

Discourses of ‘Generation Y’: where are the Sociologists?

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Abstract

The discourses surrounding ‘Generation Y’ in the public domain are pervasive and powerful. The magnitude and impact of the barrage of public scholarship in this area raises interesting questions for sociologists. As a means to beginning a dialogue with this body of discourse, this research sought to explore the apparent purpose of this literature, the audience for whom the material appeared to have been published and to record the most prominent voices within this field. Data comprised the collection of materials from 6 publicly accessible websites. Most of the data retrieved through this process were coded as ‘media sources’, and a small proportion were ‘academic peer-reviewed sources’. Analysis revealed that the purpose of this material tended to be descriptive and that most seemed to be targeted towards a general audience. There were, however, many sources which were clearly targeted to particular readerships and were instructive rather than simply descriptive. Of the prominent authors within this field, sociologists were few. This small study has shown that academic scholarship, and in particular sociological voices, are markedly absent from a popular discourse around ‘Generation Y’.

Keywords: Generation Y, Public discourse, Sociology

Introduction

‘In all these discussions I tend not to hear the rhetoric that some sociologists throw around in relation to this group. I hear very few upbeat stories of parents, teachers and employers finding this generation a joy and pleasure to interact with. Instead, what I hear said most often by those who work with Generation Y are the words *frustrating* and *confusing*. In so many areas of interaction, older generations seem exasperated by a generation that seems *disinterested, disloyal, disrespected* and *self-centered*.’ (McQueen 2008:7. Emphasis added)

Chronological lists of generational labels have been produced in various length and detail across academic and popular works. Some lists provide dates as markers of the beginning and end of these generational categories, others refer to key historical events as defining the characteristics, experiences and life-chances of each cohort. Perhaps to the detriment of the very system itself; there reside an increasing number

of overlapping sub-categories within and between labels, some with more currency than others. The sheer volume of new categories would leave even those with the sturdiest disposition to the brink of break-down should they attempt to chart them. It is clear that at the core of such categories lies the assumption that there is something distinct about one group when compared to those born to a different historical period. The proposition that those born to a particular socio-historic location ‘develop a shared set of outlooks, values and beliefs that stay with them for life’ (France 2007:42) is part of the foundation of a sociological sensibility. Generational observation is not, however, the exclusive domain of sociologists.

Whilst the use of generational labels including ‘Baby Boomers’, ‘Generation X’, ‘Generation Y’ and increasingly ‘Generation Z’ are prolific within the popular press, such works routinely lack necessary theoretical engagement. Reference to generational cohorts in the popular press is rife with universalities and overstatements. In an uncommon treatment, an opinion piece published in *The Age*, suggested that the development of generational labels serve a particular purpose: ‘Flattering a generation of consumers has proven an effective way to create a niche market’ (Scanlon 2006:13). The deafening roar from those who have colonised this field is not nearly as critical as this.

Literature review

Karl Mannheim’s (1952) *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* is widely credited as giving rise generational theorising. France (2007:42) asserts that his work points to the ‘interplay between [the biological]...and the historical circumstances and situations that creates a certain feeling of collective location and identity’. Mannheim (1952:304) asserted that it is reasonable to speak of generations of ‘actuality’, of

‘youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems’. This is the sense that shared location acts to draw together those born to a particular time who share experiences. With a focus on similarities, differences are often obscured. According to Wyn and White (1997) generational labels have the capacity to ‘trivialise’ and ‘distort’ the heterogeneity of experiences. In particular they cautioned against the uncritical use of such generalisations within the policy domain. The variation of experience within the generational cohorts was accounted for by ‘generational units’ in Manneheim’s (1952:304) writings: ‘those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units’. This important nuance seems to be given little attention in much the popular generational literature.

An examination of peer-reviewed publications dealing with ‘Generation Y’, broadly those born between early 1980 to mid 1990, is telling. In recent years there has been a wealth of literature about this group published from within the business and marketing sectors (see for example Buik, 2008; Cennamo and Gardiner, 2008; Lower, 2008), an increasing volume of peer-reviewed material emerging from the educational sector (see for example Pendergast 2007; Young, 2008) and a relatively sparse body of work emerging from within the social sciences (see for example Alloway and Dalley-Trim 2009). To the best of our knowledge, with the exception of the work of Mason, Webber, and Singleton (2007), sociologists have remained largely silent in either driving or responding to the discourses constructed in relation to generation y.

An examination of popular scholarship revealed the shelves and websites of booksellers groaning under the weight of titles including Sheahan’s (2005) *‘Generation y: Thriving and surviving a with generation y at work’*, Huntley’s (2006) *‘The world according to y: Inside the new adult generation’*, Tulgan’s (2009) *‘Not*

everyone gets a trophy: how to manage Generation Y and Erikson's (2008) *Plugged In: the Generation Y guide to thriving at work*. Almost without exception, the popular discourses produced in and through these texts suggest that the generational differences characterised in and by this group are such that they require entirely new modes of management.

For those who are curious about 'Generation Y', publicly accessible information is voluminous. Therefore, given the role of sociology in generational analysis through Mannheim's work, and given the ever increasing fervor in relation to this generation in popular discourse, and to a far lesser extent in peer-reviewed literature, this paper asks the following questions:

1. What appears to be the 'purpose' of this literature?
2. Who appears to be its audience? and
3. Who are the most prominent voices in this scholarship?

Method

In order to examine popular discursive constructions of 'Generation Y', we collected the first 10 results produced from searching six publicly accessible websites (*Google Search; Google Scholar; The Australian online; The Age online; The Herald online* and *State Library of Victoria*). Site selection was informed by the following question: As a Melbournian, if I were to seek publicly available information about 'Generation Y' where might I look? That is, we chose to replicate an information search using common publicly accessible sources as a measure of the impact of sociology in this domain. Searches were conducted using the sites own search function and in all cases the search term "Generation Y" was employed. No further limitations were applied.

Data collection/capture was undertaken in the two weeks from May 25th to June 5th 2009.

These searches produced 60 items. Searches which lead to electronic documents or a webpage were ‘captured’ (51 in total) and searches which lead to books were noted and the books themselves located (9 in total). Subsequent inspection of these results revealed 2 non-Generation Y results and 3 held insufficient content for analysis. Each of these 5 items were electronic sources and were discounted from the analysis. Therefore, 55 items were used for the analysis.

Of the 55 sources captured in this snapshot of the ‘Generation Y’ discourse, most were ‘media sources’ (newspaper articles, blogs, and videos), whilst others were ‘books’, ‘research reports’ and a small number of ‘academic peer-reviewed sources’.

Table 1: Overview of search results

Publicly available websites searched	Media sources	Book	Research Report	Academic/peer reviewed sources
Google (n=10)	8	1	1	-
Google Scholar (n=6)	1	1	1	3
The Age (n=10)	10	-	-	-
The Australian (n=10)	10	-	-	-
The Herald Sun (n=9)	9	-	-	-
State Library of Victoria – Main Catalogue (n=10)	-	7	3	-
Total (n=55)	38	9	5	3

The analysis of the electronic items was undertaken using printed versions of the material and for the books a analysis of their introductory and concluding chapters.

Findings

Coding and classification of the 55 sources, in response to the questions underpinning the research were revealing. The categories that emerged through thematic analysis of ‘purpose’, ‘audience’ and ‘authorship’ are presented below.

What appears to be the ‘purpose’ of this literature?

Five themes emerged from analyzing the apparent purpose of this literature. The largest proportion of sources were categorised as ‘descriptive’. These sources provided descriptions of the characteristics of this cohort and the social issues of greatest concern to them. It was observed that much of this literature was concerned with constructing and reconstructing the meanings underpinning the label. Two such sources were: Getler (2009:[1]) who began their *Age* article with: ‘The Facebook generation always got what it wanted’, and Lazarevic and Petrovic- Lazarevic (2007:2) who described ‘Generation Y’ as ‘very well educated and very self-assured’. The second largest category included those sources which aimed to provide advice for managing this cohort. These sources positioned ‘Generation Y’ as a group requiring specific forms of management. For example, Patterson (2007:[2]) reported that: ‘Generation Y workers fall into two distinct groups. They either want their work to "make a difference" or feel work "makes no difference" at all’.

Table 2: Apparent purpose

Search	Descriptions	Advice for managing	Response to discourse	Advice for Generation Y	Mixed
Google (n=10)	5	3	-	-	2
Google Scholar (n=6)	2	4	-	-	-
The Age (n=10)	6	1	3	-	-
The Australian (n=10)	3	2	2	3	-
The Herald Sun (n=9)	6	-	1	2	-
State Library of Victoria (n=10)	6	2	1	1	-
Total (n=55)	28	12	7	6	2

This literature also contained responses to the ‘Generation Y’ discourse (3 of these were blogs and 4 were newspaper articles). Two examples of such responses were ‘this book isn’t the answer to generational inequity – you are’ (Heath 2006:210) and Lallo’s (2009:[3]) statement: ‘While sexism, racism and homophobia are frowned upon, it seems it is OK to denigrate 4.5 million Australians because they’re young’.

Advice for members of ‘Generation Y’ was also provided in this literature. Notably, all sources within this category were related to finance; many with reference to the current economic climate. Salt (2008:[1]) offered this advice for members of this cohort: ‘The lesson is that workplace concepts, such as sacrifice and perseverance, are more important than concerns about engagement and the daily need for validation’.

The ‘mixed’ category comprised only two sources. One was a list of blogs and the other a list of videos available via google and as such their purpose was not clearly definable.

Who appears to be its audience?

We then examined the apparent audience for each of the sources. A total of six categories were identified. The largest proportion of literature appeared to be targeted at a ‘general’ audience. This suggests that scholarship in this area is being produced for a broad range of readers/viewers which creates the potential for many people to engage with these discourses.

Table 3: Apparent audience

Search	Marketers	General	Employers	Generation Y	Educationalists & Parents	Government
Google (n=10)	1	6	2	-	1	-
Google Scholar (n=8)	2	1	1	-	2	-
The Age (n=10)	1	6	2	1	-	-
The Australian (n=10)	-	4	1	4	1	-
The Herald Sun (n=9)	-	9	-	-	-	-
State Library of Victoria (n=10)	2	4	1	1	1	1
Total (n=55)	6	30	7	6	5	1

Where specific audiences were apparent these included ‘employers’, ‘marketers’, ‘educationalists and parents’ and a single source to ‘government’. We note that such groups generally observe relationships of responsibility or dependency with members of this cohort. Accordingly, when material about this generation is pitched at a particular group, it seems that those who have a stake in ‘managing’ them are of greatest importance. Such proportions of writing to these audiences suggests that ‘Generation Y’ are sufficiently ‘different’ to previous cohorts of young people that specific instruction is required for those who wish to engage with them successfully. ‘Generation Y’ themselves were found to be the audience for only small proportion of this material. This suggested that, in general, this discursive process is not conversational.

Who are the prominent voices in this scholarship?

There were five authors whose scholarship appeared more than once across the sample and as such stand as ‘prominent voices’.

Table 4: Prominent voices

Author	Title	Website	Source Type
Martin, C.A.	(2001) ‘Managing Generation Y: Global Citizens Born in the Late Seventies and Early Eighties’.	Google	Book
	(2004) ‘Sports celebrity influence on the behavioural intentions of Generation Y’.	Google Scholar	Academic peer-reviewed source
Sheahan, P	(n.d.) ‘Understanding Generation Y’.	Google	Media source
	(2005) ‘Generation Y: Thriving and surviving with Generation Y at work’.	Google Scholar	Book
Mitchell, H.	(2009) ‘Advice for the Gen Y brigade: heads down bums up’.	The Age	Media source
	(2009) ‘Cocky and cosseted gen Y not so youthful anymore but still annoying’.	The Age	Media source
Salt, B.	(2009) ‘GFC tops clear and present dangers’.	The Australian	Media source
	(2008) ‘Parasites or kids who see a good thing’.	The Australian	Media source
	(2009) ‘Over 64s buck trend and prove real survivors’.	The Australian	Media source
	(2008) ‘Gen Y learns a recession lesson’.	The Australian	Media source
Mason, M, Singleton, A. Webber, R.	(2007) ‘The spirit of Generation Y: young peoples spirituality in a changing Australia’.	State Library of Victoria	Book
	(n.d.) ‘The spirit of generation y: young peoples spirituality in a changing Australia’.	Google	Research report

It is notable that Bernard Salt, Peter Sheahan and Harold Mitchell each have a background in business and marketing. The remaining authors each have academic backgrounds: Carolyn Martin in English and Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and Ruth Webber in sociology.

Discussion/conclusions

Descriptions of 'Generation Y' being 'frustrating', 'confusing', 'disinterested, disloyal, disrespected and self-centered' (McQueen, 2008:7), as being 'in fast-forward with self-esteem on steroids' (Tulgan 2009:6), and as 'really annoying their bosses...[and] confident to the point of being cocky' (Mitchell 2009:[1]) dominate publicly accessible scholarship. Such discursive representations are indicative of Mannheim's (1952) 'actual generation' and give little credence to the notion of 'generational unit'. These discourses provide a rather narrow, though universal, construction of what it means to have been born to this cohort.

This study has revealed that the publicly accessible discourses about 'Generation Y' are informed primarily by 'media sources' such as newspaper articles and to lesser extents blogs and videos and that peer-reviewed scholarship is sparse. This means that those who seek information about 'Generation Y' from publicly accessible sources will develop their understandings about this cohort from less robustly informed sources than youth researchers may desire. The distinct lack of academic voices is of concern and the silence from within the sociological discipline is notable. Whilst sociologists must decide whether this field can and should be surrendered to those informed by their business and/or marketing backgrounds; for those accessing publicly accessible information this decision is out of their hands and as such the questions raised by this paper are important.

Much of the 'Generation Y' discourse is descriptive and aimed at informing a general audience. Alongside this work there is also scholarship which seeks to provide instruction on managing this apparently 'different' generation. The scholarship routinely suggests that this cohort is a problem and that they require management. This small study raises many more questions than it in fact answers. What are the

imperatives which drive this discourse? What are the impacts of these discursive constructions on members of the cohort? Who is excluded in these narrow constructions of ‘Generation Y’? Primarily though, we wonder why sociological voices are absent from publicly accessible discourses of ‘Generation Y’ and what the implications of this might be for those outside of the academe.

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