The Generation Game: governing through bio-politics

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Abstract

An increasingly popular management tool is to stratify a workforce along generational lines, to distinguish its qualities and differentiate orientations to work. From this, a range of organizational practices, ranging from leadership styles to reward systems are tailored to fit specific generational characteristics. We term this practice 'management-by-generation' and examine how it has the potential to govern as a bio-political technology. The paper develops nascent work within organization studies on governmentality and bio-politics to demonstrate the powerful potential of management-by-generation to govern in contemporary organizations. In line with other Foucauldian studies on aging, it also contributes to the research on generations in demonstrating how a bio-political construction of generation allows management-by-generation to govern effectively, whilst more sociologically informed conceptualisations of generation could be a source of contestation to this emerging technology.

Introduction

The concept of generation as a means by which to understand the social world has developed a 'master narrative' (White, 2013) status in wider public discourse as it comes to recognise age and an aging society as a 'grand challenge' for the future (e.g. BEIS, 2018). In popular culture, references to different generations abound: 'Millennials' have graced the cover of *TIME* magazine (Stein, 2013), books such as Tiffanie Darke's asks *Now We Are 40: Whatever Happened to Generation X?* and Robert De Niro stars in the film, *The Intern* attempting to re-enter the world of work post-retirement. In this way, the concept of generation 'goes to the heart of a number of debates about the nature of contemporary society' (Biggs, 2007: 695).

Within this wider discourse, the notion of what we term 'management-by-generation' has also developed, which constitutes establishing management techniques for an age diverse workforce according to their distinct generational characteristics that differentiates their orientations to work. Managing workforces based on their generational membership has gained traction in both popular culture and popular management, aimed at governing workers by virtue of the era in which they were born. This paper critically explores this trend drawing on scholarly research on managing generations and Foucault's work on governmentality, bio-politics, and bio-power (1980, 1991, 2003) as work in these areas highlights the power of the concept of generation as both biologically tangible but also sociologically elusive (Biggs, 2007; Joshi et al., 2010; Williams, 2020) that may help to explain its popularity.

In doing so, we provide detailed analysis of management-by-generation as a bio-political technology of governance rendering generations as an emerging category for management to define, identify, and divide populations. We contribute to organization studies research that is informed by theorisation on governmentality and bio-politics by demonstrating how management-by-generation – as a bio-political technology – has the potential to emerge as one of the regimes through which to govern in contemporary organizations to powerful effect. We also contribute by bringing the literature on generations, governmentality and bio-politics together in order to suggest how, as with Foucauldian studies of age (Biggs and Powell, 2001; Powell and Biggs, 2003; Powell, 2017), whilst a bio-political construction of generation allows management-by-generation to govern effectively, a more sociologically-informed conceptualisation of generation could be a source of contestation to this emerging technology.

The paper is comprised of four sections. The first section sets out the debates regarding the conceptualisation of generations in management literature and beyond. The second section outlines Foucault's theorisation on governmentality, bio-politics, and bio-power, considering how that relates to both the scholarly conceptualisation of generation and the emergence of a discourse around generations. The third section outlines our findings, examining how various actors in one case study organization constructed, enacted, and legitimated management-by-generation. Finally, the discussion indicates the key areas management-by-generation governs as a bio-political technology, and with it, highlights the contributions that the paper offers to both organization studies research around governmentality and bio-politics and to the study of managing generations.

Managing generations

Some of the management literature on generations draws on cohort-based definitions of the concept that prioritise grouping according to age/birth year, adopting a more quantitative approach (Lyons and Kuron, 2013; Urick et al., 2017). Drawing on the work of Ryder (1965), a generational cohort is defined as a group of individuals who have a common experience from entering a system at the same time (Joshi et al., 2010; Parry and Urwin, 2011). Thus:

> viewing generations as cohorts implies that they have concrete boundaries corresponding to a set of birth years, are homogeneous enough to be meaningful and have observable commonalities that are relatively fixed and measurable… (Lyons and Kuron, 2013: 141)

This cohort form of analysis has spawned research examining a range of management and organizational issues, whether it be in exploring intergenerational conflict (e.g. Cogin, 2012; Lester et al., 2012; Wade-Benzoni, 2002); or generational responses to organizational issues such as work intensification (e.g. Brown, 2012), commitment and job satisfaction (e.g. Benson and Brown 2011; Kooij et al., 2010), or mentoring (e.g. Munro, 2009). This burgeoning area of research on generations assumes that people born within the same time period will have similar orientations to work and thus each generation has its own opportunities and challenges for the workplace and its management (Costanza et al., 2012; Kowske et al., 2010; Twenge and Campbell, 2008). Consequently, research under this form of analysis, and in particular work that considers the variable of generation against other work-based variables such as commitment or mentoring, broadly takes a more behavioural approach to the subject which assumes as a given the classifications of different generations rather than

problematising them. Therefore, the role of power in creating such knowledge around generational groupings does not feature so significantly in work of this nature.

Nevertheless, there is a more nuanced, context sensitive, social-cultural account of the concept emerging. Here, drawing on the work of Mannheim (1936, 1952) and Elias (see Connolly, 2019), which combine biology and history, generation is defined as a loosely coupled 'social location' (Pilcher, 1994) that develops in early adulthood (Corsten, 1999) to form a collective consciousness of beliefs, values and thought patterns (Lyons and Kuron, 2013). In this definition, there must be a shared temporal, historical, and socio-cultural location (Gilleard and Higgs, 2002) for a generation to exist. In turn, what develops is a wider variety of notions of generation. For instance, we can see its use genealogically, focusing on lineage from generation to generation within a 'family tree'; an indicator of a rite of passage (Urick et al., 2017); and a social identity for group identification (Joshi et al., 2010). The concept becomes more complex and contingent within these more sociological and qualitative approaches, which can render empirical observation of the phenomenon more difficult (Connolly, 2019; White, 2013).

This scholarly treatment of the concept of generation illuminates the construct's elusiveness (Joshi et al., 2010: 393), highlighting how it is by no means 'an obvious or infallible category of the social world' (Foster, 2013: 211). In particular, it raises issues with some cohort-based approaches where a particular area of critique is the conflation of age, period, and cohort in the conceptualisation of generation (Costanza and Finkelstein, 2015; Foster, 2013; Lyons et al., 2015; Parry and Urwin, 2011). Therefore, whilst cohorts can be, 'potential "sites" for new forms of generational

consciousness' (Gilleard and Higgs, 2002: 379), they cannot necessarily constitute a generation in and of themselves. Reviews of studies based on generational cohort as a variable, therefore, highlight an array of problems regarding their theoretical and methodological bases and the confusing evidence so far produced in this area of research (Lyons and Kuron, 2013; Parry and Urwin, 2011). This has led some to question the analytical utility of the concept of generation altogether (Parry and Urwin, 2011; Rauvola et al., 2019). This may be why generation is only one of many ways age at work and in organisations has been explored.

Despite this, researchers observe that managing generations has captured the imagination of mainstream business literature (Costanza and Finkelstein, 2015; Thomas et al., 2014; Parry and Urwin, 2011). For example, Hays Consulting's profiling of Generation Y (Hays, 2007), PriceWaterhouseCooper's 'NextGen' global survey (PriceWaterhouseCooper, 2013), Cella Consulting's advice on how to bridge the generation gap and curtail conflict (Wloczewski, 2014), or the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development's guidance on what organizations can do to attract and engage with different generations (CIPD, 2008). These largely operate with a cohort-based approach to generation. Consequently, cause and effect claims can be made about different generations and a more 'objective' presentation of the generational categories can be provided (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014) rather than recognising them as socially constructed. Therefore, a persuasive discourse begins to take hold, with managing generations presented as an action-oriented solution to a grand challenge despite its underpinning conceptual flaws.

Consequently, generation remains a concept that still needs examination because it is increasingly becoming a way in which managers and employees are making sense of their organizations (Costanza and Finkelstein, 2015; Lyons et al., 2015). We coin the phrase 'management-by-generation' – establishing management techniques for an age diverse workforce according to their distinct generational characteristics that differentiates their orientations to work – to signify the emerging managerial appeal of understanding the workplace according to generational membership. The research question we seek to pursue is how does management-by-generation govern and to what effect? The next section sets out the conceptual framework around governmentality and bio-politics that we will be using to explore this question.

Foucault and governing generations

For Foucault, government focuses on the 'conduct of conduct' as 'a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons' (Gordon, 1991: 2). Foucauldian studies of government consider it as a relational practice between a range of people and communities (Rose, 1999: 3). Relating to his theorisation around governmentality (Foucault, 1991), analysis of government also considers how thought is rendered practical as a means to shape conduct (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999). Concern for the population becomes 'the ultimate end of government' (Foucault, 1991: 100), focusing on 'its optimization (in terms of wealth, health, happiness, prosperity, efficiency), and the forms of knowledge and technical means appropriate to it' (Dean, 1999: 20).

Bio-politics is a modality of government of populations (Ransom, 1997) through bio-power which centres on, 'power exercised over persons specifically in so far as they are thought of as living beings' (Gordon, 1991: 4-5). Therefore, bio-power is where 'biological existence was reflected in political existence' (Foucault, 1980: 142), i.e. where life itself became a political object. Constituting the second pole of bio-power, bio-politics is exercised at the collective social body, concerned with regulating the biological functions of life and with the 'calculated management of life' (Foucault, 1980: 139). Consequently, it focuses on the regularising and normalising of the population, establishing characteristics and norms that can be measured, ranked, and shaped (Lemke, 2011). The differences in trends within the population are not engaged with directly but instead 'regularised' at the level of the population (Foucault, 2003).

Governing as bio-politics thus incorporates a productive logic around 'the conduct of living and the living' (Gordon, 1991: 8), recognising that governing relies on the productivity and strength of populations (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999), focusing on the 'human capacities that are to be understood and acted upon by technical means' (Rose, 1999: 52). Thus, it seeks to shape the conduct of populations but from afar and so a degree of freedom is still afforded to populations in how they conduct themselves (Rose, 1999).

In relation to research on generations, under the more socio-cultural and qualitative appreciation of the concept, the role of bio-power is recognised in the inter-relations between the biological and the political which are brought to the forefront where 'life itself' plays a role in the constitution of a generation, albeit in a nuanced capacity in

this conceptualisation (e.g. Mannheim, 1952). There is also a sense of an appreciation

of the relationship between the individual and the collective generation in work of this

nature and the relationships between different generations and intersections with other

groupings (e.g. Connolly, 2019) and this dynamic is also recognised in Foucault's

governmentality where there is:

> …a concern developed to coordinate the government of individuals with the
> government of a human collectivity viewed as a population. Governing in this
> sense meant managing the population as a collective mass, while also
> managing it in all its depth and details. (Raffnsøe et al., 2019: 166).

Under the cohort-informed view of generation, the notion of demographic statistics

that can be calculated, measured, and tracked comes to the fore in its

conceptualisation, which consequently articulates a notion of the bio-politics of

generations to be governed. Informed by age, which is a body-based form of

classification (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009; Thomas et al., 2014), generation is

therefore a population categorization that allows for the possibility of government to

regulate functions of life.

At a broad level across public discourse a process of 'generationalisation' is

beginning to emerge; a discursive process through which generations are constructed

as populations that constitute sources of political intervention (e.g. White, 2013). In

line with governmentality, the generational populations are therefore constituted as,

'datum, as a field of intervention and as an objective of governmental techniques'

(Foucault, 1991: 102). This can be seen in the likes of the tracking of generational

demographics in voting patterns around Brexit in the UK (BBC, 2016), public policy

narratives around the plight of the current generation that will be the first to

experience worse life chances than their parents (Resolution Foundation, 2019), and its use as a marketing classification (Deloitte, 2018).

Mainstream business discourse is in line with this emergent generationalisation and within this, management-by-generation has the potential to be an 'instrument of government' (Foucault, 1991: 95), providing an account of how to manage generations to shape their conduct. This suggests the potential for dynamic nominalism where, 'our classifications and our classes conspire to emerge hand in hand, each egging the other on' (Hacking, 2002: 106), where the phenomenon of 'generations' and the means by which to manage them emerge in a dynamic discursive process to constitute one another.

Consequently, there appears to be connection points between governmentality, bio-power, bio-politics, and generations that are worth exploring in more detail. Despite its contemporary relevance, bio-politics is an area of Foucault's theorisation that has not been used in any significant measure in organization studies. Nevertheless, Ahonen et al.'s (2014) consideration of diversity management as an apparatus of bio-power alludes to its bio-political potential:

> …diversity research produces knowledge that renders individuals as objects of bio-political management through their classifiable differences. These characteristics are then analysed in various ways, and, in so doing, imbued with political, organizational and economic meanings. (Ahonen et al., 2014: 267-8)

Therefore, the authors argue that more needs to be done to 'unmask the ways in which power functions in the production of diversity knowledge' (Ahonen et al., 2014: 279). This study seeks to begin to develop this analytical focus, examining how management-by-generation operates as a bio-political technology, governing

collectives and to what effect. The next section outlines the methodological choices with regards the case study that form the focus of this paper.

InsureCo: an illustration of the bio-politics of management-by-generation

The findings featured in this paper constitute part of a larger study of four organizations in the engineering and insurance sectors in the UK and Australia that lasted from 2013-2015. This broader study sought to examine where and how constructs around age played out in organizational life. These chosen sectors were pertinent to the research on account of the fact that they comprised a variety of companies in age profile; both as organizational entities (i.e. the age of the organization itself), and in terms of the makeup of the workforce (i.e. the trends in age within the workforce) with some companies and their workforces being very 'young' and others much 'older'. Within these case study organizations semi-structured interviews (total of 94 with average duration of 1 hour), focus groups (total of 11 groups comprising 5-7 people, each of duration between 1-2 hours), and observations were conducted, all at the places of work for the four organizations (two in the UK, and two in Australia).

For the purposes of this paper, we have focused on one of these case study organizations; a UK based international insurance company called InsureCo. Primarily involved in call-centre work, InsureCo's workers are predominantly young, with a worker average age of 23. Despite this profile, there are distinct pockets of older workers operating in the company. The organization is considered to be a strong performer with regard to its HRM function. It has won various awards and featured in

many business media profiles for how well it manages its staff and regularly features in third party endorsements as an exemplar of best practice.

The study as a whole generated a large data set that initially required a first order thematic analysis to reduce the data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) into manageable areas for further investigation. One theme that emerged from this process was that around generations. InsureCo was the organization that had the richest data on this theme largely on account of its use of training on this subject and therefore it engaged in more formal use of generational labels and information on the dispositions of different generations to work. Consequently, focusing on the data from that particular organization was considered appropriate for that particular theme. Therefore, the following section combines information from the training, with interview and focus group data from managers that established the training, as well as those that received the training.

With the focus on InsureCo established, examination of the material focused on interrogating, '…what authorities of various sorts wanted to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques.' (Rose, 1999: 20). As such, analysis focused on each of the different actors involved in the generational training, examining how each stakeholder was defining management-by-generation, was relating management-by-generation to particular problems, and was operationalising management-by-generation in practice within the organization. Governmentality studies are also considered to be diagnostic (Rose, 1999), so whilst analysis was attentive to how management-by-generation governed, we also considered indications of dissonance and counter discourse.

Whilst management-by-generation may only be one of potentially multiple techniques of government and although this study only focuses on one training scheme, in one organization, this focus is appropriate to studies of government where:

> …it is, most often, at this vulgar, pragmatic, quotidian and minor level that one can see the languages and techniques being invented that will reshape understandings of the subjects and objects of government, and hence reshape the very presuppositions upon which government rests. (Rose, 1999: 31)

At the time we conducted the case study of InsureCo, training had been received by managers in the organization regarding the different generations they manage. The practical manifestation of this training was also emerging through incentivisation packages with their workforce but this had not been fully implemented across the whole organization. As such, the account provided inevitably focuses largely on managers' involvement in management-by-generation as a process, combined with potential indications, where possible, of future directions for this process and employee reaction to this phenomenon so far. The next section outlines the processes through which management-by-generation emerged as a bio-political technology to govern the workforce.

Managing generations as bio-politics

The findings centre on three processes and their key actors within management-by-generation: how management-by-generation was constructed by a variety of actors, how management-by-generation was enacted by management, and how management-by-generation was legitimated by various actors.

How management-by-generation is constructed

Three key parties serve to construct management-by-generation at InsureCo: the external consultancy as the training provider, the senior HR managers that introduced the training to the organization, and the managers that were put on the training programme. The training, called 'The Power of Generational Insight' already indicates the positioning of management-by-generation as a significant way to understand the workforce. It begins with the stratification of employees according to generational membership which is determined by birth year. This includes: 'Matures' (born 1925-1945), 'Boomers' (born 1946-1965), 'Generation X' or 'X-ers' (1965-1977), 'Generation Y' or 'Y-ers' (born 1978-1985), or 'Generation Z' (1994-2004). Consequently, from the outset consideration of employees as living beings (Gordon, 1991) is brought to the fore and rendered political as something that can provide 'powerful insight' into optimising the workforce population (Dean, 1999) according to the truths constructed in the training.

With the living being as political project highlighted, characteristics and norms of the different populations that can be shaped (Lemke, 2011) are established. This is achieved in the training by focusing on how the character of a generation has developed in relation to their wider context. For instance, Generation X 'tends not to be team players' on account of being 'taught to question authority at a young age' and witnessing 'lifelong employment end and nothing being guaranteed.' From these distinct characterisations of each generation the training asserts: 'Different generational groups see the world of work very differently'. Consequently, these

differences are outlined so that managers can be aware of their distinctions. For example, 'Baby boomers are very much defined by their job', meanwhile Y-ers prioritise jobs, 'which are of interest, they seek variety – they do not seek careers and traditional career development programs'. The training therefore relies on the construction of fundamental distinctions between the generations where work orientations differ noticeably from generation to generation. No areas of similarity are emphasised, just the stratification of people according to - at times dramatic - differences in how they consider work.

In turn, the training suggests that there is a need for managers to appreciate these generational differences and respond and manage appropriately in various ways including: how you communicate; 'Consider the benefits of communicating in the language of the generational group you are trying to reach'; how you recruit, '[For Y-ers] spend time with them answering their questions, admire them as individuals'; and how you negotiate teamworking, 'X-ers – teams are not defined by proximity, each person has a unique role'. The conflation of age, period, and cohort present in the training's construction of generation allows for bio-politics to emerge where classification of the population according to generational membership can account for trends and patterns in the populations' behaviour that can be regularised (Foucault, 2003).

This is in keeping with how senior HR managers at InsureCo, construct management-by-generation as a means by which to 'profile' employees and thus manage them more effectively:

> 'Basically the thinking behind it is there's no good or bad employees, there's just differences in the profiles. So we help managers have an understanding of

what appeals to different profiles in the workforce…The message is let's acknowledge those differences and their diversity and what appeals to them, and let's help you manage them…' (Senior HR)

This construct allows management-by-generation to frame generations as bio-political problems where inherent differences between generations can be classified, 'fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls' (Foucault, 2003: 255); and then the homogeneity of the generation itself means solutions can be easily applied that will allow the population to regularise in line with the trends/patterns for their grouping. Framing generations within management-by-generation in this way is appealing because it speaks to the freedom contained within bio-power that means you govern from afar by managing 'the different profiles of the workforce'.

For the managers that received the training, management-by-generation as a bio-political construct serves to normalise the generational populations. Firstly, in relation to the self, the majority of managers asserted that they fitted the generational characterisation provided by the training for their generation:

> 'I fitted into the baby boomer category: this is my attitude to work.' (Training Manager)

> 'I'd say a lot of mine related to my generation which is Y.' (Senior Recruitment Officer)

With their understanding of themselves affirmed within the generational category that applies to them, the managers then use it to understand their employees, positioning it as a means, 'to categorise people into types' (Training Manager) and with it reframing how to understand those different categories:

> 'I just remember thinking, "oh I never thought of it like that"…So just changing the way you approach people. […] I'm more aware of why

somebody older might not be doing it in this new way. It just made me aware of the reasons behind their behaviour.' (Training Manager)

Therefore, in line with the training, management-by-generation is considered insightful of the working populations at InsureCo and in turn can optimise their performance. With this, the idea of managing according to generation emerges:

> 'It's eye opening, isn't it? […] It made me think that when we set up teams, do we have to get the right kind of blend? So would you put a baby boomer with this person? I think it gives you a head start really on how to manage certain types of people.' (Operations Manager)

Equally, in managers' talk about managing their teams they begin to adopt the notion of the different responses of different generations to work generally, re-affirming the categorisation assigned to different generational groupings. The younger generations are constructed in line with the 'generational insight'. For instance, in relation to generation Y:

> 'It's really obvious though to us, their timekeeping's terrible and their mobile phone's always on; 'I've got to take this call' when they're meant to be taking a customer call and they're trying to pick their phone up. You think 'yes, that's it, that's exactly how they are'.' (Training and Development Manager)

So too are the older generations:

> '…the older generation you do find their absence levels are nowhere near the younger guys' levels...I mean one of the guy's…in over eight years he's never had a sick day […] from our trends of what we see, sometimes it's like oh there's something behind that training.' (Customer Services Team Leader)

Consequently, seeing the workforce according to generational memberships becomes normalised, bringing management-by-generation into the quotidian of organizational life where employees are seen and constructed through the lens of generation and thus generational populations are conceived as an 'objective of governmental techniques' (Foucault, 1991: 102).

Despite its powerful appeal as a bio-political construct, it was also contested by some, where employees suggested that they did not see themselves as belonging to their generational group as their individual context was different:

> 'I think I'm completely the opposite […] Because I've been in a job since school…Out of all of my friends I'm the only one who's got this job and they're all in uni…If I'd been to uni I may be different but I think because I went straight into work my mindset's completely opposite.'

Whilst others did not like being typified by generational membership:

> 'I hate the fact that we're all tarred with the same brush when we're not all the same'

Likewise, some managers did not agree with the generation that was supposed to characterise them:

> 'People take the mickey out of me and think I'm older than what I am…I sometimes think it's because I spent a lot of time with grandparents growing up so…when he came in and spoke about generations I was thinking 'well some of those things I'm motivated by' but then I was thinking maybe because I spent time with older people when I was younger, I'd see some of those things that maybe they were motivated by.' (Operations Manager)

Consequently, alternate constructs of the individual suggest sites of potential dissonance and counter discourse (Rose, 1999) emerging.

Nevertheless, overall the construction of management-by-generation as bio-political follows a three-stage process. Firstly, the training and HR function conceive of the living generation as 'a field of intervention' (Foucault, 1991:102) where performance can be optimised. Secondly, management-by-generation as a bio-political construct establishes characteristics and norms of populations that can be shaped and managed (Foucault, 2003) according to the training. Then finally, this construct is rendered practical as a means by which to shape conduct (Dean, 1999) via managers who

accept and normalise the generational populations, rendering them 'an objective of governmental techniques' (Foucault, 1991: 102).

How management-by-generation is enacted

The organization's goals are also a means by which management-by-generation becomes enacted in a more tangible sense at InsureCo. This is observed in two distinct areas of enactment: firstly, in the introduction of the management training programme on generational insight and secondly, in the alteration of incentive and reward packages according to generational membership, both of which are led by management and are therefore the focus of this section.

At this point, management-by-generation emerges as something that cannot just measure but also has the potential to begin to track populations and individuals. In the case of the management-training programme, HR can track who received the training and the subsequent performance of their teams. In the case of the incentive and reward schemes, InsureCo can track the resonance of different incentives with different generations according to subsequent performance and productivity of teams and individuals against their targets.

HR play the most significant role in introducing generational insight to the company's management training programme. Senior staff within this department highlight that managers' selection to be managers at InsureCo includes consideration of their ability to engage with different ages. This ability is then bolstered by the training on

generations which highlights to these managers how they can do this more effectively:

> '…that's all part of the training development we give and it's part of the selection process in choosing those managers that we think they'll be comfortable managing all age groups as well.' (Senior HR)

Therefore, management-by-generation becomes enacted as part of the recruitment and socialisation of management at InsureCo. To become a manager in the organization, an appreciation of how to manage different generations is required.

HR also asserts that the rationale for needing the training within the organization was a realisation that age was becoming more of an issue in the organization that needed to be managed. In particular, HR was struggling with motivation and incentive/reward schemes in the company and their ability to engender productivity amongst the workforce. InsureCo therefore proceeded to begin to implement a number of changes to the motivation and reward system, based on the different generational groups that employees belonged to:

> 'So incentive packages, the team manager, we have a group of 12 people, and if they're diverse ages and diverse generation boxes…it may not be this guy who isn't responding to certain things we're doing, maybe nothing to do with his technical ability or performance, we may be not offering something that appeals to them, you know, some time off maybe rather than an extra hundred pound in their pay packet every month, and different things like that, just because of the profile.' (Senior HR)

Incentives are a core element of the people management function in this company because the scale of incentives they offer is a particular area of differentiation for them in their sector and feeds into the many external awards they win for their HRM practices. The incentive and reward packages are cited by employees as a key reason to work at InsureCo rather than at competitors. Therefore, enacting management-by-generation through the incentive programme indicates its perceived significance as a

means by which to improve that system. The incentive programme is also the point at which management-by-generation becomes linked to individual performance and productivity where it's used to ensure incentives resonate with individuals to encourage their self-regulation and productivity.

Various managers that received the generational training outline how they proceeded to give different incentives to different generations within their teams:

> 'Say I'm running a competition in my team and my team is all 20 year olds, I know that they're going to be more interested in winning an early finish, than if I've got a team of 40 year olds I incentivise them with money. So I can adapt my approaches and work based on that.' (Senior Recruitment Officer)

> '…the younger guys on the team they like to be rewarded in alcohol, flexitime, and time off, early finishes, extended lunch that sort of thing, like to be away from work, no money. Where I've got an older generation they'd rather have a trophy on the desk for where they've done well or they'd rather have certificates and awards. […] So I think that's where you try to pick up on their trends on how they want to be dealt with.' (Team Leader)

Thus, in line with Foucault's work on health and sexuality, management-by-generation has an element of the 'diagnostic' to it where managers engage in 'dividing practices' (Danaher et al., 2000: 61) in order to ascertain how to treat – literally in the sense of this company – the populace.

How management-by-generation is legitimated

For external consultants, legitimating management-by-generation centres on framing it within the wider context of age discrimination legislation and the emerging aging population. These elements combine to encourage managers to appreciate the 'much broader spread of age diversity in the workforce' (InsureCo's training briefing) which management-by-generation represents. In line with this, HR legitimate management-

by-generation by positioning it as a solution to their problem of dealing with an age diverse workforce:

> 'We stumbled across it [the training package] and when we found out about it, we thought 'oh my god this is exactly what we need here'…' (Senior HR)

It's then further legitimated through the principles from the training being enacted in the incentive programme. This constitutes the point at which the link between the external training programme and internal company priorities are rendered tangible.

The continued legitimation of management-by-generation is also indicated in the potential future opportunity to use similar 'generational insight' to help employees to more fully understand the different generations they work with (and their incentives) in order to become a more harmonious working team:

> 'So it might be that the manager requests his team go on the generational insight thing - so the older person can understand why the younger people are wanting to finish early all the time…and younger people can understand the older person and hopefully that can bridge that gap.' (HR Manager)

Managers who have received the training and then implement its ideas through the likes of incentive and reward packages are particularly influential in management-by-generation's legitimation. Their legitimation is largely on account of their positive reception to the core ideas around different generations needing to be managed differently and is underpinned by three factors. Firstly, management-by-generation is legitimised by managers because they see themselves in the depiction of their generation:

> 'First of all, you look at yourself and you're thinking where am I? Okay, so – and then you start looking at the change and think, well I do that, yeah and I do that as well, yeah, yeah, and I do that one as well. Then you think, well okay then, so right – then start looking at other people.' (Call Centre Trainer)

As the construction of their generation resonates with how they see themselves, the ideas presented in management-by-generation are legitimised as valid representations of reality: 'I loved it. I thought it was really interesting how true it was' (Training Manager). The biological start point for management-by-generation is conceived as 'natural' and thus difficult to resist where managers adopt the principles as a truth, striving to place their teams (and themselves) in the relevant generation.

Secondly and relatedly, management-by-generation was rendered legitimate by managers because it named something they were already aware of to some degree. For example, when talking about the training this manager observes:

> 'So, he talks about how to manage those people and how to identify the different traits…when he presents it you recognise what he's saying straightaway. You know that you've probably been doing it and managing that way, but it's never been so clear-cut as when he delivers it.' (Training and Development Manager)

Comments of this nature reflect the notion of dynamic nominalism (Hacking, 2002) and suggest management-by-generation is a means by which to give legitimacy to principles that already informed their management approach.

Finally, the managers legitimise management-by-generation by highlighting how it bridges the dynamic between managing collectives and individuals. Whilst management-by-generation emphasises an understanding of collective populations of generations, its enactment through incentive packages at InsureCo enables managers to conceive of management-by-generation as also allowing for a more bespoke treatment of different aged individuals within their teams. Therefore, although it relies on an understanding of collectives, the delivery of management-by-generation has an individualised quality to it as well:

'But as a generalisation it's quite nice way of kind of understand a little bit more and you can tailor your approach to people.' (Senior Recruitment Officer)

This dynamic between the collective and individual is also reflected in how employees understood the incentive packages at the company:

'I think they [InsureCo] treat individually and treat us all the same.'

However, whilst management-by-generation's dynamic between the collective and individual was prized, it was also a source of tension, particularly around the idea of materially incentivising individuals based on measurements of attitudes and behaviours of populations. Whilst this gave a sense of a bespoke form of management, there was also a concern that recognition of the individual was not sufficiently captured:

'…we had some guy come in and talked about different generations and the things they're motivated by and you do see some of that. But you've got to look at the individual.' (Operations Manager)

'…I don't think you should go back and give anyone special treatment based on those categories.' (Senior Recruitment Officer)

Therefore, whilst management-by-generation can operate in a bio-political fashion conceived as managing the collective population and the individual, it has to be recognised that this simultaneously generates underlying tensions and contradictions.

Overall, management-by-generation becomes legitimated by various actors for its ability to calculate behaviour. Management-by-generation provides an understanding of collectives with distinct motivations and behaviours across different populations, which can then be used to incentivise individuals accordingly to better motivate them to be more productive. This is seen to resonate with wider societal issues and internal challenges within the organization that InsureCo needs to respond to, as well as how

individual managers see themselves and others, and how managers aspire (and already engage) in managing their employees.

Discussion

Within the management literature more socio-cultural, qualitative informed approaches to understanding generations attempts to capture its contingent, contextual, and nuanced nature, meanwhile some approaches to generation prioritise cohort membership, with the potential for a more behavioural and quantitative focus to emerge as a result. Within the latter conceptualisation, generations have the potential to be considered as homogenous units to be measured against other variables in the organizational context. This particular set of assumptions has taken hold in mainstream management in the form of management-by-generation: establishing management techniques for an age diverse workforce according to their distinct generational characteristics that differentiates their orientations to work. We use Foucault's work on governmentality and bio-politics to examine how management-by-generation governs.

Management-by-generation as an emerging bio-political technology of governance

The first contribution of the paper centres on the empirical account it provides of the process by which management-by-generation operates as a bio-political technology of governance. An empirical analysis of this nature explores:

> the emergence of particular 'regimes of truth' concerning the conduct of conduct, ways of speaking truth, persons authorized to speak truths, ways of enacting truths and the costs of so doing (Rose, 1999: 19).

In the context of management-by-generation, these facets are highlighted in the three core processes outlined in the findings, demonstrating different aspects of this bio-political technology of governance in action.

The first, regarding the discursive construction of management-by-generation, focuses on the naming process of generations based on a certain knowledge construct. The training constructs generations as distinct cohorts that are radically different to one another and therefore each generational population needs to be managed accordingly. In turn, each generation constitutes a:

> …collective entity, the knowledge of which is irreducible to the knowledge that any of its members may have of themselves…The population is not just a collection of living, working and speaking subjects; it is also a particular objective reality of which one can have knowledge… (Dean, 1999: 107)

The 'generational insight' training provides such objective knowledge of these collectives. As such, management-by-generation is also constructed by HR and managers as a bio-political technology that acknowledges subjects' freedom 'to be' (Rose, 1999), where it is positioned as a means to understand diverse generations and their profiles better. However, in doing so the technology is also constructed as a means to engage with populations better in order optimise them as resources (Dean, 1999). Consequently, knowledge of populations is then used to influence them and shape their conduct (Ransom, 1997). This is seen in management-by-generation where to understand these generational classifications is to serve to manage them better in order for them to be a more productive workforce.

The construction of these truth discourses over life also rely on, 'problematizations through which 'being' has been shaped in a thinkable and manageable form' (Rose, 1999: 22). Within management-by-generation, this problematization is positioned

within both a wider societal level and a more local organizational level. For instance, the training constructs generational cohorts as a form of classification of 'being' that can engage with the wider societal problems of an aging population and age diverse workforce. Meanwhile, during the enactment of management-by-generation, HR and managers frame generational membership as a form of 'being' that can help the internal organizational problems of motivation and productivity amongst staff.

Relatedly, in focusing on the enactment of management-by-generation other facets of this bio-political technology are revealed. Here, management-by-generation is enacted in InsureCo in order to render populations as political and economic problems whose conduct needs to be shaped, 'in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting undesired ones' (Rose, 1999: 52). This is principally achieved by enacting management-by-generation through the incentive scheme of the company where HR and managers attempt to shape employees' conduct through translation of the discourses of generations into relevant incentive packages for workers. Translation is a means by which governing from afar is made possible (Rose, 1999) where knowledge is translated into more localised norms and standards of conduct. This translation of the constructs of management-by-generation into organizational practices also allows for the diagnostic element of this bio-political technology to emerge.

The final process outlined in the findings concerning the legitimation of management-by-generation at InsureCo also elucidates other aspects of this bio-political technology of governance. Foucault considered modern governmentality to be:

> …simultaneously about individualizing and totalizing: that is, about finding answers to the question of what it is for an individual, and for a society or population of individuals, to be governed or governable. (Gordon, 1991: 36)

For managers at InsureCo, legitimation of management-by-generation centred on this principle of conceiving it as both capable of understanding and managing the collective and the individual which was a key part of its appeal, particularly through its practical implementation through the incentive packages. Likewise, governing is enabled and constrained by, 'what can be thought and what cannot be thought at any particular moment in our history' (Rose, 1999: 8) and InsureCo's legitimation of management-by-generation is bolstered by a process of 'dynamic nominalism' (Hacking, 2002).

Ultimately, the empirical account demonstrates the production of generations as part of wider generationalisation, which renders them an emerging category for defining, identifying, and dividing populations. Providing detailed analysis of management-by-generation as a bio-political technology of governance thus contributes to beginning to, 'unmask the ways in which power functions in the production of diversity knowledge' (Ahonen et al., 2014: 279) as well as beginning to understand how, 'these varied conceptualizations of generations may gain agency in the workplace…' (Joshi et al., 2010: 408). Bio-politics has not been a key area of focus for management or organization studies so far, and yet an understanding of management-by-generation as a bio-political technology indicates how it has the potential to emerge as one of the means by which to govern in contemporary organizations to powerful effect.

Generations and bio-politics: sites of appeal and contestation

Examining how management-by-generation operates as a bio-political technology of governance also highlights its points of appeal and contestation because the analysis is attentive to both its assumptions and its omissions (Rose, 1999). The appeal of management-by-generation is that it can operate bio-politically which is enabled by the cohort notion of generation it relies upon. In fact, it is because of its combination of tangibility (through markers of age) and elusiveness (due to the conflation of age, cohort, period, and generation) (see Biggs, 2007; Williams, 2020) that allows management-by-generation to operate as a bio-political technology of governance in organizational life. As a result:

> …'life' has become an independent, objective, and measurable factor, as well as a collective reality that can be epistemologically and practically separated from concrete living beings and the singularity of individual experience. (Lemke, 2011: 5)

In turn, the political is rendered biological which is also part of its appeal. HR and managers profiling and incentivising the workforce based on generational membership constitutes the politicisation of biological characteristics, reconstructing people as generational subjects. However, whilst management-by-generation is a politically-based regime, this is obscured via its legitimation, 'in "veridical" discourses about human beings' (Rose, 1999: 9).

Despite this appeal, the research also recognises the emergence of potential sources of contestation around the concept of generation management-by-generation relies upon. A noteworthy area of tension was the loss of recognition of the individual, particularly in terms of understanding their personal context and how that may interact with their generational categorisation and thus how they should be managed.

Therefore, more sociological, qualitative, and nuanced conceptualisations of generation, considering the lived experience of the individual, may prove to be a counter discourse that allows for '…new possibilities for action [to] come into being in consequence' (Hacking, 2002: 108). It would also potentially bring the political back to the fore and with it, consideration of the potentially discriminatory effects of management-by-generation as a bio-political technology of governance based on a cohort understanding of generation.

Foucauldian studies of age and aging (e.g. Biggs and Powell, 2001; Powell and Biggs, 2003; Powell, 2017) highlight that a bio-medical construction of age dominates to govern older people and a more socially constructed appreciation of age is a potential area for dissonance. In line with this, our research highlights how the bio-political construction of generation in management-by-generation is powerful and effective. However, in attempting 'to shatter 'taken-for-granted' assumptions' (Powell and Biggs, 2003: para 2), it also demonstrates that whilst the bio-political construct of generation is powerful, the more sociologically informed concept of generation may still allow for some prospect of contestation and dissonance.

Generations research has focused on the different perspectives surrounding the concept and their relative strengths and weaknesses in capturing what generation constitutes and therefore the effects of generation on different areas of the social world such as work and organizations (e.g. Costanza and Finkelstein, 2015; Lyons et al., 2015; Parry and Urwin, 2011; Urick et al., 2017). This paper brings together the management literature on generations and Foucault's theorisation of power, which enables us to understand why there is an appeal to the idea of generation despite its

analytical imprecision as well as how other conceptualisations of generation have the potential to serve as means of contestation and resistance.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine how power operated in management-by-generation to allow it to govern in organizations. In doing so, it contributes a detailed empirical account of how management-by-generation operates as a bio-political technology of governance and indicates that whilst the bio-political conceptualisation of generation underpinning management-by-generation can be particularly effective, the sociologically informed conceptualisation of generation could be a site of contestation for this technology. As an analysis of government, the paper attempts to consider:

> …the means of calculation, both qualitative and quantitative, the type of governing authority or agency, the forms of knowledge, techniques and other means employed, the entity to be governed and how it is conceived, the ends sought and the outcomes and consequences. (Dean, 1999: 11)

Nevertheless, there are other areas of analysis of government yet to be explored. Firstly, a wider analysis of management-by-generation than is provided here to begin to appreciate in more detail the heterogeneity of authorities (Dean, 1999) governing through generationalisation. How does management-by-generation govern in other sectors or organizations? How are other authorities such as the state, education, and professional bodies involved in this bio-political technology?

Secondly, as seen in Engstrand and Enberg (2020), governing of oneself needs to be investigated further (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999) in order to understand how individuals

act on themselves and with others under this technology (Joshi et al., 2010). The longevity of management-by-generation as a bio-political technology of governance could also be explored in this context analysing what constitutes the long-term side effects of thinking of oneself and others as part of a generation with certain dispositions to work?

Considering both the plurality of governing and the governing of the self in relation to management-by-generation would also allow for a more detailed consideration of resistance to this technology (Ransom, 1997), considering questions such as: who has the potential to resist, what does that resistance look like, and who is the target of the resistance?

This research suggests that the potential for management-by-generation to be a powerful tool of government over populations will mean a continued interest in it from management circles. Consequently, more needs to be discovered about the potential scale and consequences of this technology.

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