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Testing the intergenerational differences in mental boundaries

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INTERGENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN MENTAL BOUNDARIES[1]

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Summary.—382 employees in government offices were surveyed using demographic variables and organizational and interpersonal boundaries. Analysis of variance indicated a significant difference in Mental Boundary Score between Baby Boomers I (born 1946–1954) and Generation X (born 1965–1976) cohorts.

The study of generational differences has increased in attention during the past few years, building on early work testing value differences (Christenson, 1977) and, more recently, value priorities (McConatha & Schnell, 1997), value consensus (Na & Duckitt, 2003), and human values (Lyons, Duxbury, & Higgins, 2007). Testing generational differences for other psychological variables may provide opportunities to better understand differences between individuals across generations working in organizational settings. Studies in which generational differences are identified or refuted are necessary to advance this dialogue and provide practical implications for those working in mixed generational settings. Among psychological variables which may be useful to study are those in the areas of personality, attitudes, and motives. Research on personality has been extensive over the past 40 years—and has featured a new dimension of personality unique from the traditional NEO Five Taxonomy (McCrae & Costa, 1987), termed "boundaries in the mind" (Hartmann, 1991).

Boundaries in the mind describe how individuals separate and connect with their environment across 12 dimensions ranging from dreaming patterns to organizational behaviors (Hartmann, 1991). Mental boundaries have often been described dichotomously as thin or thick in nature, but have always been measured continuously. Thin boundaries describe the tendency to blend conscious with unconscious more readily, form deep attachments and connections easily, see relationships and interconnectedness of people and functions, and may cause difficulty separating the self from others' circumstances. Thick boundaries describe the tendency to keep distinct one's conscious from one's unconscious. Thick boundaries of the mind are characterized by holding others at a distance, valuing privacy and personal space, preference for established roles and norms, and dogmatic approaches to complexities.

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Mental boundaries have been tested and shown to be unrelated to scores on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Hartmann, 1991), Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Barbuto & Plummer, 1998, 2000) and Rorschach measures (Levin, 1986), indicating that they capture a unique dimension of personality. To date, no studies have examined differences in mental boundaries across generational cohorts. Testing boundaries in the mind across generations provides an opportunity to understand better both boundary and cross-generational influences in organizational settings. If differences in mental boundaries are identified between generational cohorts then empirical evidence for justifying notions of "generational gaps" exists.

This study has the potential to reveal important dispositional differences between members of different cohorts. Five generational cohorts have been identified in the literature studying generational differences in the workplace: Post-War (1930–1945), Baby Boomers I (1946–1955), Baby Boomers II (1956–1965), Generation X (1966–1980), Generation Y (1981–1990; Eisner, 2005; Dencker, Joshi, & Martocchio, 2007).

The Post-War cohort generation is characterized by valuing conformity, conservatism, and traditional family values (Dencker, *et al*., 2007). Post-War employees have been described as both loyal and self-sacrificing in their relationship with the organization (Eisner, 2005). The Baby Boomers I cohort tends to self-authored values and personal development (Dencker, *et al*., 2007). The Baby Boomers II cohort tends to value competition and material success, as well as having a lack of optimism, a distrust of government, and an overall general cynicism (Gifford, 1984). The Generation X cohort values emotional security, informality, independence, life balance, and entrepreneurial spirit, requiring frequent change and variety to maintain interest in their work (Dencker, *et al*., 2007). This generation likely will report thin boundary scores. Generation Y is described as highly valuing patriotism, physical safety and security, and technology (Dencker, *et al*., 2007). They appreciate feedback relating to performance rather praise, which may indicate thicker boundaries; however, less is known about this cohort since it has only recently entered the workforce (Gifford, 1984). Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa (2008) studied workforce flexibility and engagement across generations and stated that flexibility best predicted performance for individuals in the Baby Boomer I and II cohorts. Twenge and Campbell (2008) tested generational differences for psychological traits and inferred that younger generations are more likely to challenge authority and seek greater clarity and certainty than older generations. It appears from the review of the literature that the Generation X cohort may score lower (thinner) on boundaries in the mind than Baby Boomer I and Baby Boomer II cohorts.

This field study sampled 382 employees in government offices across a midwestern state of the USA. Responses of over 800 employees were requested, representing an approximate 45% response rate. Mean age of subjects was 46 yr. ($SD = 6.2$), while 42% had earned a B.S. degree, 9% had earned a M.S. degree, and 90% were women. Participants were recruited as part of a leadership development effort for government officials. Participants were asked to complete a brief survey and were assured of their confidentiality as part of informed consent. The survey included demographics (sex, date of birth) and 25 items from the Mental Boundaries Questionnaire (Hartmann, 1991), encompassing boundaries in the "interpersonal" and "opinions about organizations" subscales. Sample items included, "When I get involved with someone, we sometimes get too close," and "In an organization, everyone should have a definite place and a specific role."

The 25 Mental Boundaries items achieved an acceptable reliability estimate ($\alpha = .75$, Revelle's $\beta = .57$). Two estimates of reliability are given here: Cronbach's alpha and Revelle's beta, with beta being the more conservative estimate as it is the worst split-half reliability; beta is a better estimate of the amount of variance ascribed to one common factor (Zinbarg, Revelle, Yovel, & Li, 2005; Revelle & Zinbarg, 2009). Analysis of variance was used to test for differences between the generational cohorts on Mental Boundaries scores. Although data were collected for five generational cohorts [Post-War (born prior to 1945), Baby Boomers I (1946–1955), Baby Boomers II (1955–1964), Generation X (1965–1976), and Generation Y (1977–1994)], only the middle three groups were well represented in this sample population.

Inferential analysis was used to analyze the data. Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) on Mental Boundaries items was conducted for the three generational cohorts: Generation X ($M = 14.97$; $SD = 2.78$), Baby Boomers I ($M = 15.82$; $SD = 3.14$), Baby Boomers II ($M = 15.25$; $SD = 3.62$). This resulted in a statistically significant main effect ($F = 2.045$, $p = .017$) and produced an $R^2 = .015$. *Post hoc* Tukey *HSD* and *LSD* tests showed a statistically significant difference between Baby Boomers I and Generation X was supported ($SE = .40789$, $p = .04$).

One significant difference in Mental Boundaries scores was found across three generational cohorts. Individuals representing the Baby Boomers I cohort appear to have significantly higher (thicker) boundary scores than individuals representing the Generation X cohort. This difference was statistically significant, but the variance accounted for (less than 2%) indicates that practical implications must be *very* cautiously assessed. This means that those generational cohorts representing Generation X might have slightly higher tendency to respect authority or estab-

lished chains of command, less likelihood of adherence to structures and established norms or roles, and be less likely to polarize issues (seeing them as black or white). Conversely Baby Boomers I cohorts could have a very slight tendency to respond in the opposite manner.

No sex differences in Mental Boundaries scores were tested in this data set due to the disparate proportion of women. Future research testing the sex differences in mental boundaries is advised. If this study is replicated, a private sector population is recommended to better generalize results. Additionally, selecting a population that may include the Post-War cohort is particularly time sensitive as this group is transitioning out of the workforce and will be more difficult to sample in adequate numbers. Organizations that may be populated with more members of the Generation Y cohort should also be sampled for further intergenerational differences. Other psychological variables with potential intergenerational differences could be added to ascertain which best of these might describe generational influences in organizational settings.

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