearly makes sense of popular generational archetypes by drawing upon meaning at the extra-subjective level and presenting these archetypes as stereotypes and generalizations. In addition, we see Edward drawing from meaning at the generic subjective level as he considers his organizational processes of "bucket[ing] all these people into these our audiences into these generation." Meaning at both the extra-

¹ Australian word for tradesman. Typically associated with working class in some ways however tradies are often wealthy due to the high pay rate for manual labor in the country.

subjective and generic subjective are thus drawn upon as he considers meaning and understanding at the inter-subjective level as he notes “there aren’t many of them [individuals who comply with the stereotype]” in the industry. Accordingly, Edward posits that popular generational archetypes are not dissimilar from other cultural stereotypes i.e., tradies, and that when it comes to individuals, it’s “more about their mentality.” Interestingly, Edward draws from the extra-subjective when he notes that “a lot of tradies earn a lot more than white collar workers” and uses this to support his point that an individual’s generation category does not indicate their performance. In addition, similar to many of the previously discussed participants’ sensemaking, Edward discusses twice that generational categorization is something done to people, by others. Thus, Edward clearly sees generational archetypes as stereotypes. This sensemaking aligns with those of other participants in that they see generational archetypes as offering little insight to understanding an individual. Consider, for example, Christine’s response:

Steven: Do people talk about generations at work?

Christine: No, I, I rarely hear people talking about generations but I will often see an article Mamamia, AdNews, or you know, think like trade press or you know even you know, daily hill trashy, um, publications, or even I see quite a lot of it on SMH actually, things like about generations and generational movements and generational I guess assumptions and stereotyping, which I mean I don’t necessarily agree with, but you know, it’s out there. You can ignore it if it’s out there.

Steven: Um, do you associate yourself with a generation?

Christine: Uh uh {no}

Steven: No?

Christine: No, I think more important than generation is or, I guess, more important than an age, or being defined by your age is your behavior and I mean, and I think whether you are coming into a new job at 20, or 30 or 50, I think it's more about the way you present yourself and your attitudes towards the job more that, that has more impact on anyone than age, personally, that's my personal opinion. And I mean, that is always the way that I have always tried to sort of portray myself, I don't portray myself as this young, 20 year old that has no idea what I want to do, you know I, I work hard to prove myself, and you know, and I think people look more favorably at that.

In response to my query, Christine firmly asserted that age, or generation, was less relevant in the workplace than attitude and behavior. Here, Christine demonstrates another instance of participants making sense of generational archetypes at the level of the extra-subjective by drawing on her knowledge and understanding of individual performance at the levels of the generic subjective and inter-subjective. Christine thus makes sense of popular generational archetypes as being "out there," as she firmly asserts that "I think it's more about the way you present yourself and your attitudes towards the job more that, that has more impact on anyone than age." Ruby demonstrated similar sensemaking processes to Christine, arguing that "age is so much important as experience and attitude, um, I mean, you could be 45 years old and have been in the workforce for 25-30 years and still have no idea what is going on." Processes of identification will be

discussed more closely in the third section of this chapter. However, moments such as these demonstrate the way that participants emphasized the importance of behavior and attitude – rather than age or generation – as defining individuals in the context of their work.

Generational Archetypes as Negative and Undesirable

The resistance towards, and the negativity associated with, popular generational archetypes appeared quite frequently in interviews and manifested in a number of different ways. Like others, Greg responded to the generational prompt by referencing the ubiquity of popular generational narratives as out there and the negativity associated with being labeled as a Gen Y.

Steven: That makes sense, so one of the other real concepts that I am quite interested in is this idea of generations, is that a term that you are familiar with?

Greg: Yes, So are we talking like Generation X, Generation Y, Baby Boomers?

Steven: Yea that stuff

Greg: Uni and I guess life, the terms are thrown around all the time.

Steven So what context do you normally hear it in?

Greg: Oh those bloody Gen Ys (laughs) that sort of thing. It is used as a way to collectively merge a bunch of people together which I don't agree with as everyone has their own opinions and doesn't typically lead to that but it's definitely a thing that exists, I would say that I heard it more as a negative thing than a positive thing.

Greg defines the popular generational archetypes at the level of the extra-subjective insofar as he states they are “thrown around all the time” in “uni” and “life.” When I further prompted Greg regarding where specifically he had encountered them, he immediately references the “Bloody Gen Y” meme; a seemingly tongue-in-cheek phrase that negatively implicates young people. Greg’s sensemaking of generations draws upon the Bloody Gen Y meme and the way that negative generational discourse is drawn from the extra-subjective level. In addition, Greg’s laughter indicates some degree of resistance to the notion of generational identities being imposed as he believes that as individuals, “everyone has their own opinions and doesn’t typically lead to that.” In this sense, we see Greg’s sensemaking regarding negative generational discourse at the extra-subjective level butting up against his intra-subjective sense of who people are. Similarly, Matthew frames the experience of “generational labels” being imposed as negative or undesirable.

Steven: So one of the other topics that I am really interested in is this idea of generations, right, are you familiar with that term?

Matthew: Generations?

Steven: Yea

Matthew: Are we talking like Gen Y, Gen X and that?

Steven: That yea

Matthew: Yea (slowly), (laughs)

Steven: Yea you say yea tentatively...

Matthew: Oh no its just um, I mean, yea I mean there is these blocks that, people want to put us in, (Laughs) what's the question?

Steven: What do you think of them of that conversation?

Matthew: Yea yea I guess by the, my tentative response, it's probably, I am not someone who likes to put people in boxes too much, I think that is probably seems to be the pretty standard answer, when I ask people, cause I like to talk about all sorts of things, politics and that sort of thing, there is this, intergenerational report is probably the first thing that I think of.

Matthew is clearly drawing on knowledge and meaning at the extra-subjective level in this moment as he points to not only the popular generational archetypes but also notes the way that they are “these blocks that, people want to put us in.” Further, Matthew discusses the meaning or experience of putting people into a box as a negative one. Matthew's somewhat derisive tone combined with the annoyance evident in his demeanor suggests distaste towards not just the popular generational archetypes, but also the imposition of categories on others. In this sense, we can see Matthew making sense of generations by drawing on meaning at the extra-subjective level (i.e., generations as blocks that someone wants to put you in as discussed by the likes of the intergenerational report), as well as meaning at the inter-subjective level (i.e., putting someone into a box is an undesirable action). Elizabeth's response to the generational prompt again demonstrates this understanding of popular archetypes as stereotypes as well as the negativity associated with being labeled as one.

Steven: And what are your sort of, do you have thought or a position or a reaction to those sort of conversations?

Elizabeth: Um, I don't, I don't typically like, the fact, I feel it very um, what's the word, it's very downgrading, to say to someone oh you know it's almost a negative thing to be that person, even though some of the facts, yes I can admit that I probably, I am one of the stereotypes, um, it's not nice to be put into that box, it's not nice that you are a number, you are an individual person.

Steven: Do you associate yourself with any given generational category?

Elizabeth: Oh, I am definitely Gen Y. Um, stereotypical, don't ever watch much TV, stream things, always on my mobile, you know that kind of thing, but, there is, there is a lot of negativity that comes with that Gen Y that they don't work hard, that they, are very self-centered, that they um, they take a lot of money from their parents, which I don't think any of those factors are true in my case so I don't like being called like that stereotypical Gen Y.

Elizabeth's response demonstrates the complexity of many participants' sensemaking. Like others, Elizabeth makes sense of generational discourse as negative insofar as it's "very downgrading" because generational discourse is associated with being "boxed up" and simplified to "a number," rather than being considered as an "individual person." Where this moment with Elizabeth becomes particularly complex is in response to my follow up regarding whether she associates with a generation.

Elizabeth immediately says she is "definitely Gen Y" noting a stereotypic attribute of media consumption drawn from the extra-subjective, but upon drawing further attributes

she goes on to say that she does not like being called a “stereotypical Gen Y.” This exemplifies the complex ways in which participants made sense of both the construction of generational stereotypes and their beliefs regarding inclusion within those stereotypes.

Those Who Are Younger as a Different Generation

Despite their belief that generational archetypes were negative stereotypes that offered little insight into individuals, participants frequently drew on the extra-subjective level of meaning to make sense of the differences between themselves and those just entering the workforce. This is notable because the average age of interviewees was 25.7 years, and those entering the workforce were likely 3-4 years their junior at most. In spite of this, many participants saw themselves as a distinctly different generation than industry newcomers. The most prominent delineation was what I came to label as the Young Ones. Young Ones were principally described as having notably different attitudes towards work, technology, and social media. Again, Young Ones is a label constructed for the purposes of this section, and monikers used by respondents varied and were often amalgamations of Millennials (as younger than themselves as generation Y), Millennials, Gen Z, Gen I, or Gen Next. For example, Kathryn responded to the generational prompt by noting that she “was supposed to generation Y” but felt annoyed by it, as she did not feel the label accurately represented her. When I prompted her to discuss where she had heard about Gen Y, she began discussing the next generation coming through.

Steven: So something that I am interested in is this whole idea of generations, so are you familiar with that term?

Kathryn: Yes (Laughs)

Steven: So what does that term mean to you?

Kathryn: That term annoys me because I am supposed to be Gen Y if you read everything that is about Gen Y then it's not really how I see myself, and I don't like the fact that you have the boxes you have to fit in, that's very journalistic of me.

Steven: So what have you heard about Gen Y?

Kathryn: Oh it's all about the right here and right now which is very funny because I told you that I want to be an account manager in two years, I guess that that is very Gen Y of me, but um, it's all about, I think the big, that might be Gen Z, is that what the next one, the next one?

Steven: Yea, um, Gen Z possibly.

Kathryn: Anyway them, I think that they are even more self-centered with all of the Instagram and Facebook and I think that, I'm not sure if that is supposed to be Gen Y or the one after that, but that's definitely not a category that I want to fall into, I barely even take a selfie, so that is why I don't really like different generation break down, because I just don't necessarily associate with my generation, according to the block that has been done, I can't remember when it is, I was just looking the other day, I think it was 1994, ah the Milleniums, if that's what it is?

Steven: The Milleniums?

Kathryn: That's the generation after us, it might be to 1999 and I don't necessarily associate myself with 1999s (laughs) like they are a little bit younger.

What is particularly curious about Kathryn's sensemaking processes here is that at the age of 23, she sees herself as very distinct from those born in 1994-1999; 2-7 years her junior. In this moment, Kathryn is drawing upon knowledge and meaning of the "next generation" at the level of the extra-subjective. Certainly, the so-called Gen Z has received some degree of media coverage in Australia, and participants drew on this extra-subjective meaning in differentiating themselves from those younger in the organization. Moreover, while Kathryn was initially somewhat disparaging of the notion of Gen Y, she almost instantly began identifying more closely with it as her mind moved to Gen Z/Millenniums. Kathryn was not the only participant who engaged in sensemaking such as this. When I interviewed Julia, for example, she told me about a particularly harrowing job interview where she found herself pinned as a Gen Y then lambasted for it by the interviewer. When I followed up and asked her to go into more detail about what it meant to be Gen Y, she quickly identified as Gen Y by juxtaposing her generation against Millennials.

Steven: What do you think, what does it mean to be a Gen Y then?

Julia: Well I think that um, I think we have a bad rap, a few years ago, but it's not that bad any more, now that Millennials are happening, like, they are getting the bad rap, cause we were seen as very demanding, know it all and over confident, and like want job promotions and switched around jobs really quickly, um, and I feel like um, there was a lot of stigma attached – especially when I was like in

high school and uni and stuff. Whereas now there are the Millennials, like they are definitely way more of the focus about like, like what Millennials are doing, what they want, how they are in the workplace, like, where they are at now.

Steven: So you are, you can see yourself as Gen Y?

Julia: Yea I am definitely Gen Y

Steven: And you understand the Millennials as the new ones coming through?

Julia: Yea

Steven: So what values do you associate with them?

Julia: Um Millennials, so I guess that they are just like, really, I associate Millennials with like, they always had really cool mobile phones and the, but like, with that it's like, they are really like, on their phones on like, from a media perspective, they tap into things like snap chat, Instagram and Facebook, it's really big with them, it's like if you are going to target them, it's because they are like, really, just on their phones so much, I see them on the train in the morning. It's like, they are on their phones and their snapchat, like our brands have been like snapchat ads, and stuff like, so yea, so that is what I kind of associate with Millennials, is just there, how they are just with technology, like 24/7 now. Whereas my generation, kind of was, not as bad as they are. They are just had it all this time in front of them, so yea?

These moments with Kathryn and Julia demonstrate the way in which participants create and enact differences between themselves and those younger. Both Kathryn and Julia drew from knowledge of Millennials at the level of the extra-subjective in making

sense of the apparent differences in technology use, behaviors, and attitudes between themselves and those younger despite the fact that Millennial and Gen Y typically refer to the same generation. Moreover, their sensemaking processes demonstrate that the I quickly becomes a we, when faced with a generational other. While I will delve more into processes of identification and disidentification in Section Two of this chapter, generational archetypes seemed to be made sense of more as identities than as stereotypes when presented as a contrast between self and other.

Those Who are Older as a Different Generation

In addition to making sense of those younger as being a different generation to themselves, participants also othered older workers in a number of ways.

Old School. Several participants presented an archetype of the Old School, more senior employees who had likely started their careers in the 1970s-1990s. In the excerpt below, Thomas demonstrates how this archetype would often be presented in interviews.

Steven: Do people talk about those different generational categories at work?

Thomas: Oh Samantha, [his director] will always say how old she is or talk about when she first started buying TV, so on a typewriter, you'd have your, search, you used to have to get out the ratings book and go through line by line with a ruler and look at the program spots, the ratings, work it all out with a calculator, you could never make a mistake because you'd have to get the white-out out, then you looked, yesterday we had a company called [Supplier] in, came in and she was talking about moving to programmatic TV, so you look in terms of generations, in

the span of 25 years, you've gone from a book and a calculator and a typewriter to a laptop essentially doing the same things .

Thomas, like many others, made sense of apparent different attitudes and behaviors at work by drawing on meaning at the generic subjective (i.e., stories about the industry) as well as the inter-subjective (i.e., interaction with his director discussing changes and sensemaking of new approaches in the workplace). Thus, Thomas made sense of generational categories at work in terms of shifts in technology and the ways things are done in the industry and his organization.

Several participants drew on the imagery of *Mad Men* (the popular television series depicting the workplaces of Madison Avenue during the 1960s) to evidence not only cultural changes in the industry, but also how the differing eras had led to distinct age-based differences in the workplace. This archetype served to illustrate the substantial cultural and technological shifts in the industry. During my interview with Edward, he referenced this archetype that draws upon the organizational and industrial histories that exist at the level of the generic subjective in consideration of different generations in his workplace.

Edward: There are the old, those who are often old school mentality, so typically that is more your mad men scenario so you know wheeling and dealing, cowboy style, not as exaggerated but trying to paint a picture, but very much a trading focus, investment TV focused, newspaper print that kind of stuff, it's that mentality or at least a picture of what that might be. And there are still a lot of them. Then there is the non-old school um or traditionalists who are um I don't

know I don't know what you call them, it's not digital native but it's a different mentality, more of a modern mentality as I mentioned before the rise of things like data fueled marketing through econometrics, direct response marketing digital mixed with, the science, mixed with the art which is the planning strategic framework and direction, content creation, creative, mixing those two together

Here, Edward is creating two clear categories of those more senior at organizations. The first archetype is that of the Old School where he draws upon meaning and imagery at the extra-subjective of Mad Men, Cowboys, and Wheeling and Dealing. In addition, and similar to Thomas, he draws upon organizational and industrial histories of how these Old School used to do work in an effort to illustrate how their attitudinal positions towards work differ to those that he calls Modernists. These Modernists, according to Edward, appear to be something of a middle-management proxy (which is incidentally Edward's level in the organization) who demonstrate a combination of "science, mixed with the art."

Similar to Edward, Alice cites organization stories and histories at the generic subjective to create and enact generational differences between herself and the older employees.

Steven: What do you sort of consider, or what do you consider of older people working in this industry, what thoughts or associations?

Alice: Yea it's interesting that they refer to back to the old days, the old days in media where you get used to helicoptered to the Hunter Valley [wine region] to spend the day up there and then they also get pissed off when you have a long

lunch and not come back so I feel like older people have this past life that they refer to and they speak about it all the time and then all of a sudden as soon as you do something that's nowhere near as bad, as that, then, it's like, automatically, you can't do that, it's kind of like a little bit like being in high school.

Senior Executives. Another prominent way in which participants created and enacted generational differences of older employees was that of the Senior Executives. As discussed in Chapter 4, the marketing industry is bottom heavy with an average age of 29.7 years and more than 80 percent of employees with less than four years in the industry. The agencies and organizations themselves are often laid out in vast open offices with individuals working in groups or pods that specialize in different facets of marketing such as digital display, social media, traditional media, and analytics. Upper management, however, was typically older and often had offices “behind closed doors.” The Senior Executives construct often framed these higher-level employees as being involved in the top-line decision making and in being in those positions due to their knowledge and time in the industry.

Steven: Right, is age something that comes up at work, is it something that people talk about?

Diana: No, like I think that, to an extent it is reinforced that, there's an executive level, and there is, everyone else, if that makes sense (laughs) so there are people that are very much experienced and have been through it all and then there is people that haven't, which doesn't really bother me, because like I think that

realistically it is true, I graduate from uni and this is my first job in the industry, so yea.

Steven: Are those at the executive level, people who are necessarily up on the hierarchy? Or is it time within the industry or both?

Diana: Both

Steven: OK, do you feel like there is much differentiation between the two, is it something that is articulated a lot at work, is it something that comes up at work?

Diana: I think that it is reinforced, like, there will be meetings that are had at the exec level then obviously trickle down and that is something that only really happened in the past 6 months, so the agency has changed so much since when I began and it's become a bit more structured which is probably what you have to do as you grow and more people join the agency, but yet I think its reinforced.

Steven: And how does that make you feel?

Diana: Sometimes it can feel a little bit like, oh like, not like they don't trust you, but just that there is a disconnect between, like there is a very, obvious line between who's exec and who is not, um, but then again, because this is my first agency I don't know if that is to be expected or that is normal, or yea.

This construct elucidated the clear distinction that employees saw between themselves and those in the senior managerial positions, i.e., the ones with their own offices with doors. Here, Diana is drawing on meaning at the level of the generic subjective as she makes sense of the way in which those at the implementation level are physically separated from the senior executives at, and by, the organization.

Male Dominated. For many participants, the old days of advertising, the Old School, and thus the Senior Executives were and are notably male dominated. By the numbers, this observation makes sense as an industry census undertaken in 2014 showed that women constituted 59% of the industry workforce but only 26% of senior management roles (MFA.org, 2014). Connecting with the discussion of the Old School, Virginia posited that the senior levels were male dominated due to the “old school network.”

Steven: You spoke a little bit about looking at younger generations, and talked about, and comparing yourself to them, what about going the other way, do you think about the generations that are older than you?

Virginia: Oh yea, so there is, we call them old schools, so like, we have got, in our industry, probably 20 years ago there were a lot more men, so it's a lot, those men are in more management positions now, there is more women that have crept in, um, but they are more, they are more connected in an old school network, they are like, mate² mate mate, I'll get you a job so there, at a senior management leave, we always argue that the guys who get into those roles, they are just friends, because that's what it was like back in the old days

Virginia draws on stories at the extra-subjective level and considers these meanings in light of how business is done now – particular in relation to gender. Specifically, she draws on narratives of the old days at the level of the generic subjective

² Colloquialism for friend, typically used between males, common through Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Ireland.

as well as gendered narratives at the extra-subjective as she makes sense of the distinctly male senior management. This sentiment was echoed by Denise toward the end of my interview with her.

Steven: Cool so I think that that was actually most of the questions that I have for you, but I guess one of the questions that I have finally, is there anything else within the realm of age, generations, seniority in the context of the workplace that you think is important that I haven't asked?

Denise: Do you consider gender in the age realm?

Steven: Yea, do you think it's a part of it?

Denise: In my own observations I find that interesting

Steven: How so?

Denise: I think as, I feel that as you get more senior, the males are viewed as still having a grasp on um, the new technology and stuff but the women are seen as not as savvy, I feel like, as their age goes up, the respect doesn't go up in the same way.

Steven: That's interesting. Is that something that you have encountered personally or something you have seen?

Denise: No just my own observations, just yea.

Steven: Why do you think that is?

Denise: (laughs) um, I don't know sexism? (Laughs) I think in this industry, traditionally it was very male dominated, and um, I think a lot for the older generation, still carries that image um, that it's a advertising is a man's game, I

think that that is total, that that is really shifted now, but I feel like people who have come from that generation, um, feel like the men have more prestige, and seem to sort of command it, they can be a bit more, I would say old school more formal, um, and really um, expect respect, (laughs) expect respect, I feel um, yea I don't know, a bit it's not I just feel it's different really different, and I think that there is a lot more males than that are older in the industry um, than females there is a lot of young females, not a lot of old females.

Denise here identifies gender differentials as being embedded generationally and as with the previous participants, identifies that archetype of the old school. Specifically, Denise suggests that while "it's shifted now," individuals who have come from the generation wherein advertising was a man's game still hold onto that bias. Within this, Denise draws on roles and understandings at the level of the generic subjective in terms of an attitudinal contrast between men and women.

Section One Summary

Participants made sense of generational archetypes as stereotypes or generalizations that existed "out there." Participants made it clear that while these archetypes offer a way of speaking about groups of others, they offered little insight into themselves and their co-workers. In the organization, popular generational archetypes were spoken of as starting points in demography or targeting of advertising campaigns. Beyond these examples, however, participants emphasized that in considering others in the workplace, individuals were defined by personality, not generation. Many participants talked about the way that the imposition of generational archetypes was undesirable due

to the negative discourse associated with the likes of Generation Y. However, despite participants consistently stating that an individual's generation or age was largely not important in the workplace, many participants delineated the workplace into discrete aged groups; in some cases they specifically identified these as different generational archetypes. Several participants readily made sense of the upcoming generation as notably different from themselves in their usage of technology, behavior, and attitudes. In addition, many participants presented clear archetypes of senior workers.

Section Two: Generational Identification and Disidentification

Generational narratives and archetypes are prominent throughout academic research, industry, and popular media. Thomas et al. (2014) argued that the pervasiveness of generational discourse has led to “age-stereotyped assumptions [that] limit individuals’ discursive and material choices, locking them into age-related subject positions” (p. 1577). Thus, in this study, I sought to examine not only how individuals make sense of generational discourse, but to consider whether or not they identify or disidentify with generational constructs. As such, I posed the following two research questions.

RQ3: In what ways, if any, do individuals identify or disidentify with either generational or aged cohort constructs?

RQ4: In what ways, if any, do differing workplace contexts affect processes of generational identification and disidentification?

As identification is a long-standing and complex field in organizational studies, I elected to employ Scott et al.’s (1998) Structural Model of Identification because of

its emphasis on complexity and contextuality in identification processes. This model has two core components, or modalities, that provide insight into the multivalent and complex processes of identification and highlight the importance of context. The first modality is the Attachment modality which speaks to the identity<>identification duality: “This duality treats the available identities an organizational member may have access to as a set of rules and resources (structure) that can be drawn upon in the production of identification (system-level construct) with some corresponding target” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 307-308). The second modality is the Activation Modality that speaks to a situated-action view of identification, emphasizing the importance of context in understanding identification. “Activities influence the identities that are appropriated and reproduced in identification. Only in particular situations defined significantly by activity and activity foci, will a person identify in particular ways” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 323)

Below I present and examine participants’ processes of identification and disidentification with generational constructs. I first illustrate the way that participants positioned generational identities as peripheral and then present the ways in which participants actively disidentified with generational identity targets upon consideration.

Generational Identities as Peripheral

Participants often identified with popular generational archetypes by stating that they were a member of a generation, but then suggesting that these archetypes were not something that they associated with or thought of with any degree of frequency. For many participants, generational identification was thus fairly limited insofar as generational archetypes were seen of as age-based categories for which they met the

requirements. For example, Henry's response illustrates the way in which attachment to generational archetypes was fairly tenuous.

Steven: Do you associate yourself with a particular generation?

Henry: I know that I am in Gen Y but I wouldn't feel like, but I'm not attached to it.

Steven: So you don't wake up in the morning and think, I am one of...?

Henry: Nah, I couldn't care less

It is evident in this moment that generational identity is somewhat peripheral within the geographic metaphor of SMI's attachment modality. Henry's assertion that he is "in Gen Y" is similar to most participants' sensemaking of generational archetypes insofar as they are externally generated generalizations, stereotypes, or categorizations. Henry suggests that he would be located in, or considered as a member of Gen Y, but there is no effort on his part to connect with the identity target. Many participants demonstrated this form of attachment with generational archetypes wherein they have some sense that they are categorized within a generation, but they do not engage in identification processes with these generational identities. My interview with Greg demonstrates this cognizance of categorization.

Steven: Do you identify with a given generation?

Greg: Um I guess I identify with, well, yes because generation Y is what I am, like if, if we are collecting, it's a really good questions, yes I do, there are things,

there are certain aspects that I don't identify with, but yes I would call, I would never call myself a Gen Y person but I know that I am, yea, if that makes.

This moment with Greg – though somewhat incoherent on its surface – demonstrates fairly complex processes of identification and disidentification. Greg initially asserts that he identifies with Generation Y because “generation Y is what I am.” This is similar to Henry's identification processes in that he demonstrates some level of awareness that he, in some way, qualifies as a member of Gen Y. Greg offers two caveats, however, in that there are certain aspects that he does not identify with, and that he would never call himself a Gen Y. In many ways, this type of categorization without identification echoes participants' sensemaking of generational archetypes being stereotypes that exist out there, or as Matthew called them, “these boxes that people want to put us in.” This peripheral attachment was again demonstrated in my interview with Sean.

Steven: So just touch back on this generation thing very quickly, do you consider yourself to be a member of a generation?

Sean: Yea I would say Gen Y.

Steven: Would you say you associate your personality and values with Gen Y?

Sean: Yea I guess

Steven: You guess?

Sean: Yea, I think so, I would say that.

Steven: In terms of what you have said about the generation?

Sean: Yea and, thinking more about it, we are more, like, tech savvy I guess? If you show me a list of the attributes, then I could probably check most of them off.

Here, Sean demonstrates some degree of attachment to Gen Y insofar as he works to cultivate a link between himself and the Gen Y target via the stereotype attribute of being “tech savvy.” What is particularly interesting about this moment with Sean, however, is the way in which he suggests that being a member of a generation is determined by ticking off of a list of attributes. While Sean identifies with the generational target in some capacity, his discourse suggests that, as with many other participants, generational membership is determined by the meeting of requirements.

All three of the above excerpts evince that identification with generational identities was fairly limited. Within SMI’s spatial metaphor, it is evident that for Henry, Greg, and Sean, the Gen Y identity is more peripheral than pivotal. The way in which they identified with these identities, as a type of externally generated categorization, was fairly typical of participants in this study. There was a great deal of partiality in participants’ responses as, in many cases, participants demonstrated simultaneous identification and disidentification with popular generational archetypes. A common occurrence in the interviews was for participants to initially categorize themselves into an age-based generational category but then go on to actively disidentify in a number of specific ways.

Active Disidentification Upon Consideration

While many participants would respond to the generational prompt by categorizing themselves into an age-based generational cohort, they would often begin to

disidentify from generational identity targets as they discussed the meaning of those archetypes. The three most common ways in which participants disidentified from generational archetypes, and even peers of the same age, were: Negative Stereotypes, Differing (Aged) Cultural Values, and Possession of Life Experience.

Negative Stereotypes. The first key way that participants disidentified from generational archetypes was by noting or referencing undesirable stereotypic attributes. An example of this is the way in which Elizabeth (Chapter 5, p. 68) stated that she is “definitely a stereotypical Gen Y” initially but then goes on to actively disidentify from the target. Elizabeth identified with the target by ushering the stereotypic attribute of media consumption habits associated with Gen Y. In drawing on this meaning, however, she cites the negativity associated with the archetype and then works to actively disidentify from the target by employing the stereotypic attributes of poor work ethic, being “self-centered,” and “taking a lot of money from their parents.”

Like Elizabeth, Alice (Chapter 5, p.59-60) disidentified with Gen Y in her citing of the negative stereotypic attribute of Gen Y’s being “very selfish, me, me, me.” Curiously, while she then goes on to destabilize the accuracy of generational archetype, she also suggests that there are “young people here and I think that they are exactly Gen Y.” Alice thus concludes that while those generational categories exist, and may describe others, they do not accurately describe her.

Differing (Aged) Cultural Values. The second key way that participants disidentified from generational archetypes was by noting their possession of differing

cultural values. Notably, the differing cultural values that were drawn on were most commonly age-based.

Identifying as Older. A compelling emergent theme in the data was the way in which participants would actively disidentify from youth or their peers and actively identify as old. For example, Alice identified herself as something of a maternal figure amongst those her own age and younger in her office.

Steven: Does it seem, odd, to you, that you are 25/26 and you are sort of, identifying yourself as motherly in the workplace?

Alice: I know, I know (Laughs)

Steven: And talking about “young ones” [a term Alice used to refer to those who were just starting in the agency]? The “young ones” are 21/22?

Alice: Yea, they are like

Steven: So 3 or 4 year’s younger right?

Alice: Yea

Steven: So how does this come to be?

Alice: I have always been like that, like I, like people call me an old soul like I knit in my spare time (laughs) do you know what I mean, I love jazz music and whiskey, I’m just kind of one of those people that is always, my friends call me Martha because Martha Stewart because I have always been that, someone who could go to jail (laughs), no no no, just always been that figure I guess.

This active identification as an “Old Soul” is particularly interesting in that it allows Alice to disidentify from youth. While the median age of the industry was 29 at

the time of interviewing, many participants described themselves as being, or feeling, old. Here, Alice does so by citing her interest in jazz music, whiskey, and knitting to build and cultivate linkages to an older demographic. Similarly, when I asked Ruby whether she considered herself a member of a generation, she stated that she is “more of an old woman.”

Steven: On a more abstract, do you consider a member of a generation?

Ruby: Um, um, I don't really think about, I suppose I am because that is what I have always been told, but no. If anything people probably think I am more of an old woman than anything.

Steven: Why is that?

Ruby: Just because, (laughs) I don't know, I am just sort of an older, I don't know what the word is, quite what the right word is. Not into, not not into what people are into, but you know like, I would say, I would prefer to sit at home on a Saturday night in my pajamas than go out. I mean, I do do it, but I do it sparingly, and yea I just like all that old women stuff like cooking and baking. I have a couple of dogs, we have chickens in the backyard, and I like doing gardening, and it's all that sort of stuff.

Similar to Alice, Ruby simultaneously disidentifies from youth as she identifies as older. Ruby actively builds this linkage by first suggesting that people think she is more of an old woman as she likes “all that old woman stuff like cooking and baking.” Via the reference to her hobbies of keeping chickens and “sitting at home on a Saturday night in

her pajamas,” she disidentifies from her peers citing that she is “not what people are into.” This identification as old was also undertaken by Theresa.

Steven: Do you identify with a particularly generation, do you feel some kind of connection?

Theresa: I don't know, I feel like I am a really really old soul, like, one of my favorite movies is *Singing in the Rain* [1952] with Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds. I think that it more depends on the individual obviously, I am in my 20s, so I am quite young and I do associate with the younger generation, probably Gen Y or whatever it is.

Similar to Ruby and Alice, Theresa actively identifies as an old soul and builds this linkage via her interest in *Singing in the Rain* [1952]. Interestingly, Theresa goes on to say that as she is younger, she does associate with Gen Y, she did not appear to engage in identification. Conceivably, there may be some sense that being an Old Soul requires one to be young but have hobbies and interests not typically associated with the young. This type of identification is again seen in Andrew's response to my prompt following the discussion of the show, *Talkn' 'Bout Your Generation* [2009-2012].

Steven: What did you think of that [*Talkn' 'Bout Your Generation* [2009-2012]]?

Andrew: (laughs) I thought it was very funny seeing the differences that were like, that obviously been emphasizes on the show, but I thought it was very funny seeing the differences between what they thought was the Gen Y and the Baby Boomer, but it's sort of hard because, like a lot of the time, someone like me, I

tend to identify more with the older generations because I know a lot of the music, and it sort of tend to like, traditional sort of things, whereas a lot of the Gen Y stuff, they talk about, oh what is that what are you talking about and you are like oh duh, like it's sort of a bit different, yea, but I thought that that was a very funny show, it was good.

Steven: So you don't really consider yourself a member of generation Y then?

Andrew: Um, I guess I would, purely because of my age, not about like, the generalizations or this is what a Gen Y does, yea, it would be purely an age based thing rather than this is what a gen y is interested in kind of thing.

In his first response, Andrew actively disidentifies with Generation Y as he identifies more closely with the stereotypic attributes of older generations in the form of "liking older music" and "traditional sort of things." This is reaffirmed in his second response where Andrew goes on to say that while he would be a member of Gen Y purely based on age but not what Gen Y is interested in.

Notably, this identification as older was not as prominent amongst male participants as it was female participants. Female participants were more likely to identify as "Old Souls" via purportedly older interests and hobbies such as knitting or raising chickens, and Andrew was the only male participant to identify as older in this way. While it is possible that this finding is simply endemic to the small sample size of the study, the notable gender differentials in the industry discussed by female participants in the sensemaking section would suggest that this is likely a compelling area of focus for future study.

Identification as experienced and competent. Closely related to the way that some participants actively identified as older and disidentified from those who are young, is the way in which several participants spoke of actively disidentifying from young identities as they looked to identify as experienced and competent. Christine provides one example.

Steven: Um, do you associate yourself with a generation

Christine: Uh huh {no}

Steven: No?

Christine: No, I think more important than generation is or, I guess, more important than an age, or being defined by your age is your behavior and I mean, and I think whether you are coming into a new job at 20, or 30 or 50, I think it's more about the way you present yourself and your attitudes towards the job more that, that has more impact on anyone than age, personally, that's my personal opinion. And I mean, that is always the way that I have always tried to sort of portray myself, I don't portray myself as this young, 20 year old that has no idea what I want to do, you know I, I work hard to prove myself, and you know, and I think people look more favorably at that.

Here, Christine speaks of making a conscious effort regarding the way that she conducts herself at work. She states that attitude and presentation are pivotal at work and that portraying oneself as a young 20-year-old would likely be a misstep. The implication here, as is elucidated below by Matthew, is that young individuals may be perceived as less capable.

Steven: So you feel within the industry, that your age is not a thing?

Matthew: I don't think so, I mean, I try and just yea challenge the whole idea of idea being a factor, I think, sometimes when you sort of looking at someone a bit younger, you do see there's that tendency to go maybe they have a less experience, or they have been in the industry 10 years longer, and they look a bit older, are they looking at me and thinking that, it's all about I find it's all about how you can challenge yourself, if you, it doesn't matter if you are 25, 30 40, if you are professional in the way that you deal with people, um, then there should be no reason why they wouldn't treat you as someone who has been doing it a lot longer or is a bit older than you, I don't see a huge discrimination in age, yea sometimes it can come down to a title, I find its probably more dependent on your title as opposed to your age, so I would say that I am an account manager and someone is a director or a group business director, that would be why they don't want to have a conversation as opposed to looking at me and going you are young you don't understand and I have only ever really experienced the age discrimination probably once in my whole time I've been working and that was working with a direct client who was a lawyer and it was my first couple of months in my job and he goes, oh how old are you on the phone, and I was, 22 or 23, and he is like, you are just a small fish in a big pond, and they only thing that I could say as a response is are you going to sit here about my age or sit here and talking about business, but if you want to talk about my age then there isn't much to talk about but if you want to talk about getting you up on some advertising then

let's have a discussion about that and that immediately appealed, any sort of ambiguity, how old are you, how much experience you have, I had one objective and that was to do business and if you don't want to do business, then there is not much to talk about and that was the only time to be honest.

As is evident from Matthew's response, some in the industry equate youth with an absence of experience and thus competence. Here, Matthew recalls a moment where he actively worked to disidentify as young and identify as competent and experienced when working with a client. In this moment Matthew suggests that age is less important than position in organizational hierarchy. Closely related to this, there were several participants who had entered the industry later than most others and worked to identify as experienced and competent via Life Experience.

Possession of Life Experience. Closely related to the way in which participants identified as older, experienced, and competent, many participants identified as more mature in the sense that they possessed life experience. Christine, for example, was one of the youngest to be promoted to her level at her agency and actively looked to disidentify as young as she noted several times that despite her age, she possessed life experience.

Steven: I guess I just find it weird, to think about this idea of life experience, what is it in life experience that you get? What are the life experiences?

Christine: Yea, well I mean, like to be completely honest, I think that for my age I think that I have done a lot, like I am 22, I have lived, in another state than my family, I have moved overseas on my own, to the other side of the world without

knowing anyone I have done quite a lot for my age, I have my degree, I have been working full time already for two years, I am saving for a home whereas a lot of my friends are sort of studying or only just finishing their degree, they want to do the whole travel thing, they still live at home with their parents, they have never moved out of home, they have never had that experience of having to be on their own, and do things for themselves and I guess everyone here says “{moaning} oh you are only 22, you are a baby, you are a baby, you are such a baby, you have got, why are you saving for a house, why are you doing that, why are you working full time, when I was your age I was doing this or that} you know so I guess yea, everyone is different.

Here, Christine actively disidentifies from youth as she suggests that she has done a lot for her age such as travelling on her own, graduating, and saving for a home. She juxtaposes this against her friends who are still living at home and do not do things for themselves. Notably, this disidentification from youth via the possession of life experience also appeared with older participants who had entered the industry later than others. These participants often expressed some sense that they were behind everyone else, but they would also speak of having garnered life experience from their sojourning and present it as a valuable substitute for youth. For example, in my interview with Thomas, he discussed the way in which he was a few years behind where he should be due to a two-year working holiday in the UK and Europe.

Steven: How do um, do other people, chat about age and stuff at work, is that something that comes up in discussions?

Thomas: Um yea yea I suppose, it does so, more in like a joking manner, but that would be like, Sandra (Thomas' director) we slag her off because she is pushing 40, Samantha (Thomas' younger coworker) then thinks I'm like the oldest person in the world, but yea all in um fun.

Steven: So what do you think of that, if someone rips on you for being the oldest person in the world what is your response?

Thomas: To Samantha?

Steven: Yea

Thomas: Well the girl has never been out of her (suburb), I brush it off, it doesn't, the only thing that I would be concerned about personally, would be um, is probably career progression and the fact is I am going to be that little bit older by the time I get to where I want to be.

At the age of 28, Thomas considered himself to be at the "older end" of things. Specifically, Thomas expressed some sense of unease about the fact that he would likely be "a bit older by the time I get to where I want to be." As discussed in Chapter 4, there are four clear levels of career progression at the implementation level: coordinator, executive, manager, and director. While moving up these levels is desirable, more than half of the workforce has been in the industry less than four years (MFA.org, 2015) and so there are many vying for similar positions. Taken in combination with long hours, low pay, and a requirement to entertain outside of work hours, many participants described the industry as a young person's game. Thus, participants such as Thomas who had entered the industry later than others, looked to identify as having benefited from life

experience. This is demonstrated here as Thomas points to a narrative within his organization wherein individuals joke about the age of those older. When I queried Thomas about his response to this discourse, he dismisses Samantha's criticism referencing the fact that she has not left her suburb, calling her worldliness into question. Similar to Thomas, Lilian considered the way her career would be influenced because she entered the industry "at the ripe old age of 24."

Steven: One of the things that I am really interested in is the idea of perspectives and experiences of being young in the industry, so I guess one of the first questions is where do you fit age wise within your organization?

Lilian: Um, it's pretty median across the whole thing, I feel that to start a career you have to be relatively young when you get your foot in the door and that's probably people go to uni that's why they do it so they can get their foot in the door after they've had that experience, and I have sort of just jumped into it at the ripe old age of 24.

Steven: Is that the ripe old age is it?

Lilian: (laughs) yea, I feel like there are some people that are younger, that have been through uni, and this is their first media job where I don't so much have the media experience but I have the life experience, so I have sort of, yea, sort of getting off topic or whatever, it's a relatively young industry, I find, and people progress quite quickly, within the industry and some people, succeed because they want to and they are ambitious, and some people just stay as a coordinator for the next 10 years because they are comfortable.

Steven: You said life experience, what does that mean?

Lilian: I had a relatively hard upbringing and sort of having no parents around when I was younger, sort of, I have been brought up to be like a stronger person more ambitious person because when I get to the point where I want to have a family, I want to be able to support them the way that my family couldn't, so I want to work as hard as I can, as fiercely as I can, be as ambitious as I can so I can provide my family, and even though I have a really good relationship with my parents now I would love to get to the point where I can support them.

Here, Lilian notes the way in which her “relatively hard upbringing” has granted her life experience. Lilian differentiates herself from her peers as she suggests that this life experience has created ambition, and given that people in the industry can rise quite rapidly, she feels that it will allow her to succeed rather than “just stay as a coordinator for the next 10 years.” Thus, Christine, Thomas, and Lilian all employ the possession of life experience, in slightly different contexts, in an effort to identify as older, and more mature, than their peers.

Influence of Context on Generational Identification

As noted throughout this chapter, participants consistently stated that popular generational archetypes did not arise at work. At the same time, however, participants were relatively knowledgeable about popular generational archetypes, identifying (however partially) as a member of a generation in interviews and discussing archetypes in conversations with parents or grandparents. Returning to SMI, it seems likely that the reason for this is can be found in consideration of the activation modality, i.e., context.

Specifically, the activation modality emphasizes that “activities influence the identities that are appropriated and reproduced in identification. Only in particular situations defined significantly by activity and activity foci, will a person identify in particular ways” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 323). Thus, in the context of work, it could be concluded that there were very few activity foci that catalyzed identification with popular generational constructs. Evidence for this arose in the interviews as participants specifically noted the lack of utility of these archetypes in the context of work.

Steven: Would people talk about it within the context of work

Greg: Na no

Steven: So where do you run into it then?

Greg: Um, that’s a good question, probably in the news a lot, um not so much with friends, I would, we are all the same generation so there is no need to talk about it.

Steven: Do you talk about other generations?

Greg: Um, maybe the baby boomers, because they are our parents, um but in the context of aging populations, um, housing prices and all that sort of stuff so yea, the news is where I would hear it and discuss it, sort of based on that sort of thing.

Here, Greg provides some evidence for the absence of identification with popular generational archetypes in his workplace. Generational narratives, as stereotypes or generalizations that exist out there, have little salience in a workplace where the employees do not perceive age or aged differences. However, away from work, generational talk is more salient in that it allows a way of considering differences

between himself and his parents, changing times regarding house affordability, or even ways of understanding media conversations about aging populations. Karen also provides insight into the issue of context.

Steven: Yea. So where have you encountered this talk before?

Karen: Um good questions. I guess when you, if you sort of read or hear any social commentary, people talk about changing values, so like, you know, generation Y or people who are indecisive or can't commit to things, the baby boomers who, so I guess that is a big one because people talk a lot about now baby boomers who are getting close to retirement, and I suppose it is my parents and my parents' friends as well who talk about their children are doing things differently, that their kids are doing things that they wouldn't have done, or that it's almost like a bit of clash between parents wanting their kids to live a certain, or for their lives to turn out a certain way but the kids not necessarily wanting the same things, so I suppose it's more in general, in terms of work or here, not so much. It's interesting actually that I don't feel like so, people for example who are older than my parents here or my parents' age, because we all kind of have the same goal, we work on the same projects, I don't notice that they are. I think of my mum who talks really loudly on mobile phone because she doesn't realize that its, you don't have to yell into it and well, not the most tech aware person But you know, I don't see that, or associate those same things who might be my parents' age here because I think maybe, media, they are probably keeping up more with technology, that could be it as well. But like I said, as we are working on the same

projects and we have the same challenges, and tasks to do, it doesn't seem like there is such a big difference, um, in age or in values, maybe because we are focused on that work, you know. I guess if you, when you have drinks on Fridays or you go out with people outside of work you start to put, fill out more of a picture of who they are as you see one side at work which is the professional, not necessarily a front but the image that they have, and you don't realize that they have all these other factors in their life that do kind of separate that generational thing but it's not like so noticeable, I don't think.

Here, Karen offers another rationale for the absence of either generational discourse or generational identification in the context of work. Karen asserts that because employees are working in the same organization, with the same goals and challenges, age differences are not brought up. Again, similar to Greg, Karen notes that while those generational differences may become more apparent outside of work, i.e., during social functions, in the context of work they simply don't come up. In contrast, however, many participants discussed the home as being a space wherein generational discourse would arise. When presented with the generational prompt, many participants laid out frameworks of family generations, i.e., grandparents, parents, and themselves. Those that engaged with this type of discourse would often refer to discussions that they had had with their parents about how times had changed. That is, generational narratives were connected with the more stereotypical zeitgeist and thus functioned as a way of explaining differences between family members' experiences of life.

Steven: You mentioned the word, you talked about generations briefly which is this whole other thing that I am interested in, what does that word generation mean to you?

Ashley: I guess I take it quite literally, like you know I guess my parents' generation then my generation and I guess the generation below me which I am assuming is people finishing school now maybe or even younger than that um, I think I don't know, this is just me, chatting I don't even know if this even answers your question but I feel as if, in between like the changes in generations say in like, you know our values and um, what it like I guess what's important to us and what we strive for are so, have changed so vastly so dramatically from say my parents' generation to me, compared to the generations before them and I feel like, does that make sense?

Steven: Yea that makes sense

Ashley: Yea I guess it must be like a technology thing, like since things have changed so much, with you know like computers and phones and how everything is connected now and globalizations and all that kind of stuff has really, even I feel like for me now to what I find important to say what babies are born and what they eventually their values are going to be so different to compared to mine and compared to my parents but I feel like their generation for my parents are quite similar and before them and before them and I guess so yea, I just think that it's quite scary the way that things are changing, so quickly, as opposed to just gradually like it used to.

For Ashley, and several other participants, the word generations implied those familiar stereotypes and prompted consideration of how “times have changed” in terms of technology and values. Similar to Ashley, Greg in the aforementioned example stated that while generations may not come up at work, they certainly do arise in discussions with parents regarding the likes of rising house prices. The presence of generational archetypes and discourse at home and the absence of generational archetypes and discourse at work makes sense as the activity and/or activity foci in the home space is more likely to encourage generational identification as it offers utility in understanding divergent experiences of the world. While identifying as a Millennial amongst work colleagues may offer little utility (or even have a negative effect), doing so at home as the family watches Talkn’ ‘Bout My Generation seems more likely given that “identifications are situated in contexts of interaction in the presence of other social actors” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 304) The fact that almost no participants undertook generational identification in the interviews until I broached the subject, despite talking about a range of issues related to age, would further suggest that this identification was reliant on activity foci found outside the work context.

Section Summary

It is clear that participants’ identification and disidentification processes were complex and contextual. Attachment to generational identities was limited in two key ways. First, generational identities appeared to exist in the back region (within SMI’s geographic metaphor) and were not officially accepted or appreciated at work. Second, the identities were more peripheral than they were pivotal. Participants had some sense

that they were categorized as Millennials, but efforts to actively identify with the generational targets were very limited. Moreover, even those participants who actively identify with generational targets (at least admitting membership) often engaged in discursive disidentification upon further consideration, citing the negative nature of the discourse and the undesirable stereotypic attributes. In other cases participants looked to disidentify from generational targets in terms of either their cultural values (i.e., being an Old Soul) or alternatively, their workplace behavior. Within the context of participants' homes, however, the rules and resources for generational identification existed in a way that facilitated or encouraged identification processes.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to propose a new path for generational scholarship and illustrate the need for stronger theoretical frameworks, more varied methodological approaches, and meta-discourse. To do this, I took a phronetic approach and explored how young professionals in the advertising industry in Australia made sense of, identified with, and disidentified from generational and aged constructs. This project was grounded in Mannheim's seminal essay, *The Problem of Generations* (1952) and in critiques of current generational scholarship and treatments of the concept in popular discourse. I drew on two theoretical frameworks in the study: Weick's Sensemaking Model (1995) and Scott et al.'s (1998) Structural Model of Identification. Data were collected through qualitative research methods and analyzed with an iterative process.

In this Chapter, I present a discussion of this study and its findings. I will first attend to the research questions, and, in revisiting the theoretical frames of the study, consider why sensemaking and identification processes took place as they did. I will then discuss the contributions of this study to the field theoretically, methodologically, and practically. Third, I will consider limitations of this study as well as discuss the ways in which the study evolved during its course. Fourth, I will discuss future directions for the field. Finally, I will offer concluding remarks and reflections.

Attending to the Research Questions

This project had two central goals: to garner an emic understanding of how participants understood age and generations in their workplace and to understand if and how participants identified or disidentified with aged and generational archetypes. In this section, I will consider the extent to which this project achieved these goals as I review the findings with specific attention to the research questions and the theoretical frameworks in which they were grounded. While the discussion of sensemaking preceded consideration of identification in the previous chapters, for the analytical and summative purposes of this chapter, I will invert this structure given the centrality of identity and identification in considerations of the sensemaking process.

Identification and Disidentification

One of the two core goals of this project was to understand if and how participants identified or disidentified with aged and generational archetypes. In considering these issues, I employed Scott et al.'s (1998) Structural Model of Identification given the emphasis of this framework on the inherent complexity and contextuality of identification processes. Two research questions were posed:

RQ3: In what ways, if any, do individuals identify or disidentify with generational constructs?

RQ4: In what ways do differing workplace contexts affect processes of generational identification and disidentification?

Together, RQ3 and RQ4 sought to understand not only if and how generational identification took place but under what conditions and when. Four key themes arose in participants' identification and disidentification with generational and aged identity targets. First, generational identities were peripheral rather than pivotal. Specifically, participants' identification with these targets was apparent, but limited and partial insofar as the targets were identified with as age-based categorizations rather than as identities. Second, even when respondents accepted this peripheral categorization in terms of their fit regarding age, there was subsequent active disidentification from the generational identity. As participants drew on the meaning of generational archetypes, they increasingly disidentified from popular generation archetypes because they saw the archetypes as negative and preferred identifying with a different set of age-related cultural identities. Third, within the context of work, participants emphasized that generational identities simply did not come up with regard to coworkers in either formal or informal conversation. Fourth, in contrast with the workplace, within the context of home, identification with generational archetypes was more likely as these archetypes provided salient ways of understanding differences with relatives of different familial generations. Participants' processes of identification and disidentification can be understood by reexamining the SMI model (Figure 1.0).

Within the context of participants' work, the rules and resources for generational identification with popular generational archetypes did not exist in a way that facilitated or encouraged identification processes. That is, looking at the Attachment Modality, we can understand that generational identity was peripheral rather than pivotal. This was

evidenced in the way that participants made sense of popular generational archetypes as externally determined categories rather than identities and did not see these archetypes as a relevant part of working life beyond the consideration of demographics in advertising research and strategy. Looking at the Activation Modality, we can understand why processes of identification and disidentification took place when and where they did. Many participants discussed the way that they predominantly worked with individuals their own age, and thus there was relatively little need, desire, or even utility in identifying with these extant generational constructs on a regular basis. Further to this, the Activation Modality explains why participants actively disidentified from generational archetypes or even broader youth categories when working around older coworkers. Specifically, because respondents saw the generational archetypes as largely negative, strategic and active disidentification allowed them to perform in a way that would be seen experienced and competent. This was evidenced in the interviews themselves, as while participants would initially state that they were members of a generation, they would then actively disidentify as they further considered the stereotypic attributes of the generational identities. This process of acknowledgement of fit with the age-based category and active disidentification from its negative qualities often involved interesting processes of sensemaking regarding self and other in the workplace that will be discussed in more detail in the theoretical contributions section of the chapter.

Finally, careful consideration the activation modality offers insight as to why participants would more readily identify with popular generational archetypes outside of work. For example, in the context of watching a generation-based game show with

parents or grandparents, the activity foci in this context would encourage generational identification insofar as it was within the spirit of the show to consider these generational differences amongst family members. The same can be said in regards to conversations that participants had with parents and grandparents regarding the differences between the times in which they grew up.

Sensemaking

The other central goal of this project was to garner an emic understanding of how participants understood age and generations in their workplace. Thus, I employed Weick's (1995) theoretical framework of Sensemaking and proposed RQ1 and RQ2.

RQ1: How do individuals make sense of generational constructs?

RQ2: How can meanings about generational constructs be understood as cascading between different levels of social reality in the experience of day-to-day work?

RQ1 was somewhat broad and sought to understand what and how generations existed to participants, and RQ2 specifically worked to ensure consideration of the complexity and contextuality of sensemaking processes. Five key themes emerged in my analysis. First, participants described generations as stereotypes that existed “out there.” Second, participants noted that generational archetypes were useful tools for their jobs but the archetypes were not otherwise relevant to themselves or their coworkers. Third, participants went on to present generational stereotypes as negative and undesirable impositions on the way they perceived themselves. Fourth, despite popular generational archetypes' lack of salience in the context of work, participants created and enacted

differences between themselves and those who are (only slightly) younger than themselves. Fifth, participants also created and enacted differences between themselves and those older.

The way that participants made sense of both popular and emergent generational constructs can be elucidated via the consideration of the core properties of sensemaking: that the process is grounded in identity constructions, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. I presented the discussion of identity and identification first in this chapter as these processes are central to sensemaking. Specifically, identity shapes the way individuals interact in any given social context and hence influences how sense is made in those contexts (Weick, 1995).

What the situation means is defined by who I become while dealing with it or what and who I represent. I derive cues as to what the situation means from the self that feels most appropriate to deal with it, and much less from what is going on out there (Weick, 1995, p24)

Participants of this study readily discussed and cited generational constructs, archetypes, and discourse at the level of the extra-subjective insofar as those concepts existed in a generalized “out there” and in the media. These generational narratives and archetypes were made sense of as broad generalizations or stereotypes that were a way of speaking about a group of people, but were seen as offering very little insight into the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Accordingly, participants did not draw on the knowledge and meaning of popular generational archetypes at the level of the extra-

subjective in making sense of themselves and others at work. At the same time, however, there were emergent aged identities that were central to participants' sensemaking processes. For example, participants drew on knowledge at the generic subjective level via the plausible, extracted cues of differing roles, responsibilities, physical locations, and organizational histories. These extracted cues from the generic subjective level (e.g., a "Mad Men" approach to advertising, having a corner office) were instrumental as respondents made sense of the difference between themselves and those more senior in the organization. That is to say, these emergent accounts and archetypes were the most plausible explanations for the material differences in the context of participants' work.

[S]ensemaking is about plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention, and instrumentality. Sensemaking, to borrow Fiske's (1992) imagery, "takes a relative approach to truth, predicting that people will believe what can account for sensory experience but what is also interesting, attractive, emotionally appealing, and goal relevant (p. 879). (Weick, 1995, p. 57)

Quite simply, popular generational archetypes did not account for the material differences that were important and relevant to participants. Moreover, the way that participants made sense of the differences between themselves and those older along the lines of experience and tenure is in many ways more interesting, attractive, emotionally appealing, and goal relevant because it provides a clear trajectory for their own career progression in the organization and industry. Conversely, the negative and critical discourse about Generation Y/Millennials, or even young people, renders these identities unlikely to be employed in sensemaking as they are uninteresting, unattractive, not

emotionally appealing, and not goal relevant. To evidence this, several participants specifically reflected upon their attitude and behavior at work and emphasized the aversion to conveying youthfulness as it was framed as antithesis of experience and competence. Thus we can see participants of this study as active agents constructing sensible and sensible accounts for their material experiences (Weick, 1995).

Contributions

Theoretical Contributions

The first core theoretical contribution of this dissertation is the overall finding that popular generational archetypes did not exist to participants in the same way that they exist in scholarship in three specific ways. First, where Generational Theory (Howe & Strauss, 1991) would suggest that members of a generation would likely have some sense of perceived membership in a generation due to a shared understanding of critical experiences, this did not appear to be the case. Participants almost never brought up these popular generational archetypes on their own and when asked to, were clear in disavowing the archetypes as relevant to their lives. Participants did not consider generational archetypes to be identities that were individually defining but rather saw them as stereotypes or generalizations that were only relevant to popular discourse. They did not report on regularly using these archetypes to understand or interact with others in the workplace. Second, the antagonisms and tensions that the likes of Twenge (2014) has suggested exist between generations simply did not appear. Participants spoke of differences between themselves, those younger, and those older; however, many

participants went to great lengths to stress the value and importance of each group and the ways in which they differed from stereotypical descriptions of generations. In many interviews, I even presented devil's advocate type questions regarding whether it would be better to work with only those of a similar age, and all participants dismissed the notion entirely. In regards to older workers, participants emphasized the value and importance of those older in terms hands-on experience, business acumen, and institutional knowledge. In regards to younger workers, participants valued their enthusiasm and their knowledge of trends for younger demographic groups.

Thus, in the context of work, participants did not see or describe the generational archetypes that are supposedly so ubiquitous. That is, this study would seem to support the recent assertions of Costanza et al. (2015), Deal et al. (2010), Lyons et al. (2014), and Thomas et al. (2014) that given the absence of empirical data evidencing the generational differences, there may not be a generational *there*, there. Accordingly, this project provides support for the position that (a) popular generational archetypes are not as salient as they are assumed to be by scholarship, and (b) that individuals in the workplace actively and strategically resist the generational identification of self and others.

The second core theoretical finding of this dissertation is regarding the process through which participants created and enacted difference between themselves and those older and those younger in the workplace. This process involved drawing on meaning at the extra-subjective (discourse of popular generational archetypes), generic subjective (roles and responsibilities in the organization), and inter-subjective (differences in attitudes and experiences) levels of sensemaking in considering employee groupings

relevant to experiences and understandings of participants. Respondents in this research actively emphasized that individual mentality and behavior were paramount in the context of work, but they also clearly delineated individuals in the workplace along aged and generational lines. The emergent aged delineations drawn on in sensemaking were far more salient to participants than popular generational archetypes and clearly played an important role in their respective organizations.

Taken together, these two core theoretical contributions suggest that generational scholars embrace, rather than avoid, complexity and contextuality and look for more nuanced conceptualization of age and generations in the context of work. Moreover, the fact that the participants actively and strategically engaged (by both rejecting and embracing) extant and emergent aged and generational constructs illustrates the importance of undertaking more grounded work that seeks out emic perspectives. Beyond this, however, I believe that neither of the theoretical lenses employed for this study do justice to the complexity of participants' agency in the dual processes of sensemaking and identification. Specifically, I believe that the third and most significant contribution that this paper makes to the field is the elucidation of how participants did not simply make sense of generational archetypes nor simply identify or disidentify with those archetypes. Rather, respondents in this research actively made sense of themselves.

For participants, generational archetypes were seen as established and well-known cultural categories that supposedly describe general characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of those who fall into them. As was discussed throughout Chapter Five, participants did not resist or attempt to destabilize these categories but rather made sense

of them as stereotypes or generalizations that did not necessarily describe any one person. In this sense, the existence of generational cultural categories was not questioned and while their utility was limited, the generational archetypes and discourse remained intact. As such, what was observed in this study was participants faced with dissonance as their self-conceptualization differed from the social identity or category to which they “officially” belonged. This was frequently demonstrated in the way that participants acknowledged that the generational categories exist, and rather than questioning the validity of the archetypes, they would make sense of themselves by identifying with alternative identity targets (such as Old Souls) that also worked to disidentify themselves from popular generational targets (such as Gen Y). Thus, participants of this study were, in essence, actively and strategically deciding who they were, and in turn, who they were not. As they engaged in this Selfmaking, that is resolving the dissonance that existed between their self-conceptualization and their ascribed social categorization, they often also asserted that while they did not fit the generational mold, there were generational others who did – after all, the generational archetype must exist for a reason. For many participants, younger organizational members became this generational other who were better described by popular generational discourse. These were the individual who were constantly on their phones, or on Instagram or Snap Chat. In turn, these younger others could also be the individuals who embodied negative attitudinal attributes of the generational discourse such as irresponsibility.

While this process of sensemaking about self in a way that both maintains the archetype and disidentifies from it may seem novel, it in many ways ratifies—and

extends—Mannheim’s assertion that even those in the same generation (defined through the extra-subjective) are internally stratified and do not exist as a single amorphous group.

According to Mannheim’s account, contemporaneous individuals are further internally stratified: by their geographical and cultural location; by their actual as opposed to potential participation in the social and intellectual currents of their time and place; and by their differing responses to a particular situation so that there may develop opposing generational units (Pilcher, 1994, p. 482-483)

The sensemaking of this study’s participants would seem to evidence Mannheim’s position about stratification within a single generational cohort. Respondents clearly saw themselves as distinct from those that, defined extra-subjectively, are within the same generation. However, what is noteworthy about the current research is that it suggests that these substrata might stem from active disidentification with the negative characteristics ascribed to a generational group. Further, it suggest that the existence of distinctions within a generational group can occur both through the active identification with alternative characteristics (e.g., unlike Millennials, I am an “old soul” or experienced in the ways of the world) or through the creation of a specific set of “others” who enact the negative characteristics of the generational archetype (e.g., those “young ones” who are always on Instagram).

Within the work of Mannheim, it is also worthwhile to consider that “in order to share generational location in a sociological meaningful sense, individuals must be born within the same historical and cultural context and be exposed to experiences that occur

during their formative adult years” (Pitcher, 1994, p. 490). When Mannheim originally published *The Problem of Generations* (1923), the life expectancy in his home nation of Hungary was 45.1 years, whereas today it stands at 75 years (Geoba.se, 2016). Certainly an argument could be made that as life expectancy increases, we remain in school longer, and start careers later. Thus, what counts as our formative adult years also changes. It is conceivable that both the participants in this study, and those younger to whom they frequently referred as being different, have yet to fully pass through their formative adult years and thus develop a sense of generational kinship. That is, it is conceivable that the distinction between the participants of this study and those younger may fall to the wayside in five to ten years as a more distinct generational other appears.

Methodological Contributions

Broadly speaking, this study has demonstrated the richness of grounded approaches. For example, in interviewing, this study evidenced the utility in not operating under the pretense of the established ideas and terminology of generational scholarship. Put more generally, this study illustrated the value and importance of not priming participants about ideas held by either the interviewer or the culture. Case in point, most participants did not raise generational narratives until I prompted them to do so. Once these narratives were brought to the fore, participants’ discourse shifted notably in the remainder of the interview. In addition, findings such as the negativity associated with the imposition of generational identities or the strategic disidentification process clearly illustrate the importance of scholars not interviewing individuals as members of a generation and rather allowing them to make their own sense of age and generations.

Surprisingly, there is relatively little empirical data on the effects of research project frames communicated with participants prior to interviewing (Knox, 2009). However, many grounded theorists and qualitative researchers have stressed the role that narrative frameworks in the interview play in shaping discussion (Charmaz, 2006; Tracy, 2013). Thus, I believe that the findings of this project illustrate the need for those undertaking qualitative interviews that consider well-known cultural categories to frame projects broadly before the interview and employ a stance of deliberate naiveté during the interview (Tracy, 2013). As was clearly illustrated in my interviews, while participants would employ terms such as Millennials or Gen Y, the meaning that participants attributed to these well known, or at least widely discussed, frameworks was essential to the insight garnered from data collection. For example, had I not asked participants to explain who they were referring to when they spoke of Millennials, I would not have come to understand the way that term was employed to describe younger members of the workforce. In a much broader sense, had I imposed popular generational archetypes from the outset of the interview, it is highly unlikely that I would have been made aware of the wide range of emergent generational constructs employed by respondents as they made sense of self and others.

Practical Contributions

The primary practical contribution of this study is the way that popular generational archetypes did not appear to be as salient in this working context as the majority of generational writing would suggest. When taken in combination with the fact that the imposition of generational identities is seen as negative, it seems paramount that

researchers and management consultants alike should not impose or assume these identities in organizations. That is to say, the very notion that generation differences demand particular management strategies (see Benson & Brown, 2011; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2008; Twenge & Campbell, 2008) is at best ill-informed, and, at worst, likely to produce some of the negative workplace consequences that it purports to address (Thomas et al, 2014). Weick (1995) discussed how perceived identities shape behavior in organizations, and many organizational studies have considered how attitudes and perceptions towards others can shape subsequent action. For example, within organizational psychology, the well-documented phenomenon of behavioral confirmation illustrates how individuals “come to behave in accord with erroneous and sometimes negative beliefs held by another person” (Snyder & Haugen, 1995, p. 963). In organizational contexts, it seems likely that the introduction of generational discourse that includes the narrative of generational characteristics being very real and impactful would likely lead to behavioral confirmation. This is similar to assertions made by Weick (1995) that individuals act based on both their own identity, and the perceived identity of others. Thus, the imposition of these generational identities by researchers and management consultants could lead to undesirable organizational outcomes.

Ultimately, it stands to reason that if organizations are prohibited to discriminate against, or even talk about, age through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII, and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, then organizations should equally be prohibited from doing so under the guise of generations. That is not to suggest, however,

that there is no way that the issues identified in this dissertation could be addressed. For example, one of the most compelling findings of this project is the way in which those relatively junior saw themselves as distinct and having a lot to offer those a few years younger. While mentoring research in organizational studies typically focuses on established senior employees and young protégés (Allen & Eby, 2011; Eby et al. 2013), this finding points to the importance of creating mentoring relationships between those much closer in organizational and industrial tenure. Establishment of these types of mentoring programs would likely not only offer opportunities for career development but also strengthen the ties between these organizational members.

Limitations

While this was something of an exploratory study, there are two core limitations of this project that conceivably have played a role in shaping the data. These involve the sample of the study and the study's reliance on interviews.

Sample

As discussed in Chapter 4, the sample of this study is reflective of the industry in which it was conducted, and there are several aspects of the industry that could conceivably have shaped participants' perceptions. For example, the media and communication industry in Australia is an industry dominated by young workers, with a mean average employee age of 29 years. Given that participants suggested that generational differences did not come up in within the context of work as they typically worked with others of their own age, it seems conceivable that aged and generational

differences may be more apparent or salient in organizations or industries with a more normal or Gaussian distribution of ages. Evidence for this may lie in the way that generation discourse was shown to be more readily discussed within the context of home where those generational others were present.

Related to this, another way that the sample of this study likely affected the data is the way that the advertising industry is deeply invested in the young working population. Given the high turnover rate and reliance of the industry on young workers, it is conceivable that much of the culture of the industry and structure of the organizations has been shaped around this young population. For example, many participants spoke about the way the many individuals are drawn to the industry for the perks that come with the relationship-based business such as parties, expensive food and alcohol, and tickets to events. Another example of the influence of youth is the narrative of the industry as highly meritocratic. Many participants spoke of the industry as being one where individuals can move through the ranks quickly and at a young age providing they are talented enough. Given that these are only two examples, it seems likely that there are many ways in which the industry caters to the culture of youth. As such, it is conceivable that generational and aged sensemaking and identification processes would likely differ in industries or organizations where there is more value placed on experience and tenure.

There are other limitations to the sample that are endemic to projects of this nature. Like most interview studies, this project relied on a relatively small number of respondents, and there were several findings that could have benefited from a larger sample in order to make comparisons or draw judgments about the importance of the

insights. For example, narratives about the influence of gender in the workplace (especially with regard to older employees) were notable and interesting, but were raised by just four participants. Similarly, there were notable differences in how men and women identified and disidentified with aged narratives. For example, female participants seemed much more willing to identify as an old soul. In addition, given that the sample was from a relatively limited geographical space, there would almost certainly be variations in those situated in other geographic contexts, as they would have different meaning to draw from across all levels of social reality. Finally, it is worth noting that the respondents in this study were highly educated, affluent, and upper-middle class people. It would seem likely that examining less educated, less affluent, working class populations may render quite different results.

Reliance on Interviews

A final core limitation of this study was the almost entire reliance on interview data. Originally I had set out to undertake observation as a more important aspect of data collection, and while some observation was possible in terms of acclimating and sensitizing to the field, observational data were ultimately not used in answering research questions for several reasons. First, as has been discussed throughout the past two chapters, generational and aged differences simply did not seem to come up on in organizations. Quite simply, this was not a conversation that participants of this study appeared to enter into with much rate of frequency. Had participants expressed that this was the case, I likely would have undertaken more observation work in organizations. Second, in the instances when I did undertake observation, it was evident that I was

shaping conversations. As was discussed in Chapter 4, there were numerable issues that arose in attending YPN events. Some facilitators failed to mention my presence and this left me ethically unable to collect data that day. At other times, I was referred to as “a lab coat who wanted some rats to study.” While methodological approaches such as mine often require some degree of flexibility and improvisation, there was simply too much variation in how I was introduced to spaces. Given that I was deeply interested in participants’ sensemaking processes, and given that sensemaking is contextual and social, it was important to consider how my presence might influence the very processes that were at the core of my research questions.

Future Directions

There are many plausible future directions that stem from this project. First, in terms of generational scholarship, I believe this project has clearly demonstrated the importance of employing more grounded, qualitative methods that pursues more complex and contextual aged and generational constructs in the workplace. Moreover, the field as a whole would be well served by carefully considering its theoretical foundations, moving away from the quantitative and reductionist methods that have dominated research about generations, and in turn, engaging in meta-discourse that could shape subsequent understandings and research undertakings.

A second plausible future direction for generational scholarship may be the employment and development of Swindler’s (1986) cultural framework. This framework views culture as a toolkit of “symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views which people may

use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (Swindler, 1986, p. 273). This framework is something of an open systems perspective that suggests that an individual’s cultural repertoire provides strategies of action, as opposed to more traditional perspectives of culture in which culture defines action (Swindler, 1986). While this framework was employed by Harrison and Corley (2011) in an examination of how culture at the macro level functions as a set of resources for individuals in an organization, Swindler’s (1986) work has received relatively scant attention within organizational studies more broadly. The toolkit framework would seem well suited to aged and generational scholarship given the way that participants in this study actively and strategically drew on their broader cultural repertoire (including concepts relevant to age and generation) in their identification and sensemaking processes.

Rather than assuming or imposing generational archetypes, scholars engaged in generational research should look closely at emergent aged and generation distinctions in workplaces. It was evident in this study that popular generation archetypes held little salience within the context of work and were made sense of in a fundamentally different way than the process assumed by generational scholarship. Participants treated these archetypes as external categorizations, not as identities, and demonstrated a great deal of agency in strategically disidentifying with the negative stereotypic attributes. However, in spite of this agentic disidentification from extra-subjective categories, respondents made meaningful emergent distinctions between themselves, those younger, and those older. Research into such emergent distinctions could likely yield a great deal of insight regarding what age means in the context of work, and current attitudes and perceptions

regarding age in the workplace. There will certainly always be an impetus to measure, predict, and look to control, especially in organizational contexts. However, a conceivable meeting point for these two perspectives in the field could be allowing participants to make sense of generational archetypes before attempting to measure and evaluate them. As this study demonstrated, young professionals have a distinct perspective and experience of work. One particularly compelling area of research would be to more closely examine the way that participants create and enact difference between themselves and others who appear externally to belong to the same generational cohort. In this study, participants did this by drawing on generational narratives at the extra-subjective, roles and responsibilities at the generic subjective, and personal distinctions at the inter-subjective. If this phenomenon occurs in other contexts, it would be interesting to learn more about these sensemaking processes and the influence of organizational and individual characteristics on active disidentification.

A final future direction for the field of generational scholarship would be far greater attentiveness to intersectionality. Even with the relatively small sample of this project there were some distinct, albeit infrequently raised, discussions of experiences excluded from generational scholarship. Specifically, several female participants made sense of their age and their workplaces in very distinct ways to male participants. Where male participants spoke of the industry as a “young man’s game” and a “meritocracy,” many female participants expressed frustration at the industry being something of an “old boys club” in which the men in the office are recognized and awarded far more frequently than the women are, despite women making up the majority of the workplace.

In moving away from the reductionist emphasis, generational scholarship needs to be far more closely consider the intersections of race, nationality, gender, sexuality, ability, and class.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

Popular generational archetypes may offer some utility in considering social change historically. However, I believe they can offer us little insight into the future. Thus, generational scholars must engage in meta-discourse and critically consider the theories, pretense, and assumptions of the field. As pointed to by Thomas et al. (2014), the implications of, and policies around, age in the context of work demand careful consideration insofar as young and old alike are placed in subject positions that associate them with negative attributes and there is often little opportunity to alter or resist these narratives.

Whether it is the fetishizing of youth and novelty or the anxieties of ageing and decline, age has become a reified system of classification and a pervasive organizing principle with significant effects. The young and the new tend to be lauded, while old age is subjected to the ubiquitous narrative of ‘age as decline’ (Trethewey, 2001). Moreover, as individuals, organizations and societies struggle to deal with various ‘problems’ associated with different ages, they help to create those very problems, consciously and unconsciously perpetuating age stereotypes rather than transforming them. Age is thus a complex and pervasive discourse,

cutting across diverse organizations, institutions and societies, and producing significant material effects. (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 1570)

The workforce is, of course, aging and there will invariably be differences between those of different ages. There is value and insight in considering how those of varying ages are different in terms of experience, attitude, and behavior. However, rather than deciding what it means to be a certain age, scholars need be comfortable asking, “What is going on here?” Nearly 25 years of modern generational scholarship has yet to produce conclusive evidence that generations exist as we think they do, yet studies such as this evidence that there are likely numerous emergent ways that the likes of age, tenure, seniority, and life stage stratify life in organizations. In addition, participants of this study demonstrated a great degree of awareness about their subjective position and strategically decided who they were, and in turn, who they were not. It seems prudent scholars within the field engage in meta-discourse and more closely the impact of these emergent processes of sensemaking and identity as we consider the future of generational scholarship.

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APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

EXEMPTION GRANTED

Janet Alberts
Human Communication, Hugh Downs School of
480/965-7141
JESS.ALBERTS@asu.edu

Dear Janet Alberts:

On 5/4/2015 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Reimagining 'Generational': An interpretive study on birth cohort identification employing sensemaking and structuration.
Investigator:	Janet Alberts
IRB ID:	STUDY00002636
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REIMAGINING GENERATIONAL_Hitchcock_HRP-503a-TEMPLATE_PROTOCOL_SocialBehavioralV02-10-15_Revised.docx, Category: IRB Protocol; • REIMAGINING GENERATIONAL_Consent Form_Revised (2).pdf, Category: Consent Form; • REIMAGINING GENERATIONAL_Interview Guide_Revised.pdf, Category: Other (to reflect anything not captured above);

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 5/4/2015.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Steven Hitchcock
Steven Hitchcock

APPENDIX B
PARTICIPANT INVITATION LETTER

A lot of people talk and write about young people in the world but unsurprisingly, very little is published from the perspective of young people; this is especially true when it comes to work. In addition, most of the studies and projects which appear in the media have typically been undertaken in the likes of the USA or the UK. Thus, this project is designed to get a better understanding of what it means to be a young professional in this part of the world.

I am here attending [YPN] conferences in the hope of getting a sense of what discussions and/or ideas are important to you and your peers. In addition to this, I am hoping to interview as many [YPN] members as I can one-on-one to get a better understanding of this. If this project sounds interesting to you then do get in touch via phone or email and let me know that you are keen. The interviews typically take somewhere within the vicinity of 45-60 minutes and is really more of a conversation. There may also be the opportunity for further discussion in the coming months. I can work to interview you whenever/where is best for you about Sydney during the week so feel free to let me know what would suit. While participation is voluntary, we can meet at a café that works for you and chat over a coffee (on me!).

Thank you for expressing interest in being a part of this project! Do get in touch via phone or email if you are keen or have any questions.

Steven David Hitchcock

P: +475 346 601

E: stevendavidhitchcock@gmail.com

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYMS AND DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

Participant Table						
Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Experience	Level (1-4)	Agency/ Publisher	Organization
1	Julia	24	1yrs+	1	Publisher	A
2	Theresa	24	3yrs-	3	Agency	B
3	Peter	30	3yrs+	2	Agency	C
4	Christine	22	2yrs	2	Agency	D
5	Alice	26	4yrs-	2	Agency	D
6	Karen	27	3yrs+	2	Agency	D
7	Greg	25	1yrs+	2	Agency	D
8	Denise	29	1yrs-	2	Agency	D
9	Sean	24	3yrs-	2	Agency	D
10	Kathryn	23	3mon-	1	Agency	E
11	Lillian	24	3mon+	1	Publisher	F
12	Matthew	27	3yrs	2	Publisher	G
13	Edward	27	7yrs	4	Agency	H
14	William	28	6yrs	2	Agency	I
15	Elizabeth	26	3yrs	2	Agency	D
16	Ashley	26	5yrs	2	Agency	J
17	Larry	28	1yrs-	1	Agency	E
18	Janice	21	1yrs-	1	Agency	K
19	Helen	25	1yrs-	2	Agency	K
20	Andrew	24	1yrs-	1	Agency	K
21	Ruby	24	1yrs-	1	Agency	K
22	Thomas	28	4yrs+	2	Agency	K
23	Henry	21	3mon-	1	Agency	K
24	Diana	23	2yrs-	2	Agency	K
25	Virginia	37	15yrs	4	Agency	I
26	Sharon	44	23yrs	NA	YPN	YPN

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction:

Thanks again for agreeing to participate in our study. As you know, I am really interested in understanding the perspectives and experiences that are unique to those starting out in the working world. So I have a few questions to discuss these but feel free to throw other things in if anything occurs to you as interesting or related.

Confidentiality statement:

I will be audio recording this interview so that I can transcribe it later. I want to remind you that your participation is voluntary and you may discontinue your participation at any time. If I ask a question that makes you uncomfortable, you can skip it if you want. Do you have any questions before we begin?

**MODULE ONE: Opening questions and generative questions
(demographic/rapport building questions).**

Background information:

- Where are you from?
 - Where did you do your undergrad?
- Where do you work?
 - What do you do there?
 - How long have you been there?
- So what lead you to being at your organization?
- How did you come to be a part of NGEN?

- Do you enjoy it? Get a lot out of it? What do you think of when you think of NGEN
- What does NGEN offer you that you wouldn't otherwise have? What could it offer?

MODULE TWO: (Additional generative questions if reqd.)

- How did you find the transition coming from University to [your organization]?
- Do you remember your first week? What was it like?
- What have your experiences been like since then?
 - If you could go back and talk to yourself just as you started, would you offer any advice? What advice would you offer?

MODULE THREE: Directive questions (specific questions)

- So you are relatively young within your organization?
 - Is this something that comes up?
 - Is age something people comment on?
 - What do you associate with being young in organizations? What do you associate about being old? What about in the middle?
- What's good about being young in an organization? What's bad about being young?

- Is this something unique to [your organization]/[your industry]?

MODULE FOUR: Generational concepts

- What does the word 'generation' mean to you?
 - What generations are you familiar with?
 - What meanings do you associate with these?
- Where do you think these ideas of generations come from?
- Do you associate yourself to any one of those generations?
 - If yes, how? Why? Do you remember coming to associate yourself with this? Explicit/implicit?
 - If no, why? Do others? What does associating yourself do? Good/bad?

MODULE FIVE: Generations in organization/industry

- Do people talk about generations at work?
 - What generations are talked about at your work?
 - Where do generations come into conversation?
- How do you feel about these conversations?
 - Do you consider yourself to be a member of a generation?
 - What does that mean to you?

- Do you consciously work to associate/disassociate yourself?
 - Have you personally ever had positive or negative instances at work because of generational associations or attributions?
- Hypothetically, if generations were to disappear from everyone's minds tomorrow – how would work be different?
 - Short term?
 - Long term?

MODULE SIX: Reflective Questions

- Can I ask why you were keen to be a part of this project?
- What were the things that popped into your head when you heard about what I was doing?
- What do you think scholars/news should be talking about?
- Any questions you want to go back to? Anything else you want to chat about?

Closing statement:

Thanks again for being involved, please get in touch if you have any questions and hopefully soon we'll be able to chat about how this all comes together! Do you mind if I come back to you if anything else springs up?

APPENDIX E
SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTED

Type of Data	Amount
NGEN Sessions	10 sessions at 4 hours (40 hours)
Field notes	9 pages (single spaced)
Misc. Conferences	1 day at 8 hours (8 hours)
Interviews	26 interviews at ~33:56 (14 hours 41 minutes)
Interview Notes	26 at ~.5-1pages (single spaced)
Interview Transcripts	255 pages (single spaced)
Interview Analytic Asides	26 at ~.5-1pages (single spaced)