

# THE MILLENNIAL STEREOTYPE IN BUSINESS CLASSROOMS

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper invites the reader to reflect upon his or her perceptions of generational differences, particularly millennials, and how those perceptions may be impacting effectiveness in the classroom. A brief review of the ABSEL literature and some key academic research related to stereotyping millennials is provided along with anecdotal examples of lessons learned.*

## INTRODUCTION

Each semester, many AACSB-accredited business programs in universities around the United States conduct programs where business and community leaders come into classrooms to share their practical expertise and lessons from the real world. These programs demonstrate engagement with the community, which helps with AACSB reviews, and students seem to enjoy them. These expert guest speakers are often renowned in their industries, professions, and/or local communities, and professors hope guest speakers facilitate social or vicarious experiential learning and perhaps bring to life the course concepts in ways that professors simply cannot. I have personally experienced phenomenal speakers who were hugely successful, very humble, authentic, and inspiring as they shared their insights with the class. Ironically, the speakers often emphasize, without any prompting from me, course content that could have been taken straight from the textbook. Students perceive that content differently when it comes from a working professional rather than the textbook or even the professor.

However, occasionally speakers provided by the university are not what students or professors expect. One recent example serves as a reminder that speakers always need to be vetted by the professor! I heard from some colleagues how their dean's office asked them to host an award-winning alumna who was visiting campus that day. The speaker was supposed to deliver a presentation related to what I wish I had learned while I was a student. According to two colleagues, the presentation evolved into a millennial stereotyping rant about students lacking work ethic, seeking the easy way to the top, feeling entitled, being unable to communicate effectively, and so on. The presentation was perceived as so offensive that 3-4 students in each class of 25-40 students complained afterward.

This example provides a snapshot of the stereotypes facing millennials today as well as the types of issues that can happen in classrooms where generational diversity exists. In my classes, I am usually the only GenX person in the room, while my students are almost exclusively millennials. Noted scholar of generational differences, Jean Twenge, defines GenX as being born between 1965 and 1979, millennials as being born between 1980 and 1994, and iGen as being born between 1995 and around 2012 as that generation is still being defined (2018). Occasionally, I have students from the baby boomer generation, born between 1946 and 1964 according to Twenge (2018), especially in graduate courses.

Millennials are arguably the most widely researched generation. A Google search for millennial student found over 27 million results. Winograd and Hais (2014) reported that millennials will likely represent up to 75% of the workforce by 2025. The same report states that more than 33% of adult Americans will be part of the millennial generation by 2020. Unfortunately, the popular press often paints Millennials negatively, with catchy titles like "All You Need to Know to Motivate Millennials" in *Forbes* (Villa, 2018), and nicknames like snowflake are common (Smith, 2018). Stereotypes about Millennials often are perpetuated in classrooms by the professor, guest speakers, and even students themselves. As Eschleman, King, Mast, Ornellas, & Hunter (2017) noted, "Insights...to generational stereotypes should influence organizational and management practices" (p. 200). Thus, professors and practitioners alike are encouraged to learn more about effectively teaching, leading, and managing the different generations.

Stereotyping is time-saving, and often subconscious, behavior that has been studied for nearly a century. For this paper, the American Psychological Association's (APA) definition is used: "n. a set of cognitive generalizations (e.g., beliefs, expectations) about the qualities and characteristics of the members of a group or social category. Stereotypes...are often exaggerated, negative rather than positive, and resistant to revision..." (APA, 2019, para. 1). Through an example, Wheeler and Petty (2001) used stereotypes about elderly people to illustrate how stereotypes can be positive or negative and how both positive and negative stereotypes can be activated at the same time – elderly people are wise, walk slowly, and are senile, depending upon which stereotypes are activated.

This paper invites the ABSEL audience to critically reflect upon their own perceptions of and experiences with generational differences, particularly regarding millennials, and to critique how those perceptions and experiences may be impacting effectiveness in the classroom. A brief review of the related ABSEL literature addressing millennials and some key academic research is provided as background along with anecdotal examples of lessons learned. I hope this paper will lead to an insightful conference dialogue, especially given the rich generational differences found at ABSEL.

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM ABSEL LITERATURE

ABSEL scholars have discussed generational differences as far back as 1995 when Somers presented an exercise on age diversity using a Family Feud-style exercise. Somers (1995) reported that "Most participants were offended by some of the

stereotypes held by the other generation” (p. 277) but that some of the humorous differences led to open dialogue about “...the realities of generational differences in the workplace, such as job values and promotion expectations” (p. 277). Those lessons still ring true 20+ years later as we continue to see generational stereotypes causing offense, and there are significant differences in how generations value their work (Twenge & Kasser, 2013) and its associated rewards (Campione, 2015).

Hoover has studied millennials in several ABSEL papers during the past decade. Hoover (2011) proposed that millennials’ preference for complexity avoidance and narcissistic tendencies present special challenges for experiential learning efforts. Behavioral immersion (Giambatista & Hoover, 2009) supplemented by whole person experiential learning (Hoover, 2007) was identified as an approach for handling these millennial challenges (Hoover, 2011). Behavioral immersion, with an emphasis on learning about self, is aligned with the narcissistic tendencies, and the compressed learning experience naturally reduces students’ reliance on complexity avoidance (Hoover, 2011).

Markulis, Murff, and Strang (2011) empirically studied professors’ (n=102; 63% were over age 50) views on millennial students and how their teaching styles and use of simulations and experiential exercises had changed, if at all, in response to this generation. While professors reported trying to adapt their teaching styles to better match millennials, they also reported that they had not altered their use of simulations and experiential exercises.

Readers are encouraged to review other ABSEL conference proceedings (see the Bernie Keys Library) that include generational differences and/or millennials in some context (listed chronologically):

- Hornyak & Teasley (2011). Doing Murder One Again.
- Lawlor & Hornyak (2011). Video Killed the Biblio Star: The Impact of Digital Media on Student Learning Outcomes.
- Hoover (2013). ABSEL Reflections: 40 Years of Excellence, Now Going Forward.
- Hoover (2014). Experiential Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Personal Reflections and Insights from Burning Man.
- Hoover, Giambatista, & Tribble (2016). An Organizational Development Approach to Experiential Learning with Millennials.
- Kumar & Bhandarker (2017). Experiential Learning and Its Relevance in Business School Curriculum.

At least 50 ABSEL papers over the years have included something about stereotypes or stereotyping in the paper as revealed through a search of the Bernie Keys Library (BKL). A handful articles studied stereotypes in greater depth:

- Smith (1978) was inspired to study sex stereotypes in an undergraduate policy course where students who participated in a simulation. He had overheard a female student volunteering to “...keep all the records and minutes...if you guys make all the decisions” (p. 44).
- Ruble (1979) used an exercise related to evaluating promotion potential to study sex-role stereotypes. He found that in the classroom, males were favored for promotion. At a conference about women in management, females were more favored for promotion. Another interesting finding was that masculine characteristics were perceived as more favorable for promotion than feminine characteristics regardless of setting.
- Graeff (1980) explored sex-role stereotypes related to management work with undergraduate business students. His findings confirm the effect stereotype activation is theorized to have on behaviors as a large number of females perceived males as better suited for managerial work.
- McAfee and Anderson (1993) developed a questionnaire-based exercise about older worker stereotypes to use in HR, OB, or any course covering discrimination or diversity.
- Szal (2018) discussed gender stereotypes related to STEM and the implications for anxiety in statistics courses.

## OTHER ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP

Despite the quantity of publications on millennials, there are often contradictions in the literature. For example, millennials may not value the environment or social issues substantially more than other generations (Twenge, 2010), despite what the popular press portrays. Academic research has found some agreement on how much Millennials value leisure and balance between work and life roles. The Monitoring the Future Study (Johnston et al., 2015; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010) has collected data from high school seniors in every generation for 30+ years. Results are compared between generations to identify possible changes in attitudes related to leisure and work centrality, among other factors. Twenge, et al. (2010) reported that the strongest difference between millennials, GenX, and boomers was millennials’ high importance of personal leisure time. Conversely, millennials are less likely than prior generations to place a high value on the role of work, defined as work centrality (Twenge & Kasser, 2013). Thus, a major challenge for professors and business managers alike is addressing the implications of the importance millennials place on free time and the diminished role of work.

One alarming aspect of the study of stereotypes is that people generally begin to behave consistently with the activated stereotypes – up to 80% of the time (Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Eschleman et al. (2017) conducted experiments related to entitlement using 571 GenX and millennial participants and concluded that entitlement is a common stereotype, including among the millennial participants. Further, implicit stereotype activation, in which participants were introduced to generation titles (e.g., baby boomers, GenX, millennial) through subtle word association tasks, resulted in those millennials rating themselves higher in entitlement than millennials in the other experimental groups (explicit activation group and the behavioral state indicator group). Eschleman et al. (2017) went on to caution managers about the impact of stereotype activation: “...talking about Millennial entitlement or generational differences may produce an effect that is as strong as if the Millennial entitlement stereotype is true” (p. 206).

I posit that professors are the managers of their classrooms, and the implications are worthy of our attention. We must be

more aware of how our actions could be perpetuating stereotypes in the classroom, especially related to generational differences.

## ANECDOTAL LESSONS LEARNED

As a body, I believe ABSEL scholars already recognize that stereotypes have an impact on the course content and the students in our classes. The literature review found significant evidence supporting the notion that we are at least aware of stereotypes impacting our world and our classrooms. Given the prevalence of the millennial generation in our classrooms, a renewed look at generational differences could be worthwhile.

In my own classrooms, I find millennials to be as curious and full of promise as I was at their age. However, some challenges arise regularly in courses that I fear may reflect a pattern among millennial students. Many of these observations were also identified and discussed in Russo's (2013) study on millennial characterizations as they influence how we teach:

- Many students skip reading the instructions, even if the document is only one page. If a substantial project has more than one page of instructions, then expect many emails with questions, office visits, and project submissions that are off track. Also, expect students to take minimal responsibility for not understanding the instructions and to blame you for not being clearer. Consider providing the instructions in a video as well as electronic file. This observation ties in to the complexity avoidance issue raised by Hoover.
- Students may perceive that class time is their time, so they may wear earbuds and watch something on their devices or listen to music during class, even when there are policies in the syllabus prohibiting electronic devices. While some of Russo's (2013) students remarked that texting was rude, others were emphatic about their ability to multitask and how texting is not distracting. Perhaps a classroom demonstration would convince them that they are not paying as much attention as they think they are.
- Students anticipate immediate feedback on exams and graded assignments – as in same day.
- Some students expect to be informal in their communications with professors, peers, guest speakers, project clients, etc., such as using first names in initial interactions.

In closing, I believe that Millennial students can tolerate the jabs that society throws their way. Unfortunately, though, they often make jokes about their own generation and may be unknowingly promoting stereotypical thinking. ABSEL attendees are encouraged to complete one or more of Harvard's Implicit Bias Tests to get a sense for how inherent stereotyping is in our nature (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>). The tests are free and only take a few minutes, and there is one for age (young/old). By critically reflecting on our own perceptions and stereotypes of Millennials, my hope is that we reach a greater understanding of how to best lead and motivate these students to reach their potential as they are the future.

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