

U.S. Cross-Generational Variations in Culturally-Oriented Value Systems

**Cynthia Pavett
University of San Diego**

Much has been written about the changing values that span generational cohorts and how they affect an organization's recruiting and retaining of young talent. Typically, these studies focus on rewards that have been derived from an amalgam of various need theories of motivation. Examples of these rewards include: leisure time, interesting work, status, pay, and altruism. Additionally, a host of studies have looked at both specific and general job satisfaction. Similar to previous studies, the purpose of the present research is to investigate value differences between three work-age generations. However, the current study differs from previous works in that it focuses on underlying values rather than on rewards or attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

From the streets of the Middle East to the shop floor of factories throughout the Midwestern United States, it seems apparent that the value systems of the young differ from those of the previous generations. The current research study examines the similarities and differences in cultural values among three broad generational groups: millennials, generation X and baby-boomers. Since most organizations today employ people from all three groups (Gentry, Griggs, Deal, Mondore & Cox, 2011), differences in values can have a major impact upon a host of work-related preferences such as mode of interaction, leadership style, compensation, and managerial practices.

The generational cohorts are typically defined as "millennials" (born after 1976); "gen Xers" (born between 1964 and 1976) and "baby boomers" (born between 1946 and 1963). Previous research, books and reviews (e.g. Deal, 2007; Zemke, 2001; Dries, Pepermans & De Kerpel, 2008, Hewlett, Sherbin & Sumberg, 2009; and Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lance, 2010) have described or stereotyped these generations and some of the important differences among them. However, none of the above studies have examined differences or similarities in the cultural values that underlie work-related attitudes, work centrality, work and organizational commitment and leadership preferences.

There have been a number of studies examining specific work-related attitudes and expectations. In general, results do not present a consistent picture of potential generational similarities or differences. While various studies have found generational differences in such constructs as "being driven", centrality of work, and expectations of rapid promotions (e.g. Egri & Ralston, 2004; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola & Sutton, 2002), others have not. For example, Kowske, Rash and Wiley (2010) used data collected over an 18-year period from a large, diverse sample of employees from the United States. The focus of this study was on examining the effect of generation on work attitudes such as job satisfaction, job security and turnover intentions. The findings indicated that work attitudes differed across generations, although effect sizes were relatively small. Compared with Boomers and gen Xers, millennials reported higher

levels of overall company and job satisfaction as well as satisfaction with job security, recognition, career development and advancement. This study also reported homogeneity across the three generations in satisfaction with pay, benefits, the work itself with no differences in turnover intentions. Other studies, such as Davis, Pawlowski & Houston, 2006; Deal, 2007; Gentry, Griggs, Deal & Mondore, 2009, also found similarities across the generations on work involvement, organizational commitment, preferences for learning, and motivational factors. One study, Hewlett et al. (2009) even concluded that there were more similarities between the oldest and youngest generations in the workplace than there were differences. In the most recent study on leadership practices, Gentry, Griggs, Deal, Mondore and Cox (2011) found that the three generations consider the same leadership practices to be important. Similarities were also found in what each generation believed to be important for success in their organizations' leadership practices.

Perhaps the most relevant research, for the present study, is that of Twenge, et al. (2010) since work-related values, rather than attitudes, were the examined. Specifically, these researchers assessed the value each of the three generations placed on a series of rewards that were grouped into five categories: leisure, intrinsic, extrinsic, altruism, and social. This study is unique since it used data collected over a 30-year period. Rather than following the same subjects over this period of time, information was gathered from a representative sample of high-school seniors who fell into each of the three generational categories. This methodology isolated generational from age differences; and important distinction since values can change over time. The most salient findings were that: leisure values increased steadily over the generations; work centrality was valued most highly by the boomers; extrinsic factors (such as status and pay) were valued more highly by the younger two generations than the oldest generation; gen Xers rated social (e.g. making friends) and intrinsic (e.g. interesting work) values significantly lower than did the boomers.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current pilot study examines these values by using a version of a questionnaire (Maznevski, DiStefano, Gomez, Noorderhaven & Wu, 2002) developed to assess cross-cultural value orientations. The survey, which is based upon the original work of Kluckhohn and Stodtbeck (1961), assesses how each culture responds to the universal problems that societies have faced throughout time. It identifies six problems or challenges that are referred to as cultural orientations. The Cultural Perspectives Questionnaire (Maznevski, et al., 2002) was developed measure five of the six cultural orientations. Briefly defined, these orientations or dimensions are described in the following paragraphs.

Relationship to the Environment

This reflects how people in a society orient themselves to the world around them and to the supernatural. A value of harmony reflects the belief that humans must keep the system in balance, managers must look at all aspects of a business system and engage in small actions to affect alignment and that harmony is paramount in any social system. Mastery, the second orientation toward the environment, indicates a belief that people are separated from the world around them and their primary role is to influence and control the environment. This value is accompanied by the belief that there are direct consequences for managers who do not achieve their goals and it is often accompanied by emphasis on short-term accomplishments. The third, and last of these values is called subjugation. While this value is not common in Western societies, it is the belief that the environment is dominated by something other than humans, typically God, fate or a supernatural force. Similar to an external locus of control (Rotter, 1966), it is the belief that life is predetermined or preordained and one should not try to alter the inevitable.

Relationships among People

Relationships among People, a construct that is concerned with issues of power and responsibility, looks at preferences for collectivism, individualism or a hierarchical basis of power. Collectivistic beliefs are characterized by behaviors that view the group as dominant where members look after each other and subordinate their wishes to those of the group. Rules and privileges of the group apply only to members of the group and there is no obligation to help those outside the group (in-group collectivism). It should be noted that the dominant group could be based on extended family, on companies, communities or society. In contrast, someone with strong individualistic values believes that people look after themselves, make their own decisions and live with the consequences. Status is usually based upon individual achievements, egalitarianism in society is common, and independence is valued. Hierarchical values reflect a belief that people higher in the hierarchy have power over those lower in the hierarchy. Moreover, hierarchical levels tend to be stable over time and in organizations, information is shared only up and down vertical lines.

Basic Mode of Activity

This value is concerned with the desirable focus of activity. A doing orientation is manifested by a desire to constantly strive to achieve and a compulsion to accomplish things through hard work and action. Secondly, a strong value of thinking places high value on being rational and carefully thinking everything through before taking action. There is a focus on careful engineering and planning. Lastly, a being orientation is characterized by spontaneity where the present is experienced to its fullest and people are expected to act out their feelings as they experience them. Punctuality is less important than paying attention to the present.

Belief about Basic Human Nature

Belief about Basic Human Nature reflects one's beliefs about the character of the behavior and malleability of the human species. If people are viewed as basically evil, then people cannot be trusted and control system are used to prevent theft and fraud. Alternatively, if human nature is viewed as good and trustworthy, then when left on their own, people will behave ethically.

Orientation in Time

The last of the five values and involves a general orientation toward time and how people think about or use specific units of time. A past orientation indicates that people respond to a new challenge by looking to tradition and problems are solved based upon what has worked in the past. Hence, history is used as a guide for future behaviors and the society takes great pride in its history. A present orientation is characterized by making decisions to resolve a current situation without thoroughly examining its future impact. An emphasis is placed on concern for the immediate effects of an action and planning horizons are relatively short – generally, one or two years. Hence, reward systems that focus on short-term (quarterly) results are valued. The future orientation emphasizes examining the possible consequences of an action for its future implications. Long term planning is valued and as are reward systems that focus on future returns.

Given the mixed results of the previous research and the exploratory nature of the present study, no specific hypotheses will be delineated. Rather, this cross-sectional pilot study will examine inter-generational values and draw upon past research to discuss the results.

METHOD

Participants

The survey was administered to a convince sample of 158 representatives from all three generational groups. The 44 baby-boomers are all full-time employees from a wide range of organizations; the 33 gen Xers are also employed and drawn mainly from a diverse group of students who are enrolled in various

Master's degree programs in business administration at a private university; the 71 millennials consist primarily of undergraduate business administration students.

Measures and Procedures

The survey, which is based upon the Cultural Perspectives Questionnaire (Maznevski, et al., 2002), consists of 89 questions assessing the five cultural values described above. The only demographics included in this pilot study were gender, age and employment in the public (government) or private sectors. Regarding gender, only 108 of the respondents provided this information.

The survey was administered electronically such that no individual response could be identified unless desired by the respondent. A cover letter explained the intent of the study and participation for the baby-boomers was strictly voluntary. For the students, however, while their permission was obtained to anonymously use the results, taking the survey was a requirement for the class.

The main analyses conducted in this study were a series of ANOVA to ascertain differences between the responses of the three generational cohorts across the value dimensions. Separate ANOVAs were run for each of the five main value categories. Tukey post-hoc multiple comparison tests were done to isolate pairwise significant differences. Additionally, simple independent pair's t-tests were conducted to ascertain the differences in values for the two demographic groups: gender and government employment.

RESULTS

The overall means and standard deviations for the entire sample are presented in Table 1. Under each of the five value orientations, the highest number represents the relative dominance of the value subcategory. In general, the results are similar to those of the most recent study examining cross-cultural values in twenty-five countries, including the United States. The GLOBE studies (Chhokar, Brodbek & House, 2007), which were based upon a survey administered in 825 companies in 62 countries, defined nine values that are similar to those used in the present study.

**TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON VALUE ORIENTATIONS FOR THE SAMPLE¹**

Dimension	Mean	SD
<i>Environment</i>		
Harmony	4.72	.69
Mastery	5.10	.71
Subjugation	2.70	.85
<i>People</i>		
Collective	4.59	.79
Hierarchical	4.55	.72
Individual	5.11	.73
<i>Activity</i>		
Being	3.80	.81
Doing	4.98	.81
Thinking	4.62	.92
<i>Humans</i>		
Evil	3.15	1.47
Good	4.08	1.07
<i>Time</i>		
Past	5.13	.83
Present	3.80	.87
Future	4.43	.93

¹N = 148

The results of Table 1 mirror these findings. For example, the high average score for mastery is similar to the Chhokar; et al.'s finding that the U.S. rated high in assertiveness. Both studies found relatively high scores for individualism, and a doing (or performance) orientation. Unlike the GLOBE (2007) studies, the current results indicate a past orientation and suggest that the respondents' view of human nature is basically good.

To examine the potential of a linear relationship between the relative importances of the 14 values contained in the five general orientations, simple correlation were conducted. The results, which are presented in Table 2, produced only three significant correlations: an inverse relationship between age and being, and viewing man as evil. A positive relationship occurred between age and a belief that human nature is basically good.

TABLE 2
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN AGE AND VALUE ORIENTATIONS

Dimension	Correlation
<i>Environment</i>	
Harmony	-.11
Mastery	.02
Subjugation	.08
<i>People</i>	
Collective	-.09
Hierarchical	-.05
Individual	.03
<i>Activity</i>	
Being	-.38**
Doing	-.01
Thinking	-.05
<i>Humans</i>	
Evil	-.22**
Good	.17*
<i>Time</i>	
Past	-.04
Present	-.19*
Future	.03

*p<.05; ** p<.01

The main research question of this paper is, of course, the differences in value orientations between the three generational groups. Simple analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted on each of the value orientations for each of the three generational cohorts. (See Table 3)

Results of the ANOVA's are seen in Table 3. Only four significant and two near-significant results were found. In terms of relation to people, both the Millennials and Baby Boomers had significantly higher scores than did the gen Xers in their preference for hierarchy. On a similar note, the Boomer generation placed somewhat more value (p=.09) on individualism than did the other two cohorts. When examining the results for activity orientation, significant differences were found between the three generations with the Millennials reporting higher preferences for being than did the gen Xers or the Boomers. Also, in the same value category, the Boomers significantly preferred doing more so than did the other two generational cohorts. With respect to their views on the nature of man, near significance (p=.09), the Millennials rated people as more evil than did either the gen Xers or the Boomers. Significant differences were obtained for the three groups on the present-orientation relation to time. The Millennials

placed significantly more importance on the present than did the gen Xers or the Boomers. It should be noted that all of the above differences and attending significance levels were confirmed in the Tukey post-hoc multiple comparison tests.

TABLE 3
ANOVA OF VALUE ORIENTATIONS BY GENERATIONAL COHORT

Value	Mean	S.D.	F.	Sig.
<i>Harmony</i>				
Millennials ¹	4.78	.74		
Gen X'ers ²	4.70	.55		
Baby Boomers ³	4.65	.71		
			.486	.61
<i>Mastery</i>				
Millennials	5.10	.71		
Gen Xers	4.93	.74		
Baby Boomers	5.24	.71		
			1.84	.16
<i>Subjugation</i>				
Millennials	2.64	.88		
Gen Xers	2.63	.63		
Baby Boomers	2.80	.93		
			.53	.59
<i>Collective</i>				
Millennials	4.69	.81		
Gen Xers	4.53	.71		
Baby Boomers	4.50	.81		
			.99	.37
<i>Hierarchical</i>				
Millennials	4.64	.74		
Gen Xers	4.27	.58		
Baby Boomers	4.63	.75		
			3.43	.03
<i>Individual</i>				
Millennials	5.10	.80		
Gen Xers	4.91	.73		
Baby Boomers	5.27	.57		
			2.41	.09
<i>Being</i>				
Millennials	4.04	.75		
Gen Xers	3.85	.93		
Baby Boomers	3.36	.63		
			11.00	.00
<i>Doing</i>				
Millennials	5.05	.85		
Gen Xers	4.59	.68		
Baby Boomers	5.13	.76		
			4.98	.00

TABLE 4
COMPARISON OF MEAN SCORES FOR GOVERNMENT AND
NON-GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

Dimension	Mean Non-Gov.¹	S.D.	Mean Gov.²	S.D.	t-value	2-tail sig.
<i>Environment</i>						
Harmony	5.34	5.65	4.70	.61	.65	.62
Mastery	5.12	.71	5.08	.71	1.04	.19
Subjugation	2.60	.82	2.83	.71	-1.68	.09
<i>People</i>						
Collective	4.57	.79	4.62	.79	-.63	.71
Hierarchical	4.52	.73	4.58	.70	-.47	.64
Individual	5.09	.71	5.13	.76	-.39	.70
<i>Activity</i>						
Being	3.90	.81	3.67	.80	1.74	.08
Doing	4.92	.80	4.96	.82	.14	.89
Thinking	4.55	.92	4.71	.91	-1.04	.30
<i>Humans</i>						
Evil	3.39	1.51	2.84	1.34	2.33	.02
Good	3.89	1.11	4.35	.95	-2.73	.00
<i>Time</i>						
Past	5.12	.86	5.14	.80	-.17	.86
Present	3.89	.83	3.69	.98	1.40	.17
Future	4.30	.92	4.60	.90	-1.95	.05

¹N for non-government employees = 83; ²N for government employees = 65

TABLE 5
COMPARISON OF MEAN SCORES FOR MALES AND FEMALES

Dimension	Mean Males.¹	S.D.	Mean Females²	S.D.	t-value	2-tail sig.
<i>Environment</i>						
Harmony	4.89	.70	5.61	5.19	-.70	.48
Mastery	5.08	.72	5.02	.70	.41	.68
Subjugation	2.70	.82	2.58	.82	.75	.45
<i>People</i>						
Collective	4.69	.80	4.52	.69	1.18	.24
Hierarchical	4.64	.77	4.46	.70	1.27	.21
Individual	5.07	.76	5.05	.72	.91	.85
<i>Activity</i>						
Being	4.16	.77	3.70	.81	2.93	.00
Doing	5.09	.80	4.84	.86	1.59	.11
Thinking	4.73	.79	4.40	1.01	1.83	.06
<i>Humans</i>						
Evil	3.51	1.53	3.11	1.51	1.34	.18
Good	3.89	1.15	3.96	1.06	-.32	.79
<i>Time</i>						
Past	5.19	.81	5.11	.85	.57	.57
Present	4.00	.80	3.79	.77	1.35	.17
Future	4.36	.82	4.19	1.01	.92	.36

¹N Males = 57; ²N Females = 51

Of the fourteen values, only two reached any modicum of significance. Males rated the activity orientation of “being” significantly higher than did females but also rated thinking somewhat ($p=.06$) higher than did the women. Implications of the current paper’s results for managing people will be discussed in the context of preferences for leadership style, motivation and interaction style. Additionally, the obvious limitations of this pilot study will also be elucidated.

DISCUSSION

While the results of this pilot study yielded few significant results with respect to general differences in cultural values, several noteworthy conclusions can be drawn. First, the overall sample’s values closely mirror those of previous, older studies on similar values. For example, Hofstede’s (2007) data clearly indicated that, when compared with other countries, the U.S.A. is extremely individualistic. This same contention can be found in the cross-cultural works of Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck (1961) and Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1998). That Americans, as a whole, value both mastery and a “doing” orientation are also supported by these previous studies. In contrast, the same support is not garnered for the purported value of viewing man as basically good. With respect to time orientation, the current study indicated that the past was more highly valued than the present or the future. This finding is the total opposite of the classic cross-cultural studies that characterize Americans as present-oriented. However, it could be argued that this finding is due, in part, to the preponderance of Boomers in the current sample.

With respect to generational differences, the results are similar to a score of past research that examined a host of work-related values and attitudes. Basically, there are similarities and differences between the three generational groups. Several studies have concluded that the Millennials are more individualistic and self-focused than the older generations (e.g. Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007; Sirias, Karp, & Brotherton, 2007; Twenge & Campbell, 2001, 2009; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell & Bushman, 2008). These conclusions have inspired researchers to label Millennials as *Generation Me*. While the current study did confirm that individualism was the dominant value, within the category of relationship to people, for the Millennials, their scores were similar to those of the previous generations. Within this same category, it was surprising that significant differences were found between the generations in the preference for a hierarchical arrangement of people. Specifically, both the Boomers and the Millennials had a significantly stronger preference for this arrangement than did the gen Xers. This result is not too dissimilar from those of two other cross-sectional studies that found the Millennials placed importance on gaining status (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Wong, Gardiner, Lang & Coulon, 2008) which can be obtained via position or hierarchical power. Since this group of young people was just starting their careers, the result also implies that they may place importance on gaining status through their achievements. As indicated in the current results for the values category of activity orientation, the Millennials placed the highest value on doing as opposed to thinking or being. In sharp contrast, the Millennials also like to “chill” more so than their predecessors since their score on “being” was significantly higher than the other two generations. However, this contradiction is consistent with the findings of Twenge, et al. (2010) that Millennials place strong value on leisure time as a potential organizational reward yet they are required to work long hours and maintain an active (real or virtual-time) social life.

That the Boomers placed more value on individualism than did the gen Xers is not surprising given the era in which they were value processed. This generation grew up with the civil rights movement, protests against the Vietnam War and the “age of peace and love”. What is surprising in the current results is that the Boomers also placed more value on hierarchy than did the gen Xers. This is a seeming contradiction to the rebellious nature of their earlier years.

With respect to the lower score on individualism for the gen Xers, their generation witnessed had a substantially higher chance of coming from broken homes and the age of downsizing with its subsequent loss of their parents’ jobs (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 2008). This cohort, along with their subsequent cohort, is living with economic conditions where long work hours and the necessity of a dual-income

household are necessities (Twenge, et al., 2010). These influences could potentially have impacted on their belief that status is based upon individual achievement – a component of individualism.

The most predictable of the differences between the values of the three generational cohorts is in the category of time orientation. The Millennials placed significantly more emphasis on the present than did the other generations. Even though, as indicated in the results, this was not their dominant value, it does indicate that their decisions are made without regard to future implications. Again, this result stands in contrast with the reported emphasis placed on a past time orientation: looking to the past as a guide for current decisions. Hence, even though the youngest generation placed more value on living in the present than did their predecessors, they still use history and tradition as the basis for their decisions.

In spite of the few differences discussed above, the current study clearly indicates that there are many similarities between the generations. As previously mentioned, most of the research in this area is fraught with seeming contradictions and mixed results (e.g. Kowske, et al., 2010; Twenge, et al., 2010). There are both similarities and differences between the generations with respect to work values, attitudes and personality traits. The only consistent thread running through the studies appears to be the fact that the youngest generation values its leisure time. This is no great surprise and many organizations, especially the fast-paced high-tech ones such as Apple and Google, have incorporated opportunities for leisure into the workplace.

The last two analyses, which examined the difference between government and private sector respondents and males and females, were based more on conjecture than previous literature. Since the sample consisted of an almost equal number of people employed in the public and private sectors, this study was designed to examine the potential differences between the two groups. Results yielded more similarities than differences indicating that the nature of the employer had little impact upon the overall emphasis placed upon the fourteen values. The only surprising result was that the government employees, who included a fair number of active-duty military, viewed the nature of man as good rather than evil. When looking at the potential differences between males and females, again, few significant results emerged. While both genders rated their activity orientation as doing, males placed greater importance on “being” than did the females. Again, this was not the dominant value for either gender but merely indicated that males valued their leisure time more than did the females.

LIMITATIONS

Since this was a pilot study, it has several notable limitations. First, the sample size was limited and hence, conclusions for the general population cannot be drawn. Secondly, this was a convenience sample. While it consisted of a variety of people who were in various stages in their careers, it is not a representative sample. In addition to the limitations imposed by the sample, the survey that was used was designed to examine cross-cultural values rather than those of a group from the same, albeit diverse, culture. All respondents were Americans even though they may have come from any number of ethnic backgrounds. The current study did not assess ethnicity. Lastly, the study was cross-sectional in nature. The ideal design for a study of generational differences is a sequential cohort design, similar to that used by Twenge, et al., (2010), that follows several generations longitudinally as they move through their working lives.

Future research that is conducted within a single country should draw on a large, representative sample in which ethnicity is assessed. Additionally, the ideal study would follow the advice of Schaie (1965) to assess values longitudinally.

In spite of its obvious limitations, the current study does add to the body of research on values across generations. It is distinct in that it looked at culturally-based values rather than rewards, personality or attitudes. This pilot study corroborates the body of generational research in its findings that there are both similarities and differences across generational cohorts.

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