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14. ABSTRACT
Generational studies is a scientific field that has and is receiving a lot of attention within corporate America, particularly with the fourth generation entering the workforce, Generation Z. This paper asserts that there are unique differences between generations within the Air Force; however, the sciences (generational studies versus lifespan thinking) remain divided on which field is more capable of providing the answers for why there appear to be such stark differences in and amongst generations. First, this thesis will outline the characteristics of the four generations currently serving in the Air Force (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z). Second, this study will analyze the disagreements between generational studies and lifespan thinking in analyzing personnel and individuals' characteristics over one's lifetime. Third, the study will examine the current leadership development framework for Air Force officers through the Full-Range Leadership Model to show how generational understanding could be a beneficial addition to the curriculum, assisting in Air Force officers' development. Finally, this study will provide three recommendations for how the Air Force could better help commanders to understand Generation Z Airmen and the gaps between generations, including ways for the Air Force to help commanders overcome these understanding gaps and thereby better utilize and equip their diverse workforce.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

GENERATIONAL UNDERSTANDING GAPS AND THE IMPACTS ON COMMAND

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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AY 2020-21

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Executive Summary

Title: Generational Understanding Gaps and Impacts on Commanders

Author: Major Joshua D. Frizzell, United States Air Force

Thesis: Through better understanding the characteristics and dynamics of Generation Z Airmen, commanders can be better prepared to lead not only Generation Z but a vast multi-generational workforce that resides within the Air Force squadron.

Abstract: Generational studies is a scientific field that has and is receiving a lot of attention within corporate America, particularly with the fourth generation entering the workforce, Generation Z. This paper asserts that there are unique differences between generations within the Air Force; however, the sciences (generational studies versus lifespan thinking) remain divided on which field is more capable of providing the answers for why there appear to be such stark differences in and amongst generations. First, this thesis will outline the characteristics of the four generations currently serving in the Air Force (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z). Second, this study will analyze the disagreements between generational studies and lifespan thinking in analyzing personnel and individuals' characteristics over one's lifetime. Third, the study will examine the current leadership development framework for Air Force officers through the Full-Range Leadership Model to show how generational understanding could be a beneficial addition to the curriculum, assisting in Air Force officers' development. Finally, this study will provide three recommendations for how the Air Force could better help commanders to understand Generation Z Airmen and the gaps between generations, including ways for the Air Force to help commanders overcome these understanding gaps and thereby better utilize and equip their diverse workforce.

Conclusion: Generational differences come from one's life experiences, character development, and morals, as well as society's effects on each respective generation. In light of these generational complexities, commanders can better serve and lead within the Air Force squadron through better working to understanding Generation Z dynamics, and as a result, be better equipped and prepared to lead a multi-generational workforce.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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"Only when diverse perspectives are included, respected, and valued can we start to get a full picture of the world: who we serve and what they need."¹ – Brené Brown

Introduction

There are currently four distinct generational cohorts serving within the Air Force: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z. These generations appear to have "wildly different ideas about work ethic, work-life balance, and long-term career goals" and "each age cohort brings its expectations, goals, motivations, and experience into the office every day."² Holistically speaking, generations are groups of individuals who share a specific time frame that encompasses the birth, maturation, and critical events that influence and shape their lives.³ Generational studies posits generational influences come from one's life experiences, character development, and morals, as well as society's effects on each respective generation, and in light of these potential complexities in each generation, leaders need to understand if there are indeed generational differences in how commanders lead Generation Z.⁴ Through better understanding characteristics and dynamics of Generation Z Airmen, commanders can be better prepared to lead not only Generation Z but a vast multi-generational workforce that resides within the Air Force squadron.

Air Force doctrine, Volume 2 *Leadership*, outlines expectations for its officers who will command. The *Leadership* doctrine requires that officers in command exercise authority and responsibility to accomplish the mission.⁵ The critical focus on what the Air Force expects of its commanders and the focus of this study is that commanders have a "responsibility for health, welfare, morale, and discipline of assigned personnel."⁶ A part of leadership responsibility is understanding the individuals one leads. This study will research the following: are there understanding gaps between Air Force commanders and the youngest generation in the ranks,

Generation Z? If so, how best can they be addressed, and what benefits does this provide to the Air Force squadron as a whole?

Significance and Purpose

The Air Force expects its officers to move quickly through leadership levels at the tactical and operational levels.⁷ The Air Force develops leaders through "education, training, inclusive collaboration, and experience" as directed in Annex 1-1, the *Force Development* construct.⁸ The Air Force prescribes that officers will develop through job performance across the spectrum of an officer's career and attend Professional Military Education (PME). The PME that is fundamentally shaping officers as they develop is Squadron Officer School (SOS) and Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) (or respective sister-service equivalents). The SOS and ACSC curriculums contain classes on leadership development and emotional intelligence, and both schools have developed and grown the focus on leadership development for captains and majors with the overhaul of the Air Force continuum of learning in 2015. Additionally, the Air Force created a leadership development course for commanders in 2018 at the direction of the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General David Goldfein. General Goldfein wanted to better prepare future commanders by making them "more effective, adaptive, and [capable of creating more] lethal squadrons."⁹ Additionally, General Goldfein wanted to create a course that was a "great compliment to the Air Force's leadership training and development continuum," which would fill gaps "and recognizes that leadership, like other skills, must be developed and practiced" over time.¹⁰ These changes were necessary and needed as the Air Force worked to develop officers who would be an asset to the Air Force and to the squadrons they would command in the future. Yet, as Dr. Fil Arenas at the Air Force Air University at Maxwell AFB states in *Developing Your Full Range of Leadership: Leveraging a Transformational Approach*,

"The human side of leadership is barely discussed in most leadership programs. Have we forgotten who we are leading? Human leaders, just as their followers, are fallible; we must embrace the shortcoming as opportunities for growth and self-awareness."¹¹ Dr. Arenas' acknowledgment provides an inroad and understanding that there is a need to understand people and highlights the importance of looking into if there are indeed generational differences and understanding gaps between commanders and Generation Z. As there has been no research that could be found for the Air Force researching generational differences, this thesis hopes to start the purposeful study of how to better understand people and generations serving in the Air Force to equip leaders better in order to better support Generation Z Airmen.

Some scholars claim that there are significant differences between generations that cause friction or "clashpoints" between generations.¹² There are differing opinions on how generational analysis occurs, whether individuals should be assigned to generational cohorts or studied across one's lifespan. Yet, both analyses contribute to understanding people and generations better — more on that later. There is a consensus that leaders must understand their people and that genuinely doing so is a challenge.¹³ In her work, *Clash of Generations: Managing the New Workplace Reality*, Valerie Grubb highlights the results of a 2014 Gallup poll and found "one in 10 people possess the inherent talent to manage – and companies fail to pick good managers a staggering 82 percent of the time. When combined with the added challenge of having four generations in the workplace, the odds increase that companies will experience higher turnover or low employment engagement."¹⁴ Generational differences, when left unaddressed, can have negative impacts on the performance of organizations. Through misunderstanding and miscommunication as to where the organization is headed, there can be an increased resistance to change because of leadership failures to communicate effectively at all levels in the workforce

and conflict, which is avoidable through a better understanding of multi-generational workforces.¹⁵

While the adaptation of the SOS and ACSC curriculum and creation of the Air Force's commander's leadership course is a necessary step in the right direction, there is no discussion of generational leadership and differences within these three courses. When one references the 2021 SOS course 21B Leadership Syllabus; the ACSC Leadership Development Syllabus for Academic Year 21, current as of 1 September 2020; or the leadership development course for Squadron Command current as of 17 December 2018, generational studies or generational differences are not taught. While it is essential for Air Force officers to continue to look for ways to better understand and grow themselves through the self-study of leadership, it is also crucial that leaders understand the characteristics and tendencies of the people they lead.

The examination of and exploration of generational understanding regarding what makes Generation Z who they are is critical, especially as there appear to be significant generational differences between Generation Z and previous generations.¹⁶ But this leads to a whole host of other questions. Are not all generations different from the ones before? What makes them so? Is there something that does put Gen Z in a separate field all by themselves? The generational studies experts would offer that the Air Force needs to better understand Gen Z to ensure retention, success, and purpose for these young men and women coming into the ranks.¹⁷ While there is both research and data regarding Gen Z, it is unclear what, if anything, Air Force commanders know about this new Generation that makes up 20.3% of the U.S. population and approximately forty percent of the Air Force enlisted force.¹⁸ For this study's purpose, commanders are those in the ranks of Major to Lieutenant Colonel at the squadron level based on the requirement and tendency to interact with and influence Generation Z at the tactical level of

command. Through personnel engagements, while leading the Air Force squadron, these commanders will provide the direction for their organizations, directly impacting the understanding of Gen Zers; the goal is to enable commanders to better understand, effect, and lead Generation Z Airmen through mutual understanding.

The PEW research center provides three significant factors shaping generations: the Life Cycle Effect, the Period Effect, and the Cohort Effect.¹⁹ The Life Cycle Effect is the position that a member holds in life: one can think of a clash between a parent and a teenager as an example of the life cycle effect.²⁰ The Period effect is the events and social impacts that influence the respective generation, such as the generations that experienced World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, or September 11, 2001.²¹ The Cohort Effect is when one generation experienced an event, for instance, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and subsequent generations could not share the event as it occurred before a respective generations' birth.²²

This study will look at the following to analyze if there are understanding gaps between commanders and Generation Z Airmen and, as a byproduct, highlight the challenges and provide some recommendations to leading a multi-generational workforce. First, an overview and understanding of generational cohorts serving within the Air Force will be provided. As there are currently four generations in the Air Force ranks, it is crucial to understand what scholars have to say about each generation and their respective generational characteristics. Second, a review of the literature and the debates regarding the benefit of generational studies to understand people better is provided. There are divides on whether generational studies or lifespan thinking is more effective in analyzing generations; however, they both point to a leaders' requirement to better understand the people and human dynamics within a workforce. Third, an overview of the current leadership development framework of Air Force officers will be discussed. Finally, some

recommendations will be provided for ways the Air Force can better develop its officers in understanding people and the distinct traits that come with the individual as a person.

Generational Cohorts in the Air Force

The field of generational studies divides groups of people into cohorts, and four of these cohorts are currently serving within the United States Air Force: Baby Boomer, Generation X (Gen X), Millennials (Gen Y), and Generation Z (Gen Z). These cohorts are broken down based on sharing similar chronological timelines and are influenced by shared events, values, beliefs, and behaviors that impact an individual's views and their contribution to the workforce as part of a respective generation.²³ There are differing views on the exact dates and timelines for these cohorts across the generational studies field, which presents some difficulty in academia and scientists studying generational differences. These specific difficulties of utilizing generational studies and disagreements on generational studies' efficacy will be expounded upon later in the paper. Figure 1 below highlights the PEW research center's timelines for the years for each generation that will be analyzed in this study.²⁴

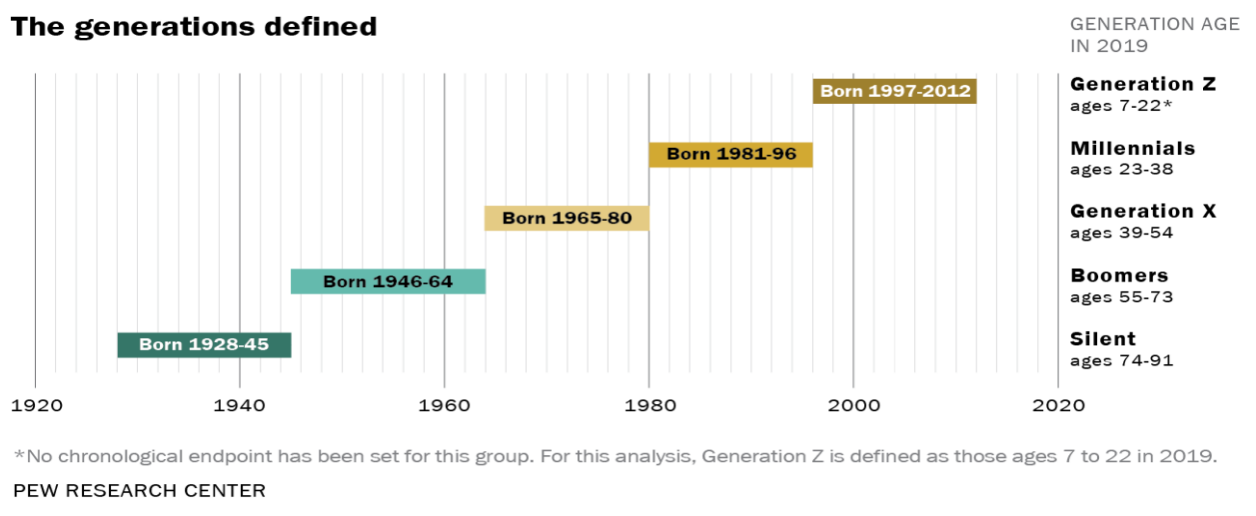


Figure 1 – PEW Research Center – Generations Defined

The PEW data states that 1997 is their starting point for Generation Z but have not assigned an end date yet.²⁵ The below figure (figure 2) breaks out the Air Force generations by age for the enlisted and officer force.

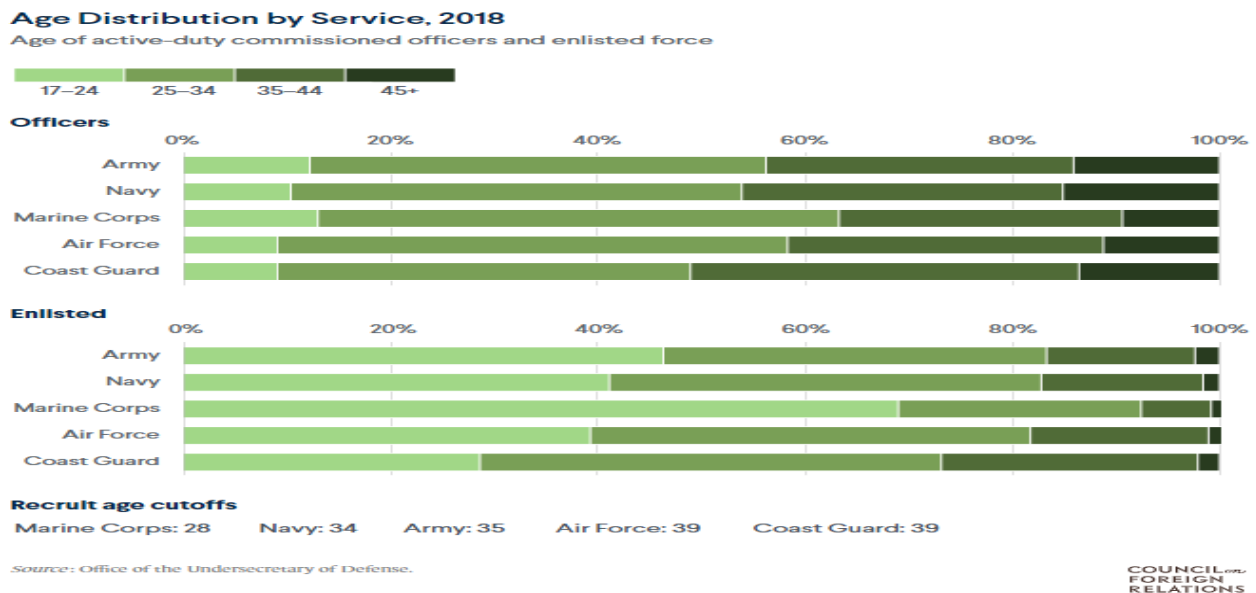


Figure 2 – Age Distribution by Service from 2018

As evidenced by the above chart, the Baby Boomer generation is on its way out the door as the current four-star generals serving are around sixty-two years old with only a few years left to serve. Meanwhile, the senior enlisted advisor to the Chairmen of the Joint Chief is forty-nine years old, placing him squarely in Generation X. Generation X includes both officers and enlisted. Those approaching the most senior ranks of the Air Force are Baby Boomers who will soon hand senior leadership responsibilities over to Generation X. As of 2018, approximately forty percent of the enlisted force and ten percent of the officer corps was Generation Z. Another forty percent of the enlisted force and fifty percent of the officer corps were Millennials. Approximately twenty percent of the enlisted force and forty percent of the officer corps were

Generation X or Baby Boomer (with Baby Boomers representing the smallest percentage serving within the Air Force ranks).

Baby Boomers were born between the middle-1940s and the middle-1960s, and they are called "Boomers" because of the high birth rates in America during that timeframe.²⁶ Baby Boomers, until 2020, were the largest generation within the United States until the Millennial Generation eclipsed them as the largest represented generational society in the United States.²⁷ Life events impacting Boomers include "the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, Woodstock, the civil rights movement, and the Kennedy and King assassination."²⁸ Boomers' stereotypical assessment is that they are task-focused, competition seeking, materialistic, individualistic, and controlling of what happens to them and focused on the good of contributing to and supporting their work centers.²⁹

Preparing to take over the senior levels of Air Force leadership positions, Generation X was born in the middle-1960s up to 1980.³⁰ They grew up in an era where their parents worked a lot, and they were left home alone to fend for themselves in the afternoons after school. During their growing up years, divorce rates rose, and disloyalty in the workplace as experienced by their parents was expected, so Gen Xers are distrustful of corporations and, in general, try to maintain a better work and life balance than what they experienced growing up.³¹ Gen X's stereotypical assessment is that they are likely self-centered but want a challenge at work, and a good salary and benefits matter because they witnessed the lack of workplace benefits for their parents growing up.³²

The Millennial Generation (Gen Y) stretches from 1980 to 1996.³³ Coming about in an age where technology was taking off, Millennials are the first truly technologically savvy generation as they predominantly knew about or had use of cell phones, the internet, televisions,

computers, and a myriad of other technological devices, unlike those who came before them.³⁴ With the advent of so much technology, the world shrank with the onset of globalization for the Millennials. The spread of technology and being brought up in the widening globalization movement greatly influenced Gen Y and how it views life, the world, and global values.³⁵ Gen Y's stereotypes are that they lack trust in organizations but desire to work hard and live meaningful lives; they believe that education is vital and that family is critical to their success and ultimate quality of life.³⁶

Generation Z came about in 1997. Some of Gen Zers' uniqueness is that they have had technology at their fingertips since day one. With globalization, institutional insecurities, and a vast information environment, Gen Z has been exposed to more information than any generation ever before. Gen Z finds out about and sees the global realities of life more quickly and with more realism than any previous generation.³⁷ Gen Zers also have phenomenal technology skills because they have been actively utilizing technology and the internet for most of their lives compared to previous generations who adapted to technology over a respective life span. With this technology shaping Gen Z, this also means that Gen Z has been shaped not just by parents and their respective small communities but by the globe and the impacts of myriad diverse personalities, people, views, and influences across the span of their lives.³⁸ However, Generation Z's changes and growth are coming about quicker due to technological advances, and the impacts are not all good.³⁹ One primary consequence of being the technological generation is that Gen Z is prone to psychological stress. The psychological stress and pressure are getting more pronounced with increased depression cases and suicidal thoughts based on a study from 2005 to 2017.⁴⁰ Gen Zers are "more likely to report mental health as fair or poor as compared with other generations," and "they have the highest rate of diagnosed depression followed by anxiety,"

while "sixty-seven percent of Gen Z in the United States and 85% worldwide say stress prevents them from taking on leadership responsibilities."⁴¹ Mental health is already a major concern for the Air Force and the Department of Defense writ large, so this highlights an important need to be aware of these concerns and issues.

Gen Zers are multitaskers. With technology always at their fingertips, they can talk, text, read, discuss, and—seemingly, in their mind—do so with great ease.⁴² With this said, they are prone to having shorter attention spans, desiring to focus on multiple things to try to accomplish more things at once.⁴³ Gen Zers have trouble dealing with hardship and connecting with people outside of their circle, and this is attributed in large part to the high dependence on technology.⁴⁴ A good summary of Generation Z's stereotypical attributes is that they are "realistic, independent, digital, private, yet face-to-face oriented, role hopping multitaskers, and globally attuned."⁴⁵ In large part, Gen Z shows a generation that is primed for both action and contribution. Like any other generation, Gen Z comes with some complexities that can likely produce some great results if focused on and learned about. With the note of attention span concerns, psychological sensitivities, and an inability to deal with hardship, this can be attributed in part because they (while technologically globalized) grew up relatively protected from the world by parents and authority figures who were always there to support them.⁴⁶

As for what Generation Z brings to the workplace, there are a few key areas where Generation Z has clear expectations, and organizational leaders need to manage expectations as well as make clear what the respective company expects of its Gen Z employees in return. One of the key areas of concern is that Generation Z lacks work experience; "in 1979, 60% of teens held a job, while in 2015, 34% of teens held a job and it is expected to drop to 25% in 2024."⁴⁷ This is important because it shows a lack of workplace understanding and shapes expectations of

employees coming into the job market as well as providing the understanding and knowledge of what work place interaction and expectations look like.⁴⁸ Additionally, Generation Z wants to manage their own expectations in order to understand the good and bad nature of the job and workplace they are entering into, to include knowing the "essential job responsibilities; expectations for hours worked, travel, and work conditions; top positive and negative aspects associated with performing the job; top positive and negative aspects of working for the organization; the top positive and negative aspects of working for the manager; [and] culture, growth, and career path."⁴⁹ To help Gen Zers manage their expectations, a good onboarding program to orient members to the organization is a critical component for Gen Zers entering the workforce. A formal onboarding process helps to increase the likelihood of "better performance, retention, satisfaction, commitment, and self-efficacy."⁵⁰ This will also serve to help Gen Zers reduce their levels of anxiety and nervousness as they enter into a new organization and potentially hold a full-time job for the first time.⁵¹ Finally, Generation Z feels strongly about the psychological contract regarding what leaders expect of them and what they expect of their leaders.⁵² Managers must provide clear expectations through a clear onboarding process and provide continual feedback, and employees must receive the appropriate training, development and growth opportunities, or this can lead to "poor performance and productivity, low satisfaction, [and] high turnover..." rates for the work force.⁵³ While the turnover rate is not necessarily an issue for the Air Force due to contractual commitments, it highlights the attention span and work place experience issues that Generation Z Airmen will bring with them into the Air Force.

Debating the Value of Generational Studies

This study is limited because there are disagreements amongst academics and scholars on the relevance and scientific backing of generational studies. For most critics, generational studies errs in relegating people to cohorts compiled of individuals. Generational studies critics feel this leads to overgeneralization and typecasting of the impacts of how generations interact in the workforce and how they must be led, managed, and taught.⁵⁴ Many critics do not think that generational studies can scientifically prove there are differences amongst generations. There is an inference from the generational studies field that newer generations have life easier or that older generations view life differently from the younger generations. Yet most critics would say it is simply not possible to prove this empirically.⁵⁵ As a result, lifespan thinking scholar C.W. Rudolph (and many of his contemporaries) proposes applying lifespan thinking to understanding individuals better. Lifespan thinking allows for more freedom for the individual to grow and develop over time, over the course of one's life, and as a result, is not just a prescription of traits and characteristics based on a generational assignment that rules out maturation as an individual ages. "The lifespan perspective is an integrative meta-theory that originated from the field of developmental psychology. It focuses on general principles of intraindividual development, interindividual differences in developmental trajectories, and malleability of development of different ages."⁵⁶ Rudolph proposes four critical reasons that generational thinking is wrong: the creation of incorrect contrasts amongst generations; the oversimplification and overgeneralization of cohorts; the distraction through misrepresenting the modeling of generations; and lastly, the prescription of generational studies that do not truly analyze the intricacies of understanding people.⁵⁷ Additionally, there are concerns that "one cannot use only people's ages and fixed dates to compare cohorts; one must specify the events and experiences

that are hypothesized to lead to cohort differences and systematically test those hypothesis."⁵⁸

As a result, lifespan thinking research is a multifaceted way of thinking about how and why people are who they are. Specifically, lifespan thinking is

"the proposition of historical and sociocultural embeddedness acknowledges that development is influenced not only by biological factors (e.g., genetics), but also by historical and evolutionary contexts (i.e., the time period during which an individual's development unfolds), changes in sociocultural conditions (i.e., structural factors such as the economy, education, and medical care), and interactions of person and contextual factors."⁵⁹

Lifespan thinking argues that people change over time within a respective generational cohort, and proponents of this theory would contend that time, in and of itself, is not a sufficiently meaningful variable.⁶⁰ The meanings of cohort and time require expansion to create more value for the period, and timeframes that would be beneficial to study are time periods such as "puberty, parenthood/grandparenthood, menopause or societal markers such as workforce entry, marriage, or retirement" to understand generations and why they act how they act.⁶¹

Generational studies experts, including Lyons, Kuron, Twenge, and others, agree that additional empirical work is needed to bolster ongoing and future generational studies research; however, they urge researchers not to "throw out the baby with the bathwater."⁶² Like any research, it is easy to poke holes and disagree with respective findings while missing the critical knowledge contributed to understanding generational differences. Concerning understanding human dynamics, "leaders should view generational differences not merely as idiosyncratic inter-group differences...but as manifestations of broader trends in society and work that continue to evolve as the generations move through their respective life courses."⁶³ As Paul Sackett states, "One cannot use only people's ages and fixed dates to compare cohorts; one must

specify the events and experiences that are hypothesized to lead to cohort differences and systematically test those hypotheses"⁶⁴ There is an ability and need for generational studies and lifespan thinking to continue contributing to the understanding of people to help leaders better understand the workforce and the human dynamics that make up the work force, particularly with Generation Z.⁶⁵ Studying human attributes and what makes people who they are can help leaders to get the most out of each group of individuals as they age in order for the entirety of the work force to contribute to the success of the organization.

Existing Education and Training on Leadership in the Air Force

As Air Force officers advance through the ranks, they accept more leadership responsibility, and as a result, an officer's impacts become more noticeable by everyone around them. The Air Force recognizes the importance of training its officer corps and does so through developmental opportunities within the continuum of learning over an officer's career to work to "create a culture of lifelong learning."⁶⁶ In 2017, the Air Education and Training Command looked at how the Air Force's force developmental construct works and looking for ways to update the construct because it had not been updated significantly since its creation.⁶⁷ The basic premise and model for officers' training is on the job training supplemented by distance learning and in-residence education through SOS and ACSC. This model works to ensure an officer is advancing in leadership abilities so that they are able to develop subordinates and ultimately capable of becoming successful commanders, able to lead their organizations. The Human Capital Annex to the Air Force's Strategic Master Plan from 2015 provides insight into why the development of an officer is essential:

"World class application of airpower requires a highly specialized and competent workforce developed through deliberate training, education, and leadership experiences. The development of a technically competent Airman can take years and, as such, the Air

Force must take steps to leverage and retain that investment. It is imperative that we develop a holistic strategy for attracting, recruiting, developing, and retaining the right Total Force Airmen that meet the needs of the Air Force in a cost effective way...The need for Airmen who possess the right occupational skills and institutional competencies forms the core requirement of force development. Where occupational competencies are required to build technical depth, the Air Force's institutional competencies are key to ensuring the ability of Airmen to operate successfully in a constantly changing environment at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels."⁶⁸

As outlined by Air Education and Training Command, this guidance was vital because it set in motion many changes to the SOS and ACSC curriculum that benefitted and will continue to benefit officers as they grow in their understanding of leadership principles. The model of leadership that the Air Force teaches is the Full-Range Model of Leadership and has also expanded its focus on emotional intelligence as outlined in the introduction to this thesis.

The FRLM is an all-encompassing leadership model that provides leaders' expectations across the leadership theories focusing on laissez-faire, transactional, and transformational leadership practices for how to lead subordinates and teams. Figure three highlights the parts of the model.

Laissez Faire	Transactional		Transformational			
	Hands-off Leadership	Management by Exception (MBE)	Contingent Reward (CR)	Individual Consideration (IC)	Intellectual Stimulation (IS)	Inspirational Motivation (IM)
	Passive Active					

Figure 1. The full-range leadership model

Figure 3 – Full-Range Leadership Model

In this model, we find one negative and two positive leadership measures (though transformational leadership is the ultimate goal) with sub measures that allow for understanding and development of leadership skills through the FRLM when faced with leading people,

undergoing leadership challenges, and thriving in basic leadership situations an officer might encounter over the course of one's career.⁶⁹

The Laissez-Faire, "hands-off," leadership model shows how an officer should not aspire to lead subordinates.⁷⁰ This is an essential concept for officers to understand as this model is strictly an abdication of leadership and accountability to those below a respective officer.⁷¹ The officer who might exhibit this type of leadership behavior is an officer who is not around to lead, refuses to make decisions, fails to care for subordinates, and does not mentor and mold subordinates to help them grow.⁷² The Laissez-Faire leader does not inspire or create a dynamic work environment of teamwork and care and lacks a desire for performance that causes organizational performance declines and leads to frustrated organizational members.⁷³

Transactional leadership is just that: an agreement between a leader and a follower that motivates an organization and its personnel to achieve goals to help succeed at the mission.⁷⁴ The transactional leader monitors the organization and personnel's performance closely and ensures that the organizational performance is where it should be and, ultimately, enables accomplishment of the mission. When there is a failure of mission accomplishment or personnel, the transactional leader will hold personnel accountable.⁷⁵ There are subsets of the transactional leadership theory that highlight the leadership behaviors and expectations one should receive from the transactional leader. There are the "contingent reward (reward for performance)," "management by exception (active) (responds to deviations in standards as soon as possible)," and "management by exception (passive) (responds to deviations in standards only when necessary)."⁷⁶ Transactional leadership provides some pros and cons to how a leader can motivate subordinates to achieve results and take care of the mission, and it provides the rigidity

of discipline that is important within the Air Force to ensure personnel are taken care of and performing to the level required to complete the job and enable the Air Force mission.⁷⁷

Transformational leaders are the leaders for whom subordinates want to work. The transformational leader builds relationships with followers, and through developing relationships, the subordinate's level of performance rises.⁷⁸ A transformational leader provides "idealized influence (role model, respected, admired, high ethical standards)," "inspirational leadership (motivating, inspiring, articulating a vision)," "intellectual stimulation (thinking "outside the box," reframing old problems, innovative)," and "individual consideration (coaching, mentoring, active listening, valuing diversity)."⁷⁹ The transformational leader is ultimately working to inspire and bring out the best in an individual through working to serve and be attentive to the needs of the member.⁸⁰ Additionally, this type of leader is working to address and care about the individual and their self-worth, pushing them to greater heights of achievement.⁸¹

Through a brief description, the FLRM provides clear and concise measures for how officers should and should not lead subordinates. However, there is no mention or teaching of generational differences or even human dynamics within the FLRM. Whether one prescribes to generational studies theory or the lifespan thinking model, there is a uniqueness to people that bears understanding, especially if one endeavors to achieve transformational or transactional leadership practices within an organization. Johann Riescher points out that working to understand the workforce and its generational characteristics can help leaders find ways to overcome the generational understanding gaps.⁸² Additionally, he points out, success comes from an ability to "recruit, retain, manage, and motivate employees" from across all the generational divides that make up organizations.⁸³ Leadership requires adaptation, and it

involves the inclusion of all levels of subordinates within an organization. To be inclusive, leaders must understand the entirety of the workforce, and through the inclusive leadership and understanding of all generations, the performance of an organization will rise through inclusive leadership.⁸⁴

Recommendations for Improving Generational Understanding

This thesis has probably created more questions than answers due to the debate on the efficacy of generational studies versus lifespan thinking and the true nature, relevance, and impacts of generational divides between commanders and generation Z. With the divides highlighted, it still appears that it is worth learning about and understanding. At the least, discussing individual nuances of how people develop, grow, and mature over the course of their lives, whether they are assigned to a generation cohort or not, will benefit leaders in their attempts to engage with their subordinates. The willingness to start a conversation that analyzes human dynamics in the workplace would be a step in the right direction, regardless of the angle that is taken in order to assist both leaders and followers as they interact in the workplace.

As leaders in other generations are quick to disparage Generation Z as "different than mine" or "lazy" or "distracted," General Martin Dempsey, the 18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would caution leaders to slow down on the aspersions towards the younger generation.⁸⁵ General Dempsey cautions leaders against writing off an entire generation, having heard from a myriad of leaders to include an Army Drill Sergeant, a CEO, and the commissioner of the National Basketball Association, who all shared concerns for relational dynamics between leaders and subordinates directed at Generation Z.⁸⁶ General Dempsey reflects on how these individuals all lamented issues with Gen Z that negatively impacted their respective organizations.⁸⁷ Then he argues that it is not the follower's fault that there are issues. The leader

bears the responsibility to understand how to follow, teach, develop, mold, and grow subordinates into who they should be and who the organization needs them to be to accomplish the mission. The leader-follower relationship is a two-way street, according to General Dempsey.⁸⁸ The responsibility requires proactive leadership by commanders, who are ultimately responsible for the development of their subordinates. General Dempsey asserts that the "issues of – inattentiveness, the propensity to be distracted, and unhappiness— hint at a single factor, one that's bigger and more interesting, and that we may actually be able to do something about: young (and not-so-young) men and women, regardless of occupation, status, and affluence, think less and less today about what they should reasonably expect of each other as leaders and followers. They lack a common baseline of expectations."⁸⁹ It is harder and harder to create this sense of belonging with all the stimuli and scrutiny that face today's workforce and fix this problem, and Gen Dempsey argues that one must remember how to follow first in order to lead better, not forgetting what it is like to be a subordinate.⁹⁰ Through learning and reflecting on how to follow, one can better understand the subordinates being lead.⁹¹

The following are recommendations for ways in which the identified understand gaps between commander's and generation Z can be addressed:

First, it would be helpful to incorporate the teachings that have been highlighted in this thesis regarding generational differences. It is not to say that the Air Force must adopt generational studies or lifespan thinking, but it could serve officers well to consider the individuals they lead through study and analysis of the literature and research on generational differences that are out there. As Dr. Arynas points out, many leadership models leave out the human who is being led, so it would be prudent for Air University to start looking into these fields and studies to see what would be worthwhile to add to the officer PME curriculum. In

addition, there are numerous firms that offer coaching and teaching about leading and working in multi-generational work forces that could provide a starting point or training as part of the PME curriculum. At the very least, the studying of generational differences would provide a new perspective on human dynamics that is currently not being provided to the officer corps and challenge assumptions and stereotypical generalities made by leaders within the Air Force, particularly towards this youngest generation. It might also start some conversations that need to happen for everyone's enlightenment helping to build better, more cohesive teams.

Second, the unit climate assessment processes within the Air Force could use an overhaul regarding the timeline in which they are required to be accomplished. Currently, the Air Force requires that all new squadron commanders accomplish a Defense Equal Opportunity Climate Survey (DEOCS) within 120 calendar days of assuming command and annually thereafter.⁹² This requirement, while rightfully needed to get feedback, does not allow a commander to get off on the right foot in command. Upon receiving the climate survey results, it is often very unclear when the "command team" or "commander" is addressed in the survey which commander is being referenced, as by this point a commander has been sitting in the seat for anywhere from a couple to six months. The DEOCS survey provides a good tool for commanders as it allows demographics (age, gender, race) to be identified for the respondents, while non-attributable for the respondent. This data set and suggestions, or items that need attention, being brought up before a commander takes command would be immensely helpful for a new commander, who could then see how the generational cohorts of the unit feel, as the demographics are often spread between the eighteen-year-old Airmen to the fifty-year-old civil service employee, who have varying needs, wants, and hopes for the unit and its incoming commander. The Air Force could learn from the Marine Corps in the manner they do their command climate surveys. Marine

Administrative Message 291/19 requires that all commanders accomplish a climate survey 90 days prior to planned change of command and annually thereafter.⁹³ The outgoing commander then briefs the incoming command, allowing for a clear line in the sand of where the unit stands for strengths, weaknesses, and room for improvement that the new commander can focus on as required.

Third, the psychological contract desired by Generation Z makes for a unique demand on Air Force commanders and the squadron to ensure that the onboarding of Generation Z Airmen provides the necessary equipping desired by Gen Z and legitimately required, given the lack of work experience of the majority of Gen Z Airmen. Along with this is the desire for clear expectations (up and down the chain of command) as Gen Zers enter the squadron. The Air Force does not have a requirement for a formal onboarding process. As it stands, the respective squadron manages the reception of new Airmen into the organization, and as such, the onboarding process and expectations of new Airmen to organizations could use standardizing and reimagination to benefit the Gen Z Airmen. In particular, a more formalized onboarding process could benefit the Airmen and units in general, considering fifty percent of Gen Zers in the corporate work force desire to change jobs within the next two years.⁹⁴

Effective onboarding process can be done through the Four C's model. The Four C's are Compliance, Clarification, Culture, and Connection.⁹⁵ The onboarding focus on each of these four levels is needed in order to receive the member into the organization and get them off to a productive start and feeling like a member of the team. Compliance focuses on the basics of the organization's rules and regulations.⁹⁶ Clarification focuses on ensuring an employee understands their new job and the expectations of the organization.⁹⁷ Culture focuses on giving the employee an understanding of the norms of the organization.⁹⁸ Connection deals with the importance of

relationships and networks the employee needs to establish.⁹⁹ There are three levels of onboarding: passive, high potential, and proactive.¹⁰⁰ Passive onboarding is just as it sounds, it is the informal process of guiding new employees that is checklist driven, but it fails to dive into the cultural or connection points that need to be made to more greatly assist new employees in feeling welcome and a part of the team.¹⁰¹ High Potential onboarding covers compliance and clarification well; however, only some cultural and connection processes are in place leaving the new employee not fully immersed in the organization's culture or ability to connect with the team.¹⁰² Proactive gives the employees the full benefit of all the "C's" in order for them to reach their full potential in the organization and ensure they are an effective member of the workforce and are valued..¹⁰³

Onboarding Strategy Level	Compliance	Clarification	Culture	Connection
1 Passive	YES	SOME	LITTLE/ NONE	LITTLE/ NONE
2 High Potential	YES	YES	SOME	SOME
3 Proactive	YES	YES	YES	YES

Figure 4 – Onboarding Strategy Levels

Approximately fifty percent of organizations utilize the passive onboarding process, thirty percent utilize the high potential onboarding process, and only twenty percent of organizations utilize the proactive onboarding process.¹⁰⁴ A renewed focus on onboarding Airmen and members of the squadron could greatly help to create a better psychological contract for Generation Z Airmen, commanders, and the squadron's leadership team, filling in the gaps of what Generation Z desires as they enter the workforce.

Conclusion

Steven Covey points out in his book *Seven Habits of a Highly Effective Leader* that leadership takes proactivity. It takes inward reflection and understanding that “powerful leadership” must look for and adapt to the changes within an organization to make sure resources are moving in the right direction.¹⁰⁵ “If industries do not monitor the environment, including their work teams, and exercise the creative leadership to keep headed in the right direction, no amount of management expertise can keep them from failing.”¹⁰⁶ This requires commanders to be willing to adapt leadership skills through better understanding of Generation Z and better connection with Generation Z. The hope is that this is the start of a discussion in order to more effectively understand the Generation Z Airmen that commanders are charged to lead, as well as the multi-generational workforce that is the United States Air Force. These shifts are not to cause more work for commanders; they are simply recommendations to alter ongoing processes in order to make current processes more effective and beneficial for the future of our Air Force and Airmen. This should start the conversation on whether the current way of understanding people is the best way and make sure the Air Force is not stagnant in how it approaches, interacts with, and leads member of Generation Z. When this is done well, all generations of Airmen (military and civilian) within the Air Force will benefit from a better understanding of the most important resource available – our people.

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