
Generational Perspectives in the Workplace: Interpreting the Discourses That Constitute Women's Struggle to Balance Work and Life

Journal of Business Communication

49(4) 332–356

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Business Communication

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DOI: 10.1177/0021943612456037

<http://jbc.sagepub.com>

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Abstract

Employing the feminist interpretive focus group method, findings in this study demonstrate how different generational perspectives of professional women, socialized at different periods of time, intersect in the current workforce to explain conflict around work and life. In particular, the authors found conflict centers around two well-documented discourses thematic in their focus groups, which organize the way people think about work—paying one's dues and face-time. Using interpretive focus groups to draw out the different interpretive frames of the generations, this study deconstructs the interpretations, providing a hopeful place to begin a theoretical and practical conversation that bridges the different perspectives of women across generations as they negotiate work and life. Findings have implications for organizational, work/life, and qualitative communication studies.

Keywords

critical discourse studies, feminism, organizational communication, qualitative

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For the first time in modern society, four distinct generations of people interact in the workforce, changing the way we think about balancing work and life (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). An article about a national law firm in the entrepreneurial magazine, *Fast Company*, underscores the challenges:

Young lawyers were once willing to sacrifice the next 10 years of their lives chained to a desk in the law library, working 100-hour weeks, for the chance to make partner. But increasingly, law school graduates want work/life balance, flexible schedules, and philanthropic work. They couldn't care less about partnership. (Sacks, 2006, para. 12)

The complex struggle over work/life balance spans all generations in today's workforce (Fishbein, 2008). For example, in an article in *The New York Times*, Gross (2006) argued, "Corporate America scrambles to help the soaring number of Boomers, mostly working women, whose obligation to frail, elderly parents results in absenteeism, workday distractions or stress-related health problems" (para. 3). Accordingly, today's workforce, especially women, balance more than complicated family issues; they negotiate work and travel, volunteer work, education, and other nonfamily activities essential for a rich and fulfilling life (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006). C. A. Martin and Tulgan argued that balancing work and life is a major source of intergenerational conflict in the workplace, offering a compelling reason for studying intergenerational work/life conflict.

Because women experience work/life conflict so poignantly (Parker, 2011), this study focuses on how women from different generations understand it. In particular, we utilized the feminist methodology of interpretive focus groups (IFGs; Leavy, 2007) to generate the interpretive frames (Jorgenson, 2000) that women from different generations use as they negotiate work and life.

Findings in this study demonstrate how different generational perspectives, socialized at different periods of time, intersect in the current workforce to explain perceived conflict around work/life balance. In particular we found perceived conflict was embedded in two enduring discourses that organize the way we think about work—paying your dues and face-time. Highlighting these discourses support their prominence in work/life literature (see also Kirby, Golden, Medved, Jorgenson, & Buzzanell, 2003; Perlow, 1997). Additionally, this essay extends this research by identifying how these discourses were interpreted by professional women in different generational cohorts (Inglehart, 1977). We argue that the differences in the ways distinct generations of women interpret these discourses explain conflict and open a hopeful space for productive dialogue. We believe our findings disrupt current thinking in life cycle research that suggests women's needs of the workplace are tied to their stage in life by offering generational cohort theory as a more powerful construct affecting women's choices and desires.

This essay proceeds with a literature review of work/life and generational research. We continue with a detailed explication of the IFG method and the findings of our

project. Our study demonstrates this feminist method is one that bridges the researcher and participant roles in the analysis process. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the contribution this empirical study makes to organizational communication, work/life research, and research methods for communication scholars interested in feminist practices.

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Literature Review

We begin with a brief discussion of the gendered workplace, providing the background for studying women's experiences in work/life contexts. Understanding the workplace as gendered provides an important backdrop for interpreting the attitudes of women that differ generationally. Within the context of a gendered workplace, we next examine the literatures that frame our study—work/life conflict scholarship and research on generational differences, which comprise the bulk of the literature review. We add that generation is an influential characteristic of women's experience or standpoint. We illuminate the gap in understanding work/life issues through the distinct lenses of the various generations, which some scholars find are at the heart of conflict in the workplace. Finally, we introduce interpretive frames as a method for understanding the discourses that surround work/life conflict.

The Gendered Workplace

In recent decades, scholars have argued the workplace is a gendered construction. This concept has been developed in social linguistic and discourse analytic work by identifying the micro practices of talk that are gendered as feminine or masculine, such as talk that is viewed as polite and/or talk that enriches relationships. Fletcher (1999) and Holmes and Marra (2004) refer to this talk, usually associated as feminine, as relational practice. Work in this area is also careful to contextualize talk as taking place in specific communities of practice that are also gendered, such as Holmes and Stubbe's (2003) comparisons of humor in blue-collar and white-collar work contexts. However, the present study draws from the work of organizational communication scholars who discuss the gendered workplace in terms of its meso- (workplace norms and policies) and macro-level (societal and cultural norms) structures, such as the institutionalized discourses and embedded structures that privilege men.

Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) claimed an organization is "fundamentally gendered" when gender not only constitutes organizing but is also marked by a struggle over meanings, in which case certain meanings privilege particular interests (pp. xiv-xv). According to Kirby et al. (2003), structures (norms and policies) of the gendered workplace still prioritize work over family; men's work and careers still take precedence

over women's work and careers; and work time and projects still take precedence over family time and events (see also Jorgenson, 2000). These workplace practices traditionally privilege men and work and subordinate life and family (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005). Indeed, many employers describe a committed worker as someone who maintains a physical presence at work, demonstrated by face-time and prioritizing work over family and other life experiences (Kirby et al., 2003). Kirby et al. argued that face-time is symbolic of commitment and productivity despite increasing evidence that individuals are more productive when given discretion over their work hours and locations. Without this visible commitment, workers risk negative evaluations and promotional consequences (Kirby et al., 2003; Perlow, 1997).

Although managers profess the importance of balancing work and life, their emphasis on deadlines and modeling of workaholic behavior diminishes the emphasis on life experiences (Kirby et al., 2003). For example, a study conducted by the Ford Foundation, found employees who used such benefits as flextime, job-sharing, telecommuting, and part-time work suffered career consequences despite being typically more efficient and productive than their colleagues (Rapoport & Bailyn, 1996; see also Perlow, 1997). These practices have particular consequences for women who encounter work norms that perpetuate masculine notions of success (Elmore, 2009; Jorgenson, 2000). In the realm of work/life balance, these practices "fundamentally privilege" men, making it especially important to study the work life challenges that women face. Accordingly, we next discuss work/life conflict in the context of a fundamentally gendered workplace.

Work/Life Conflict

Research by communication scholars that initially emphasized work and family has evolved to include issues germane to work and life. "Conflicts and initiatives that used to be framed as work/family have in recent years been recast as work/life initiatives in recognition of the home and personal pressures that may conflict with work for all employees" (Kirby, Wieland, & McBride, 2006, p. 327; see also Golden, Kirby, & Jorgenson, 2006; Kirby et al., 2003). Kirby et al. (2006) lay out an extensive research review and agenda regarding the literature on work/life conflict. They conceive conflict as time based (i.e., excessive work hours), strain based (i.e., role stressors that induce physical or psychological pain), and behavior based (i.e., parenting vs. managerial styles). The authors further organize the literature in terms of the antecedents to work/life conflict, which range from conflict such as work-related factors (i.e., shifts and overtime) to life-related conflicts (i.e., dependent children) to personal characteristics (i.e., personality traits; see Kirby et al., 2006, for an extensive review). In their discussion of antecedents, Kirby et al. argue life-related factors, such as the impact of the developmental stage of a family on work/life conflict, are reflective of the life cycle approach. The life cycle approach acknowledges that conflict will increase with the onset of life changes such as marriage and children and will decrease as the youngest child ages (e.g., Eckman, 2002).

A Generational Perspective

Building on the life cycle approach, a generational approach to work/life conflict attends to the differences among women at different stages of their careers. Each generation brings to the work environment a different perspective grounded in unique demographic, economic, and social experiences that ultimately influence the divergent ways each define success and security (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Zemke et al., 2000). According to C. A. Martin and Tulgan (2006) and Zemke et al. (2000), generational differences result in friction and affect job satisfaction, retention, and ultimately productivity. Furthermore, the generation gap contributes to subtle mistrust and communication breakdowns between coworkers, preventing effective teamwork and collaboration (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006).

Peter C. Brinckerhoff (2007), a professor and consultant who studies generational influences in nonprofits, postulated that work/life balance is a key focal point of intergenerational conflict. In other evidence of conflict in the workplace surrounding perceived contrasting views about work and life, the Society for Human Resources Management survey found conflict regarding acceptable work hours was the most common negative result of an intergenerational workforce (Miller, 2004). In particular, some aging workers now desire work/life balance but struggle to admit their new needs because, according to scholars, their generation invented the 60-hour workweek (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Zemke et al., 2000). And younger employees' preference for more time for their personal lives leads to complaints by older workers about their younger colleagues' unwillingness to work hard (Miller, 2004).

Building on the life cycle approach, a generational approach to work/life conflict attends to the differences among women at different stages of their careers.

Although experts debate the labels and time spans that define the generations—Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X (Gen X), and Generation Y (Gen Y), they are uniquely socially and historically situated and thus interact in the workplace in distinct ways. According to C. A. Martin and Tulgan (2006), Traditionalists (born before the end of World War II), who currently construct 7% of the workforce, value self-sacrifice and conformity. Traditionalists' common dreams include dependable employment, marriage, family, and owning their own home, in which case nine-to-five workdays with occasional overtime constitute work/life balance (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Zemke et al., 2000). Traditionalists are known for holding strong family values; however, they are likely to separate work from leisure time, and therefore they notice injustice in the workplace when work infringes on their personal time (Coleman, Gallagher & Fiorito, 2005).

The largest generation—the Boomers—born between 1946 and 1964, is said to expect to live the good life, and they have worked long hours to attain it (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Zemke et al., 2000). According to C. A. Martin and Tulgan (2006), this group, which comprises 41% of the workforce, invented the supermom role, in

which women experience it all—a good career and a family. However, the authors claim that as Boomers mature, their focus shifts to more quality time with family, caring for their parents, and an interest in experiences rather than material goods. Additionally, after experiencing years of a difficult work pace, some Boomers enjoy simplified lives by working more efficiently with technology, which facilitates a more balanced lifestyle with more free time (Cordeniz, 2002).

Born between 1965 and 1977, Gen X was the first to verbalize the desire for work/life balance at the beginning of their careers (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006). According to C. A. Martin and Tulgan (2006), the group, which comprises 29.5% of the workforce, values quality of life and views work as just one part of their lives. The authors argue that Gen X appreciates time more than money and their lifestyles and buying habits reflect it. This mind-set fuels a growing trend among Gen X women to challenge the supermom role by giving up high-powered careers or cutting back on work hours at the peak of career advancement in order to raise their children (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Zemke et al., 2000). Brenton Faber (2001), a generational ethics scholar, argued that Gen Xers value flexibility and recreational pursuits more than they value career success, promotions, and transfers. He claimed this generation sees little value in the material possessions for which their parents worked. Jayson (2006) claimed that Gen X's desire for work/life balance is often at odds with the values of the corporate world.

Those born between 1978 and 1990 now have a significant presence (22%) in the workforce (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006). Gen Y workers value social responsibility, which translates into volunteerism and careful selection of the organizations for which they work (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006). According to Armour (2005), the youngest workers are more interested in making their jobs accommodate their personal lives. They want jobs with flexibility, telecommuting options, and the ability to go part-time or leave the workforce temporarily while they further their education or volunteer their time (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Zemke et al., 2000).

Generational cohort theory (Inglehart, 1977) explains why we would expect to see differences across generations. The theory is based on assumptions about socialization processes and scarcity theory (Dou, Wang, & Zhou, 2006). Dou et al. explain,

Generations growing up during periods of socioeconomic insecurity (e.g., social upheaval) learn survival skills (e.g., economic determinism, rationality). On the other hand, generations growing up during periods of socioeconomic security learn postmodernistic values. Consequently, a nation's history can reflect the differences in values and attitudes across its generational cohorts (Conger, 1997; Rogler, 2002). (p. 102)

A difference in values and attitudes in the workplace among different generational cohorts of working women reflects “that cohorts tend to place the greatest subjective value on the socioeconomic resources that were in short supply in their youth” (Dou et al., 2006, p. 102) or, in this case, in the early socialization years of their working

experience. Thus, generational cohort theory explicates the relationship working women have to the changing social and economic conditions of work.

Much of what we know about intergenerational difference in the workplace has been generated by business and sociology scholars (e.g., Brinckerhoff, 2007; Coleman Gallagher & Fiorito, 2005; Cordeniz, 2002; Durkin, 2008; Eisner, 2005; Faber, 2001; C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006; Twenge, 2006; Zemke, et al., 2000). Current intergenerational communication studies emphasize communication between younger and older generations in social and relational contexts, such as doctors and patients and elderly parents and adult children (e.g., Harwood, 1998; McCann, Dailey, Giles, & Ota, 2005; Williams & Giles, 1996; Williams & Ota, 1997). However, little empirical work has integrated intergenerational communication and work/life issues (for an exception, see McCann & Giles, 2006). This study attends to this gap by illuminating the discourses that constitute how women from different generational cohorts interpret and navigate work/life issues in the workplace.

Discourse and Interpretive Frames

A discursive lens elucidates how particular meanings, values, and attitudes are communicatively constituted (J. Martin, 1990; Medved & Kirby, 2005). Discourse is often understood as little “d” discourse—the micro practices of everyday talk—and big “D” discourse—the organizing ideologies that order our world (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). We adopt Ashcraft and Mumby’s (2004) position that “discourse—in all its forms—does ideological work that shapes our relationships to the world in ways that are not always apparent to us” (p. xviii). In particular, this study examines the discourses that surround work/life conflict by foregrounding the interpretive frames that are evoked by different generations of women. Jorgenson’s (2000) work on interpretive frames explains how one particular meaning is chosen over another (see also Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Jorgenson (2000) claimed a frame perspective facilitates examination of the ways in which people access power as they construct their experience. We approach these questions in the spirit of feminist standpoint research (Harding, 1991), which assumes difference (in this case generational difference) constitutes socially situated perspectives around work/life issues for women. Accordingly, we ask,

Research Question 1: What are the broader discourses that constitute intergenerational conflict around work/life balance for professional women?

Research Question 2: What are the interpretive frames that professional women use to understand these discourses consistent with their generational experience?

Method

This study employed IFGs, which reflect the principles of feminist participatory theory (Leavy, 2007). According to Leavy, interpretive focus groups (IFGs) participate

in the analysis process of previously collected data on a subject matter with which the group members are intimately familiar. They are most frequently combined with prior observations, interviews, and surveys. The author explains this new methodological qualitative approach gathers community members who live or work in the same overall socioeconomic condition as do the people “under study” to assist in data analysis (e.g., Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). Leavy (2007) explains that participants of IFGs engage in unraveling the meanings behind the forces that affect their everyday lives. This form of qualitative inquiry seeks experiences and perspectives with a sincere desire for mutual learning generated from the focus group participants’ interpretations and descriptions.

Because we were studying women and work/life issues, we wanted a method that honored the feminist principles of research (for reviews, see Ashcraft, 2005; Trethewey, 1997). IFGs shift power from the researcher, constituting collaboration as a core element of the research process. Researchers bring community members into the process as “experts,” who thus participate in the creation of new knowledge (Leavy, 2007, p. 181). According to Leavy, the IFG method allows the researcher to gain data, such as attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences, from a range of respondents at once and generate theory.

Participant Selection

According to Leavy (2007), and based on the feminist principles of IFGs, researchers are encouraged to create focus groups composed of homogeneous participants; group members’ similarities create a safe communicative environment. We chose to study professional working women because, as the preceding discussion indicates, many of the challenges associated with negotiating work and life are particularly felt by women. The category working women includes a variety of women’s experiences, from single mother, to two-parent families who are struggling financially, to professional women who choose to work for reasons other than money. Our study focused on professional women who chose to work outside of the home. Although there is a legitimate case to be made for studying a less privileged group, we believe that the sheer number of women who work outside the home warrants study of all women’s experiences. Indeed, the U.S. Census Bureau (2007) reported that of the nation’s 60.5 million married-couple families, dual-worker couples reached 53.4% in 2007. Additionally, we are both professional women, married with children trying to manage work and life responsibilities. Although we both are technically born into the Gen X cohort, Linda self-identifies as a “cusper,” hovering between two generations because she believes she shares many of the values of the Boomer generation. Thus, originating much from our own standpoints, and using the above criteria, we selected career women from dual-career families who chose to work outside the home.

According to Leavy (2007), segmentation maximizes the benefits of homogeneity while building a comparative dimension into a project. Segmentation allows for multiple focus groups in which case each group is composed of similar members yet

Table 1. Gen X/Y Interpretive Focus Group

Pseudonym	Age (Years)	Education Level	Title	Industry
Ann	31	Jurist doctorate	Vice president	Consumer products
Donna	34	Jurist doctorate	Manager	Professional services
Melissa	39	Postgraduate	Psychologist	Health care
Pam	29	Bachelor	Manager	Professional services
Nan	26	Master of science	Manager	Health care
Susie	37	Jurist doctorate	Officer	Professional services
Alexandra	31	Master of science	Translator	Professional services

differences exist among the groups. This technique allows feminist researchers to compare how groups experience a range of topics and at the same time minimizes power imbalances (Leavy, 2007). Therefore, we divided the women into two focus groups. One group consisted of women belonging to Gen X and Gen Y (because of their overlap in their approach to work/life issues) and the other included Boomers.¹ Participants were recruited via convenience sampling by first inviting those we knew whose life experiences matched the criteria for the study. In addition, in the spirit of snowball sampling, participants were encouraged to bring a guest (who met the criteria) who was not known to the researchers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Although 30 women were invited in total, the Gen X/Y group was composed of 7 and the Boomer group was composed of 8 participants. (Ironically, 15 women declined to participate due to conflicts involving work/life issues). Both focus groups were held for 2 hours in the home of the first author. The setting was casual-professional, taking place in the dining room and accompanied by a meal.

The first IFG included five women from Gen X and two from Gen Y, ranging in age from 26 to 39 years (see Table 1). Two of the Gen X women were cuspers at the age of 31. Four participants held advanced degrees, two were enrolled in graduate school, and one had a bachelor's degree. In addition, all women were White and middle-upper class. They represented various occupations, including a psychiatrist, a translator, a lawyer, and various managers from different industries, including law, insurance, non-profit, finance, and sports apparel. Four participants cared for young children.

Segmentation allows for multiple focus groups in which case each group is composed of similar members yet differences exist among the groups.

The Boomer IFG included eight women ranging in age from 44 to 60 years (Table 2). Two women held advanced degrees and the remaining six had bachelor's degrees. All of the Boomer women had children and two cared for elderly parents. The women were White and middle-upper class and represented a variety of occupations, including a professor, an accountant, a marketer, an administrator, a business owner, and a physical therapist.

Table 2. Boomer Interpretive Focus Group

Pseudonym	Age (Years)	Education Level	Title	Industry
Mary	60	PhD	Professor	Higher education
Karen	58	BS Business	Business owner	Health care
Bonnie	51	Bachelor's level	Chief operating officer	Professional services
Darcy	52	Bachelor's level	Physical therapist	Health care
Natalie	44	MBA	Certified public accountant	Professional services
Mel	48	Bachelor's level	Director	Professional services
Lisa	60	Bachelor's level	Certified public accountant	Professional services
Connie	47	Bachelor's level	Administrative associate	Consumer products

Table 3. Stage I Data Sets

Name	Generation	Education Level	Title	Industry	Data Description
Rick	Boomer	Jurist doctorate	Partner	Professional services	Study 1: Interviews, observation, field notes
Kristin	Gen X	Jurist doctorate	Associate	Professional services	Study 1: Interviews, observation, field notes
Colin	Gen X	Jurist doctorate	Associate	Professional services	Study 1: Interview
5 Professional women	Gen X	Jurist doctorates	Associates	Professional Services	Study 1: Observation field notes
10 Men and women (anonymous)	Gen Y	Bachelor's and master's level	Staff	Higher education	Study 2: 10-Question written survey

Note: Data represent two pilot research projects, over 2 years (qualitative project and quantitative survey). These data were made available to the participants in both interpretive focus groups.

Data Collection and Analysis

An advantage of the IFG method is the ability to build on smaller data sets that are previously collected (Table 3). Accordingly, focus group members in this study analyzed texts (transcripts and questionnaires) from two complete, but smaller, data sets that included ethnographic interviews, observations, and questionnaires collected in disparate but related studies regarding generational attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors

pertaining to work and life. (Data collected prior to the IFG were not limited to women's experiences.) Texts from these data were collected over the course of 2 years primarily in semester-long, institutional review board–approved studies. We refer to these data as Stage 1 data because they were collected prior to conducting the IFGs.²

IFGs radiate a “feminist-infused” evolving approach, not a precise replication of steps or a rigid rendition of questions (Leavy, 2007). Accordingly, we asked the participants to identify a data excerpt from the Stage 1 texts to begin the focus group analysis. The Gen X/Y group, held first, selected a quote made by a male Boomer in the Stage 1 interview data, which launched the 2-hour discussion.³ Building on the Gen X/Y group experience, the Boomer IFG chose to begin with the same statement. In keeping with feminist principles, participants determined the flow of the conversation, at times reading other excerpts from the data sets to support their interpretive claims. Participants were encouraged to interpret all previously gathered data, which meant that the Boomer IFG, held later, also had the opportunity to respond to the themes identified by the Gen X/Y group. We refer to data (participant quotes) and analyses (participant-initiated themes, i.e., technological skill and entitlement) that emerged from the IFG process as Stage 2. We identify the origins of the data by indicating if it emerged in Stage 1 or Stage 2 throughout the findings section.

During the 2-hour focus groups, we traded roles as group facilitators and observed group responses. To capture all possible data and themes, we audiotaped, videotaped, took field notes, and used a flip chart during the IFGs. Writing themes that emerged from participant responses on flip charts and periodically reading the accumulating comments and themes provided an opportunity for IFG members to react, modify, and/or elaborate as the collaborative interpretation evolved.

In keeping with feminist principles, participants determined the flow of the conversation, at times reading other excerpts from the data sets to support their interpretive claims.

Building on the themes accumulated during the IFGs, during post-IFG analysis (Stage 3)⁴ we (the researchers) first organized data around the interpretive frames utilized by the different generational groups. We attended to both unified themes (i.e., themes about the gendered workplace) and disparate themes (i.e., different understandings of technology). Thus, at first we avoided resting on a single interpretation that explained approaches to work and life. Using all data sets and drawing particularly from the thematic categories elicited during the IFGs, we integrated themes along particular dimensions, seeking theoretical explanations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For example, we integrated the themes around technology and identity, two themes posited in the IFG, around the larger theme of face-time, employing a grounded theory method that led us to understand the findings as distinct interpretive frames (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kirby et al., 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). We found most of the themes elicited in the IFG process, such as entitlement, collapsed around two discursive

categories—paying your dues and face-time. Although IFG participants contributed the original themes during Stage 2, we organized and collapsed the themes outside of the IFG process in Stage 3.

Findings: Discourses and Interpretive Frames

This study identified different interpretations of two dominant discourses that reproduced the values of paying your dues and giving the organization face-time (Research Question 1). Discursive themes surrounding these workplace discourses reveal complex, and at times, disparate interpretive frames for understanding paying your dues and face-time that are embedded in social and historical contexts bound by generational experience.

The Discourse of Paying Your Dues

They [younger generations] can't expect to be paid \$200,000 and not put in the hours. If they want a different lifestyle with limited hours then they can work for a government agency. If they want to know what it means to work hard, then they need to go to New York. Fifty-sixty hours a week are nothing. (Rick,⁵ Boomer interview, Stage 1 data)

The comment above, made by Rick, a senior partner in a law firm, reproduces a larger discourse encapsulated in the cliché that one must pay their dues. Rick articulates that the younger generations want to be paid well but “not put in the hours.” The thematic discourse of paying your dues (i.e., “put in the hours”) is ubiquitous in literature and assumptions about the workplace in the United States. Indeed, in American companies, new employees are expected to pay their dues and experience what their employers did in their own first 5 to 10 working years (Zemke et al., 2000). According to Zemke et al., these early years may constitute nearly abusive behavior from managers, 70- and 80-hour workweeks, and no involvement in the running of the business. Historically, noncompliance was detrimental to a person's career (Perlow, 1997). Kirby (2000) argued that although managers have begun to profess the importance of balancing work and family, their emphasis on deadlines and their modeling of workaholic behavior diminish the emphasis on life.

Not surprisingly a tension surfaces in the workplace with the addition of Gen X and Y workers who seek improved accommodations to better balance work and life. Reacting explicitly to their Boomer employers and parents who worked long hours (C. A. Martin & Tulgan, 2006), we found participants from the younger generations confessed they did not want to work the long hours but conformed to the structure because they cared about the people with whom they worked. Kristin (Gen X interview, Stage 1 data) said, “I think working 55 hours a week is too much. You know, these people [Boomers] would think working 70 hours is probably about right. I am

working more than I want to, but I don't want to let anyone down." The IFG method revealed two interpretive frames for understanding the generational tension that surrounds the expectation that one must pay their dues.

Interpretive Frames for the Discourse of Paying Your Dues

The different IFGs settled to some degree on different interpretations of the discourse that constitutes pressure on the younger generations to first pay their dues before expecting rewards in the workplace (Research Question 2). Members of the Boomer IFG made sense of the younger generations' refusal to pay their dues as a result of entitlement. Some Boomers took responsibility for raising the younger generations to be entitled. In the Gen X/Y IFG, the women interpreted the discourse of paying one's dues as one that validated their predecessor's choices when it came to work/life balance.

Entitlement. Boomer workers in this study initially framed the younger generations' lack of desire to work long hours as an attitude of entitlement. Their expectations of the younger generation were embedded in the larger discourse of needing to pay your dues. For example, Natalie (Boomer IFG, Stage 2 data) said in reference to employment interviews she conducted,

Gen Xers ask, "What does this city have to offer me?" They seem more concerned about that, than the actual job you have to offer. They all expect to buy homes in wealthy suburbs. And I'm saying, "What are you doing? You should start with a ranch [style home]?" I think they think someone owes them.

Karen (Boomer IFG, Stage 2 data) led the concern that the work ethic of younger employees is different as they tend to come in late, take longer lunch breaks, and "turn 8:00 a.m. into 8ish." Mel (Boomer IFG, Stage 2 data) echoed this experience, sharing the story of her younger 25-year-old employee who typically arrived at the office later than Mel, even though Mel dropped off a toddler and an infant on her way to work. According to Mel, the younger employee expected more liberal work hours. Bonnie (Boomer, IFG, Stage 2 data) said, "Younger people just give themselves permission to come in whenever." In the same conversational thread, Darcy (Boomer, IFG, Stage 2 data) asked the group, "why do women in the generation behind us think they can [go in and out of the workplace] because I would say women in my generation didn't think they could?" She went on to say, "I paid 16 years of dues professionally before I could [choose my own hours]." Mel also shared a story about how she could work part-time after having her children, prompting Bonnie to say, "You could do that because you spent the time in the front of your career." The discussion that ensued in the Boomer IFG reinforced the themes of entitlement and the need for younger generations to pay their dues before benefitting from flexible or part-time work hours.

However, Gen X IFG group members viewed the work ethic differently. Susie took particular offense to one of the comments included from the data set in which Rick

(Boomer interview, Stage 1 data) claimed younger generations needed to be more appreciative of their jobs and salaries. Susie asked, “What do the Boomers want us to appreciate—money and prestige? If they really want us to appreciate them, they need to show us some respect.” Susie’s response was typical of comments from members of both IFGs who acknowledged the younger generations did not care as much about money and prestige at the cost of time with their families and the ability to balance work and life. Yet, although *entitlement* was one of the first themes that surfaced in the Boomer IFG, when the word was read back to the Boomer focus group participants, they bristled, not wanting to rest fully on this interpretation.

Validation. The IFG method evoked another interpretation for the prevalence of a discourse of paying one’s dues, that is, validation. Donna (Gen X/Y IFG, Stage 2 data) explained, “It must be hard to be a Boomer. None of us have had the values we were brought up with completely challenged.” Accordingly, participants in the Gen X/Y IFG initiated the explanation that Boomers’ willingness to reproduce the discourse of paying your dues, actually may be less about the younger generations’ entitled attitudes and more about embracing an interpretation that validates Boomer life choices.

Participants in the Gen X/Y IFG surmised that for the workaholic Boomers to acknowledge another way of working would call into question a lifetime of choices regarding their family and other life experiences. Indeed, in an interview with Rick (Boomer, Stage 1 data) captured in the original data sets, he admitted he did not like it when young professionals say they want to spend more time with their family. He said, “It feels like a slap in the face” and confessed it was embarrassing to him that people think he did not spend time or want to spend time with his kids. Donna (Gen X/Y IFG, Stage 2 data), interpreting Rick’s comment (Boomer, Stage 1 data) said,

There is a sense of expectations being different and putting the mirror up to yourself (. . .), and on some level if it makes you feel bad in any way about the choices you made when you were younger, then you might lash out against the new generation that’s not making the same choices as you did.

Rejecting the discourse of paying your dues challenges Rick to question the decisions he made to work long hours and tolerate absences from his family and to question the necessity of his sense of duty. In response to a question about wanting to work less Rick said,

I think if I was just to say that I’m not going to do anything for the management of the [organization], I might be able to cut back some of that time and not have all of it fill up with just [typical] work. But I’m just not willing to do that, and I don’t think that would be the right thing . . . that’s just not consistent with my sense of responsibility. (Stage 1 Data)

Reproducing the discourse of paying your dues works to validate Boomers’ decisions regarding their own work/life challenges. For example, Natalie (Boomer IFG, Stage 2 data) said,

I waited until my children were older. You make choices. My younger son just left home, so I can work late or go home early. I have no boundaries. You make adjustments with young children with what you're comfortable with. When I interview younger people I ask them, "When you have kids what is your plan?" And they answer whichever one of us [married couple] is further along in their career will stay home. My generation didn't talk that way.

The discourses of paying your dues, and the associated interpretive frame that younger generations are entitled, ratify the decisions Natalie and Rick made. The frame works to define the context in which Rick, Natalie, Mary, and the other Boomer IFG participants made the right decisions for their children, careers, and/or marriages. They paid their dues, and under this premise they did the right thing.

Discourse of Face-Time

The secretary of a young female lawyer said, "I am worried about Kristin. She is working until 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning and waking up at 5:30 to respond to e-mail. She tries to rest at home before coming into the office and then stays late." Moments later, Rick, a senior partner in Kristin's firm, stepped outside his office and sarcastically complained about Kristin's lack of visibility. "It would be nice to see her during working hours. Do we know when she plans to come in?" (field notes, Stage 1 data).

The excerpt above illustrates another tension-riddled discourse across generations represented in the IFGs—that of the importance of face-time (Research Question 1). Historically, employers placed a greater premium on face-time and the number of hours worked as an indication of worker productivity rather than on actual productivity (Kirby et al., 2006; Perlow, 1997; Rapoport & Bailyn, 1996). Not surprisingly, among our participants, Boomers expected younger generations to log more face-time in the workplace, while Gen X and Gen Y women challenged traditional expectations of face-time. Participants in the Boomer IFG echoed these sentiments expressed by Mel (Boomer IFG, Stage 2 data): "I notice with younger people that they give themselves permission to come in late. It's hard to work on a team when you're not there."

Interpretive Frames for the Discourse of Face-Time

The discourse of face-time is better understood through three interpretive frames that surfaced as themes in the IFGs—a technological skill frame, face-time as product, and face-time as relationship. These disparate interpretations explicate the potential conflict around face-time (Research Question 2).

Technological adroitness. A partial explanation for the perceived generational conflict associated with face-time rests in disparate skill levels with the technology that facilitates working away from the organization. Accordingly, participants' understandings of face-time are filtered through their understandings of new technologies. IFG participants across both groups and multiple generations valued technology and

face-time, demonstrating appreciation for a diverse set of communication skills. For example, a Gen Y respondent wrote on a questionnaire (Stage 1 data), “I hate voice mail. E-mail is okay. Meetings are fine if there is a clear agenda and timeline. . . . I prefer face-to-face because you get more done.” While this Gen Y participant expressed a preference for face-time, it would similarly be impossible to claim the generation that produced Steve Jobs and Bill Gates does not embrace technology. However, both IFG groups noted differences in approaches to technology as a theme that distinguished the generations. Not surprisingly, Gen Y has been described as the most technically literate generation, with preferences toward the use of technology (Eisner, 2005; Wolberg & Pokrywczynski, 2001).

Questions about technology as a replacement for face-time surfaced in conversations by and about Boomers. For example, Mary (Boomer IFG, Stage 2 data) said, regarding her employees who work at home: “What do they do? How do I know they are working?” Donna (Gen X/Gen Y IFG, Stage 2 data) claimed, “ Boomers [at my work] have discomfort with remote access, but they are coming along and seeing how much work can be done.” Contrarily, the discourse of participants from the younger generations framed technology as an accomplice to working away from the office. Pam (Gen X/Y IFG, Stage 2 data) explained,

Many of us access networks remotely, but one or two Boomers in the office don't know how to do that . . . they don't know how to use technology such as thinking with your fingertips so they continue to use Dictaphones.

Although this experience was not consistent across all participants—some Boomers were very adept at technology and some Gen X and Gen Y participants did not notice differences across the generations—both groups acknowledged tension regarding technology and face-time, especially when a lack of understanding of the technology was apparent, primarily in the Boomer generation. The tension is further explained with the generational distinctions of how face-time is interpreted.

Face-time as product oriented. Although all generations participating in the IFGs admitted the value and necessity of face-time, especially when dealing with clients, discussion also revealed distinct generational interpretations of face-time. The discourse of Gen X/Y participants framed face-time in terms of accomplishing a particular product or project. Nan (Gen X/Y IFG, Stage 2 data) explained, “The work is the work. Leaving doesn't change it getting done, just when it gets done. And it will get done.” Maggie (Gen X/Y IFG, Stage 2 data) and Ann (Gen X/Y IFG, Stage 2 data) noted conflicts over face-time in Boomer-led organizations. Ann said, “I'm working with a Boomer who is an absolute workaholic but he's learning, getting it, the technological advances, you can tell there is some discomfort with this remote workforce . . . You can see his struggle with that.” The Gen X/Y group surmised Boomers focused too heavily on face-time as opposed to whether the project was complete. Indeed, Karen (Boomer IFG, Stage 2 data) said, referring to the younger generations, “There is a whole change of responsibility in the work force. Job starts at 8:00 people come in

at 8:15. It has an ish on it.” Initially, the Gen X/Y IFG (Stage 2 data) interpreted Boomers’ desire for face-time as a lack of trust. However, a benefit of the IFG format is the ability for the participants to discursively negotiate more nuanced and cognizant interpretations of interaction. Such was the case, when Gen X/Y IFG participants suggested face-time is also about relationships in the workplace.

Face-time as relationship oriented. Participants in the Gen X/Y IFG attributed generational differences of face-time to a difference in the sources in which the generations derive their identity and relationships. Ann (Gen X/Y IFG, Stage 2 data) asked the group,

Is your identity tied to your work? I remember when I started at the firm . . . I didn’t know where my degree was . . . and a partner came in and asked, “Where is your diploma? I thought you graduated at the top of your class? Why isn’t it framed and on your wall?” (. . .) I realized he identified with his education and career path and it was a huge component of who he was and I was proud of what I accomplished, but it didn’t define my sense of who I am.

Boomers’ long hours in the office no doubt result in identities and relationships that are strongly linked to their work. Indeed, discourse analysts have documented how small talk (something that can only be achieved through face-time) serves important relational practice and “is oriented to the face needs of others” (Goffman, 1974, cited in Mullany, 2006, p. 6). The work of Holmes (1995) and others (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Mullany, 2006) suggests that the relational needs associated with talk in the workplace may even be greater for women than they are for men. Mullany’s work also hints of generational distinctions:

We have also seen how those who have broken through the glass ceiling use small talk as an appropriate politeness strategy in departmental meetings to foster as sense of solidarity and collegiality amongst their team. On the basis of this evidence there is no doubt that small talk is an integral component of these workplace cultures. (p. 74)

While Mullany (2006) and Holmes and Stubbe’s (2003) work focus on the micro discourses that are often considered gendered and polite, their findings inform ours as having established the importance of small talk and polite conversations as a practice of women in the workplace, in particular the women featured in these studies who were established in leadership positions. Hence, face-time is one of the interactive processes constituting Boomers’ identities and relationships. Comments from Boomers indicated an identity linked to service and relationships. For example, Mary (Boomer IFG, Stage 2 data) said, “I feel I need to be available. I do think face-time is important.” Darcy (Boomer IFG) said, “I had a reputation and I had a permanent place.” Bonnie (Boomer IFG) said, “Work is important to me; it’s difficult to cut ties.” And Lisa (Boomer IFG) said, “At the end of the day, it’s what you’ve gotten done, but face-time does matter.”

When the discourse of face-time is interpreted as relationship oriented as opposed to product oriented, it is easy to see the potential for conflict in the workplace. Younger generations' rejection of traditional face-time could be misinterpreted as a rejection of how the Boomers came to define themselves and their relationships at work. Displayed in the field note excerpt at the beginning of this section, the older generation's emphasis on face-time at first glance can be interpreted as mistrust. But further deconstruction of the frames used to understand these discourses, through the IFG method, offers more complex analysis than stereotypes of entitled Gen Xers and distrustful Boomers. Analyses offered in these frames provide a starting place to bridge understanding among and between generations of women in the workplace. Another bridge apparent in these focus groups was that the generations were united in their journey to challenge a gendered workplace, albeit in very different ways.

Discussion: The Hegemonic Shadow of the Gendered Workplace and Role Models for Navigating It

A work ethic that reproduces paying your dues and face-time as ubiquitous discourses across generations is a decidedly hegemonic one. Both discourses have historically marginalized working women balancing life responsibilities (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Buzzanell, 1995; Kirby & Krone, 2002; J. Martin, 1990). Given this, we found it intriguing that the interpretive frames depicted in this study were admittedly shaped by the role models that helped socialize each generation into the workplace, paving the way for how they should interpret the discourses. Work role models, which surfaced as a theme in both IFGs, have shaped the different generations' interpretations of the discourses of paying your dues and face-time.

For women in the Boomer IFG, many of their working role models were men. They reacted to their own mother's choices, or lack of choices, sometimes by choosing a profession for the independence it would bring them. For example, Mary (Boomer IFG, Stage 2 data) said, "My mom was home with 12 kids and I didn't want that life. Plus my dad was a jerk and I knew I couldn't rely on man." Karen (Boomer IFG) acknowledged the influence of each generation's role models, "Younger generations watch us and we watched women first blaze the trail." Karen shared with the group that Boomers do not model balance—they work "long and hard." Karen expressed pleasure that younger generations of women could come "in and out" of the workforce. Yet women in the Boomer IFG did not have the luxury of questioning their work hours because they were sometimes the first professional women in their fields to work, as was Mary (Boomer IFG). Boomer IFG women reacted to a gendered workplace by breaking glass ceilings and adopting the masculine gendered work ethic that manifests in the memes of paying your dues and putting in face-time. Even though these Boomer women did not have wives at home to manage the family (as their male counterparts did, noted by Bonnie and Mary in the Boomer IFG), they made choices within the structure that was available to them. This is consistent with generational cohort theory, which illuminates scarce resources (e.g., the presence of women professionals in the workplace) shape values and attitudes.

Younger generations of women in our IFG also reacted to the gendered workplace by challenging the hegemony of the discourses of paying your dues and face-time and by rejecting entitlement as an interpretive frame. In their case, the workplace had gratefully changed with the addition of their Boomer women role models. Gen X/Y women in our IFGs discussed how they could take for granted their right to be in the workplace; accordingly, they sought improved workplace accommodations. Responses on a questionnaire (Stage 1 data) given to Gen Y men and women included in the original data sets reviewed by the IFGs indicated on average a preference to work between 35 to 40 hours a week, and a few respondents expressed they wished to work as few as 20 hours per week. In addition, younger generations had the benefit of watching their mothers work. Their experience, sometimes as the latchkey children left at home while their mothers' worked, emboldened them to reject the discourses of paying your dues and face-time. A Gen X woman talked about wanting to be "healthier . . . well-rounded . . . to participate more in things outside of work and bring up children and sort of be there for the family" (Kristin, Gen X interview, Stage 1 data). While Boomer IFG women spoke of their challenges in penetrating the glass ceiling (Mary), women in the Gen X/Y IFG challenged the structures and discourses of work that limited their ability to have a fulfilling career and a fulfilling life outside of work. Accordingly, Gen X and Y women challenged the dominant discourse of paying your dues and face-time because they interpreted the workplace differently than their mothers and employers.

Implications

This study has theoretical implications for organizational communication research, work/life studies, and feminist methods. We conclude this essay with an argument that generational cohort theory formulates an important contribution to organizational communication research and research on work/life conflict. Finally, we argue this study provides an empirical example of a compelling approach to feminist studies—the IFG.

Younger generations of women in our IFG also reacted to the gendered workplace by challenging the hegemony of the discourses of paying your dues and face-time and by rejecting entitlement as an interpretive frame.

Organizational communication research is enriched by generational cohort theory (Inglehart, 1977), which explains not only conflict around work and life issues surrounding women in the workplace but also conflict plaguing the generations across cohorts and sexes. This study calls into question the conflicts that exist for men in the workplace. Are men's experiences any more or less influenced by a gendered work ethic? Generational cohort theory draws the attention of organizational communication scholars to the socializing events that accompanied each generation into their first positions. It holds promise for dissecting the language, values, and attitudes that are negotiated in organizations in an ongoing manner.

Additionally, generational cohort theory extends the important research on women's negotiation of work and life. It supplements the life cycle research, which claims that life cycle and the material demands associated with life cycle are important features in the negotiation of women's experience in the workplace. While life cycle elucidates the demands on women at different stages in their career, and the negotiations and accommodations they make in order to manage those demands (Kirby et al., 2006), a generational perspective enriches our understanding by establishing that women from different generations do not interpret the demands of work and the life cycle in the same way. For example, Renee recalls her own experience with her female, Boomer, department chair, who after hearing the phrase several times very sincerely asked her to clarify, "Just what do you mean by '[I] want balance?'" Hence, the negotiation of work and life is mediated by generational attitudes and understandings of the workplace. In particular, generational cohort theory (Inglehart, 1977) and the themes identified in this study suggest that women from younger generational cohorts may not experience less conflict as they progress through the life cycle, despite a decrease in responsibilities such as child care (Kirby et al., 2006). Indeed, a generational cohort perspective argues that profound experiences, such as an absent working mother, constitute lasting attitudes and values about work. Following this logic, Gen X and Y generational cohorts of women may be fighting hegemonic structures until the structures change. Future research should attend to the intersection of life cycle research and generational cohorts and pursue questions such as: How do women from different generations work differently or the same as they progress through the life cycle? How does conflict with work and life change among generational cohorts as they age? Finally, this study provides an empirical illustration of IFGs (Leavy, 2007). It demonstrates how IFGs are uniquely suited to elicit interpretive frames and the enduring discourses that constitute them. Thus, they are well matched with feminist qualitative communication research. In particular, IFGs facilitated evolving interpretations that drew from the group experience to dialogically transcend stereotypes. Similar to biographical research, IFGS invoke "a bridge between the analysis of work [and] the self-reflection of practitioners" (Dausien, Hanses, Inowlocki, & Riemann, 2008, p. 2). In this case, the group experience facilitated deeper analysis and further deconstruction of surface-level themes that, if taken at face value, might never have reached the adroit analysis that was achieved. The obvious benefit is that the analysis was performed with the researchers rather than solely by the researchers, thus reaching a level of authenticity that could not be achieved by the researchers alone.

Generational cohort theory draws the attention of organizational communication scholars to the socializing events that accompanied each generation into their first positions.

Conclusion

The unique method of joining women across generations to help interpret their lived experiences offered inimitable insight into the strength and meaning of the ubiquitous

discourses of paying your dues and face-time. All of the generational cohorts participating in this study demonstrated insight and compassion for the other's experience. That said, our intent was not to essentialize generational differences with the IFG method. Admittedly, generational cohorts are only messy categories that do not fully capture the life and work experiences that shape women's approach to work. This is why some younger Boomers will identify more closely with the Gen X/Y perspective depicted here, and some Gen X workers, like Linda, align their values more closely with the Boomer generation. However, seeking to understand generational differences also elucidates the potential for both conflict resolution and understanding among generations of women in the workplace. We believe this study provides a hopeful place to begin a conversation, thus bridging women across generations as they negotiate work and life.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. We focused on Boomers and Generations X and Y because previous scholarship has indicated most of the conflict regarding work/life issues centers on differences among these groups. Additionally, aging Traditionalists are less representative of the current workforce.
2. The first data set incorporates qualitative interviews and observations completed in an ethnographic project in a professional services firm. Although women and men were included in the study, women were the primary subjects of the study. Both structured and spontaneous interviews were conducted over the course of three months. Participants were asked questions regarding how they perceived their work culture. Generational differences were found in the analysis of different perceptions regarding work, work ethic, and work/life balance. The second data set examined in this project was the result of an anonymous questionnaire on work/life issues distributed to female and male Gen Y staff that work in the field of higher education.
3. The data excerpt that launched the IFG analyses was

I think if I was just to say that I'm not going to do anything for the management of [the organization], I might be able to cut back some of that time and not have all of it fill up with just [typical] work. But I'm just not willing to do that and I don't think that would be the right thing . . . that's just not consistent with my sense of responsibility. (Rick, Boomer interview, Stage 1)

Although Rick is a male Boomer, he is quoted throughout this article because (a) the participants of our focus groups (all women) found his comments particularly provoking and (b) his comments are in reference to the female associates in his professional firm. Returning

to Rick's voice throughout this essay reinforces our claim that work/life conflict takes place in the context of a gendered workplace.

4. Stage 3 is the analysis conducted by the authors typical of any interpretive work. Throughout Stage 3, we built on the themes produced in the IFGs during Stage 2. For example, participants in the Gen X IFG (Stage 2) contributed the theme of identity as a way of interpreting differences in generational approaches to work. In Stage 3, we connected that theme to another dominant theme that was present in Stage 2 and in the literature—face-time. Thus, Stage 3 at times provided the evolutionary analysis of a concept informed by theory.
5. All names and some industries have been altered to maintain confidentiality for the participants.

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Bios

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