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Entitled or misunderstood? Towards the repositioning of the sense of entitlement concept in the generational difference debate

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Submission for Special Issue of Community Work and Family to celebrate the work and influence of Sue Lewis.

Abstract

This paper contributes to debates in the broad area of generational differences at work. Specifically, we locate this study within the literature of the work values and expectations of the ‘Millennial generation’, also known as ‘GenMe’ (Twenge, 2006; 2010). Much has been made in the media and popular practitioner literature about how the latest generation of workers have a ‘sense of entitlement’ and therefore expect more from the workplace than previous generations. In this paper, we argue that this mainstream view of the sense of entitlement as a concept is problematic and requires a more critical examination. We consider two divergent bodies of literature on the sense of entitlement in relation to generational differences at work – a managerialist approach, which conceptualises sense of entitlement to work-life balance (WLB) as a negative trait, and a second body, based on the seminal work by Sue Lewis and colleagues, that treats sense of entitlement as a situated process rather than an internal characteristic. We use data from a study of young adults leaving university in the UK, inspired by Sue’s work. Our analysis challenges the notion of today’s younger workers as more ‘entitled’ than previous generations. This study extends existing research by providing a contextualised analysis of young people’s situated accounts of sense of entitlement at work.

Keywords: Generation Y, sense of entitlement, work-life balance

Resumen

Este artículo contribuye a los debates sobre las diferencias generacionales en el trabajo. En particular, ubicamos este estudio dentro de la literatura sobre los valores y las expectativas laborales de la “Generación del milenio”, también conocida como “Generación Y”, o “GenYo” (Twenge, 2006; 2010). En los medios de difusión y en la literatura profesional, mucho se ha hablado sobre cómo esta generación tiene un alto “sentido de derecho” y por lo tanto espera mucho más del mundo del trabajo que las generaciones anteriores. En este artículo, sostenemos que este concepto dominante de sentido de derecho tiene varios problemas. Se necesita un examen más crítico. Consideramos dos cuerpos distintos de

investigación que tratan de las diferencias generacionales en el sentido de derecho en el trabajo. El primero tiene un enfoque gerencial, en el que se conceptualiza el sentido de derecho como un rasgo negativo. El segundo cuerpo está basado en el trabajo seminal de Sue Lewis y colaboradoras, en el que se trata el sentido de derecho como un proceso situado, en vez de un rasgo innato. Se utilizarán datos de un estudio sobre jóvenes en Gran Bretaña, en el momento de graduarse. Nuestro análisis demuestra que los jóvenes de hoy no tienen más sentido de derecho que generaciones anteriores. Este estudio extiende los hallazgos disponibles al proveer un análisis contextualizado de las narrativas situadas de jóvenes de la generación del milenio sobre el sentido de derecho en el trabajo.

Palabras clave: Generación del milenio, sentido de derecho, equilibrio entre trabajo y vida.

Introduction

This paper examines how university leavers who plan to enter full-time and professional employment construct their expectations of work-life balance (WLB) support from future employers. It contributes to debates in the broad area of generational differences at work by focusing on one specific generational group – the so-called ‘Millennial’ generation’, also known as ‘Generation Y’ or ‘Generation Me’ (GenMe – see Twenge, 2006; 2010). We locate the debate within the largely practitioner and managerialist literature of the work values and expectations of younger workers who arguably belong to a “decidedly different generation” (Miller and Konopaske, 2013, p. 809). Much has been made in the media and popular practitioner literature about how this latest generation of workers have a ‘sense of entitlement’ and therefore expect ‘more’ from the workplace than previous generations. We argue that this mainstream view of the sense of entitlement as a concept is problematic and requires a more critical examination.

The paper aims to extend existing research by providing a contextualised analysis of young people’s situated accounts of sense of entitlement at work. Our work builds on Suzan (Sue) Lewis’ seminal contributions in the field of work, family, and organisations research, and in particular her application and development of the sense of entitlement framework to understand WLB expectations across different national contexts in Europe (e.g. Lewis and Smithson, 2001 and Herman and Lewis, 2012).

Sue influenced the design of the current study, and also worked closely with the two authors of this paper on a number of studies. The first author (Uracha) started working with Sue in 2003 as a PhD supervisee at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK and in 2007 became a

colleague in the same department as Sue at Middlesex University, UK. Uracha's doctoral thesis, on which the current study is based, examined the WLB conceptualisations and expectations of British-born and Asian-born university students studying in the UK. The work was supervised by both Sue and Janet (the second author) and was heavily influenced by their joint publication entitled "Sense of entitlement to support for the reconciliation of employment and family life" (Lewis and Smithson, 2001), which was shortlisted for the 2002 Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award for Excellence in Work-Family Research.

We now divide the paper into three sections. First, we focus on the literature on the sense of entitlement in relation to generational differences at work by considering two diverging bodies of work. The first is based on practitioner and managerialist approach to studying generational differences that treats the concept of sense of entitlement as a negative trait. In the second body of literature, we draw on the pioneering work on the sense of entitlement to WLB support by Sue and her colleagues to a) critique the dominant negative view of the sense of entitlement concept and b) offer an alternative positioning of the concept in the generational difference debate. Secondly, we provide details of our study of the WLB expectations of university leavers, including our data collection and data analysis methods. Thirdly, we present and discuss our findings and analysis, which contests the popular notion that today's generation of younger workers are more 'entitled' than previous generations.

Generational differences at work and the sense of entitlement of the new generation of workers

A basic assumption of the generational difference approach is that each generation share similar work values and expectations, based on "a common view of the world because they share common memories of the historical events in the formative years of their life"

(Buonocore et al., 2015, p. 301). In the practitioner and managerialist literature, there is a tendency to uncritically adopt the four (Western-based) categories of ‘generations’ of ‘Veterans’, ‘Baby Boomers’, ‘Generation X’, and ‘Generation Y’ (also known as ‘Millennials’). The main differentiator is years of birth: Veterans are born between 1925-1942; Baby Boomers are born between 1943-1960; Generation X are born between 1961-1981, and Generation Y workers are those born from 1982 onwards, although there is some variation in terms of birth years across the four groups between studies (Parry and Urwin, 2011). In a critical review of generational differences in work values, Parry and Urwin (2011, p. 79) argued that while this is a “popular practitioner idea...the academic empirical evidence for generational differences in work values is, at best, mixed”. They also noted that the sociological notion of generations (e.g. Mannheim, 1952) originally included the view that “individuals cannot be members of the same generation simply because they share a year of birth. They must definitely be in a position to participate in certain common experiences so that a concrete bond is created between members of a generation” (Parry and Urwin, 2011, p. 81).

Within the generational difference approach adopted in the managerialist literature, the notion of generation continues to be used uncritically, and has been defined broadly as, for example, “an identifiable group that shares birth years, age, location and significant life events at critical development stages” (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66). As a construct, it tends to be used interchangeably with age and birth cohort, which are subject to change over experience and time, whereas generational effects are theorised as more stable. In other words, it is more than being about when a person was born. It “represents a unique type of social location based on the dynamic interplay between being born in a particular year and the socio-political events that occur throughout the life course of the birth cohort, particularly

while the cohort comes of age” (McMullin et al., 2007, pp. 299–300). A second critique that Parry and Unwin made in their review of generational difference studies is that they tend to be cross-sectional in design. This implicitly assumes that there is homogeneity in generational groupings and ignores important social-demographic differences, such as gender, ethnicity and cultural and national contexts. While, because of these ambiguities, the term “cohort” might be preferable in some ways, we use the term “generation” for our analysis here as it is most often used in the management and media discourses which we focus on in this paper.

Today’s younger workers (i.e. Generation Y) often “get a bad press, with many misconceptions about them being workshy with a sense of entitlement” (Dann, 2015). Western media coverage of generational differences in work values portray them as challenging for employers to manage. For example, Alsop’s (2008) article, “The ‘Trophy Kids’ Go to Work’ published in *The Wall Street Journal*, made the following assertion:

“Born between 1980 and 2001, the millennials were coddled by their parents and nurtured with a strong sense of entitlement...If there is one overriding perception of the millennial generation, it’s that these young people have great – and sometimes outlandish – expectations. Employers realize the millennials are their future work force, but they are concerned about this generation’s desire to shape their jobs to fit their lives rather than adapt their lives to the workplace”

The disquiet that younger workers care more about WLB than work itself is echoed in managerialist academic literature on generational difference in work values. The notion that younger workers are more entitled, including to WLB, than previous generations is a recurring theme (e.g. Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Twenge, 2010; Buonocore et al., 2015). In a review paper of generational differences in work attitudes,

Twenge (2010, p. 208) concluded that today's younger workers (who she labelled 'Generation Me' or GenMe – see Twenge, 2006):

“may be difficult to motivate...they see work as less central to their lives, are more likely to value leisure, and say they are less willing to work hard. Viewed positively, this generation places a high importance on WLB beginning in high school, long before they have children. Viewed more negatively, the work ethic has declined and productivity may follow.”

In a recent study of work entitlements, defined negatively as “the deep-seated belief that one deserves more pay, recognition, positive feedback, and other rewards than others deserve regardless of one's contribution to the organisation”, Miller and Konopaske (2014, p. 808) suggested that:

“Interest in entitlement has recently increased due to the lament of the popular press on the increase in a host of maladaptive traits and attitudes as well as the emergence of recurring evidence in the scientific literature finding that the current generation of workers now entering the workforce tend to be more narcissistic and entitled, and have higher self-esteem than previous generations.”

This concept of sense of entitlement is problematic in this literature; it is linked with being 'entitled' or indulged, even “maladaptive”, and has even been used interchangeably with narcissism (e.g. Twenge, 2006; Twenge and Campbell, 2009). Miller and Konopaske (2014, 809) argued that entitlement should, in fact, be conceptualised as “part of the constellation of traits under the banner of narcissism with the other narcissistic traits” (see Fisk (2010) for a discussion of the aetiology of 'excessive entitlement'). In these conceptualisations, to have a

sense of entitlement is something undesirable and damaging to the workforce and wider society.

Towards the contextualization of the sense of entitlement concept

In the second body of literature on the sense of entitlement to WLB support, we draw on the important work of Sue and her colleagues to reposition the concept of sense of entitlement in the generational difference debate. Lewis and Smithson's (2001) paper on sense of entitlement was part of a wider five-country study of young European women and men's WLB expectations of support from the state and from employers (Lewis et al., 1998; Nilsen et al., 2002). Here we focus specifically on the development of the sense of entitlement as an explanatory framework for discussing employee expectations of employers, but the research design, methodology and analysis were all collaboratively developed by the wider team. Lewis and Smithson (2001) positioned sense of entitlement to WLB support as a process whereby individuals form their perceptions of what is fair and reasonable to expect in relation to their WLB, based on what is normative and socially acceptable. It is theorised as determined by social comparison processes and constructed on the basis of social, normative, and feasibility comparison standards (Lewis & Haas, 2005; Herman & Lewis, 2012). This perspective is fundamentally different from how the sense of entitlement is conceptualised in the managerialist literature. Lewis and Smithson's (2001) processual and gendered approach to the sense of entitlement concept is influenced by the work of Brenda Major, who proposed that "men and women have differing sense of personal entitlement, or deservingness, with regard to what they should put into and receive from intimate relationships, especially with regard to the distribution of unpaid labor of the family (e.g., housework and childcare)" (Major, 1993, p. 141). Major argued that women tend to compare themselves to other

women, rather than to other men and vice versa, through “the politics of comparison” (Hochschild, 1989) that leads to less resentment and greater sense of gratitude. This view, therefore, regards the sense of entitlement to WLB as situated and shaped by gendered norms.

Lewis and Smithson (2001) developed the sense of entitlement concept further by situating gendered social comparison processes within specific welfare states and gender contracts (Hirdman, 1988; Pfau-Effinger, 1994). Researchers in the five country team collected qualitative data through focus groups and individual interviews. This approach contrasted with previous studies on the sense of entitlement, which were experimental and laboratory-based or were carried out in naturalistic but narrowly defined contexts. The qualitative methodology allowed for nuance in sense of entitlement positions, where they found that young Europeans’ perceived entitlement to employer support varied according to the specific policy considered, gender, and perception of benefits to employers (Lewis and Smithson, 2001). Building on this work, Herman and Lewis (2012) theorised and applied the sense of entitlement concept in their three-country study of women’s career-related decisions at the transition to motherhood in highly masculinised science, engineering, and technology sectors. Sense of entitlement was developed as a framework for enabling wider contextualisation of workers’ perceptions and expectations related to WLB and career issues, by taking into account both individual cognition and contexts at organisational and national state levels. Together, the papers by Lewis and Smithson (2001) and Herman and Lewis (2012) contribute to key developments in our understanding of the sense of entitlement in relation to work, family, and organisations. These works point to the importance of layers of context on the processes that underpin sense of entitlement.

Our study

In the current study, two groups of young people were considered – British-born and Asian-born university students who were studying in the UK and were about to enter full-time employment. By including both British-born and Asian-born participants, the study explored how young adults' accounts of WLB expectations were influenced by their experiences in their country of origin and/or by their experiences as students in Britain. The Asian participants were particularly interesting, as they were situated between two cultural contexts and were negotiating a transition from being students to workers while living in two sets of social contexts (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al., 2014).

The participants were 30 young adults who were nationals of Asian countries or Britain. Pseudonyms were adopted to preserve the participants' anonymity. All were university students in Manchester, UK, in the final-year of their studies and planning to enter the labour market within the next year. Within the Asian subgroup, 15 participants were from China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. There was also ethnic diversity in the British subgroup which included two second-generation British-Pakistani participants (one man and one woman) and one second-generation British-Chinese man. This composition reflected the national and ethnic diversity among the Manchester student population. All 30 participants took part in an individual interview and 23 subsequently participated in one of four focus groups (for more information about the focus group findings, see Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al., 2014). Participants talked about their feelings about graduating from university and entering employment, their plans for and expectations of paid work, the meanings of WLB in general and for them personally, in the immediate and distant future, and their expectations of WLB employer and state support. They discussed reasons for pursuing a degree, why they chose to study in the UK, their views on gender roles and norms at work and home, and the impact of education and upbringing on how they made sense of all

these issues. Thematic analysis was used for both interview and focus group data (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, 2009; Chatrakul Na Ayudhya and Lewis, 2011). Here, we examine one research question: how do British-born and Asian-born university leavers in the UK construct their expectations of employer WLB support before entering the labour market?

Analysis

This analysis considers the accounts of British-born and Asian-born university leavers, paying particular attention to the university leavers' perceptions of employers' roles in providing workers with WLB support. Overall, the young people in our study did have a sense of entitlement, but this was limited and weak.. Most participants spoke about employer WLB support as a 'business case', but not everyone saw this positively. We identified two distinct but overlapping perceptions of employers' role. The first is the 'bonus' perception, in which some participants regarded employer WLB support as being helpful towards employees' WLB. The second perception is one of scepticism towards employer WLB support. The two perceptions are interrelated in that both are underpinned by the young people's beliefs that WLB is principally an individual choice and a personal responsibility. As the following analysis demonstrates, the rhetoric of individual choice has become the norm for many of the participants and therefore shaped their sense of entitlement.

1. The 'bonus' perception: Employer WLB support is an extra, not an entitlement

The young people who articulated this perception did not perceive employer WLB support to be an entitlement or a right. Interestingly, the majority of the participants who held this perception were Asian students.

Extract 1 (interview)

Interviewer (...) *so flexible working hours is something that you actually wouldn't mind at all (...) from the company. Do you expect them to give it to you?*

Traveller If they do give, it's a bonus. If they don't, I don't expect it, because there are not that many companies that do that. (...) I have friends that are working with companies that deals with US client-base (...) You can't have flexible working hours then. You have to work at the times that the US office are open.

Interviewer (...) *And do you think that's fair?*

Traveller Well, they chose the job! No one forced them in to it. (...) They knew the (working) times are like that. They don't have a problem with it, then that's fine, it's fair.

(Traveller, Malaysian man, age 25)

Traveller's account indicates a low sense of entitlement to flexible working hours, based on his perception that it was not normative for most employers to do so. Here, we see that normative comparison process was shaped by Traveller's multiple contexts. The first context is his location in time and place, in particular his Malaysian national context, where flexible working arrangements were positioned as not being seen as the norm. Secondly, the concrete experiences of his friends represented the context of social relations on his sense of entitlement, as they acted as his social referents in this social comparison process. Finally, the quote reveals how the notion of individual choice was reproduced through his account of justifying why it was fair for him not to expect flexible working arrangements as a right, but rather as a bonus.

To many of the Asian participants, the idea of employer WLB support was something new, to the extent that it was unheard of. On many occasions, the interviewer provided some examples employer WLB support and it was only then that the participants started to think about the feasibility of such support. Subsequently, although the idea of external WLB support was regarded as a positive benefit, there was a tendency among the Asian participants to not expect or take for granted the offer of such support. This indicates that while employer WLB support may be regarded as feasible among some participants, this perception alone did not necessarily enhance their sense of entitlement. The following focus group excerpt illustrates this process:

Extract 2 (focus group)

Tia It depends what you can give to the company, I think. If you can give, like, if you're good at (your job), then only the company can be your own judge (...) And if you're good enough, eventually they will give it to you, I think.

Interviewer *Yeah. So (...) you think you kind of, you have to prove to the company that [overlaps with Tia]*

Tia You're worth it!

Ying Cos for a company, they can't allow all the employees to leave early on Friday. (...) they pay for the working hours. And if anybody wants to leave, because of their family, the company will lose a lot of money. (...) And I think it's especially important for starters. The company has to pay a lot of money for their training and probably they're the people that contribute the least to the company. I think it's unfair for a company to pay everything they want.

The two young women above were from Indonesia and China respectively and engaged in a complementary interaction to articulate how employer WLB support is not perceived as an entitlement for all employees. Tia and Ying's discussion denotes a perception that employers should provide WLB support only to 'good workers' if it is economically profitable for them to do so. In this way, employer WLB support was constructed as a legitimate strategy to reward those who have demonstrated their value to the organisation, reproducing the notion of the ideal worker. Therefore, although employer WLB support was perceived as feasible, the appropriateness of when it should be implemented was dependent on whether individual employees have earned it. Tia and Ying did not exclude themselves from this criterion, as they argued that this was particularly relevant in the case of new recruits like themselves.

By conceptualising employer WLB support as something to be earned by the individual, the imperative of individual choice and personal responsibility is upheld and reproduced in these young people's accounts of employer WLB support.

2. The scepticism perception: Employer WLB support interferes with individual choice and responsibility

In this second perception of employer's role in providing WLB support, the young people who exhibited this were mainly British students. They were wary of the existence of such support in organisations:

Extract 3 (focus group)

Nancy I don't really expect anything from my employers. I sort of have quite initially not negative, but I carry quite cynical, maybe, approach to

why they're doing things or what you can get out of them. And then it should be there, but you can't necessarily expect it. You can't expect that they'll treat you in a nice way or like benefits, really.

Interviewer *Why is that?*

Nancy Because they're not all nice [laughs].

[Laughter from group]

Interviewer *Yeah. Do you agree with that?*

Titho I think it is. That's what the mind-set was like. It's changing, I would say. But yeah, most of the places you don't tend to have that.

As this focus group discussion shows, some young people exercised caution in their expectations of their future employment relationships. Nancy, a British student, held a somewhat negative view of employers in general, which she based on her previous and current part-time employment experiences. Titho, an Indian male student, had six years' full-time employment experience in India prior to his current MBA studies in Britain and appeared less sceptical by comparison. This demonstrates how personal experiences from different national and cultural contexts shaped the sense of entitlement in various ways.

The accounts of other young British participants also demonstrated a degree of scepticism towards employer WLB support.

Extract 4 (interview)

Interviewer *(...) what do you think about companies giving WLB support to workers?*

Duncan: I'd be a little bit dubious about that, to be honest.. The word 'company' brings up an image of like a large corporation. And I wouldn't particularly trust that they would have my best interest at heart. (...) Just because I think (...) they might have been briefed by the top people in the company to suggest to employees "OK, this is what WLB is. I'm telling you what WLB is." (...) And I don't think that a company can do that. I think it's very much down to the individual about what the right level is (...).

(Duncan, British man, age 26)

The reluctance and doubt towards the existence of employer WLB support that was articulated by Duncan indicates a social comparison process of low appropriateness judgement towards employers having a role in individuals' WLB. To him, this was perceived as an interference with individual choice and a way of imposing organisational values (and control) onto individual workers. This sceptical interpretation challenges the mainstream positioning of employer WLB support as providing choices for workers (Lewis et al., 2007). The following quote extends this position further:

Extract 5 (interview)

Is this help (employer WLB support) requested or is it given? What is the nature of this help and who's going to give it? (...) I think it could be quite worrying, condescending, this kind of prescribing culture of "you need help doing this. We need to have meetings about your WLB". (...) I think that really is up to individuals. It's certainly not something I'd be particularly comfortable discussing with my employers or the company. I think it'd be something I'd think should be my issue.

(Ari Mazel, British male, age 27)

The discourse of individual choice resonated strongly in Ari Mazel's perception of employers' role in providing WLB support to employees. His scepticism was reflected in words such as "condescending" and "imposed". To him, although employer WLB support might be beneficial for some individuals, its take-up should be optional, not prescribed. This denotes that he felt entitled to be able to choose if and when he utilises such support.

Instead of having a sense of entitlement to employer WLB support, there appears to be a stronger sense of entitlement to individual choice among some of the young people. By questioning employers' motives for offering WLB support and arguing it could interfere with individuals' personal choice and responsibility, young people like Nancy, Duncan and Ari Mazel were contesting the managerialist normative assumption that employer WLB support is a 'win-win' for both employers and employees.

Discussion and conclusions

This article examined how university leavers who planned to enter full-time and professional employment constructed their expectations of employer WLB support. Our key finding of weak sense of entitlement among our participants challenges the uncritical but often cited view that young adults in Generation Y have a high sense of entitlement to WLB compared to previous generation of workers.

In this paper, we highlighted two key themes from the data, based on two distinct but interrelated perceptions of what young people thought was normative and appropriate to expect in relation to employer WLB support. Both were underpinned by the normative

assumption that WLB was primarily a matter of individual choice and therefore, a personal responsibility. Firstly, we showed how the ‘bonus’ perception based on the business case argument weakened sense of entitlement to WLB support. The young people who adopted this position were largely those from Asian countries. We argue that these young adults were reproducing managerialist assumptions about WLB support; that it is available in theory - most likely in the form of policy, but in practice, it is something has to be earned through demonstrating one’s worth in the organisation. Secondly, we found that the scepticism perception based on the ‘personal lives, private troubles’ argument also weakened sense of entitlement to WLB support. The young people who adopted this position mainly grew up in the UK, and we suggest that their views reflected the normalisation of the individual choice rhetoric that underpins neoliberal societies. Superficially, it appears that they were contesting and challenging this norm by rejecting the role of employers in facilitating their WLB. However, we argue that in doing so, they were inadvertently reinforcing and legitimising the individual choice rhetoric.

The findings highlight the importance of normative social comparisons in shaping sense of entitlement and how differences in past life course experiences in different national contexts matter. All our participants were students in the UK at a time when a prevailing discourse on WLB manifested in frequent newspaper articles, government discussions and policy. These were mostly individualistic in nature, referring to either individual choices or policies supposedly intended to enhance such ‘choices’ (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005). This discourse was not limited to the UK context and was increasingly becoming evident in non-western national contexts, often transposed via multinational company surveys and policies (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006; Lewis, Gambles, & Rapoport, 2007; Nilsen, Brannen, & Lewis, 2013; Rajan-Rankin (2016) this issue). While the British students’ lives had

unfolded with a context of growing national and European public debate about work and family during a period of increasing female labour force participation, the Asian students' early lives had unfolded in various countries, typically with emphasis on economic development and the need for hard work to establish nations as key competitors in the global economy (Larson, Wilson, & Rickman, 2009; Xiao & Cooke, 2012). Furthermore, the Asian university leavers were part of a wider group of young adults to travel out of their home countries to study abroad – as customers of the internationalisation of higher education in Britain. Their immigration status as temporary migrants in Britain is important as a context for understanding their expectations of WLB support, as this is likely to shape how they perceived their positions in the British labour market. As our findings have shown, Asian university leavers seeking work in the UK compared themselves to other international students seeking work, and this led to an acceptance of their precarious position in the UK labour market as temporary migrants with qualification and skills, but subject to immigration control. British-born participants, on the other hand, did not have to contend with this status and how this might impact their employment experiences and expectations.

In this paper, we have contributed to the development of the sense of entitlement framework in three ways. Firstly, we have argued for the need to reposition the concept in the broad area of generational differences at work by moving away from the managerialist view that it is a negative trait. We have shown how this dominant approach has uncritically essentialised younger workers as 'entitled', even narcissistic. The findings from our study have challenged this view by providing a contextualised analysis of young adults' weak sense of entitlement to employer WLB support.

Secondly, we built on the seminal work of Sue and her colleagues by adopting their processual approach to sense of entitlement, which has been particularly influential in our application and theorisation of the sense of entitlement among younger workers. The studies by Lewis et al (1998) and Lewis and Smithson (2001) pointed to the importance of examining WLB expectations of young workers, most of whom did not yet have family and caring responsibilities, and thus provided a platform to consider the views of workers who are not parents but may be one day in the future. Sue and her colleagues have argued and shown that sense of entitlement is a process that is situated in “layers of context” (Herman and Lewis, 2012, p. 770), particularly the national context and welfare regime that shape gender norms in relation to careers, paid work, and care. This teaches us the importance of looking at broader social and cultural contexts when discussing employee-employer expectations, which tends to be studied at the individual level.

Thirdly, our study has extended the framework by taking into account socio-historical ‘time’ in shaping young adults’ situated sense of entitlement to WLB support. We discussed how our participants’ weak and limited sense of entitlement can be theorised as the reproduction of the individual choice and personal responsibility rhetoric. This is part of a wider debate about the nature of work in neoliberal economies, where work intensification and unequal employment relationship between employee and employer persist. In the case of the Asian university leavers, their immigration status intersected with other contextual factors to shape their weak sense of entitlement to WLB employer support. This underscores the situated nature of sense of entitlement, where an individual’s perception of their labour market position in neoliberal, globalised economy also matter.

Our paper has shown the importance of understanding the situated nature of workers' accounts of sense of entitlement and the need to contextualise rather than generalise these findings. These accounts of limited sense of entitlement to employer WLB support were generated in a research context that sought to capture university leavers' accounts of what WLB meant to them at a specific point in their lives. Therefore, they were accounts from a particular economically and educationally privileged group of young adults who were seeking full-time and professional employment and we did not intend to generalise their perceptions as representative of a specific generation, namely Generation Y.

Finally, this study is important for two reasons. Firstly, the group of well-educated but also precarious migrant/expatriate workers is increasing dramatically in a neoliberal global economy. The experience of being a highly educated international citizen, but with only a weak sense of entitlement to WLB support, is likely to become more common in this (and subsequent) generations. Secondly, this study extends the ground-breaking work by Sue Lewis on sense of entitlement and individual choice. Here, our focus was particularly on the temporal and generational context for a new generation entering the workforce. We have highlighted how the changing economic context of a globalised, neoliberal economy is shaping (and weakening compared to previous generations) this generation's sense of entitlement to employer support for WLB.

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