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Theory and Generation X

Gary S. Marshall

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Introduction

This special issues section of *JPAE* provides an opportunity to address the experience of the new generation of MPA students who are often labeled the X Generation. The term Generation X was coined by Coupland (1991); "X" in this case refers to the mathematical symbol for indeterminacy or the unknown. The argument implicit in the moniker is that, while all previous generations had some point of reference that provided them with a social anchor, the current generation does not have such an anchor through which to interpret their social experience. As a result, they are often depicted as "slackers" with little commitment to anything meaningful. Based on my encounters with Generation X students in the classroom, I cannot agree. I do, however, see their mindset and their experience as different from those of mid-career students. In this essay, I discuss the literature addressing Generation X and Generation X students' learning experience as related to theories of organization.

Theory in the Classroom

In a class on organization theory and behavior that I teach in our MPA program, a group in the class was giving a presentation on organizational communication. One of the group members—an older student who has a strong positivist orientation toward social science research—was explaining to the class that, in his view, public administration had passed from a phase in which the "thinking" public administrator was dominant to a new phase in which the "feeling" public administrator now holds sway. At the end of his portion of the presentation, he passed out some specially printed 5" x 8" cards. In stylish lettering, each card read "Feeling-Oriented Public Administration: The New Paradigm." The class members' reaction to his presentation was quite interesting. My impression was that they might agree with him. However, what I learned from these students was something entirely different. They were cynical about all approaches to understanding human action. As a result, they saw all theories of organization as strategies of manipulation. This was true not only for the youngest students, who weren't necessarily in positions of responsibility

where they worked, but also for students who were moving into positions of responsibility in their organizations.

As we continued the discussion, it became clear that many of these students saw themselves as operating outside the main narrative of progress that has historically undergirded theories of public administration. A quote from Geoffrey T. Holtz's *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind "Generation X"* is apropos to these students' orientation: "The Boomer pipe dream that all of the world's ills can be solved merely with good intentions is widely understood by the younger generation to be a naive fantasy" (1995).

The Younger Generation

This is the voice of a new cohort of students that we will increasingly find in our classrooms. Many work for nonprofit agencies that deliver the public goods and services traditionally delivered by public organizations. An increasing percentage work in law enforcement agencies, corrections facilities, youth homes, and elder care organizations. They are between twenty-two and thirty-two years of age. Many are underpaid and hope that returning for an MPA will give them the skills and bonafides they need to obtain a better position.

Some aspects of this profile are no different than those for other cohorts of MPA students. The main commonality is that virtually all students seek an MPA to increase their chances of career success. However, earlier cohorts of MPA students held either public service idealism or organizational commitment, or both, as a guiding force as they went through an MPA program. In my judgment, the current cohort of MPA students carries a lower set of expectations about what they encounter in their social experience and consequently a higher degree of cynicism about strategies for change and improvement. This does not translate, however, into the blank passivity that is stereotypically applied to the X Generation—"The Numb Generation" as it has been called by the *New York Times*—but rather into a mindset that is sanguine about the future and savvy in navigating a complex and jagged social experience.

Generation X: The Literature

"Imagine coming to a beach at the very end of a long summer of big crowds and wild goings-on. The beach is sunburned, the sand shopworn, hot and full of debris—no place for walking barefoot. You step on a bottle and a cop cites you for littering" (Strauss and Howe, 1991).

This quote from the well-received text *Generations* describes the sentiments of many Generation Xers. Their experience is one in which

the sublime has been replaced by the performative. For these individuals, "All the causes have faded away. . .the symbolic meaning has been sucked out of life. . .[and] all that is left is the harsh reality of social pathology" (1991). Although this description may seem extreme, it reflects at least part of the description that surrounds Generation X.

Already much of the literature on Generation X has been trivialized, satirized, or dissected in the service of market research. This has occurred, however, in part because of the intersection of identity, popular culture, and the concept of spectacle. On this point, Peter Sacks' book *Generation X Goes to College* argues that, for Generation X students, the professor is seen primarily as a performer who can be tuned in and tuned out in the same way that one would change the TV channels with a remote control device. Sacks suggests that Generation X students see themselves as consumers who want their education neatly packaged, not too complex, but at the same time yielding high dividends.

Several key texts examine the Generation X experience, including Holtz (1995), Mahedy and Bernardi (1995), Sacks (1996), Wexler and Hume (1994), and Coupland (1991). The common question that these authors explore is "Why are members of Generation X so apathetic, distrustful, restless, and lacking commitment?" This question and related questions have yielded some often-quoted answers that alarm liberals and conservative alike. The answers include the following: over half have divorced parents, they are the first generation of latchkey kids, their generation is experiencing a dramatic increase in imprisonment, they have fewer career opportunities, and they are characterized by distrust born from growing up in the post-Watergate era with little or no trust in political leadership.

Consider the following statistics cited by Strauss and Howe (1991):

- A Generation X child of the 1980s faced twice the risk of parental divorce as a child of the mid-1960s and three times the risk of a child of the 1950s.
- Through the 1980s, approximately five thousand children under age eighteen committed suicide, the largest number and proportion ever recorded for that age bracket
- Through the 1970s, the number of "latchkey" children under age fourteen left alone after school roughly doubled.
- A third more Generation X youth are in jail compared to Baby Boomers. In 1990, Generation Xers became the majority of the U.S. prison population. A dramatic subset of this 1990 data shows that one in four black men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine was in jail, on probation, or on parole.

- Generation Xers, on average, have less college education than their elders, but the average inflation-adjusted earnings for high school dropouts fell by 42 percent between 1973 and 1986.
- During the decade after 1978 (the year that the last of the Baby Boom generation turned eighteen), the purchasing power of both child-poverty benefits and the federal minimum wage declined steeply.
- In contrast to the traditional research assumption that cynicism increases as people move into mid-life and beyond, current research shows that cynicism is highest among Generation X.

These statistics are informative because they provide the context for understanding the social experience of Generation X.

An Overdetermined World

Coupland (1991) offers two definitions that reflect the extent to which the message of modernism seems to pose more questions than answers:

- **Historical Overdosing:** To live in a period of time when too much seems to happen. Major symptoms include addiction to newspapers, magazines, and TV news broadcasts.
- **Historical Underdosing:** To live in a period of time when nothing seems to happen. Major symptoms include addiction to newspapers, magazines, and TV news broadcasts.

Generation X students have grown up in the midst of dramatic technological and economic change that has brought both positive and negative outcomes. Consider the comments of this Generation Xer: “We don’t really trust anything anymore. That’s why we’re searching. If we trusted, we wouldn’t be searching. Everything is so unstable and unsure. There’s always a big question after each answer. We can’t trust anybody, not even ourselves” (Sacks, 1996).

The perspective presented above was very evident in the class I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. For example, the idea of a career ladder was met with great skepticism by all Generation Xers—even students whose education and training was in an area of high demand in the labor market. Much of the Generation X literature again suggests the seemingly narrow range of possibilities in the lives of Generation X students. As one student quipped, “So many things have already happened in the world that we can’t possibly come up with anything else.” Thus, Generation X students are characterized as resilient survivors in a world that offers them little and expects even less from them. Moreover, Strauss and Howe suggest that an underlying determinist ethos is operative wherein the implicit message from their elders is that “failure means that there must be something wrong with

you.” Hence, their world is more characteristic of a jungle where you “keep your eyes open and expect the worst and handle it on your own” (Strauss and Howe, 1991). As such, Generation Xers are depicted as concealing from others what they are knowing, hearing, watching, or thinking.

Consider the following account from a university faculty member from an English department:

In the past students plotted their stories so that all kinds of terrible things would happen to their protagonists, but in the end everyone alone or together would work their way out of danger and get on with their lives. Today violence enters the plot without benefit of plot, as if by metaphysical caprice. Not a caprice of the student writers but by forces beyond their control. In most cases, the protagonists see themselves isolated in a brutal world and yearn for the stability and hope that makes life worth living (Strauss and Howe, 1991).

Resistance to Theory

Given the above accounting of Generation X, what can we determine about their view of theories of organization? It is argued that Generation Xers find little room for idealism in the world around them. Generation X students have grown up in an era of rapid technological change that poses as many problems as answers. As such, they are quite ambivalent about accepting the theory of progress that undergirds the narrative of modern public administration. For members of Generation X, the sublime has been replaced by the performative. Given this context, one might reframe the question as “Why are Generation X students resistant to theory, and why do they see theories of organization as strategies of manipulation?”

In examining Generation X’s resistance to theory, one must consider that most professional graduate programs emphasize the tacit grand narrative of technical rationality (White and Adams, 1994). This narrative suggests that the role of theory, especially in organizations, is performative. That is, the baseline strategy of all organization theory is to enhance the productive, i.e., performative capacity of organizations. In addition, there is an assumption that organizations are independent realities to which optimal management strategies can be applied.

An excellent example of this point is the concept of organizational culture. In professional graduate education, the most representative view of organizational culture is the “corporate culture” model (Smircich, 1983) in which culture is seen as a variable that can either help or hinder the effectiveness of an organization. Symbols, rituals, and other

artifacts of culture are studied by academics, managers, and others in order to understand patterns of organizational action and to improve management of the organization. It is this approach—the attempt to manage all facets of organizational life—that Generation X students seem to resist. The resistance is founded in the tacit assumption that they are manageable and expendable elements of an organizational reality in which they have limited input and influence.

Conclusion

As one might expect of today's hyperreal world, there are books and articles with specific strategies on how to manage Generation Xers in the workplace. Muchnick (1996) identifies five key approaches:

- necessary freedom
- active involvement
- key recognition
- empathy
- direct communication.

Sack's *Generation X Goes to College*, as discussed earlier, suggests that Generation X students want to be entertained and spoon-fed in the classroom. This essay is not intended to articulate an additional instrumental strategy for dealing with members of Generation X. Rather, I suggest that we begin to explore the social experience of our pre-service students as we think about public administration education for the twenty-first century.

From the Generation X perspective, even theories that purport to improve the human condition have been co-opted into the service of performativity. As such, what concerns should we have about student learning in public administration? How do members of Generation X view traditional concepts of citizenship, governance, and progress? We must begin an active dialogue around these issues with the generation that will take our place.

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