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Variation in career and workplace attitudes by generation, gender, and culture differences in career perceptions in the United States and China

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to compare and understand how age, gender and culture affect individual career and work-related attitudes in Chinese and American samples.

Design/methodology/approach – Online and printed questionnaires were administered to employees and managers in China, whereas in the USA, faculty, staff and students at a Midwestern university responded to an online survey. Snowball sampling technique was used to collect data. Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to test the hypothesis.

Findings – The study showed different work values and attitudes in the workplace between Chinese and the US samples, and indicated the specific influences that national culture has on them. Culture affects generational changes; generational differences in the US sample are bigger than in Chinese sample; work values differ across generations and cultures; traditional gender role differences persist more strongly across generations in Chinese sample than in the US sample.

Research limitations/implications – Generalizability issues; cross-sectional data.

Practical implications – US-based multi-national corporations need to understand these differences and better manage their diverse employees operating in China.

Originality/value – This study compared generation, culture and gender differences simultaneously; parallel groups at similar life stages were used by basing the boundaries of each generation on the distinct cultural events of each nation. This approach is more consistent with generation definitions than by using influential specific events of each country, respectively. Useful to managers, it will provide guidance for understanding work values and attitudes across gender and generations in the USA and China. Most benefit will occur for US based multinational companies that have Chinese operations, and manage employees with cultural, gender and generational differences.

Keywords Gender, China, USA, National cultures, Generational differences, Generation, Career perception, Gender differences, Cultural differences, Manager expectations

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Economic development and globalization make today's workplace more complex than ever before. Improved general health conditions lead to prolonged career life for employees. Many women joining the work force are finding their careers particularly demanding. Multi-national corporations (MNCs) that manage employees from different cultures face workplace cross-cultural conflicts. Today's managers are significantly challenged to not only manage employees from different backgrounds effectively, but also understand the many different individual needs that stem from gender, generation, and culture. Ineffectiveness in dealing with the latter could lead to negative employee outcomes such as turnover, low commitment and counter-productive behaviors, as well as undesirable organizational outcomes, i.e. low productivity, shrunk market share, or even closed facilities. The purpose of our study is to untangle dissimilar career-related perceptions that different generations of males and females have in the USA and China. It is particularly important for the US-based MNCs to understand these differences for several reasons, the first one being Chinese economic growth including the increasingly huge market that has attracted large investment from the USA. American investors are facing the challenge of understanding and managing Chinese employees. Also, Chinese women are considered an important part of the workforce, making it rare for them to stay at home and furthering the need for American companies operating in China to understand their various needs. Finally, the Chinese government has proposed an extension of the legal retirement age, making it possible that more generations will co-exist in the workplace. All of this leads to the need for US-based MNCs to pay particular attention to the generational, cultural and gender differences of their employees operating in China.

Human resource professionals and researchers are becoming much more interested in generational differences in the workplace (e.g. Cennamo and Gardner, 2008; Joshi *et al.*, 2010; Parry and Urwin, 2011; Cogin, 2012). While there has been extensive research on Western (mostly USA) contexts (Egri and Ralston, 2004; Hurst and Good, 2009; Parry and Urwin, 2011), limited research has examined the existence of generational differences in the work values and beliefs in other countries (Shragay and Tziner, 2011; Twenge, 2010; Yi *et al.*, 2010). In addition, differences within a generation and complexity between generations may explain the conflicting results of generational studies; the impact of gender and culture on generational differences in the workplace has not been thoroughly analyzed (Inkson *et al.*, 2007; Dencker *et al.*, 2008; Parry and Urwin, 2011). While a few studies (e.g. Cogin, 2012) compared generational differences across cultures, they used the same time frame across different countries; while many events have been significant globally, this practice does not fit with the common definition of generations focussing on shared events and social change affecting individual's attitudes and development. While some trends are universal, each country and culture faces unique challenges and changes. Thus, we defined parallel groups at similar life stages but based the boundaries of each generation on the distinct cultural events of each nation.

In this study we explore the gap in the literature to examine the influences of gender and culture in the generation research. Specifically, we investigate the generational and gender differences in career perceptions within the USA and China to compare career attitudes in the two nations. We also examine the gender differences in career perceptions among generational counterparts in the two countries.

Review of literature

Overview of generations

Karl Mannheim introduced the concept of generation in the 1920s and defined it as “a group of people who share a common habitus, nexis, and culture [...] a collective memory that serves to integrate” (Mannheim, 1952). The collective memory are embedded with an identifiable group of individuals that share common birth years, location, age, major life events, and social changes at critical developmental period (Kupperschmidt, 2000). These background events influence and define each generation, and they impact individual’s thoughts, values, attitudes, and behaviors, which presumably differ across generations because of different generations, as a stable generational identity throughout a generation’s life time (Egri and Ralston, 2004). Thus, generation is considered a subculture in a nation that reflects the value orientations emphasized during particular historical period within a country (Egri and Ralston, 2004). It should be noted that to discriminate among different generations, historical events in a particular location or country are as important as birth periods as the former shape the common beliefs and behaviors of individuals from the same location (Howe and Strauss, 2000). In other words, the difference of cultures, countries, and histories may shape different generations.

Generations in the USA and China

Generations in the USA are commonly labeled as the Baby Boomers (Boomers, born 1946-1964), Generation X (Gen X-ers, born 1965-1978), and the Generation Y (Gen Y-ers, born after 1979) (e.g. Strauss and Howe, 1991). The Baby Boomers respect authority (Hart, 2006), expect the best from life (Kupperschmidt, 2000), wish to have more control over their career life, and prefer a more consensual leadership style (Murphy, 2010). People in Generation X are considered “cynical, pessimistic, and individualistic” (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola and Sutton, 2002). They are family-oriented, pragmatic, and tolerant of both alternative lifestyles and cultural diversity (Morgan and Ribbens, 2006). They place more preference for flexible work arrangements, and financial leverage over patience and loyalty to employers. Generation Y is also called the “Millennials or the Next Generation, or the Digital Generation, Echo Boomers, Nexters, and the Boomlet” (Morgan and Ribbens, 2006, p. 6). They are considered confident, optimistic, collectivist and highly socialized (Huntley, 2006; Hart, 2006; Smola and Sutton, 2002). They prefer challenging work and seek opportunities to fulfill their potential and meet their need to succeed. Job security is not an important factor for them; change is usually acceptable (Hart, 2006).

In Chinese society, generations are usually labeled by birth decade, i.e. “Born in the 1960s,” “Born in the 1970s,” and “Born in the 1980s.” In this study, we adopted the following terms to define Chinese generations: Cultural Revolution (born 1961-1966), Social Reform (born 1971-1976), and Millennials (born 1981-1986) (Yi *et al.*, 2010).

The Cultural Revolution generation, or “Born in the 1960s,” experienced the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and extreme poverty in their youth (Yi *et al.*, 2010). They are considered the first generation in the history of China to engage in the deregulated economy and they consider financial security to be important (Yi *et al.*, 2010). The Social Reform generation, or “Born in the 1970s,” experienced drastic economic development in China during their formative years (Yi *et al.*, 2010). They are more realistic and pragmatic than the Cultural Revolution generation. They are thought of as the recipients of the benefits modernization has brought and generally enjoy and increased level of material prosperity. The Millennials generation, among many other

names, is most commonly labeled the “One Child Generation” (Yi *et al.*, 2010). The One Child Policy was launched in 1979 and only permitted urban families to have one child. As a result, the Millennials are usually the single child in the family and possess stereotypical traits such as being selfish, self-centered, rebellious and irresponsible. However, they are also characterized as having strong self-confidence, diverse interests, and strong need for self-improvement (China Youth Press, 1986). Inconsistent with the Chinese tradition, the Millennials emphasize differences and individualism (Liu, 2005).

Generational differences in the workplace

Empirical studies suggested inconsistent or mixed findings regarding generational differences in the workplace (both complementary and contradictory) (Dencker *et al.*, 2008; Parry and Urwin, 2011, Macky *et al.*, 2008; Sullivan *et al.*, 2009). For example, Parry and Urwin (2011) reviewed the diversity literature and summarized that generational differences were found in the Schwartz values (Lyons *et al.*, 2007), work values related to status and freedom (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008), motivational factors such as affiliation and power (Wong *et al.*, 2008), need for self-approval (Twenge and Campbell, 2008) and workplace fun (Lamm and Meeks, 2009). On the other hand, many studies do not find generational differences in the workplace in terms of work-related values (Jurkiewicz and Brown, 1998), work attitudes toward leadership (Levy *et al.*, 2005), extrinsic, social and altruism-related values (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008), and career perceptions (Yi *et al.*, 2010). To address the complexities in these findings, Dencker *et al.* (2008) developed a framework linking other factors such as gender and culture to the development of generational memories. Specifically, heterogeneity within generations may be more than between them (Eyerman and Turner, 1998), and the probability that significant differences of gender or culture within a generation could make it more difficult to distinguish the differences between generations.

A number of generation research studies examined gender effects in the workplace (e.g. Lippmann, 2008; Terjesen *et al.*, 2007). However, research along this line has not been fully investigated, being mostly concentrated within a single generational counterpart. Apart from gender, some studies examine the cultural effects in generation research by comparing workplace values and attitudes for people from different cultures (e.g. Hui-Chun and Miller, 2003, on Taiwanese and Western; Murphy *et al.*, 2004, on USA and Japan; Egri and Ralston, 2004, on USA and China; Cugin, 2012 on multiple countries). However, except for one study (Egri and Ralston, 2004), the above studies used the same birth period to define generations within different cultures, which is inconsistent with the assumption that generations are primarily defined by the critical events shaping their values and attitudes, thus undermining the validity of these comparisons.

In summary, studies have been focussing on work value differences in different generations within gender or national contexts (Inkson *et al.*, 2007; Granrose, 2007), but little attention has been paid to the generational effects that may differ within gender and culture (Parry and Urwin, 2011). In this study, we examine generation, gender and culture simultaneously by comparing the generational and gender effects on career perceptions from the US and Chinese respondents. In addition, we filled in a gap in the cross-cultural generational research by comparing patterns of different generational counterparts in two countries instead of using the ethnocentric methodology of directly comparing people born in the same time period from different nations, which deviates from the basic definition of generations (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

Hypotheses

Theoretical foundation

Overall, effective differences in cultural and gender in generational variations between the USA and China can be explained by institutional theories. Institutions are defined as the “cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior” (Scott, 1995, p. 33). The institutional structure of a nation, including culture, social norms, economic, legal and education systems, has a cognitive component, which consists of shared values, norms and perceptions (Wu *et al.*, 2008). This is in concert with the concept of generations, which means that generational counterparts are formed through shared values and perceptions. In other words, generations are formed indirectly by institutions in their development stage through the overall influence from formal constraints (e.g. legal systems, administrative rules and regulations) and informal constraints (e.g. culture, economy and social norms) (North, 1990). Not surprisingly, these constraints would exert their own influence on workplace attitudes and career perceptions in a generation through the cultural, economic, social factors (i.e. institutional forces) that formed the shared beliefs for a generation. Some institutional factors such as socio-economic factors are changing more rapidly in China than in the USA; some institutional factors such as culture has a strong, yet stable effect across generations in China. These differences in the changing paces in institutional forces between the two nations cause the variations of career perceptions and attitudes among different generations in the USA and China.

General differences in career and work place attitudes in US and China

Culture, defined as the “shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives that are transmitted across generations” (House *et al.*, 2001, pp. 494-495), carries collective characteristics stably across generations. Employees’ perceptions, values and behaviors in the workplace are significantly influenced by their national culture (Robbins *et al.*, 1998; Murphy *et al.*, 2004). The USA and China have significantly different cultural, social, political and economic contexts (Pan *et al.*, 1994), which produces different workplace attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, individualism is widely taken as an essential value in American culture while Chinese values put more emphasis on collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). Compared to Chinese, Americans are more self-centered, self-righteous and self-confident stemming from their individualistic values (Pan *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, we propose that:

H1a. The Americans evaluate themselves more positively on career-related characteristics than the Chinese.

The Chinese have higher values for power distance than the Americans (Hofstede, 2001). A paternalistic culture usually occurs in a society with high power distance and it is more possible to observe a paternalistic cultural relationship between managers and employees in China than in America (Aycan *et al.*, 2000). In a paternalistic culture, the subordinates demand and expect guidance, protection, and care from their superiors. Therefore, we propose that:

H1b. The Americans demand and expect less from their managers than the Chinese.

As a high power distance society, the Chinese respect authorities and are more likely to adhere to authority and comply with superiors than Americans (Chinta and Capar, 2007). Consistent with the paternalistic cultural tradition, it is likely that the Chinese believe that it's appropriate for the superior to initiate career-related changes for the employees. Therefore, we propose that:

- H1c.* The Americans are more likely to initiate career-related changes than the Chinese.

Generational differences in career and work place attitudes in USA and China

Generation is a subculture in a country which encompass the collective mindset of people from the same time period in that nation (Egri and Ralston, 2004). The cultural changes in a nation shape the values and mindset for people in the same period in the country, which develop into generational characteristics (Egri and Ralston, 2004). Despite the extensive changes that have taken place in both America and China, the nature of cultural change is different (Tse *et al.*, 1994). Traditional values derived from Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Communism are stably existent in China and still prevail within Chinese society (Tse *et al.*, 1994; Ralston *et al.*, 1996; Cennamo, 2008). In the USA, however, research has shown that different generations have different work values (e.g. Hurst and Good, 2009). In contrast, generational differences in some career attitudes among Chinese including self-perception, perception of the ideal manager, and perception of career-related change have not been found (Yi *et al.*, 2010). Given the significant cultural and historical differences of China and the USA, we believe that the generational differences of the Americans in work values and attitudes are different from those of the Chinese. Specifically, we propose that:

- H2a.* The generational differences of Americans, in regard to their career related self-perceptions, are greater than those of the Chinese.
- H2b.* The generational differences of Americans, in regard to their demands and expectations from their managers, are greater than those of the Chinese.
- H2c.* The generational differences of Americans, in regard to the likelihood to initiate career-related changes, are greater than those of the Chinese.

Gender differences in career and work place attitudes in USA and China

The perception of gender is also a reflection of national cultural values, as suggested in Hofstede's work related to the masculinity/femininity dimension of culture (Hofstede, 1991, 2001). In both the USA and China, society generally retains the assumption that men are masculine and linked with career roles and women are feminine and related to family roles (Bem, 1981). Those with a masculine role are considered to be assertive, confident, self-promotional, controlling, and dominant and those with the feminine role are considered to care for others, friendly, helpful, warm, supportive and selfless (Stuhlmacher and Poitras, 2010). The Chinese society traditionally has been a male-dominant society; a woman's role is the family scenario of husband and children (Jiang and Yang, 2011). However, the political changes in China brought upon profound impacts on the gender roles (Granrose, 2007). With gender equality having been made law, a growing number of Chinese women have been encouraged to join the labor force. Women enjoy equal legal status and are considered as an equal and

important part of the labor force as men (Jiang and Yang, 2011). Therefore, we expect that, at least from the career perspective, men and women are less different in China than in the USA. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3a. The gender difference of Americans, in regard to their career-related self-perceptions, is greater than that of the Chinese.

H3b. The gender difference of Americans, in regard to their demands and expectations from their managers, is greater than that of the Chinese.

H3c. The gender difference of Americans, in regard to the likelihood to initiate career-related changes, is greater than that of the Chinese.

Gender and generational differences in career and work place attitudes in USA and China

Interactions of gender and generational effects should also be explored. The subculture theory of generation suggests that a generation's collective mindset is shaped by significant social or political events that occurred during the developmental stage of the generation, resulting in a mutual identity that reflect its values, attitudes, perceptions and behaviors (Strauss and Howe, 1991). This indicates that different cultural changes lead to different changes in gender roles, which in turn result in the change of gender status in a society. In the USA, the workforce has been increasingly diverse, including more women, different ethnicities and more immigrants (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). Meanwhile, the American Millennial generations have more exposure to diversified ethnicities and cultures than the Boomers and Gen-X (Morgan and Ribbens, 2006). These changes result in the American Millennial generation having more complex work values and attitudes, and more obvious gender differences. Therefore, we propose that:

H4a. The American Millennial Generation has greater gender differences in work values and attitudes than that of the respective American Generation X and Baby Boomers.

In China, the communist doctrine has proclaimed equality between the sexes, women having been told that they could "support half the sky" and could do anything that men could accomplish (Granrose, 2007). However, due to the dramatic changes brought by globalization as well as economic and social reform, the role and self-perception of women in China is changing profoundly (Stedham and Yamamura, 2004), moving away from the socialist notion proposed by the government that men and women are exactly the same in careers and jobs. The Chinese women are getting more opportunities for career development. At the same time there are fewer efforts to improve their status, resulting in quickly growing gender inequalities and discrimination within Chinese society (Zhang *et al.*, 2009). While this is happening, the convergence of Eastern and Western culture creates diverse perceptions about gender roles for young generation in China. Therefore, we propose that:

H4b. The Chinese Millennial generation has greater gender differences in work values and attitudes than that of the respective Chinese Social Reform and Cultural Revolution generations.

Compared to the USA, China also has a rapidly growing economy and more drastic changes in its economic systems, political mechanisms, social values, and laws and regulations. Therefore, we believe that the gender differences of the Chinese generations in work values and attitudes are greater than those of the Americans. Thus, we propose that:

- H4c.* The gender differences are increasing in the younger Chinese generations more than in the parallel American generations due to more rapid socio-economic, political and legal changes in China.

Methodology

Our survey examined three aspects of career-related issues:

- (1) self-perception of the respondent;
- (2) respondent's perception of the ideal manager; and
- (3) respondent's perception of career-related change (Morgan and Ribbens, 2006).

We used Wolburg and Pokrywczynski's (2001) research to examine respondents' self-perception and their view of ideal manager, which was used in other generational studies (e.g. Fletcher *et al.*, 2009; Yi *et al.*, 2010). Participants were asked to what degree they agree with the statement in the questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. Sample items self-perception include "ambitious," "confident," "dedicated." Sample items of perceptions of ideal managers include "competent," "future-looking," "mentor." The instrument was double translated to ensure accuracy (Brislin, 1980). The Chinese version of the questionnaire was used in that country's sample.

Data collection

The snowball sampling method was used to recruit respondents. The link to the online questionnaire was sent to contacts by an e-mail, with an explanation of the purpose of the study. In addition, we obtained help from managers in a large company in China and administered printed questionnaires to their employees. In the USA, faculty, staff and students from a Midwestern university participated in the online survey.

Results

The total sample size was 386 Chinese and 1,538 Americans. For the Chinese sample, 109 completed surveys outside our specified generations were removed, and there were 284 respondents (male 129, female 155) who fit the three predefined age groups, including 61 Cultural Revolution (male 27, female 34), 126 Social Reform (male 54, female 72) and 97 Millennials (male 48, female 49). For the US sample, no surveys were abandoned, so the response rate was 10.8 percent out of the 14,241 population of the university who received the e-mailed link to the survey. Data analysis was conducted on 1,538 respondents (male 566, female 972), including 520 Boomers (male 191, female 329); 322 Generation X (male 125, female 197) and 696 Millennials (male 250, female 446).

Independent-samples *t*-test revealed statistically significant differences between the US sample and the Chinese sample for work-related perceptions (see Table AI). A reverse scale was used to test *H1a*, from 1 = describes me very well and 5 = does not describe me at all. Lower scores indicate higher identification with the described traits. We found that the Americans evaluate themselves more positively on these traits than

the Chinese do. Thus, *H1a* is supported (Table AI). *H1b* involves perceived traits of an ideal manager, and the results suggest that the Americans demand and expect more from their managers than the Chinese, as a lower average value indicates a stronger identification with the trait of an ideal manager. Thus, *H1b* is not supported (Table AI). *H1c* proposes that the Americans are more likely to make career-related move than the Chinese. In the case of requesting promotions, the Americans are “unlikely” to request a promotion with a mean of 3.85, while the Chinese has the lower mean, 2.98, and is more likely to request a promotion. The means for the measure of looking for a new employer echo those for requesting a promotion. The mean (3.48) for Americans is slightly higher than “Somewhat likely,” and the Chinese is more likely to find a new job with a mean of 3.08. *H1c* (Table AI) is not supported. In contrast to expectations, the Chinese are more likely to make career-related changes than the Americans.

Table AII shows the generational differences of the Americans and Chinese in work-related attitudes and career perceptions. When we tested *H2a* regarding self-perception of the career-related characteristics by using One-way analysis of variance, we found that the generational differences of the Americans are significant, but no statistically significant differences existed between generations in China. Thus, *H2a* is supported. *H2b* proposes that the generational differences of the Americans about their demands and expectations from their managers are bigger than those of the Chinese. In terms of desired traits of a manager, the results show that there are no statistically significant differences between generations in both USA and China, thus *H2b* is not supported. We also found that both the US sample and the Chinese sample have statistically significant differences between generations in the likelihood to make career changes, but the American generational differences are significantly bigger than those of the Chinese using post hoc group comparison (Egri and Ralston, 2004). Thus, *H2c* is supported.

H3a is not supported by independent-samples *t*-test, showing no significant gender differences in the self-perceptions of career-related characteristics for both American and Chinese samples (Table AIII). However, results also show that the gender difference of both the Americans and Chinese in their demands and expectations from their managers is statistically significant, but the American gender differences are significantly bigger than those of the Chinese using *post hoc* group comparison (Egri and Ralston, 2004). Therefore, *H3b* was supported. *H3c* proposes that the gender difference of the Americans in the likelihood to initiate career-related changes is bigger than that of the Chinese. The results of independent-samples T test found that Chinese respondents have statistically significant differences across gender with their intent to change career while America respondents have no difference. Thus, *H3c* is not supported. Further, it indicates that there is statistical result opposite to the hypothesis.

Tables AIV and AV show results for *H4a-H4c*. Only in the likelihood of initiating career-related changes, the gender difference of the Chinese Millennial generation is significantly bigger than that of the American Millennial generation. In the USA data regarding self-perception of the career-related characteristics, we found that there is no significant gender difference in all three generations. However, there is significant gender difference in all three generations regarding expectations and demands for ideal managers. No statistically significant gender differences were detected for perception of career-related change of any US generation. Thus, *H4a* is not supported. In the Chinese sample, the Millennial generation has greater gender differences in perceptions of the ideal manager and career-related changes than the gender differences within the

Social Reform and the Cultural Revolution generations (which show no significant gender differences in all categories except for the Social Reform generation in perceptions of ideal manager). Thus, *H4b* is partially supported. Meanwhile, compared to the American generations, the gender differences of the Chinese generations are getting bigger (see Tables AIV and AV), especially in terms of both perception of the ideal manager and career-related changes. Thus, *H4c* is partially supported.

Discussion

Our study found that the Americans and the Chinese have different work values and attitudes in the workplace, indicating that national culture has important influences on work values and beliefs, and these findings verify the conclusions of previous studies (Robbins *et al.*, 1998; Murphy *et al.*, 2004). Specifically, the Americans have a more positive impression of themselves than the Chinese. Interestingly, we also established that the Americans demand and expect more from their managers than the Chinese. The Chinese are more likely to make career moves than the Americans, opposite to the hypotheses. This indicates that paternalistic cultural characteristics are diminishing in the Chinese society, and employees are taking more control of their own careers than most literature predicts.

In addition, we found that the generational differences in the US sample are generally bigger than in those differences in Chinese sample, indicating that a strong traditional culture is not only influential in work-related perceptions but also more stable across generations in China. It is also consistent with the observation that between-culture differences in values are larger than within-culture differences (Tsaw *et al.*, 2011).

Interestingly, while the Americans have no gender differences among the three generations in terms of their attitudes toward career, and despite the fact that the Chinese socialist doctrine emphasizes that sexes are equal at work does affect self-perceptions and perceptions of ideal managers, it seems that traditional gender roles of men and women (i.e. man are assertive, confident, masculine and career oriented and women are submissive, feminine and family oriented) are still persistent in China when it comes to seeking control of the careers, reflected in the results indicating that Chinese women are less likely to initiate career-related changes than their male counterpart.

Further, the results of our study indicate that the cultural changes of the US sample and Chinese sample are different. We found that gender difference of the American generations in work values and attitudes is different from that of the Chinese generations. Gender difference more or less exists in each American generation, but only the Chinese Millennials and Social Reform generation have statistically significant gender difference in terms of desired traits from the manager. It is suggested that gender difference of Chinese generational attitudes has more obvious changes than gender difference of the American generations, suggesting that the economic and social reforms have brought profound changes to the perception of women in today's Chinese society.

Implications

Enhanced by the Institutional Theory in the explanatory power, our study contribute to the literature by examining and comparing the generation, gender and culture effects simultaneously in the two largest nations in the world and making some interesting

findings that reflect the differences in the institutional changes (e.g. economics, politics, culture and legal systems) in these two nations. It fills in the gap in the literature that previous studies only focussed on one aspect or context of generation, gender, or culture when exploring employee work place attitudes and career perceptions, confirming that gender and culture are important factors contributing to the development of generational memories (Dencker *et al.*, 2008), and that generation effects may differ across gender and culture (Parry and Urwin, 2011). In addition, our study filled in a gap in the cross-cultural generational research by comparing patterns of different generation cohorts in two countries. Unlike most previous generational comparison studies which directly compared people from different nations who had the same birth period and defined them as from the same generation, our study compared the generations from different countries. This methodology is more consistent with the basic definition of generations (Kupperschmidt, 2000) that generations are formed by counterparts who shared the same critical social and cultural events during their development stage. Basically, we argue that people from different countries, even though born in the same time period, are not shaped the same way in their youth by the same historical and cultural events, therefore cannot be considered as the same generation. Therefore, our method of defining and comparing generations in different nations is a more solid way to help us gain further knowledge of understanding generational phenomena.

Our study also has practical implications for managers, especially those from MNCs that have operations both in China and the USA. Human resource managers often admire “best practices” in their management policies, but these practices may not work for people in different generations. Further, the same practices that are proven to work in the USA may not work in the Chinese branches. For example, the younger generations in the USA are often considered to be more aggressive, dynamic and demanding than the older generations. Much attention from managers has been paid to how to effectively manage and motivate the younger generations. While there are much more changes in the Chinese society than in the USA, the values of the Chinese are relatively stable across generations. Therefore, rather than looking for ways to motivate the younger generations of Chinese employees, MNC managers might want to pay more attention to the Chinese culture that has been powerfully and consistently influencing the work place attitudes and career perceptions of the Chinese employees across different generations. Also, our study indicates that the Americans demand and expect more from their managers than the Chinese, but the Chinese are more likely to make career-related initiatives than the Americans. Therefore, it would be a misconception that the Chinese employees are less proactive to manage their careers, even though they seem to complain less about their supervisors. HR managers and decision makers should notice these differences when making policies regarding employees needs and directing their behaviors.

Another concern that is worth noticing by the policy makers and HR managers are the career development of women employees. As indicated by our results, women are less likely to demand from managers and less likely to initiate career-related changes than men. This is probably determined by the segregation of gender roles formed by tradition and culture that women should take care of family and a stable job is good for family and children while constant changes of jobs and job assignment demand time and energy from women employees that should be devoted to family (Hofstede, 2001). In the Chinese situation, although the ideology of the government specifies that women are equal to men in every aspect in social lives, the traditional cultural values have

gradually taken over the temporary political influence due to the economic development since the 1980s, reflected in gender differences in their likelihood to make career moves among younger generations. When families are able to make more than the bare minimum to support the family, they often choose to let the women to devote more resources (such as time and energy) to the family while men are pursuing their careers. Therefore, women are often the ones who have to sacrifice their careers. This is often the case in tradition-dominated areas such as the Middle East (Tlaiss, 2013) and Southeast Asia (Wu, *et al.*, 2008). Policy makers should take a more active role in helping female employees pursue their career goals, not just in the USA, but also in China. While there are anti-discrimination laws in the USA that specifically protect the rights of women, there are no such laws in China at this time, which result in a more hostile working environment for women. It is even more critical for MNCs, under such conditions as in China, to make HR strategies that target at female employees to help them survive and prosper in their careers. Policies and benefits such as on-site daycare facilities, maternity leave and working from home have proven to be effective to attract and retain women in the workplace (Noe *et al.*, 2012). With the help and encouragement from the organizations, women may be able to effectively balance the demands from both the career and family, thus less hesitant to make career moves and pursue their career goals to become successful professionals in the workplace.

Limitations and future research

Our study dealt with the complexity of the interplay of generation, gender and culture in understanding work values and attitudes in people's perceptions and how difficult it is to separately analyze some of our results. Further research is needed to untangle the specific effects of gender, generation and culture. Also, a limitation of our study is that we use countries as a proxy for cultures. Future study could use quantitative measures (such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions) to specify the cultural effect of career perceptions across generations. Another limitation of the current study is that these findings are based on cross-sectional research design. There has been a criticism that generational effect is not distinguished from age effect and career stage effect using cross-sectional data (Dencker *et al.*, 2008; Parry and Urwin, 2011). Longitudinal research is needed to examine how the various social and political events influence the value-development process of the generation cohort (Parry and Urwin, 2011). In addition, the group of participants may not perfectly represent populations in both countries. More sophisticated analysis will be made possible by a bigger and randomly selected sample.

Our data is also limited by potential common method variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003) because all variables are taken from a self-reported questionnaire.

We did take several precautions in the data collection process to minimize this problem. For example, the snow-balling methodology insured anonymity and confidentiality so the respondents are more willing to answer the questions as honestly as possible. This would minimize the possibility of social desirability playing as a source of common method variance. Also, we adopted all of the questions in the questionnaire from well-validated measures, which leaves little room for misinterpretations as a consistent artifact to serve as common factor in explaining variances. In addition, age and gender, the major categorical variables in our study, although self-reported, are considered less easy to be altered by individual perceptions and often treated as objective measures, which helps reduce the common method variance problem.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, our findings explored the impact of culture and gender on generational differences consistent with the notion that generation effects may differ across culture and gender (Inkson *et al.*, 2007; Dencker *et al.*, 2008; Yi *et al.*, 2010; Parry and Urwin, 2011). It contributes to the development of a framework for studying generational differences of careers across cultures and gender and provides managers with some guidance about how to understand the various work values and attitudes across gender and generations in the USA and China. This is especially beneficial for US-based MNCs who has operations in China facing the challenge of managing employees of different cultural backgrounds, gender and generations.

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Appendix

	USA	China	<i>t</i>
Self-perception	35.58	41.36	-8.45***
Ideal manager	13.39	20.94	-12.73***
Seek a promotion	3.85	2.98	10.68***
Seek a new employer	3.48	3.08	4.85***

Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed)

Table A1.
General comparison
of USA and China

Table AII.
Comparison of USA
and China by
generation

	USA Generation				<i>F</i>	China			<i>F</i>
	Millennial	X	Boomers	Millennial		Social reform	Cultural revolution		
Self-perception	35.30	36.03	35.68	3.14*	42.01	40.20	42.69	1.23	
Ideal manager	13.34	13.40	13.44	0.11	20.04	20.33	23.61	2.91	
Seek a promotion	4.06	3.67	3.66	12.59***	2.96	2.83	3.33	3.73*	
Seek a new employer	2.99	3.52	4.11	96.83***	3.04	2.85	3.62	8.68***	

Notes: * $p \leq 0.05$; *** $p \leq 0.001$ (one-tailed)

Table AIII.
Comparison of
United States and
China by gender

	USA			<i>t</i>	China		
	Male	Female			Male	Female	<i>t</i>
Self-perception	35.57	35.58	-0.03	41.31	41.39	-0.06	
Ideal manager	14.21	12.91	6.61***	22.22	19.86	1.20*	
Seek a promotion	3.78	3.88	-1.17	2.74	3.17	-3.07**	
Seek a new employer	3.38	3.53	-1.94	2.90	3.23	-2.29*	

Notes: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed)

Table AIV.
USA by generation
and gender

	Millennial			Generation X			Boomers		
	Male	Female	<i>t</i>	Male	Female	<i>t</i>	Male	Female	<i>t</i>
Self-perception	35.39	35.25	0.41	35.90	36.11	-0.40	35.60	35.72	0.12
Ideal manager	14.25	12.83	4.56***	14.24	12.88	3.58***	14.16	13.02	3.36***
Seek a promotion	4.01	4.09	-0.66	3.56	3.74	0.98	3.64	3.68	-0.31
Seek a new employer	2.85	2.85	-1.77	3.50	3.53	-0.17	4.00	4.18	-1.66

Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed)

Table AV.
China by generation
and gender

	Millennial			Social Reform			Cultural Revolution		
	Male	Female	<i>t</i>	Male	Female	<i>t</i>	Male	Female	<i>t</i>
Self-perception	44.06	40.00	1.83	38.24	41.68	-0.40	42.56	42.79	-1.67
Ideal manager	23.31	16.83	3.42***	19.28	21.13	3.58***	26.19	21.56	-1.07
Seek a promotion	2.73	3.18	-1.99*	2.59	3.00	-1.88	3.07	3.53	-1.51
Seek a new employer	2.71	3.37	-2.76**	2.85	2.85	-0.02	3.33	3.85	-1.80

Notes: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed)

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