Defining ‘Professionalism’: A Social Constructivist Analysis of Generational Conceptions

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INTRODUCTION

Previous research has linked the concept of professionalism in several fields such as marketing, journalism, and healthcare with ethical behavior of employees (Ellingson, 2011). However, none of these studies have provided a clear definition of professionalism. Given the general importance of ethics in organizations, a consistent definition of professionalism seems important to identify (Faber, 2011). Studies have also shown that various generations view what comprises ethical behavior differently (Schullery, 2013). Structuration theory suggests that both professionalism and ethics are socially constructed through interaction; as such, understanding how people believe professionalism is enacted (and thereby defined) seems vitally important, as does examining whether this definition varies between generations. Using thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses from participants in a variety of age ranges and fields, this study examines how different generations conceive of what communicative behaviors constitute professionalism.

METHODS

• The demographics of the survey consisted of 51 females, 12 males, and one individual who identified as other.
• The generational breakdown of the survey was 12 Baby Boomers, 22 members of Generation X, and 30 Millennials.
• Quantitative data was collected via Qualtrics survey online. A link to the survey was attached to Facebook posts from the researchers.
• This survey consists of 51 questions measuring the participants level of agreement on statements. Referencing specific workplace behaviors related to particular generations taken from a study done by Schullery (2013). Examples are “I expect there to be a clear and distinct line between work and fun,” “Job titles are not important to me,” and “I am not bothered when others use social media at work.”
• Two open-ended questions related to the participant’s opinion of how professionalism is defined and why they ranked generations in the order that they did were included.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY

• This theory is defined as “a perspective suggesting that communication is the vehicle through which reality is understood, constituted, and represented, and it is through communication that beliefs and meaning are constructed and negotiated” (Davis et al., 2013, p. 322).
• We applied this theory to study how different generations have communicated to construct and negotiate the definition of professionalism.

RESULTS

RQ1: HOW DO EMPLOYEES IN DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONS DEFINE PROFESSIONALISM?

• From participant responses to “Please define professionalism in your own words,” we identified 87 separate thought units.
• Using a grounded theory (Davis et al., 2013, p. 330) approach, these thought units were coded, resulting in 10 of themes.
• Using a constant comparison method, these were collapsed into conceptually similar themes, and seven major themes arose, as displayed in the graphic above:
  • Appropriate behavior
  • Timeliness
  • Communication
  • Work Ethic
  • Job Skills
  • Work Ethic
  • Attitude
  • Appearance

RQ2: DO GENERATIONS DIFFER IN DEFINITIONS OF PROFESSIONALISM?

• These pie charts depict the most important themes of professionalism for each generation.

DISCUSSION

• Survey results show a change in generational definitions of professionalism from previous research conducted in this field (Schullery, 2013).
• Previous research on Baby Boomers stated that members of the generation prefer to be fully engaged with their work. Our research confirms this (Schullery, 2013).
• Past research on Generation X stated that members of the generation did not think job titles were important. The results of our study align with this research (Faber, 2001).
• Research has indicated that Millennials will not give full effort if they do not find the work meaningful. The survey results indicate that Millennials will give full effort no matter the circumstances (Schullery, 2013).
• Previous research has relied on unclear and inconsistent conceptualizations of the term professionalism.
• Our research shows a generational basis for this inconsistency.

REFERENCES