

‘Talkin’ ‘Bout My Generation’:

**Older, Unemployed Workers Critique the Workplace Orientations of
Millennials, Boomers, and the Silent Generation***

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Introduction

When I met 60-year old Helen in August 2013, she had two advanced degrees – Masters and JD – and was working part-time as a human resources consultant. Helen’s previous full-time hours were reduced because her employer had lost a lucrative contract. This was not the only employment predicament Helen recently encountered. From 2007 to 2009, Helen weathered four job losses that had overturned her middle-class life:

I lost everything during that ... two and a half years of unemployment. Everything! ... My townhome was foreclosed on. My credit was destroyed... I had nothing. I was living on money from friends and a little bit of money my mother would give me; she was making my car payments. I had nothing. I was getting food stamps ... [and] I was getting welfare.

When she spoke further about the nature of her consulting work, Helen mentioned she teaches organizations how to “manage and motivate” different generations at work. Helen referenced the Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y – otherwise known as “the Millennials” – and shared some insights into the types of employment “incentives” that encouraged these generations to thrive in the workplace. Similar comments are found in popular management books, which further suggest generational differences can become magnified in the workplace and lead to intergenerational conflict (e.g., Zemke, Raines and Filipczak 1999; Lancaster and Stillman 2003; Johnson and Johnson 2010; Grubb 2017).

In this paper, I sociologically examine the narratives a larger group of older, white-collar workers – which included Helen – constructed about themselves and two additional generations: parents and younger workplace colleagues. The data informing this account are derived from in-depth, qualitative interviews I conducted from July 2013 to October 2014. All of the interviewees were over 50 years of age and had experienced job loss sometime between 2007 and 2014, a timespan marked by the Great Recession and its long-lasting impact on the U.S. economy. Like thousands of other older Americans who lost jobs in this same historical moment, most of my interviewees encountered difficulties acquiring new employment. Many individuals attributed their misfortune to ageism in the labor market.

Perhaps because age was at the forefront of their minds, interviewees also shared thoughts about different generations in relation to the workplace. Two themes are particularly noteworthy: recognition of the dramatically different work lives and retirements their parents had as members of the *Silent Generation*; and characterizations of generation gaps between themselves, the *Boomers*, and *Millennial* colleagues. As I will argue, these comments reflect the unique socio-economic position of the Boomer generation: they came of age in a historical moment characterized by economic growth and expansion, and paired with an employment contract that promoted lifetime employment. When the Boomers experienced late-career job loss, a new managerial discourse emphasized individual autonomy and a short-term orientation toward the employment relationship (Lester et al. 2003).

I begin this paper by briefly reviewing what sociologists and others mean by the concept of “generation.” This discussion is followed by a more detailed overview of the contrasting socio-economic contexts in which Boomers first came of age and later experienced late-career job loss.

What is a generation?

When Karl Mannheim (1928/1952) wrote his seminal essay, “The Problem of Generations,” he argued for sociological study of people born at the same moment in historical time. As Mannheim believed, when young people¹ experience a momentous event – for example, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, Woodstock – they organically develop a unified consciousness that informs future attitudes and behaviors, and instills a shared sense of belonging. The idea that defining historical moments can produce a collective mindset and greater unity within a youth cohort lives on in other scholarship (Strauss and Howe 1991; Rudolph and Zacher 2017), the popular media (Meisner 2020), and in a public who routinely encounters generational rhetoric in the media landscape (Rudolph and Zacher 2020).

¹ More specifically, individuals between the ages of 17 to 25 (Mannheim 1928/1952).

While Mannheim defined generations by a singular birth year, today generations are popularly distinguished by a span of birth years associated with a demographic trend. For example, Pew Research Center (2015) defines the Baby Boomers as a generation born in the United States from 1946, the end of World War II, to 1964. This time span coincides with a sharp increase in fertility rates and ends shortly before their precipitous decline; this moment is also characterized by considerable social upheaval within U.S. society and beyond (Bristow 2019). However, the precise years defining a generation varies from account to account. Strauss and Howe (1991) use an earlier time-span, 1943 to 1960, to classify the Baby Boom generation. Giddens, by way of contrast, limits a generation to a single decade: born in the 1950s, or the 1960s, and so on (as cited by Fineman 2011).

Contemporary sociologists recognize that broad generational boundaries are somewhat arbitrary. They additionally assert that differences derived from race, socio-economic status, cultural origin, and other personal characteristics are too substantial to support the claim that people born across a particular timespan have a shared habitus (Fineman 2011). However, life course scholars have found that large-scale events transpiring in the formative years of childhood and adolescence indeed leave an imprint on adult behaviors, attitudes, and paths chosen (Elder 1974; Rudolph and Zacher 2017). The idea of a complex interplay between historical time and human lives resonates with my central claim in this paper: two specific socio-economic and cultural contexts shaped the career trajectories of my Boomer interviewees, and later informed their comments about different generations in relation to the workplace.

Socio-economic and cultural context of Boomer job loss

Over the course of their careers, the individuals recruited to this study negotiated two divergent labor markets: an “age of security” and an “age of flexibility” (Kalleberg 2011). Their early workplace socialization occurred in an age of security. Interviewees experienced this socialization directly – through their initial labor market participation – and indirectly – through the employment experiences of elder family members, senior colleagues, and mentors. By the time of their late-career dismissal, interviewees

were entrenched in a neoliberal age of flexibility. These two eras have contrasting assumptions about the employment relationship.

In North America, the age of security was fueled by unprecedented economic growth and expansion. Employers in the post-World War II decades offered various enticements to attract and retain committed employees. For white-collar workers, internal promotion systems incentivized job performance while also emphasizing loyalty to a single employer. For blue-collar workers, a robust union environment ensured well-paying jobs and seniority-based promotions that similarly inspired long-term worker commitment (Hollister 2011). Other employment protections included employer-supported pension plans and health insurance (Kalleberg 2011). The net result was a particular social contract: faithful and competent employees generally could expect stable employment; a steady, living wage; and numerous benefits that strengthened employee commitment (Cappelli et al. 1997).

The first signs of flexibility emerged in the early 1980s when numerous structural factors coalesced in corporate efforts to reduce employment costs and redirect attention to profit and share price (Gershon 2017; Sennett 2006). By the late 1990s, business organizations routinely engaged in workforce reductions, targeting employees across industries, occupations, and occupational hierarchies (Lane 2011; Mendenhall et al. 2008; Sharone 2014; Snyder 2016). At the same time that organizational practices embraced dispensability, white-collar employees began experiencing workplace conditions traditionally reported by manual laborers: intensification of the pace of work, increased workloads, higher productivity expectations, and employee confusion stemming from continuously changing management strategies (Crowley et al. 2010; Kelly and Moen 2020).

Today, staff reductions are considered a commonsense business strategy to be employed both in response to unstable market conditions and as a means to achieve strategic financial goals (Gershon 2017). Accompanying the loss of job security and stability are other organizational practices focused on shifting the burden of employment costs from employers to employees. For example, the number of workers with employer-supported health insurance and pension plans has steadily declined since the late 1970s (Kalleberg 2011). Defined-benefit pensions, which provide predetermined disbursements to retired

workers, have largely been replaced with defined-contribution plans that require individuals to invest savings in the stock market where growth can be contingent on investor savvy and market stability. During the Great Recession and its sluggish recovery, individuals nearing retirement lost sums of money substantial enough to derail many retirement plans (Wolff, Owens and Burak 2011). In short, the age of flexibility has introduced risks that individuals did not assume in the age of security.

Additional pressures arise from broader cultural changes accompanying the transition from the age of security to the age of flexibility. While the former period emphasized “we’re all in this together,” the current era is characterized by the mantra, “you’re on your own” (Kalleberg 2011: 31). This ideological shift from the collective good to individual autonomy was assisted by a neoliberal revolution, the driving force behind the age of flexibility (Cabanas and Illouz 2019). Larger cultural notions emphasizing “personal responsibility” and “taking ownership of one’s own life” now inform a variety of political, economic, and social spheres (Kalleberg 2011: 31). In the workplace, these ideas have enormous consequences for employees. White-collar workers are now expected to expand their human capital in preparation for the potential of job loss incurred through organizational downsizing initiatives.

The Boomer generation in my sample of interviewees has consequently experienced – *in vivo* – a major organizational and ideological transformation. They began their careers in a historical moment that offered job stability and secure retirements for valued employees, and experienced late-career job loss in an era that privileges individual autonomy over corporate responsibility. One can imagine the psychological difficulties of negotiating two contrary sets of employment expectations in a single career. Younger generations such as the Millennials come to the workplace already socialized in the ideas of the neoliberal flexible economy. In this regard, they lack lived experience with an earlier set of conditions more favorable to the physical, mental, and financial health of employees. This contrast reinforces a central tenet of life course theory: historical change impacts different generations of people differently (Elder, Kirkpatrick and Crosnoe 2003). Before moving on to my research findings, I return to describing my data, method, and analytical approach.

Data and Method

My larger qualitative study broadly focuses on how involuntary unemployment is experienced by people 50 years of age or older. Interviewees became jobless through downsizings, reorganizations, business closings, and other reactions to the Great Recession and its prolonged recovery. I chose to focus on older workers in part because individuals 55 years of age and over incurred the highest rates of joblessness lasting one year or longer (Pew Charitable Trusts 2012). Interviewees lived within a 75-mile radius of Minnesota's Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul, and they had been employed in the formal economy as either salaried or temporary employees, or as independent contractors.

Recruitment to the study spanned from July 2013 to October 2014 with three sampling strategies employed. First, I generated a convenience sample in a rural Minnesota city of approximately 20,000 people. Posters advertising the study, which I placed in popular locations throughout the community, invited individuals aged 50 years or older to "tell your story" about job loss due to the current downturn in the economy. News of the study soon spread to a more expansive geographic area by way of additional advertisement at several online and physical sites. Second, interviewees received flyers about the study, which I invited them to share with age-qualified spouses, friends, neighbors, and former coworkers in similar circumstances. I also disseminated details of the study to colleagues, students, and community leaders. This snowball strategy increased sample size and assisted in further expanding the study's geographic locus. Finally, to offset sample bias and maximize variability in reported experience, I conducted site-specific sampling at several organizations assisting unemployed workers from various socio-demographic backgrounds.

The final analytic sample consists of 62 individuals. Interviewees lived in 13 contiguous counties and in three distinct geographic regions: rural towns, suburbs, and the metropolitan area of Minneapolis/St. Paul. Minnesota is home to a broad range of businesses and industries that differ by type and size and thus, there is variability in the industries in which interviewees were once employed. Occupational diversity is also represented in the sample. My sampling strategies were designed to encourage racial, religious, and class diversity; however, my recruitment effort ultimately yielded a

sample that is White, predominantly Christian, and – on the basis of educational achievement and occupations held – middle to upper-middle class.

While data collection is complete, I continue to analyze interview transcripts. Therefore, in this paper, I focus on comments provided by 48 interviewees, slightly more than three-quarters of the full sample. This sub-sample consists of 25 interviewees who were male-presenting and 23 who were female-presenting. Year of birth ranges from 1946 to 1962, with 59 years as the average age of interviewees. Additional summary statistics for the 48 interviewees are presented in Table 1.

- Table 1 here -

I conducted semi-structured interviews in a conversational manner. The interviews were exploratory rather than hypothesis driven with the following topics covered: interviewees' socio-demographic background, occupational identity, and dismissal experience; perception of the effects of job loss on self, relationships, and finances; process of searching for new employment; and reflections on the total experience. It was not unusual for interviews to take two-hours or longer to complete and in that time, I did not perceive any hesitation or self-censoring on the part of interviewees; at the end of the process, individuals frequently mentioned that the experience felt therapeutic. I did not ask questions about generations but occasionally interviewees volunteered details about their frugality and careful money management, habits some individuals attributed to their parents. Sometimes I responded with a question like, "Are you the child of Depression-era parents?" Despite this single probe, I was surprised to hear interviewees more broadly reference various generations repeatedly, both within and across interviews.

Several undergraduate research assistants transcribed the interviews and also participated in initially coding the transcripts. Each transcript was read several times, both by myself and my research assistants. To ensure intercoder reliability, our process was guided by a set of coding criteria, which

defined themes and specified the types of quotations that fit within each theme. Quotations initially identified as relevant to the theme of “generations” were copied into an “excerpt file” (Weiss 1994). I later reviewed the excerpt file using Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant comparison method. In this regard, I read and reread quotes to identify smaller sets of themes, and then focused on establishing internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton 2002).

Findings

Interviewees frequently mentioned the difficulties they encountered as older workers who were seeking new employment. They presented strategies adopted to hide their advanced age (e.g., coloring grey hair, losing weight, or omitting job experiences from their resume); they also discussed particular types of jobs they wanted to avoid because the physical conditions of work were considered difficult to manage with an aging body. Interviewees perceived age discrimination, both in the context of their dismissal and inability to acquire new employment. Many interviewees were convinced that their advanced age was viewed negatively by prospective employers.

Thirty-four individuals – seventy-one percent of the 48-person sample – additionally referenced generations when discussing their job loss experience. Such comments are perhaps not surprising considering there are six generations employed in the Twin Cities greater metro area labor force: Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers, the Silent and Greatest Generations (DEED 2019). When interviewees addressed generational differences, their comments mainly focused on three specific groups: themselves – Baby Boomers, their parents – the Silent Generation, and younger Millennial colleagues.

Individuals spoke about their own generational identity without being prompted. A few interviewees referred to themselves as Baby Boomers or they called themselves “older” workers or “the older generation.” Some interviewees also described themselves in relation to defining events or motivations associated with the Boomers. For example, 62-year-old Benjamin stated that “the dawning of

the Age of Aquarius” informed a desire in his young self to seek employment that would make a “difference” in the world. Similar sentiments were expressed by 61-year-old Isaac: “for those of us who grew up in the 60s and 70s, we wanted to change the world ... and some of us did.” Helen reminisced about key events witnessed in her formative years including the Vietnam War protests and Civil Rights Movement. She and Stephanie and Meg also referenced the implications of women’s increasing labor force participation rates as they were beginning their own careers. Stephanie, a 60-year-old former creative director, had fond memories of this time: “women were just hitting strides and it was great. It was great. Yeah, really good.”

Interviewees also drew numerous contrasts between themselves and the Silent Generation and Millennials. Below I document how interviewees framed themselves vis-à-vis these two groups. In the passages that follow, filler words such as “yeah,” “um,” “like,” “so,” and “you know” are mostly eliminated. Anonymity is established through the use of pseudonyms and by omitting places of employment and other biographical details that have the potential to reveal identities.

The Silent Generation

In a first theme emerging from the data, interviewees established career and retirement differences between themselves and parents who were members of the Silent Generation. Born from 1928 through to 1945, the Silent Generation experienced the Great Depression and World War II as children (Pew Research Center 2015).² Interviewees, however, did not employ this nomenclature; they more commonly referred to parents as the “generation that grew up in the Depression.” Before reviewing comments in more detail, it is important to restate that interviewees racially identified as White. In this regard, their perceptions of a former time period are filtered by the various privileges Whiteness offered their parents (Wilkerson 2010).

² Because I did not ask interviewees for their parents’ birth years, it is possible that some parents were born before 1928, which would signify they are members of the Greatest Generation. I use the terminology of the Silent Generation because several interviewees referenced the Great Depression as a childhood experience for their parents.

Christopher, Sean, and Isaac spoke about the financial assistance their Depression-era parents provided after each experienced job loss due to the Great Recession. For example, when 61-year-old Isaac was unable to secure steady employment after his 2008 dismissal, his wealthy father subsequently “passed on a sizable amount of money” that funded a comfortable early retirement for Isaac and his wife. Fifty-four-year-old Christopher, a project manager who lost his job in 2011, also noted the financial support he received from his widowed mother. Christopher attributed his mother’s generosity in part to her experience of living through the Great Depression: “Coming out of the Depression ... many of them put things together in a way so they could retire ... comfortably ... and help their kids, [and] keep helping their kids.” Christopher additionally acknowledged the lucrative salary his father earned in the Post-World War II economy, which he discovered after his father died:

“My father ... had done what some tax attorneys will tell you to do: he had every tax return from 1948, their entire marriage. It was kind of fascinating to look at those, at least briefly, and to see what a small sum of money he made in 1950 ... but then at the end, he was in the \$200,000 to \$300,000 range. He was doing incredibly well.

Not every interviewee had parents who were as generous as Christopher’s widowed mother. Fifty-three-year-old Sara was furious that her mother and father, “Depression-era babies,” refrained from providing any financial assistance after Sara’s 2011 layoff due to economic restructuring. Two years later, at her 2013 interview, Sara reported she was earning \$13 an hour at a job she acquired through a temp agency; this meager income was a considerable departure from her former middle-class salary.

Other interviewees spoke about the money mindset their Depression-era parents instilled. For example, Tad’s parents, whom he identified as “children of the Depression,” influenced his savings habits to the extent that he could embark on an early retirement after his 2012 downsizing: “my parents are both children of the Depression and that’s rubbed off in a major way. The house is paid off, I had the money for my kids’ college.... Maybe we need to make a few choices going forward, but we’re fine.” Felix, a 58-year-old former data manager who was similarly contemplating early retirement, also benefited from the

financial habits his Depression-era parents modeled. In the following quote, Felix expresses gratitude for the “very simple life” he experienced as a child:

I remember when I was young, my dad just started his own business in the early ‘60s so I was about 7, 8, 9 years old.... One thing I do remember is having oatmeal for dinner, or an egg and toast. And I didn’t feel like I was missing out on anything. And then, you know, ... my dad fixed everything.

Felix’s comment, “I didn’t feel like I was missing out on anything,” suggests a nostalgic view of the prudent ways of a previous generation. Sixty-year-old Helen crafted a romantic account of how her working-class father spent his retirement years:

[My father] retired at ... 60. He spent 25 years on a rail road pension just hanging out. Because it was like, oh my God, all [my parents] did was just hang out – for 25 years. They went to Ireland, they went to Hawaii.... All they did was play for 25 years.... His gross income was probably \$30,000 or something. I mean everything was paid for; it’s ... completely fascinating ... that anybody could live like that.

The awe Helen expresses conveys an awareness that her father’s retirement experience is unfathomable from a contemporary standpoint. Many interviewees recognized the extent to which their financial standing was diminished in the current socio-economic context, regardless of their white-collar and educational backgrounds. As 57-year old Dawn stated, “it’s bleak; it is comically dark; it is depressing. I’m of the generation that was supposed to have it better than my parents ... [but] this generation does not have it as good as the one before. It is really sad.”

Some interviewees acknowledged stressful interactions with elderly parents who were unaware of the employment landscape older, unemployed white-collar workers negotiated from 2007 to 2014. Fifty-eight-year-old Mark, a former account manager who had difficulty securing steady employment after his 2009 dismissal, was particularly annoyed by his mother-in-law’s frequent question: “Well, how many jobs have you applied for today?” Mark’s irritation stemmed from a series of constraints he and other interviewees reported: limited job opportunities for older white-collar workers; tedious and time-

consuming online employment application systems; the necessity of making time for networking; and employer responses that suggested a preference for hiring younger workers.

In a final set of comments in the Silent Generation theme, several interviewees demonstrated their awareness of how the employment context had transitioned since their now elderly parents were in the labor force. Fifty-seven-year-old Charles fleshed out this argument by drawing on the example set by his father-in-law:

My father-in-law ... worked at [his employer] for 42 years. Forty-two years. And you don't see that anymore. You don't see people staying with one company [for] more than two or three years now. And I think that's the accepted role of employees today. I think the expectation is employees are not going to stay. And I think the companies ... in turn treat the employees as temporary.

Charles's acknowledgement of the flexible employment contract, one that treats employees as "temporary," is repeated by Margaret, a clerical worker who was downsized from a job she loved in 2012. Margaret began her commentary by sharing some employment advice once offered by her father:

My father always said, you find a good job [and] you stay there, because that's the generation he was from. You find one, you stay there. And I think nowadays you don't. You get your experience, you get what you can from that company, learn as much as you can, and you move on and take your experience and get more money.

Margaret's transactional view – "you get what you can" from your employer and then "move on" – is revealing. At 61 years of age, Margaret's career began in an era characterized by job security; she and other interviewees now appear to have internalized the idea of a short-term employment relationship, which emerged with the neoliberal flexible economy.

The Millennials

In a second theme, interviewees shared comments about younger colleagues, whom I call "Millennials." This generation was born after 1980, which makes them "the first generation to come of

age in the new millennium” (Pew Research Center 2015: 3). Individuals refrained, however, from using this terminology. Sara and Helen instead mentioned “Generation Y,” an alternative moniker for the Millennials;³ other interviewees used phrases such as “the younger generation” or “kids today.” Together, interviewees shared numerous perceived shortcomings of the Millennials.

Popular management manuals suggest that multiple generations in the workplace will “clash” (Zemke, Raines and Filipczak 1999; Grubb 2017), “collide” (Lancaster and Stillman 2003), or create “friction” (Johnson and Johnson 2010). Intergenerational conflict was indeed apparent in many interviewee comments. A few individuals, for example, made off-the-cuff remarks that belittled or diminished the Millennial workforce. Fifty-five-year-old Victoria and 59-year-old Sally shared a fear of finding jobs that required working “with a bunch of 20-somethings,” a phrase articulated – word-for-word – by both interviewees. Fifty-eight-year-old Kaleb mentioned a job opportunity that also attracted the attention of “two young whippersnappers,” a term for young people that is formally construed as having negative connotations. Sixty-eight-year-old Cat referred to the “one little 30-year-old in the room” who was downsized at the same time as Cat.

When 61-year-old Stephanie discussed the employment search she initiated after a 2008 job loss, she characterized the individuals reading her resume in the following manner: “20-year-old HR people, what do they know?” Fifty-three-year-old Sara also voiced a complaint about a younger “HR person” who appeared to lose interest in hiring Sara after reviewing her resume:

She asked me to send her a resume and I did; and she said, ‘I want to talk to you early next week,’ and I said, ‘your schedule is busier than mine so just give me a couple of dates and I’ll respond as quickly as possible;’ and then I never heard [back].... I think this happens with a lot of Generation Y – she’s Generation Y – and I think she looked at my resume and went, oh well, she’s kind of older.

³ At one point in their respective transcripts, Sara and Helen also referenced Generation X. In all other quotes about “the younger generation,” I infer from the comments shared that interviewees were referencing workers who were in their twenties and early thirties.

Sara's conclusion that she was a victim of ageist hiring practices perhaps reveals an insecurity created by a historical moment with high rates of long-term unemployment amongst older workers. In 2014, almost half of unemployed workers age 55 years and older reported an unemployment spell lasting 27 weeks or longer (Kosanovich and Theodossious Sherman 2015).

Interviewee comments also exposed other personal insecurities. Fifty-four-year-old Lyle, a former director of sales, mentioned more than once that he lacked "a four-year college degree;" this educational level was a minimum requirement for the types of jobs Lyle was seeking. He was particularly agitated that his "30-plus years of work experience" could not compete with "some kid [who] comes out of college with great grades and a marketing degree." Lyle continued his rant by mocking the sales approach he believed this young person was apt to have: "'Can I just text him?' No, you can't; you have to go out and sell it." While 64-year-old Marie celebrated her ability to "work right alongside people much younger than me and be right there with the technology, the software, ... the understanding," 59-year-old Martie appeared concerned that her employment prospects might be jeopardized because she was "part of a generation that wasn't born to technology, where it's just a part of how I think."

Interviewees also mentioned numerous shortcomings of former Millennial colleagues. These co-workers were characterized as being "clueless" or "lacking expertise." Sixty-one-year-old Margaret shared her disgust with younger workers who did not demonstrate full commitment to the employer:

They don't care. They don't put [in] 100 percent. It's a job, it's money, I'm going home, that's it.

You know, ... we have so much to offer and what are we doing? Being greeters at Wal-Mart, or being receptionists, volunteering our time at the hospitals, and stuff like that (sigh). It's sad....

The older generation has so much more to offer than the younger people.

In this next passage, 59-year-old Sally critiqued younger colleagues for not wanting to "pay their dues." Midway through her comment, Sally switches from "they" to "I," in order to signify the phrasing a Millennial employee might use when asserting themselves in the workplace:

They're not willing to spend the time to, how do I want to say this (sigh). They don't see that they have to pay their dues in any way, shape, or form. If I don't like it, I'm going to move on to the

next thing. And then the other piece of it is, well, I've been here six months, and I've done a good job, now I need a raise, or I need to be promoted; they want to go through those stages quickly. These comments reveal a paradox. On the one hand, interviewees demonstrate an awareness of the flexible employment relationship that emerged with the rise of neoliberalism. Yet, on the other hand, they criticize younger workers who model the autonomy, individual self-interest, and economic gain that neoliberal actors are socialized to embrace (Brown 2015). This finding suggests that the employment socialization interviewees received in their formative years, during the age of security, continues to inform how they view work and the employment relationship.

Conclusion

This paper examines the narratives a select group of older, unemployed white-collar workers constructed about themselves and two additional groups – the Silent Generation and the Millennials. Interviewees were Baby Boomers who experienced job loss between 2007 and 2014, a time span that captures the onset of the Great Recession and its ensuing jobless recovery. This was the longest downturn the U.S. had weathered in seven decades. In this tumultuous moment, older unemployed workers nationwide were vulnerable to long-term unemployment and downward mobility; this was also a common fate within my sample of interviewees. The life course adage, historical change impacts different generations of people differently (Elder, Kirkpatrick and Crosnoe 2003), forms the backbone of my approach in this paper. I situate interviewees in two socio-economic contexts: the age of security, which they experienced in their formative years, and the neoliberal flexible economy, which is the time in which they experienced late-career job loss. The generational comments shared with me reflect these two larger socio-economic contexts.

When speaking about the Silent Generation, interviewees acknowledged the financial support some of their parents were able to provide after job loss. While parents were foremost identified as children of the Great Depression, this generation was also employed in the booming labor market of the

post-World War II economy, which allowed them achieve financial independence in their senior years. Parents' workplace experiences in the age of security also shaped the financial wisdom and job advice they imparted to their children: "you find a good job [and] you stay there," as Margaret noted. While interviewees also began their work lives in the age of security, they experienced late-career job loss in a different socio-economic and cultural context. The comments interviewees shared demonstrate their recognition that a new era is currently in place: one that emphasizes a short-term relationship between employers and employees, and with almost none of the employment benefits that resulted in financial agency and security for many White families in the post-World War II economy.

Additionally, the historic transition to a neo-liberal flexible economy appears to leave an imprint on specific remarks interviewees shared about the Millennials. This younger generation of workers, according to interviewees, lacks loyalty, skill, competence, drive, and dedication. When younger workers engaged in workplace behaviors that demonstrated their internalization of neoliberal employment expectations, they also were the object of derision within my sample of Baby Boomers. Perhaps interviewees did not recognize that the unfamiliar work ethic of the Millennial generation might be an appropriate response to the employment conditions of the neoliberal flexible economy.

While management gurus claim that conflict between Millennials and Boomers is a natural reflection of their clashing group personalities, I instead argue that employer responses to the neoliberal flexible economy are partly responsible for driving a wedge between workers of different age cohorts. The insecurities expressed by interviewees when critiquing the Millennial labor force make this argument clear. Interviewees understood who and what contemporary employers reward: youthful workers, technological savvy, and a college diploma. Most of my interviewees had a college diploma; a few individuals mentioned they were comfortable using technology but others were not; and all of the interviewees had aged out of their youth long ago. Now they were perceiving age discrimination, both in the workplace and in the larger labor market.

Neoliberal ideology is recognized for its ability to divide and isolate socio-economic groups from one another (Monbiot 2016). Generational rhetoric, which appears to be intensifying especially on social

media (Meisner 2020), also serves a similar function. In the workplace, attention is diverted from addressing age-based inequalities and scarce resources, and redirected to managing the competing mindsets of different generational groups. In classic neoliberal fashion, the individual is seen as responsible for ameliorating problems rooted in larger socio-economic and cultural transformations.

Table 1 Sample characteristics (N=48)	
Interviewee Characteristics	N
Gender	
Male presenting	25
Female presenting	23
Age at Interview	
50-59	27
60-68	21
Marital Status	
Married/cohabitating/significant other	34
Widowed	1
Single	13
Residential Location	
Urban	9
Suburban	23
Rural	16
Occupation at Dismissal	
Management	24
Office and administrative support	6
Computer related occupation	5
Sales and related occupation	1
Healthcare practitioners and support occupation	3
Architecture and engineering occupation	1
Miscellaneous	7
Year of Dismissal	
2007	3
2008	4
2009	6
2010	2
2011	9
2012	9
2013	9
2014	6

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