How I failed the big four and the big four failed me: an exploration of aspiration in the accountancy profession

Abstract

Organisations spend huge amounts on recruitment campaigns and inductions to attract top talent. At the same time professional workers' mobility in the labour market is high. This article captures the experiences of millennials and baby boomers in accountancy firms, and shows that for millennials organisational attempts to lure people into long term labour commitments are sometimes based on spin that fuels millennials career aspirations. Through a focus group and 48 interviews we show how many millennial participants, disappointed by early career experiences that had not lived up to their hype, intended to move around the labour market and were not aspiring to stay at one place for long, creating a disconnect between employer and employee expectations.

Using Bourdieu's concepts as instruments to think with, we posit that habitus, capitals and illusio provide insights into the formation of aspiration. Our study provides a platform for debate about worker aspiration and mobility in the professions and interrogates the disconnection between what organisations purport to offer and how employees perceive their offerings. Recommendations to narrow or make sense of the disconnection can inform the planning and implementation of recruitment for aspirant professionals and employers.

Key words: accountancy, aspiration, baby boomers, big four, millennials, turnover

Introduction

As contemporary employment conditions have become more volatile and unpredictable the trajectory of career paths now carry a high degree of ambiguity (Hofstetter & Rosenblatt 2017). Due to the precarious nature of employment, careers have become increasingly individualised, following what Hall (1976) describes as Protean Career Orientations (PCOs). Conceived as self-directed, value driven and concerned with work life balance, much research around PCOs and its antecedents has focused on established workers, with less about younger adults at the start of their careers (Crowley-Henry and Weir 2007; Park and Rothwell 2009; Rastgar, Ebrahimi and Hessan 2014). This paper will in part fill this gap. As education has evolved into mass education, hierarchies exchanged for flattened structures, command and control by democracy and consultation, these differences have affected both individuals and their organisations. We focus on two generations: Millennials who are widely accepted as the generation born between 1981 and 1996, and Baby Boomers generally defined as those born between 1946 and 1964 (Murphy 2007). These generational cohorts were chosen as they represent those at the beginning and those approaching the end of their career pathways that work as accountants in Big Four companies, a name attributed to the four largest professional service organisations in the world: Ernst & Young (EY), KPMG, PWC and Deloitte.

Using Bourdieu's (1983) framework, the research aims to investigate two key issues.

The differences in career aspiration between two generations.

To explore the gap between millennials aspiration and career opportunities, and to interrogate the impact on millennials and on organisations

The paper makes two contributions. First, it extends the career literature by pointing to generational groups as an important dimension of aspiration in professional work. Second, it shows the key role of the habitus in reproducing the dynamics of aspiration.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the theoretical framework, in particular how we have explored aspiration through a Bourdieusian lens, followed by a discussion of generational groups and their navigation of the workplace. Next we consider labour turnover, then place generational literature firmly in a Bourdieusian framework. Research methods are followed by our findings under three headings: aspiration, opportunity and disappointment. We then discuss the findings and the paper's contributions to the understanding of aspiration in career orientation.

Bourdieu and aspiration

In November 2010 the UK government declared it imperative to become an 'aspiration nation' (Richardson 2010). Aspiration is associated with hopes and dreams and represents an innately positive outlook of a person's future (Bauman 1998). Scholars such as Appadurai (2003), Bauman (1998), Goldthorpe (1998) and Giddens (1991) have explored aspiration; however, none have used Bourdieu's conceptual tool of habitus to explore how aspiration is negotiated.

Using Bourdieu's concepts as instruments to think with, rather than rules to follow, we posit that habitus, capitals and illusio provide vital insights into the formation of aspiration. For Bourdieu, aspirations are (re) produced through the interaction of habitus, a matrix of dispositions that shape how the individual operates in the world; capital, representing economic, cultural, social and symbolic; and field, representative of the social context. Using his theory of practice we suggest that habitus enables us to explore aspiration from two perspectives. First, the influence of habitus on employees' aspirations and second, institutional habitus (Tarabini, Curran & Fontdevila 2017). To examine this we explore the constant negotiation required as individuals come to understand the value for their capital within the expectation boundaries set in organisational contexts, in other words, how we can shed light on how individual and institutional habitus can function synchronously.

For Bourdieu, while aspirations are socially embedded, his tools allow for different strategies and struggles and the ways one may come to understand the 'future that fits them' or to decide that something is 'not for the likes of us' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 130). Thus we can appreciate that Bourdieu's tools highlight a generous and non-deterministic view of aspiration, describing it using words like 'imagined' 'fuzzy' 'blurred' showing how it is never fixed or static, but malleable and changing much like the habitus from which it partly derives.

We interrogate how Bourdieu's concept of habitus constructs participants' aspiration, against two backdrops: first, that of baby boomers and second, millennials. Since habitus is permeable, it reacts to the solicitations of the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:18) and impacts on the structures that shape it. Bourdieu uses the notion of 'field' to explain social interactions and (re)production of inequalities in society. An individual's power is linked to their understanding of the field and how to play by its rules; as well as the capital (economic (material possessions), social (social relations), cultural (historical and cultural possessions), and symbolic (recognition or prestige) (see Bourdieu 1990) they possess and can use in the field. In theorising with habitus, the actions of individuals are not necessarily regulated by reference to future goals as 'actions are not purposeful but, rather, continuously adaptive' (Robbins 1999:29), so new experiences can change the habitus. While habitus wants to accrue capital and to be valued, it influences how a person thinks and what they think about (Ingram 2011). In unpacking the impact of habitus, Nash (1990:445) articulates that 'we do what we choose to do and what we choose to do must be what we have learned to do and want'. In this sense aspiration is the product of our prior learning combined with desire.

So while our habitus colours our interpretation of the world, since it is not fixed, it evolves and engages in different social spaces that Bourdieu calls social fields that come with their own rules and regulations. Individuals with a habitus that matches the habitus of others in a given field are said to be like a 'fish in water' Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:127), so a contented employee whose aspirations are met would be such. In contrast, if one's habitus and field are ill matched, an individual becomes a fish out of water, discontented, restless and unfulfilled. Bourdieu recognised that both organisations and individuals are malleable, producing a backdrop of uncertainty that must strive continuously for alignment in order to avoid the stress of becoming a fish out of water, a misalignment he called hysteresis. Thus, in practice, the rules of the game function as an organising principle of society (Bourdieu, 1991), reproducing subordination of some by others. These rules are made easy for organisations to implement through Bourdieu's concept of illusio, the process whereby an individual internalises the use of language and tools during socialisation events such as recruitment and induction. By participating in shared activities with others, and building anticipatory socialised responses (Scholarios et al 2003), individuals reconstruct the rules through their participation.

Aspirational Difference: Understanding Generational groups

To understand the aspirational attitudes of millennials and baby boomers, the differences between the two generational cohorts offer a starting point. Generational cohorts represent those born within an approximate 17 to 20-year time span and denote a biological period in which it is possible for people to reproduce and mature (Campbell, Twenge and Campbell, 2017). Generational cohorts typically share formative experiences, hold specific identities and traits that associate them with their birth cohort (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2019; Rudolph and Zacher, 2020). However, as Bourdieu's interpretation of habitus represents an ever shifting and adapting construct, so too can generational characteristics evidence shift. Further, those born at the beginning and end of their generational period may experience 'generational fuzziness' (Campbell, Twenge and Campbell, 2017 p.131), sharing characteristics with the pre or succeeding generation, or share no typical stereotypical characteristics at all (Chamberlin, 2009; Weiss and Perry, 2020; Moore and Krause, 2021). Although this opens up the possibility of aspirational malleability amongst the generational cohort groups, millennial and baby boomer cohorts exposed to similar social influences may inevitably share similar characteristics and aspirations.

Generational Characteristics

Although there is a small deviance amongst generational researchers about the specific start and end period of the generational categories, baby boomers, also identified as the Me Generation, Boomers and Vietnam Generation, generally represent those born between 1946-1964 (Murphy, 2007; Nakagawa and Yellowlees, 2020). Characteristically baby boomers are regarded as flexible labour, with strong communicative skills, a willingness to please, yet have a reported tendency to be self-orientated (Steelcase, 2009; Andrade and Westover, 2018).

In contrast, 'the Millennial generation, born between 1980 and 1994' (Zaharee, Lipkie, Mehlman and Neylon, 2018:51) also known as Nexters, Generation Y or the Internet Generation (Pirie and Worcester, 1998; Gardner, 2006; Murphy, 2007;Egerová, Kutlák, & Eger, 2021), are recognised as tech-literate through interactions with it at a relatively young age. Described as the most educated and highly desirable employees, Weinbaum, Girven, and Oberholtzer (2016) posit that the most prominent characteristics of millennials is confidence, strong self-expression and liberal tendencies. Millennials are reported to consider themselves special, are achievement orientated, innovative thinkers and multi-taskers with the ability to accept change (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2019; Egerová, Kutlák, & Eger, 2021) and thus are attractive to organisations seeking competitive advantage in a global business

environment. Despite this, Stewart et al., (2017) note that the life experiences and focus on their educational journey may leave millennials ill prepared to enter the workplace shaped by previous generations. Apportioning blame for millennial ill preparedness largely on a 'more dangerous world' (Kotz 2016:1164), Wilson and Gerber (2008) argue that millennials have been socialised in a more sheltered environment than previous generations. In addition, their familiarity with technology has resulted in an expectation to achieve instantaneous solutions aided by greater parental guidance and perpetual support in educational settings (Kotz, 2016; Suar, Kumar Jha, Sekhar Das, Alat and Patnaik, 2020). Thus, early socialisation has shaped the habitus and aspirational foundations of millennials, and may lead to greater aspirational expectations and support than workplaces currently offer. This, coupled with the anticipatory socialisation embedded in recruitment literature and inductions as carriers of discourse, develops aspiration.

Generations and Habitus

In extension of the habitus generational discussion, Mannheim's (1952) work on social generations and Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus is extended through Woodman and Wynn (2015) generational habitus lens which offers insight into millennial and baby boomers' aspirations of work. Collectively, Bourdieu and Mannheim provide a solution to the structure and agency challenge by using these insights to help understand how generational groups mediate and respond to challenges and opportunities in their careers (Hoolichan and McKee, 2019). Although criticised for placing too much emphasis on individual agency (Hoolihan and McKee, 2019), Woodman and Wynn (2015) extend the generation habitus theory by linking Becks's (1992) risk society view which argues that a weakening of social structures obligates younger generations to favour a different lifestyle or identity to previous generations. In doing so, generational habitus, negotiated through illusio (Bourdieu, 1991), whereby individuals are driven and shaped by what they ascribe importance and meaning to, such as parental and societal influences (Humphreys and Rigg, 2020).

Navigating the Workplace

In attempting to translate the socialisation experiences of millennials and baby boomers into the labour force, workplaces are challenged with attracting, retaining and motivating labour to ensure the continuity, sustainability and bottom line performance of firms (Zupan, Mihelič & Aleksić, 2018). To achieve this, workplaces need to engage in greater understanding of their workers and their working preferences in order to attract an engaged workforce (Zaharee, Lipkie, Mehlman and Neylon, 2018; Egerová, Kutlák, & Eger, 2021).

The contrast between both generations leaves workplaces with the challenge of structuring work in ways that meet the aspirations of workers from a more individualised perspective in order to limit employee disillusionment and labour turnover (Egerová, Kutlák, & Eger, 2021). Appreciating how and why generational cohorts are attracted and engaged by organisations is key to a positive worker experience that can negate labour turnover and aid employee retention.

Labour turnover represents a cost to businesses caused by loss of talent and additional-recruitment costs (Agba et al., 2021). From a talent perspective, baby boomers are generally viewed as a reliable and static cohort that are less likely to voice their dissatisfactions at work (Johns, 2017), and turnover triggers among boomers are influenced by intention to retire, a lack of trust in management and dissatisfaction related to remuneration and high workloads (Deloitte, 2020). In contrast, millennials are reported as the job-hopping generation that may bring potential organisational costs due to having limited affinity with employers and a willingness to move more freely between employers than any previous generation (Konings et al., 2021). Reasons for millennial labour mobility, reputedly linked to

dissatisfaction and disengagement, yet we should consider that some of the fault could lie with employers who offer insufficient incentives to encourage retention (ibid). Much of the media and literature reviewing recruitment practices of firms attempting to attract talent note how millennials are inherently different from other generational groups (Zaharee, Lipkie, Mehlman and Neylon, 2018). However, an emerging argument in recruitment literature highlights how workers across generations are more similar than dissimilar in their attitudes towards work, and dissimilarities are due to a worker's life-stage rather than as a result of generational traits (Costanza et al., 2012) suggesting a divide in the academic field on this issue.

In support of the generational similarity perspective, two surveys (Tohmatsu, 2016; Deloitte, 2020) identified dissatisfaction with pay as the primary reason why all generational employees left their employer. Across-the-board pay rises fail to improve the retention incentives particularly amongst high performing employees who prefer incentives such as 'stay bonus rewards or stock options' as potential remedies to the labour turnover problems (Zaharee, Lipkie, Mehlman and Neylon, 2018, p.52). In the same Deloitte study, lack of development opportunities was cited across all generational groups as the second most common reason why employees left employment. This is significant given that research indicates that millennials are eager to excel in their careers, develop their leadership capabilities yet require robust training programmes, continuous educational opportunities and work rotation options that allow for cross-functional advancement in order to achieve this (Thompson and Gregory, 2012; Young, 2014; Calk and Patrick, 2017). In addition, baby boomers require promotion opportunities, are goal-orientated and require recognition for their actions from peers and managers (SHRM.org, 2021).

The opportunity to engage in purposeful work is also a significant factor in labour retention (Comaford, 2016). Both generational groups note an interest in work being more than just a place and is instead something they need to feel part of that offers a purpose beyond the pay check (Sweeney, Benge and Carter, 2019). Diametrically opposed to prioritising profit and growth maximisation, worker aspiration denotes a shift in preference for working in organisations that value developing people and are environmentally and socially responsible (Tohmatsu, 2016; Deloitte, 2020).

Methodology

In order to investigate generational experiences the study employed a three-phased approach, and in practice the first two phases occurred over the same time so overlapped somewhat. The first phase was a series of conversations about our observations of millennials aspiration. Phase two involved in-depth interviews with 48 participants, either face to face or by zoom, roughly half baby boomers and half millennials to gain insights into participants' personal accounts of their aspiration and experiences. The third phase was a focus group (comprising baby boomers and millennials) of over 20 participants where we revisited the interview questions as a group conversation. One of the authors is a former author in residence (Marshall et al 2014) at a big four company so had insights and connections that he would not otherwise have had.

Interviews took place between February and September 2020, the first 20 before the first lockdown caused by the covid pandemic and the rest online via zoom. Interviews were conducted using broader questions throughout, focusing on narrower areas of inquiry as data collection and analysis progressed in parallel (Spradley, 1979). For example, the interplay between aspiration and opportunity (and lack of) emerged early as significant themes, so we orientated our questions accordingly. We asked follow up questions to clarify information. Questions were open-ended and aimed at allowing 'unanticipated statements and stories to emerge' (Charmaz, 2006:26). Interviews were recorded with participant consent, allowing us to focus on asking questions and listening to pick up nuance in the moment

(Anderson, 2013). As well as transcriptions we had taken notes that were not audio taped to preserve insights that could later inform coding and analysis.

Out of 120 current and former big four employees contacted by email, just under 50 agreed to participate, with just over half aged between 26 -28. Two subsequently dropped out citing work pressures as the reason. Twenty were aged 50 and over, the majority were female (28). Most participants were from the city region in which the research took place or within a twenty-mile radius. All participants were interviewed once, with interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes.

Forty-eight practising or former accountants at the big four from three UK cities participated. The first step in producing a sample of participants was to have a chat with family and friends in the industry who might qualify for the research. This produced six participants who each brought another three. Next, following initial contact by email, and an online talk from one of the authors explaining the research questions and inviting people to participate a further 12 came forward. We then used snowball sampling by asking for suggestions of other potential interviewees. From this, some new names came forward, who in turn introduced us to more participants. We believed that the relative ease in which we gathered participants could be due to two factors. First, the strength of feeling about the study helped to generate interest; second, the latter half of the research occurred during the first pandemic lockdown when some participants were furloughed from work, others were bored and almost all were working from home, and as one said 'it was something to do'. We kept interviewing until data collection and analysis stopped generating new themes, signalling that we had approached theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

After the interviews, participants were invited to an online focus group that we called What shapes our aspiration? 20 participants attended, 14 millennials and six baby boomer. The discussion lasted just under an hour, was recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Consistent with a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) data analysis began concurrently with data collection through team meetings and discussions of interview notes. Each interview transcript was coded using line by line coding, with nvivo descriptors being the primary approach to assigning labels to codes. Through initial coding, 21 categories and later three broader core categories: "aspiration", "opportunity" and "disappointment" were agreed.   Although there were nuanced differences between these three categories, all of them indicated an understanding of what aspiration entailed, individually and organisationally. Discussions about emerging findings were held with participants at random intervals and served as a means of improving reliability.

Drawback of methods

The methodology is subject to several drawbacks. The relatively small sample size means that findings are not generalizable, reliance on interviews implies that reported conversations rather than observed behaviours were privileged, and the coding process subjective and open to different interpretations. Further, the participants were mostly white females, working and living in the same metropolis of northern cities. Initially the sample drew from participants known to one of the authors, who had been a 'researcher in residence' (Marshall et al 2014). The research was undertaken during the covid pandemic, a period that some saw as stalling or thwarting their career aspiration, so might have

influenced their responses. The main challenge in an exploratory study such as this one was to balance description with comparison in order to enable analytical generalisation

Findings

This research focused on accountants' perceptions and experiences of aspiration in the big four, with many millennials reporting that a gap existed between their aspiration about what working for a big four company could be like potentially and their actual experience. We present these experiences in participants' own words, differentiated by pseudonyms. The work of Deardorff et al (2012) has been useful to frame commonalities and develop themes. We discuss the main findings under three broad headings: "aspiration", "opportunity" and "disappointment", sub divided into baby boomers and millennials.

Aspiration

While all participants had aspirations about their career goals and life in general, baby boomers aspirations aligned more closely to what the company offered. If they wanted to 'reach the top' the extra work and time they would have to invest was clear. A strong sense of personal ownership of career path existed among many baby boomers, and as one participant put it, 'if you want to go far, it's up to you 100%, no scheme, programme, mentor can take the place of that personal dedication'. Some millennials, in contrast, had high aspirations at the beginning of their career, yet also wanted to maintain a control and work life balance that for some precluded the need to study or network outside of work and most were determined that work should not encroach on home life. The biggest difference in the two cohorts lay not right at the beginning of their career but a few years in. At this point all baby boomers expressed that they had been on the career trajectory that they aspired to, whereas all millennials in this research felt let down by the mismatch between their aspiration and the reality of their working lives, let down attributed to personal and organisational factors, particularly the latter. Personal factors included feeling overqualified for their actual roles, with some admitting to a naivety about how their prior qualifications would help them stand out but in fact were very ordinary. Organisational factors such as exaggerated claims made in recruitment literature, and by recruitment agencies, compounded by inductions that promised challenge and opportunity but failed to deliver.

Baby boomers

For most baby boomers there was a strong sense of personal ownership of their careers, for instance:

'I hoped for a good job with qualifications and to be able to get on. I knew if I wanted to climb to the top I would have to put in extra work which I did, some might say too much but you don't get something for nothing' (Rob 58)

'I have always been ambitious. I knew I wanted to excel if you like so I studied part time for a degree, fewer people had them then now it's two a penny. I worked all day and studied all night but there weren't distractions then like the internet and gaming like my son does' (Jackie 54)

For most, what they experienced in their careers aligned with what they aspired to, as expressed below by Debbie and Dave:

'I think then and I think now my aspirations or dreams if you like were quite simple and realistic. Good job, buy a house, save up to travel when kids grown. Nothing or no one outside of my family or work led me to aspire to any more or less' (Debbie 60)

'The career ladder set our aspiration, you could see the hierarchy and knew what to do to climb. It required much more than just turn up at work' (Dave 54)

With reference to millennials, some baby boomers commented on the spin that seduced and over promised:

'I can see why they expect so much. I've sat in induction. In fact I've contributed and we are told to 'not disappoint them, give it some gloss' when really a lot of the job is pretty mundane. More honesty is needed then they wouldn't feel so flat' (Lindsey 56)

While others commented on the qualification system:

'Of course they (millennials) expect to be doing challenging work and they have studied hard for it. In fact, too hard. We are a great profession, but a lot of it is graft and repetitive and mundane' (Alison 59)

Millennials

Most millennials expressed holding very high aspirations about their careers and organizations:

'Yes I did have high aspiration. Who set them I'm not so sure. I suppose it was a mix of family and background where my parents definitely set the bar high for us and then I looked for good employers where I could be challenged. I've been disappointed because the challenging work doesn't exist, maybe just for the top few. Recruitment and induction was just hype'. (Lawrence 27)

Similar feelings were expressed by Ryan:

'The job was so bigged up (during recruitment and induction) and I fell for it hook, line and sinker' (Ryan 27)

Some reflected on where their aspirations derived from:

'I did think I was a good catch, degree, masters, student debt, placements, pushy family - of course I had high aspirations. It's been a shock that so many others had exactly the same. My parents say that it's harder for us because the great level playing field where everyone goes to uni means it's much more difficult to stand out' (Rebecca 30)

For some millennials the theme of work life balance was mentioned often in the context of aspiration, for instance:

'I aspire to be the best me I can but that means work life balance so I want a good work life and good home life not just one over the other' (Olivia 25)

'I want to do well and aspire to have a happy life. I would like the job to be what it says on the tin so that I can make a proper decision if it's a good fit' (Connor 24)

A few years into their careers, some millennials expressed a desire to regain some control over their careers. Widespread cynicism about the amount of spin was common, summarised below by Sophie:

'From now on, the more highly attractive a job is dressed up with spin, the more dodgy I think it will be' (Sophie 28)

Asked how their aspirations had altered, the desire to reclaim more control was common:

'I want to be in the driving seat not be seduced by spin' (Hannah 26)

'Good job, good home life, good terms and conditions and balance, these are my aspirations'. (Claire 26)

Opportunity

Questions about opportunities revealed the biggest differences between the two generations. In general, baby boomers regarded career opportunities as something they largely created themselves. In contrast, millennials expected opportunities to be provided, and had indeed been informed at recruitment and induction that that would be the case.

Baby boomers

'If I'm honest the company has always done what they said. But I do see a difference now - younger people are promised a lot more both before and once they join than we were' (Helen 52)

And a similar comment was made by Alison:

'There is really very little difference in the opportunities available now as then. What is different is how it's dressed up as a package of training, development, benefits, rewards. I'm not surprised when the younger ones get fed up and jump ship' (Alison 59)

Jackie commented that with much more emphasis on equality these days, it was in fact more 'level' in the past:

'In a way it was a much more level playing field. Most people got offered the same chance at promotion and it was clear what you needed to do'. (Jackie 54)

The theme of creating one's own opportunities was referred to often:

'The company told us what opportunities were there, then it was up to you to put in the graft and reach higher through night classes, study, taking on extra, covering others, doing some of the crap, and yes socialise with the gaffers' (Lindsey 56)

Millennials

Many millennials retold stories of being seduced repeatedly about the plentiful opportunities at different organisations during milk rounds, recruitment days, assessment centres and in induction. For example:

'I thought that there would be lots of opportunities because that's what I was told. You keep hearing talent schemes, rewards, blue sky thinking prizes….. so you buy into it. And you wait and wait….. And if you ask you are told about some remote time in the future' (Oliver 27)

'Opportunities are presented as a given. I'm afraid they are invisible because they are simply not there for most of us. Our company is a bit clever as they do groom the token employee on some special scheme or international assignment but it's like for 1 in every 10,000 so don't hold your breath'. (Sophie 28)

Below Claire mentions how she got seduced by the earlier promises, and then bought in to the contagious spin:

'I've been here for four years now and do remind them in my annual review about what things they promised. They (my line manager) just smiles and says that would be nice but must focus on the day

job. Friends in other companies say it's no different for them, but it's hush hush cos there's pressure to say your company is fab, and you look daft for believing it' (Claire 26)

The theme of being 'distinct' was apparent in relation to access to opportunity:

'I kind of thought my background, degree, masters, internship, would be enough and I would get opportunities to shine but it doesn't work like that. It raises your hopes when really the work is pretty routine' (Lawrence 27)

Disappointment

There were big differences in the theme of disappointment between the two generations. Both the depth of disappointment and the range of triggers that disappointed was greater.

Baby boomers

Little disappointment attributed to the job was expressed by baby boomers. If they were disappointed at all, it was attributed to sexism in wider society and their family roles, for example:

'It was just kind of more difficult to progress as a woman; you were expected to be pleased if you progressed to a certain point whereas you saw men who joined at the same time and often were not as competent go further' (Loraine 51)

'As soon as the kids arrived my career ladder was cut. It wasn't spoken just there, sexism under the surface bubbling away. The length of time it takes to catch up has been a source of annoyance and disappointment' (Debbie 60)

The reduction in subtle and blatant sexism was expressed by male baby boomers too, for instance:

'Young women when I was starting basically struggled when they got married or had kids, promotion wasn't so easy at all. Nowadays my daughters have much more equality with the men'. (Steve 57)

Below Sue expresses some sympathy with millennials:

'We weren't ever that disappointed because we never thought the sky was the limit. I feel for younger people coming in now with their debts and promises of great opportunities. It's not fair and they truly think they can teach us old dogs a trick or two, but all the spin around things like great ideas schemes feeds into their arrogance. No wonder there's an epidemic of depression in youngsters' (Sue 56)

Millennials

For millennials, disappointment was attributed to three sources: a mass-market education system that has made their qualifications commonplace, recruitment spin and promises of exciting opportunities that too often led to crushing disappointment, for instance:

'Honestly the things they said in the recruitment literature! then in the interview, I could cry at how much I was sold. I thought my Masters with distinction would count for something but it's the norm. My career story so far is how I failed the big four and how the big four failed me' (Lawrence 27)

The theme of delayed gratification in one's career led to much disappointment, and mentioned by several participants. For example:

'We were told that great ideas were rewarded and often implemented. It was a scam. I came up with two great ideas and my mentor acknowledged them. I asked what next and his response was 'maybe in about 20 years' time'. I was fuming'. (Rebecca 30)

The theme of feeling underemployed also fed into millennials' disappointment:

'From the initial recruitment literature, the interviews, the induction - so much spin. And you have made a decision to work for them so you want to believe it all. I have been disappointed. Not even using my GCSE skills let alone my masters'. (Sophie 28)

The theme of disappointment was returned to frequently, and experienced from straight after induction all the way through to leaving the organisation, to the extent that it impacted their decision making and new job search strategies. For instance:

'I think I must have come across as really aggressive at the second interview. I was so determined to find out what it was really going to be like but struggled to get behind the fantastic talent scheme, training opportunities talk'. (Olivia 25)

The overwhelming sense of disappointment that we heard about foregrounded a resistance to employers' interventions to increase engagement or wellbeing. This manifest as a general disbelief in their organisations through to active resistance:

'I will not spend any time now in bolstering their image by attending recruitment events, fairs, inductions, selling spin, doing surveys. No, all my free time is spent unpacking all the *** and getting my career where it should be' (Rebecca 30).

So although Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence implies the wide acceptance by the dominated group of its subordinated position (Bourdieu 1991), in a few instances participants committed 'upward violence' and acts of resistance.

Discussion and conclusion

Aside from technological advances, the outstanding similarity experienced by both baby boomers and millennials was the job itself. Differences lay in extrinsic elements, in particular the aspirations about the job that in turn led to perceptions of opportunity and disappointment, and influenced behaviours including intentions to stay, job satisfaction, organisational loyalty and work life balance.

Using Bourdieu's concepts, differences in aspiration were seeded partly in family background or habitus, and in the accrual of cultural and social capitals such as qualifications and networks. Many millennials had experienced a fall in Bourdieu's 'distinction' created by widening participation in higher education, that had led to greater disappointment and unmet expectations for some.

In general, baby boomers spoke about how they 'Knew their place', and had a clear career ladder to climb. While in theory the ladder was open to all, there was a sense among some females that in practice it was more available to men, with restrictions from sexist structures and expectations prevalent in society played out in the workplace.

For many millennials, influenced by the 'spin and hype' around the job that fed into their aspirations of what a job would entail, built a false anticipatory socialised attitude that ultimately created a real sense of disappointment (Handley 2017). The hype, in abundance in the early stages of their careers, in recruitment literature, campaigns and inductions led the focus group discussion about 'contagious spin' around the buy-in narratives constructed about great companies, creating a momentum that often leads to further disappointment, and for many a 'collective disillusionment' (Bourdieu 1990). In other words, the participants in this study behaved in ways that conform with and reinforce their own subordination (Bourdieu 1977); this is 'violence' since they remain 'below their potential realizations'

(Galtung 1969 p.168). Further, since opportunities were promoted as guaranteed, and coupled with their already high entry qualifications, few millennials considered the need to create opportunities.

Interviewing two generations in the same profession highlighted certain aspiration paradoxes that perhaps would not have been possible if considering aspiration through the lens of millennials only. Bourdieu's tools have allowed for a nuanced analysis of contradictory demands, the emotional meaning participants attach to these categories and the stories/narratives that they employ to make sense of these discourses. For instance, Connolly and Healey (2004) state that the habitus gradually internalizes the 'acceptance of those ideas and structures that tend to subordinate' as individuals 'progressively developed taken-for-granted ways of thinking and behaving that reflect this lived experience' (p.16) creating frustration, disappointment or hysteresis. Referring to the role of aspiration in the habitus, MacLeod (2009, p.117) theorises that 'the habitus engenders aspirations that reflect objective probabilities'. Through an exploration of how the participants conceptualised power in relation to aspiration, Skeggs (2004) focuses on how the habitus seeks to accrue value, that influences how subjectivities are enacted and dispositions constructed within it. Thus habitus, while durable and transposable, is not immutable and thus must change if the field or organisation does not live up to one's expectations, in other words if there is a clash between the organisational and individual habitus.

Further, conceptualizations of aspiration are not simply the result of one's habitus but rather of the fusion between one's habitus and one's current and past circumstances (Grenfell 2008). It is unsurprising here that highly educated millennials expected the glossy promise of challenging careers to deliver on their promise, and have been left disappointed with aspirations unmet. In a capitalistic society, Zipin, Sellar and Hattam (2012) argue, drawing on Bourdieu, the formation of aspirations is 'defined in relation to the axioms of capital' where 'those with less access to social, cultural or economic resources must aspire in competition with those who have greater access' (p. 187). What might be the problem now is that individuals have been seduced to better themselves, to seek distinction through investment in education, only to find that elite education has evolved into mass education. Participants' habitus became active in relation to the field, what Ingram calls the 'dialectical confrontation' between habitus and field where the habitus adapts to the reality (Ingram 2011, p.290), a phase that for some millennials, was marked by disappointment about aspirations held but not attainable. Since habitus seeks unity and tries to avoid hysteresis, baby boomers' alignment between habitus and field avoided dissonance. For millennials, in contrast, hysteresis occurred due to the dissonance between what their organisations offered in principle and practice, creating disappointment for many.

Since the concept of a job for life has diminished, employers, faced with high turnover among young staff, there seems little point in high investment in recruitment and induction, for the return on investment is likely to be low. If employers and employees are to thrive jointly, the relationship between field and habitus needs to be closer. This can happen in different ways. Employers can be more honest and transparent, and avoid raising aspirations beyond what is available. Employees can reflect upon the market as it is and try to differentiate themselves in a myriad of ways addressing not only qualifications but skills and competences too. Then, armed with skills and qualifications, they might develop a precarious habitus (Harrison, Collins and Bahor, 2020) capable of responding flexibly and creatively to the uncertainties of the economy.

Limitations of study and future research

While we have responded to our research aims, doing so has raised some gaps that might inform future research. Most of our participants were employees in full time permanent contracts, a status somewhat different to many employees in today's gig economy, characterised by precarity and insecurity. Further, the study of intersectional categories (race, class, gender) which are in operation during the ongoing formation of aspirations is something we have not touched upon and is worthy of future research.

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