

The Effects of Stereotype Activation on Generational Differences

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ABSTRACT

Three experimental studies were conducted to examine the effects of stereotype activation on generational differences in personality between Millennials (born between 1979 and 1994) and Generation X (born between 1965 and 1978). Personality was assessed using a self-report measure of entitlement in Study 1 and 2. Study 3 incorporated a version of Prisoner's Dilemma to assess a behavioral state indicator of entitlement. Participants either experienced no stereotype activation, implicit activation about generational differences, or explicit stereotype activation that "Millennials are the most entitled generation." The results were consistent with expectations across all three studies. Millennials who experienced implicit stereotype activation about generational differences were higher in entitlement than participants in other conditions. Conversely, Millennials who experienced explicit stereotype activation about their own entitlement were lower in entitlement than participants in other conditions. Overall, the results indicate that generational differences are in part influenced by stereotype activation.

Organizations within the United States are currently experiencing a mass exodus of older workers and an influx of youth into the workforce. A large rotation in the workforce raises concerns that the needs, beliefs, and characteristics of workers will shift due to generational differences. Generational differences are described as differences between cohorts of people (or generations) who have been uniquely shaped by shared cultural events during important developmental stages. The notion of generational differences is often discussed in popular media (e.g., [Stein & Sanburn, 2013](#)), is widely researched (e.g., [Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012](#); [Twenge & Foster, 2008, 2010](#); [Wey Smola & Sutton, 2002](#)), and led to changes in business management practices (e.g., [Fisk, 2010](#); [Wellner, 2004](#)). Unfortunately, little is known about how these popular beliefs are affecting people and workers. Insight into worker reactions to generational stereotypes should influence organizational and management practices. Three experimental studies are integrated to test how generational cohorts shift in personality scores after they are presented with generational stereotypes.

Generations

A generation is most commonly described as a social category for people who have similar birth year, birth location, and life events at critical developmental stages ([Wey Smola & Sutton, 2002](#)). These cohorts are believed to share similar life experiences, which result in the development of personality characteristics that distinguishes them from

other generational cohorts. Despite the breadth of research examining generations from the cohort perspective, there is inconsistency in the birth years used to identify each generation. For example, researchers have created social categories of World War II-ers (born 1909–1933; [Schaeffer, 2000](#)), Swingers (born 1934–1945; [Schaeffer, 2000](#)), Traditionals (born before 1940; [Kupperschmidt, 2000](#)), Matures (born 1925–1942; [Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998](#)), and Baby Boomers (born 1940–1964; [Wey Smola & Sutton, 2002](#)).

Two recent generations are often labeled Generation X and Millennials. For the current study, we rely on [Wey Smola and Sutton \(2002\)](#) for descriptions of each generation as it is the most widely cited article on generational differences with over 1,000 citations listed on Google Scholar. Generation X includes people born between the years of 1965 and 1978 who share life events of a childhood filled with financial and family insecurity, diversity, and rapid change ([Karp, Sirias, & Arnold, 1999](#); [Kupperschmidt, 2000](#)). Generation X are also greatly influenced by the development of the internet, AIDS, and MTV ([O'Bannon, 2001](#)). Millennials include people born between the years of 1979 to 1994 who share a life event of being the first born into an internet-laden ("wired") world.

Beliefs of Entitlement

For the current study, entitlement is emphasized because the belief that Millennials are entitled is widely disseminated within U.S. culture and the trait has negative societal implications. For example, Millennials

are commonly described in popular news mediums as being the most entitled and narcissistic generation (e.g., Stein & Sanburn, 2013). Entitlement is a subfactor of narcissism that represents a stable and pervasive belief that one deserves more than others and is reflected in both desired and actual behaviors (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004; Raskin & Terry, 1988). This belief of being more deserving than others is present regardless of the relative effort put into a task and context. For example, a person high in entitlement may believe they deserve greater pay than coworkers regardless of the effort put forth by them or their coworkers on job tasks. The negative implications of higher entitlement are widespread. Entitlement is correlated with providing less support to others, greater pay expectations, theft temptations, turnover intentions, and conflict with colleagues (Campbell et al., 2004; Harvey, Harris, Gillis, & Martinko, 2014; Harvey & Martinko, 2009; Whitman, Halbesleben, & Shanine, 2013). The negative consequences of entitlement are so prevalent within society that researchers have proposed that human resource and management practices be adapted to reduce entitlement of workers (Fisk, 2010; Naumann, Minsky, & Sturman, 2002; Wellner, 2004).

The belief of increased entitlement among Millennials can be attributed to four explanations: a regulating social force, generational differences, maturation, and a cultural shift. Although the current study examines the role of a regulating social force on entitlement, we review the other explanations because they are commonly attributed to Millennial entitlement. These perspectives are considered complementary rather than mutually exclusive because they all emphasize how cultural events and characteristics shape the personality culture members.

Due to a regulating social force

The belief about Millennial entitlement may represent a conscious and unconscious effort by society to self-regulate and maintain consistency overtime (Mannheim, 1952). This sociological explanation describes that social change occurs as a group-level phenomenon in which there is a dynamic exchange between groups. The social forces perspective is often ignored by psychology researchers when studying generations because psychologists often focus on birth cohorts and singular events because they provide specific parameters for how an individual develops (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). The social forces perspective does not discount the role of shared cohort events and biology, but rather describes the effect of culture more broadly to also include a continuous regulating force that shapes social change. Specifically, cultures are always under the unconscious pressure to evolve and change, which will occur among the younger members of a culture. The pressure to evolve can lead people to believe a cultural shift is beginning. However, large shifts are rare because culture is continuously regulated by unconscious and conscious information sharing by older cohorts.

Large shifts within a culture often require a sudden mass exiting of a culture's population (e.g., war, disease) that allows for younger members to have quick unimpeded social change. Unconscious information is the most common information exchanged between older and younger members and is information that is undetected by all parties. Conscious information involves intentional efforts from older members to shape the behaviors of younger members. When the tempo of change becomes too strong through continuous unconscious forces and becomes problematic to society (e.g., younger people are perceived as becoming too entitled), a culture will become aware of the

problematic shift and consciously engage in efforts to stabilize a culture and dull the change. The belief of Millennial entitlement may represent the cultural regulatory process (social force) to maintain cultural consistency. This implies that the belief of Millennial entitlement is inaccurate because cultural levels of entitlement are always slightly in flux, but unlikely reaching abnormal levels.

Due to generational differences

The belief of Millennials being more entitled is often attributed to generational differences due to shared childhood experiences. Millennials grew up in a technology-laden period that provided instant fulfillment of socioemotional needs. In addition, Millennials likely experienced a fulfillment of financial and safety needs during adolescence due to a prosperous U.S. economy in the 1990s. The abundance of resources available during adolescence may have increased entitlement and decreased the work ethic of U.S. youth. This cultural belief is consistent with Twenge and Foster's (2008; 2010) research indicating that Millennials have self-reported higher narcissism scores than prior generations, which likely perpetuated the belief. Under the premise of generational differences, the belief of Millennial entitlement is accurate.

Due to maturation

Maturation may also explain the belief that Millennials are high in entitlement. This explanation emphasizes a difference in entitlement between generations, but the difference is due to the maturation of people rather than shared life events. That is, all young people are high in entitlement regardless of childhood events, but entitlement decreases within people as they mature and age. Research has often struggled to differentiate between generational differences and maturation effects because of the difficulty in administering a long-term longitudinal study with appropriate controls (Costanza et al., 2012). Similar to the generational differences explanation, the maturation effect indicates that the belief of Millennial entitlement is accurate.

Due to a cultural shift

A ubiquitous cultural shift can also explain the belief of Millennial entitlement. That is, all people within the United States may have increased in entitlement during the 1990s and not just Millennials. The cultural shift in entitlement may be attributed to the observed change in individualism within the United States over the past several decades. The increase in individualism emphasizes the importance of self and a decrease in empathy and social rules. As indicated by Twenge, Sherman, and Wells (2016), the increase of individualism may be the cause for many recent cohort differences. Although all people within a culture may have shifted up in entitlement, an emphasis may be placed on youth and younger generations because of the long-term impact younger people have on society. This implies that the belief of Millennial entitlement is partly inaccurate because all age cohorts have shifted up in entitlement.

Stereotypes and Stereotype Activation

Testing how people react to the belief of Millennial entitlement will help shed light into the accuracy of the aforementioned explanatory mechanisms. Reactions to beliefs about a social group are best understood by research pertaining to stereotypes and stereotype activation. Stereotypes are the beliefs in which a social group (e.g., those born between 1979

and 1994) is described by common traits (e.g., entitlement). Stereotype activation occurs when a person is presented with a stereotype (Wheeler & Petty, 2001). The presentation of a stereotype can be either explicit or implicit. Explicit activation involves directly referencing the stereotype and the target group (e.g., Millennials are entitled). Implicit activation does not directly link the stereotype with a target group; rather activation occurs subtly by presenting a word or image that triggers the stereotype. In addition, stereotype activation can be either about oneself (e.g., Millennials being told that Millennials are entitled) or about others (e.g., Generation X being told that Millennials are entitled).

The Principle of Ideomotor Action (Wheeler & Petty, 2001) provides a theoretical model for reactions to stereotypes. The Principle of Ideomotor Action argues that the activation of stereotypes can impact perceptions and behaviors by making mental contents differentially accessible. In other words, the activation of a negative stereotype about a social group will result in greater unconscious activation of related memory content while inhibiting access to inconsistent behavioral information in memory. The notion that the mere act of thinking about a behavior will increase the tendency to engage in that behavior (Carpenter, 1874) has led to more recent research involving behavioral priming, which explains an automatic behavioral response that is activated immediately by a situational context (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Lewin, 1943; Mischel, 1973). Indeed, Wheeler and Petty's (2001) review of stereotype activation research reveals that participants in studies who were presented with negative self-stereotypes assimilate most of the time. Implicit activation of a stereotype is believed to lead to a perception or behavior consistent with the stereotype whereas explicit activation is more likely to lead to a perception or behavior inconsistent with the stereotype (Bargh, 1989). Implicit activation enables the pre-conscious activation to influence responses without the perceiver being aware of the interpretive bias. Explicit activation, however, allows for the perceiver to interpret the stereotype and potentially correct for it by reacting in ways contrary to the stereotype.

The social forces model indicates that stereotype activation should affect Millennial entitlement because the social forces model describes an effect (regulatory process) occurring in present day, which enables stereotype activation to shape behavior. Generational differences, maturation, and cultural shift imply that stereotype activation should not affect Millennial entitlement because the change in entitlement occurred in the past and is observed retrospectively. The social forces model is very similar to the stereotype activation model posed in the current study. Whereas the social forces model explains why unconscious and conscious information is used to shape behavior at a cultural level, the stereotype activation model explains why the phenomena occur at an individual level. Thus, the potential effect of stereotype activation can help shed light into why the U.S. culture currently holds a belief that Millennials are entitled.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, Millennials and Generation X are compared on perceptions of entitlement. Study 1 implicitly activates the stereotype that Millennials are more entitled than older generations.

Hypothesis 1a: Millennials presented with an implicit stereotype will report greater entitlement than Millennials presented with no stereotype.

Hypothesis 1b: Millennials presented with an implicit stereotype will report greater entitlement than Generation X presented with an implicit stereotype.

METHOD—STUDY 1

Participants

Participants were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid \$0.85. Participants were required to be currently living within the United States. Data were analyzed from 571 participants who provided useable data. Data were excluded from 79 participants who did not respond accurately to two attention checks (e.g., "please mark disagree"; Meade & Craig, 2012), could not be coded as either Millennials or Generation X, or failed to provide a response to the word association tasks. Millennials represented 70% of the sample whereas Generation X represented 30%. The mean age of the participants was 32 years old, 47% were female, 72% were Caucasian/White, 10% were African American/Black, and 10% were Asian.

Design and Procedure

Participants were instructed to complete a survey about their work experiences. The survey description, requirements, and title intentionally avoided any mention of generations or age. All participants began the survey by completing questions about their work status (e.g., tenure) and questions about common workplace experiences (e.g., organizational support) to mask the intentions of studying generational differences. The experimental design was a 2 × 2 between-subjects design with one measured variable (generation) and one manipulated variable (stereotype activation). The two stereotype activation conditions included: no stereotype activation and implicit stereotype activation. Participants were randomly assigned to either the no stereotype activation condition ($n_{\text{Generation X}} = 83$; $n_{\text{Millennials}} = 196$) or implicit stereotype activation condition ($n_{\text{Generation X}} = 86$; $n_{\text{Millennials}} = 206$).

Both conditions included instructions to complete three word association tasks (i.e., "please write any words that come to mind after each statement."), which differed in content between the conditions. Word association tasks have been used to activate stereotypes (e.g., Macrae, Stangor, & Milne, 1994). In the no stereotype activation condition, the word association tasks included (a) "Trees," (b) "Baked Goods," and (c) "Clouds." In the implicit stereotype activation condition, the word association tasks included (a) "Baby Boomer Generation," (b) "Generation X," and (c) "Generation Y/Millennials." No additional information regarding generations (e.g., definitions of the generations) was provided to ensure the subtlety of the implicit stereotype activation. After the word association tasks, both groups completed questions regarding entitlement and demographics (e.g., age).

Measures

Entitlement

Entitlement was assessed with a nine-item scale (Campbell et al., 2004). Participants were instructed to indicate if the statement reflected their beliefs. Each item was assessed on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Example items include, "I honestly feel I'm just more deserving than others" and "I feel entitled to more of everything." The entitlement scale yielded an internal consistency reliability of .90.

Generational coding

Participants' self-reported birth year was coded as either Generation X or Millennial following the coding method of Wey Smola and Sutton (2002). Generation X included participants born between 1965 and 1978 whereas Millennials included participants born between 1979 and 1994. Birth year was asked after the participants completed all survey tasks to ensure that the birth year question did not inadvertently activate a stereotype prior to the manipulation condition.

Manipulation check

To ensure that the conditions differed in stereotype activation, participants were asked at the end of the survey to rate their agreement to the statement, "this survey made me think about the generation I was born in." Participants responded on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Participants in the control condition ($M = 2.45$, standard deviation [SD] = 0.87) were less likely to think about their generational affiliation compared to participants in the implicit stereotype activation condition ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.76$; $t[569] = 21.24$, $p < .01$). Overall, the manipulation check indicates that generational stereotypes were unlikely activated in the control group.

RESULTS—STUDY 1

A 2 (generation) \times 2 (experimental condition) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test for a significant interaction between generation and experimental condition.

There was a significant interaction effect between generation and condition [$F(1, 567) = 11.34$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$]. Post hoc simple effects analyses were conducted to further examine the significant interaction and test the hypotheses.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, Millennials presented with an implicit stereotype about generational differences reported higher entitlement scores ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.85$) than Millennials presented with no stereotype ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.81$; $M_{\text{Difference}} = .28$, $p < .01$). Consistent with Hypothesis 1b, Millennials presented with an implicit stereotype about generational differences also reported higher entitlement scores than Generation X presented with the same implicit stereotype ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 0.79$; $M_{\text{Difference}} = .45$, $p < .01$). In sum, Millennials in the implicit stereotype condition reported higher entitlement compared to other experimental conditions.

STUDY 2

Study 2 expands upon Study 1 by including an explicit stereotype activation condition. Explicit stereotype activation is likely to yield different reactions for Millennials because they can consciously make efforts to react in ways inconsistent to the stereotype. Within stereotype threat research, this phenomenon is commonly referred to as a stereotype reactance effect (e.g., Kray, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001; Nguyen & Ryan, 2008). For example, explicit stereotype activation in the context of women and math (e.g., women are poor at math ability tests) can result in women performing better on a math test in an effort to counteract the stereotype (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008). The perceptual or behavior change is the result of a debiasing strategy to avoid confirming the stereotype, such as changing one's perceptions on an assessment to avoid confirming the stereotype or redirecting one's thoughts toward more positive attributes (Dijksterhuis & Van Knippenberg, 2000; Petty & Wegener, 1993; Wheeler & Petty, 2001).

Hypothesis 2a: Millennials presented with an explicit stereotype will report lower entitlement than Millennials presented with no stereotype.

Hypothesis 2b: Millennials presented with an explicit stereotype will report lower entitlement than Generation X presented with an explicit stereotype.

METHOD—STUDY 2

Participants

Participants were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid \$0.85. Participants were required to be currently living within the United States. Data were analyzed from 612 participants who provided usable data. Data were excluded from 63 participants who participated in Study 1, did not respond accurately to two attention checks, could not be coded as either Millennials or Generation X, or failed to provide a response to the word association tasks. Millennials represented 58% of the sample whereas Generation X represented 42%. The mean age of the participants was 34 years old, 41% were female, 76% were Caucasian/White, 11% were African American/Black, and 8% were Asian.

Design and Procedure

The same survey and procedure was used in Study 2 as in Study 1 except for an additional experimental condition. The experimental design was a 2 \times 3 between-subjects design with one measured variable (generation) and one manipulated variable (stereotype activation). The three stereotype activation conditions included: no stereotype activation, implicit stereotype activation, and explicit stereotype activation. Participants were randomly assigned to either the no stereotype activation condition ($n_{\text{Generation X}} = 90$; $n_{\text{Millennials}} = 92$), implicit stereotype activation condition ($n_{\text{Generation X}} = 88$; $n_{\text{Millennials}} = 124$), or explicit stereotype activation condition ($n_{\text{Generation X}} = 78$; $n_{\text{Millennials}} = 140$).

The control condition (no stereotype activation) was consistent with Study 1. The implicit stereotype activation condition was altered to include birth year ranges for the word association task so that participants could more easily identify with a specific generation. Stereotype activation effects are stronger when participants can identify with the stereotype (e.g., Schmader, 2002). In the explicit stereotype activation condition, participants were first presented with same word association task used in the implicit stereotype activation. Participants were then presented with an image of the TIME Magazine cover that describes Millennials as "lazy, entitled narcissists." A quote from the article also presented directly below the image: "I am about to do what old people have done throughout history: call those younger than me lazy, entitled, selfish, and shallow. But I have statistics! I have quotes from respected academics! Unlike my parents, my grandparents and my great-grandparents, I have proof" (Stein & Sanburn, 2013). To ensure that participants reviewed the image and quote, two follow-up questions were presented: (a) "Do you agree that Generation Y/Millennials (those born 1979–1994) are lazy, entitled narcissists?" and (b) "Do you know others who believe that Generation Y/Millennials (those born 1979–1994) are lazy, entitled narcissists?"

Measures

Entitlement

Entitlement was assessed with the same scale as in Study 1. The entitlement scale yielded an internal consistency reliability of .89.

Generational coding

Participants were coded as Generation X or Millennial using same method as in Study 1.

Manipulation check

The manipulation check was conducted using the same method as in Study 1. Participants in the control condition ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 0.95$) were less likely to think about their generational affiliation compared to participants in the implicit stereotype activation condition ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.73$; $t[392] = 24.66$, $p < .01$) and explicit stereotype activation condition ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.85$; $t[398] = 20.33$, $p < .01$). It is worth noting that the implicit stereotype activation condition was significantly higher on the manipulation check than the explicit stereotype activation condition ($t[428] = 3.40$, $p < .01$), but this difference was relatively small compared to differences involving the control condition. Overall, the manipulation check indicates that generational stereotypes were unlikely activated in the control group.

RESULTS—STUDY 2

A 2 (generation) \times 3 (experimental condition) analysis of variance was conducted to test for a significant interaction between generation and experimental condition. There was a significant interaction effect between generation and condition [$F(2, 608) = 15.78$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$]. Post hoc simple effects analyses were conducted to further examine the significant interaction and test the hypotheses. Figure 1 presents the entitlement scale scores and standard error estimates for the different conditions.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, Millennials presented with an implicit stereotype about generational differences reported higher entitlement scores ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.69$) than Millennials presented with no stereotype ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.55$; $M_{\text{Difference}} = .48$, $p < .01$). Consistent with Hypothesis 1b, Millennials presented with an implicit stereotype about generational differences also reported higher entitlement scores than Generation X presented with the same implicit stereotype ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 0.80$; $M_{\text{Difference}} = .49$, $p < .01$). In sum, Millennials in the implicit stereotype condition reported higher entitlement compared to other experimental conditions.

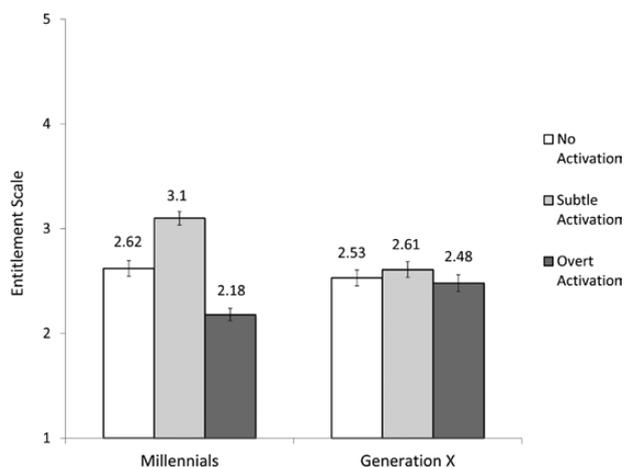


Figure 1. Entitlement scale means and standard error estimates for different conditions and generations in Study 2.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2a, Millennials presented with an explicit stereotype about Millennials being entitled ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 0.70$) were lower in entitlement than Millennials presented with no stereotype ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.55$; $M_{\text{Difference}} = .44$, $p < .01$). Consistent with Hypothesis 2b, Millennials presented with an explicit stereotype about Millennials being entitled were lower in entitlement than Generation X presented with the same explicit stereotype ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 0.90$; $M_{\text{Difference}} = .30$, $p < .01$). In sum, Millennials in the explicit stereotype condition reported lower entitlement compared to other experimental conditions.

STUDY 3

Study 3 expands upon the previous findings by replacing the self-report dispositional scale of entitlement with a behavioral state indicator of entitlement. A behavioral outcome will demonstrate the applicability of the experimental findings to the workplace.

METHOD—STUDY 3

Participants

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling approach within San Francisco, California. Participants were recruited in-person at coffee shops. Data were analyzed from 360 participants who provided a birth year from 1965 to 1994. Data were excluded from 14 participants who could not be coded as either Millennials or Generation X or who chose to terminate their participation early. Millennials and Generation X each represented 50% of the sample. The mean age of the participants was 35 years old, 51% were female, 70% were Caucasian/White, 9% were African American/Black, and 12% were Asian.

Design and Procedure

The experimental design was a 2 \times 3 between-subjects design with one measured variable (generation) and one manipulated variable (stereotype activation). The three stereotype activation conditions included: no stereotype activation, implicit stereotype activation, and explicit stereotype activation. Participants were randomly assigned to either the no stereotype activation condition ($n_{\text{Generation X}} = 60$; $n_{\text{Millennials}} = 60$), implicit stereotype activation condition ($n_{\text{Generation X}} = 60$; $n_{\text{Millennials}} = 60$), or explicit stereotype activation condition ($n_{\text{Generation X}} = 60$; $n_{\text{Millennials}} = 60$).

The electronic survey used in Study 2 was adapted to a shorter paper version. Specifically, the initial survey questions on the workplace were removed to reduce time requirements and increase the likelihood of participation. The three experimental conditions were identical to Study 2. Participants were approached and asked if they would be willing to participate in a 2-min psychology research survey and activity for \$1 compensation. Coffee shops were used for recruitment because of the rapid customer turnover. If multiple people were sitting together, only one person in the group was allowed to participate. After completing the word association tasks for their respective experimental condition, participants were paid their \$1 compensation and presented with a game with the opportunity to win a bonus of \$1, \$0.50, or no additional pay. All participants were guaranteed their base pay of \$1 regardless of the outcome of the game. The game was a version of the Prisoner's Dilemma task with the game result being a behavioral state indicator of entitlement. The instructions were:

You have been paired with another person in the room who just completed this game and is waiting to see the final results. For the game, you can choose to either "Share" or "Take" the

bonus pay of \$1.00. If both partners choose “Share,” then both partners receive \$0.50 bonus pay. If one partner chooses “Take” and the other partner chooses “Share,” then the “Take” partner receives a \$1.00 bonus pay whereas the “Share” partner receives no bonus pay. If both partners choose “Take,” then both partners receive no bonus pay.

Participants completed the game without interaction with a partner in an effort to standardize the process. No demographic information of the partner was provided to the participant. To ensure perceptions of fairness, every participant was given a partner response of “Share” at the end of the game. In other words, all participants underwent mild deception and received a bonus pay of \$1.00 or \$0.50 depending upon their own answer.

Measures

Behavioral state indicator of entitlement

Behavioral state indicator of entitlement was assessed using the aforementioned version of the Prisoner’s Dilemma task. Responses were coded as low entitlement (0) if “Share” was selected and high entitlement (1) if “Take” was selected. Prisoner’s Dilemma was selected as a behavioral state indicator of entitlement because the player is faced with an opportunity to pursue self-interests at the cost of another player despite no difference in effort exerted among the players. In addition, Liberman, Samuels, and Ross (2004, p. 1183) suggest that Prisoner’s Dilemma may represent a negotiation conflict between entitlement and mutual advancement. Prisoner’s Dilemma has been used to study a wide range of behavioral phenomenon, such as team cooperation and negotiation strategies (e.g., Cable & Shane, 1991; Cox, Lobel, & McLeod, 1991; Zeng & Chen, 2003).

Prior to the current study, a pilot study of 60 undergraduate students was conducted to evaluate the correlation between the entitlement scale and the behavioral state indicator of entitlement. All students were in the same room and told they have been randomly paired with another person in the room, but participants were not informed who the partner was. Students could choose to either “Share” or “Take” extra credit. If both partners chose “Share,” each participant would receive 1% extra credit in the course. If one partner chose “Take” and the other partner chose “Share,” then the “Take” partner would receive 3% extra credit whereas the “Share” partner would receive no extra credit. If both partners chose “Take,” then both partners would receive no extra credit. Responses to the game were recorded on a sheet of paper, which subsequently included the self-report entitlement scale. The behavioral state indicator of entitlement was positively associated ($r = .35, p < .01$) with the entitlement scale. The strength of the correlation is similar to other comparisons between state—trait measures of similar constructs (e.g., anger; Deffenbacher et al., 1996), subjective and objective measures of the same construct (e.g., job performance; Bommer, Johnson, Rich, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 1995), and between implicit and explicit self-report measures (e.g., Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner, Le, & Schmitt, 2005). As a result, the behavioral state indicator of entitlement used in Study 3 is an acceptable state-level behavioral indicator of the dispositional construct.

Generational coding

Participants were coded as Generation X or Millennial using same method as in Studies 1 and 2. Birth year was asked after the participants provided a response to the Prisoner’s Dilemma game.

Manipulation check

The manipulation check was conducted using the same method as in Studies 1 and 2. Participants in the control condition ($M = 2.51, SD = 1.08$) were less likely to think about their generational affiliation compared to participants in the implicit stereotype activation condition ($M = 4.22, SD = 0.62; t[238] = 15.04, p < .01$) and explicit stereotype activation condition ($M = 4.30, SD = 0.75; t[238] = 14.91, p < .01$). It is worth noting that the implicit stereotype activation condition was not significantly different on the manipulation check compared to the explicit stereotype activation condition ($t[238] = 0.90, p = .37$). Overall, the manipulation check indicates that generational stereotypes were unlikely activated in the control group.

RESULTS—STUDY 3

A 2 (generation) \times 3 (experimental condition) analysis of variance was conducted to test for a significant interaction between generation and experimental condition. There was a significant interaction effect between generation and condition [$F(2, 354) = 4.47, p = .01, \eta^2 = .03$]. Post hoc simple effects analyses were conducted to further examine the significant interaction and test the hypotheses. Figure 2 presents the percent of participants who engaged in entitled behavior and standard error estimates for the different conditions.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1a, Millennials presented with an implicit stereotype about generational differences behaved with greater entitlement (58% chose “Take”) than Millennials presented with no stereotype (38% chose “Take”; $M_{\text{Difference}} = .20$ or 20%, $p = .02$). Consistent with Hypothesis 1b, Millennials presented with an implicit stereotype about generational differences also behaved with greater entitlement than Generation X presented with the same implicit stereotype (40% chose “Take”; $M_{\text{Difference}} = .18$ or 18%, $p = .04$). In sum, Millennials in the implicit stereotype condition behaved with greater entitlement compared to other experimental conditions.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2a, Millennials presented with an explicit stereotype about Millennials being entitled behaved with less entitlement (18% chose “Take”) than Millennials presented with no stereotype (38% chose “Take”; $M_{\text{Difference}} = .20$ or 20%, $p = .02$). Consistent with Hypothesis 2b, Millennials presented with an explicit

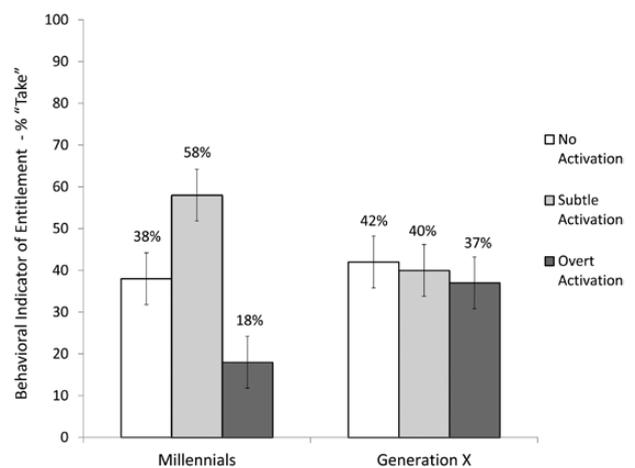


Figure 2. Percentage of Millennials who selected “Take” (behavioral indicator of entitlement) and standard error estimates for different conditions in Study 3.

stereotype about Millennials being entitled also behaved with less entitlement than Generation X presented with the same explicit stereotype (37% chose “Take”; $M_{\text{Difference}} = .19$ or 19%, $p = .04$). In sum, Millennials in the explicit stereotype condition behaved with less entitlement compared to other experimental conditions.

DISCUSSION

The basis of the current study is that the stereotype of Millennial entitlement is commonly held, which is likely to result in worker perceptual and behavioral reactions when implicitly or explicitly discussed in the workplace. In other words, discussing generational differences is likely to yield changes in workers that are equal or greater than the original generational difference. The stereotype of Millennial entitlement was commonly held among participants across the three studies. Participants who were explicitly told about the stereotype of Millennial entitlement (participants in the explicit activation conditions) were asked questions about entitlement beliefs. A total of 46% agree that Millennials are entitled and 82% know someone else who believes Millennials are entitled. Interestingly, these beliefs about Millennial entitlement did not differ by birth cohort, which indicates Millennials and Generation X are equally likely to hold this stereotype. The open-ended responses to the word completion tasks were also examined to evaluate the prevalence of the stereotype. Across all three studies in the word completion task for “Millennials/Generation Y,” 15% of participants listed words associated with entitlement (e.g., lazy, entitled, spoiled). This percentage may have been higher if the instructions were to list personal characteristics because the vast majority of participants (76%) listed events instead of personal characteristics. Overall, the results indicate that the stereotype of Millennial entitlement is commonly held by people within the United States.

Hypotheses across the three studies tested if the commonly held stereotype of Millennial entitlement yielded changes in perception and behaviors among Millennials. Studies 1 and 2 examined the effects of stereotype activation on self-report entitlement whereas Study 3 examined the effects of stereotype activation on a behavioral state indicator of entitlement. Participants were categorized as either Millennials or Generation X using birth years and then subjected to one of three experimental conditions: no stereotype activation, implicit stereotype activation regarding generations, or explicit stereotype activation regarding Millennial entitlement. The findings were consistent with hypotheses across the three studies. Millennials presented with an implicit stereotype about generations were higher in entitlement than participants in all other conditions. Conversely, Millennials presented with an explicit stereotype about their own entitlement were lower in entitlement than participants in all other conditions. The findings indicate that the stereotype about Millennial entitlement is pervasive enough to be activated. As a result, the social forces model and Principle of Ideomotor Action (Wheeler & Petty, 2001) can be used to predict the perceptual and behavioral reactions to stereotypes about birth cohorts.

The social forces model describes how societal beliefs and stereotypes are a characteristic of culture (Markus & Kitayama, 2010) that will influence generational differences. Stereotype activation (either implicit or explicit) is the information sharing process between cultural members that is used to stabilize a culture and prevent major cultural shifts. The social forces model differs from other theoretical models of generational differences because of the dynamic and current influence

of culture on a workers’ beliefs and behaviors. The dynamic and current effects of stereotype activation enable the social forces model to be directly measured and tested, whereas other theoretical models (e.g., generational differences due to shared life events) rely upon identifying potential generational differences that occurred retrospectively and cannot be properly tested because of the reliance of archival data sets or cross-sectional designs.

It is important to note that other theoretical models are potentially complementary to the effects found in the current study. That is, generational differences due to shared life events during adolescence, maturation, or a cultural shift in entitlement may have occurred in the past; the current study cannot rule out these possibilities nor make claims regarding the accuracy of the Millennial entitlement stereotype. Comparisons between the Millennials control group (no stereotype activation) and Generation X control group (no stereotype activation) demonstrated no differences in entitlement between Millennials and Generation X across the three studies, but the null effects are confounded by maturation and age. Indeed, null effects for generational differences are common among cross-sectional studies (Costanza et al., 2012). Overall, we cannot make strong conclusions regarding the accuracy of the Millennial stereotype and the other theoretical models.

Implications

The social forces model introduces a cultural factor that needs to be controlled for when testing for generational differences. Past research on generational differences has yielded inconsistent findings (Costanza et al., 2012), which may be partially attributed to the social forces model and the need to control for stereotype activation. The current study was successful in increasing or decreasing entitlement ratings with behavioral priming strategies (stereotype activation). Researchers testing for generational differences need to avoid inadvertently introducing a stereotype activation confound, which may occur by simply using words relevant to generations (e.g., Millennials) prior to testing hypotheses. Fortunately, avoiding or controlling for a stereotype activation confound is much easier than controlling for the confounds of age and maturation.

The implications for the current research extend to organizations because the prevalence of the Millennial entitlement stereotype is commonly held by participants. Given the prevalence of the Millennial entitlement stereotype, managers are likely encountering work related issues about generational stereotypes. It is important for managers to recognize that they are not passive bystanders to generational differences. Rather, a manager is likely shaping their workers’ beliefs and behaviors through implicit and explicit information. The pattern of effects across the three studies indicates that implicit and explicit stereotype activation can shift perceptions and behaviors of entitlement up or down about 0.5 SDs. This effect size is similar in strength to research that makes claims of generational differences in narcissism (Twenge & Foster, 2010). In other words, talking about Millennial entitlement or generational differences may produce an effect that is as strong as if the Millennial entitlement stereotype is true.

Managers should be educated about the impact of stereotype activation. Management training can capitalize on the vast amount of stereotype activation research, which often focuses on gender or race stereotypes, to learn how to reduce or eliminate the effects of stereotypes. For example, stereotype identification is a consistent moderator of the effects of stereotype activation (e.g., Schmader, 2002); those

who believe a stereotype are more likely to change their perceptions and behaviors in a predicted direction. We recommend that stereotype activation be discussed in management training to demonstrate that generational differences are likely being perpetuated within the work environment and teach managers how they can reduce workers from identifying with the stereotype.

Although the current experiments focused on Millennial stereotypes, the research pertains to workers of all ages. Older workers also experience negative stereotypes, such as beliefs of poor memory and cognitive performance (e.g., Barber & Mather, 2014). Regardless of the accuracy of these widespread stereotypes, the implicit and explicit discussions about these stereotypes is likely perpetuating any effects. We recommend organizations and managers work to discredit stereotypes within the workplace by emphasizing the unique individuality of each worker. Managers should tailor their efforts to the specific characteristics of their workers rather than managing based on generalizations about the workforce as a whole.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the current study deserve further empirical attention. First, the effects of stereotype activation on Millennial entitlement scores may be an inaccurate estimate for the population in general. The effects of stereotype activation are stronger when a person believes the stereotype to be true and personally relevant (Schmader, 2002). Participants were not selected based on their awareness or belief of the stereotype of entitlement because these questions would likely activate the stereotype and affect the manipulation conditions. As a result, the effects sizes found in the current study may depend upon whether or not participants believed the Millennial stereotype prior to participating.

Future research should also extend the social forces model to other commonly held stereotypes, including positive stereotypes. In addition to the belief of entitlement among Millennials, a developing stereotype is that Millennials are more socially minded and desire greater meaning in their work (Stein & Sanburn, 2013). Although stereotype activation researchers have begun to examine the effects on positive stereotypes (c.f., Wheeler & Petty, 2001), the social forces perspective emphasizes that conscious regulation efforts only begin when the emerging shift is harmful to the culture as a whole. Thus, it is unclear if the current findings will generalize to positive stereotypes.

The cross-sectional nature of the data limits our ability to test the accuracy of the Millennial entitlement stereotype. Although no differences in entitlement were found between the Millennials control group (no stereotype activation) and Generation X control group (no stereotype activation) across all three studies, the null effects are confounded with age and maturation. Indeed, null effects for generational differences are common among cross-sectional studies (Costanza et al., 2012). It is important to note that the implications of the current study are not dependent upon the Millennial entitlement stereotype being true. In fact, the null findings comparing Millennials and Generation X within control groups across all three studies may suggest that entitlement differences are not due to shared life events, but rather stereotype activation. The current set of studies demonstrates that workers are likely to react to stereotypes about generational differences and not whether the generational differences exist prior to stereotype activation.

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