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Examining the influence of transculturation on work ethic in the United States

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# Examining the influence of transculturation on work ethic in the United States

Work ethic in  
the United  
States

145

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of cultural assimilation – termed “transculturation” – on work ethic perceptions, thus this study examines trends in work ethic across ethnic and generational groups within the USA.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Following a literature review on work ethic, ethnicity, and transculturation, an analysis of variance based on 873 survey responses is presented. The sample includes undergraduate and graduate students at several public universities within the USA.

**Findings** – An empirical analysis supports the hypothesis that the variation of work ethic perceptions within the Millennial generation is significantly less than the variation among older generations. The authors find no significant difference in general work ethic perceptions among Millennial ethnic groups.

**Research limitations/implications** – While the study is conducted using a convenience sample, the demographics are closely representative of the USA labor force. The results suggest that Millennials, while a more diverse ethnic population, exhibit less variation among work ethic perceptions than earlier generational groups.

**Practical implications** – Understanding differences in work ethic perceptions across various ethnic groups is valuable for managers interested in designing jobs that appropriately exploit the full value of a multi-generational workforce.

**Originality/value** – The findings of this study offer new insights into how more recent generations, while more ethnically diverse, exhibit a convergence in perceptions of work ethic.

**Keywords** Ethnicity, Transculturation, Work ethic

**Paper type** Research paper

## Literature review

The demographic landscape of the USA is changing. Researchers project that the ethnic makeup of the USA will continue evolving in future years with the Latino population projected to account for the majority of the nation’s population growth through 2050 (Passel and Cohn, 2008). The slow growth of Caucasians in the USA coupled with the rise of immigration and growth of the Hispanic and Asian American groups (Frey, 2009) suggests the ethnic representation in the USA is more diverse than ever in the nation’s history.

Similarly, over recent decades, the workforce of the USA has experienced substantial change in gender representation, age structure, and ethnic composition (Toossi, 2002). For example, from 1950 to 2000, the total labor force population nearly doubled; while the current majority of individuals in the workforce are Caucasians (nearly 70 percent), Hispanic and Asian ethnic groups are growing rapidly with Hispanics expected to account for 24 percent of the labor force by 2050 and Asians nearly 8 percent



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(Lee and Mather, 2008). Given the changes in labor force demographics, managers are left to wonder how such changes will influence the firm. Specifically, are the noted demographic trends suggestive of changes in employees' work place values and attitudes?

Research shows that general differences among ethnic groups exist. For example, Caucasians are identified as more individualistic (Cokley *et al.*, 2007), and African Americans are identified as collective with a rich history of oral tradition (White, 1984). Furthermore, African Americans have more positive work attitudes than Caucasians (Somers and Birnbaum, 2001), and Hispanic and Caucasian professionals vary in the factors that influence job satisfaction (Moyes and Redd, 2008).

To better understand the extent to which work place values and attitudes of employees are changing, we examine individual work ethic. Work ethic is a set of beliefs and attitudes that reflect the fundamental value of work and is used as a comprehensive measure of how individuals perceive work importance, leisure time, morality, and similar work-related factors (Miller *et al.*, 2001). The study of work ethic has gained attention as work values are central to understanding a broad scope of work-related values and behaviors (Gahan and Abeysekera, 2009). Work ethic, more specifically, is shown to influence employee job satisfaction, commitment, and general attitudes toward work (Chu, 2007; Gursoy *et al.*, 2008). Researchers have called for more empirical research related to work ethic given its implications on employee output and firm success (Van Ness *et al.*, 2010), and by better understanding employee success drivers at a more advanced level, researchers can inform managers, thereby making them better equipped to design firms more aligned with employee values (Ralston *et al.*, 1997), create a more motivated workforce (Lawler, 1968), and ultimately enhance firm performance.

Historically, research notes differences across ethnic groups with respect to work ethic (e.g. Bhagat, 1979; Cokley *et al.*, 2007). For example, Ghorpade *et al.* (2006) conducted an ethno-religious examination of work ethic and found that Filipinos rate significantly higher in the dimension of hard work compared to other ethnicities. In addition to variation across ethnic groups, differences in work ethic are also shown to exist across generational groups of Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials (e.g. Cennamo and Gardner, 2008; Meriac *et al.*, 2010; Smola and Sutton, 2002; Twenge *et al.*, 2010) and between genders (e.g. Furnham and Muhiudeen, 1984; Hall, 1990; Hill, 1997; Meriac *et al.*, 2009; Wollack *et al.*, 1971). However, not all research suggests that work ethic manifests differently across groups. Real *et al.* (2010), for example, conducted a multi-generational study of skilled workers in a single trade and found that few quantitative differences exist across generations. Results from a longitudinal study conducted by Highhouse *et al.* (2010) suggest that a decline in the importance of work has manifested over time and is not tied to specific demographic characteristics. While much discussion is found in the literature regarding potential differences and similarities of work ethic across groups, few studies seek to empirically examine the changing nature of such trends, and researchers are left uncertain as to whether demographic changes may suggest deeper-level cultural changes among members of the labor force.

Research investigating the relation between work ethic and culture exists (e.g. Nevins, Bearden and Money, 2007), but most of this literature focusses upon national culture (e.g. Furnham and Rajamanickman, 1992; Woehr *et al.*, 2007). Early studies (e.g. Aul, 1978; Buchholz, 1978; ul Hassan, 1968; Wollack *et al.*, 1971) that examine ethnic culture and work ethic tend to be limited to only a few ethnicities

(i.e. “white” and “black” groups), as is more recent research (e.g. Cokley *et al.*, 2007). Given the changing demographics and the numerous ethnic groups present in the USA workforce, we assert that the dynamic nature of this workforce warrants further investigation of work ethic perceptions relative to ethnicity. The influence of various ethnic cultures may have an important impact upon general work ethic beliefs. However, no research currently exists that explores such influences. This study seeks to fill this gap in the cross-cultural management and work ethic literatures by examining the potential influence of multiple ethnic cultures upon work ethic perceptions.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of work ethic across ethnic groups in the USA and investigate whether perceptions of work ethic are changing over generations. To do so, we conduct an analysis of work ethic perceptions from individuals who identify themselves as Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, or Asian American and are members of the Baby Boomer, Generation X, or Millennial generation. Within this framework, we examine the variation of general work ethic perceptions across ethnic groups within each generation to determine how these perceptions have changed over generations. In addition, we examine each dimension of work ethic (i.e. hard work, self-reliance, leisure, centrality of work, morality/ethics, delay of gratification, and wasted time) to contribute a more detailed analysis to the continuing discussion of differences in the workplace. Employing a transculturation perspective, we suggest that perceptions of work ethic are becoming more similar over generations, which is confirmed through an empirical analysis that finds no significant differences among work ethic perceptions across ethnic groups within the Millennial generation. These findings suggest that as the USA workforce is becoming more culturally and ethnically diverse, a convergence of work ethic perceptions has occurred over generations.

## Literature review

### *Work ethic*

The study of work ethic has a long, albeit a somewhat tumultuous, history. Ensuuing from Weber’s (1904-1905/1958) conceptualization of work ethic, numerous studies attempt to explain the nature of the work ethic construct, the relation of work ethic to other work-related attitudes, and differences in work ethic across various groups. Each incremental step in the understanding of work ethic provides additional insights into the changing nature of the workforce.

While Weber’s (1904-1905/1958) conceptualization of work ethic suggests it is a multidimensional construct, many researchers operationalize and measure work ethic as unidimensional (Miller *et al.*, 2001). Earlier measures of work ethic such as the Protestant Ethic Scale (Goldstein and Eichhorn, 1961), Pro-Protestant Ethic Scale (Blood, 1969), Spirit of Capitalism Scale (Hammond and Williams, 1976), and Australian Work Ethic Scale (Ho and Lloyd, 1984), include a limited number of items and are unidimensional in nature. More recently, Miller *et al.* (2001) developed, tested, and validated the Multidimensional Work Ethic Profile (MWEP). Reverting to the multidimensional conceptualization of work ethic and building upon extant literature on work ethic, Miller and colleagues (2001) establish that work ethic is indeed a multidimensional construct consisting of seven dimensions: centrality of work, delay of gratification, hard work, leisure, morality/ethics, self-reliance, and wasted time. As a result, work ethic is now generally understood to be a set of beliefs and values regarding the value of work, which includes these dimensions (Meriac *et al.*, 2010;

Miller *et al.*, 2001). Development in psychology and neuroscience lends further support to a multidimensional conceptualization of work ethic (Lee *et al.*, 2010).

Numerous studies investigate the relationship between work ethic and various constructs. For example, evidence suggests that links exist between work ethic and attitudes toward unemployment (Furnham, 1982) and attitudes toward the poor (Cozzarelli *et al.*, 2001). Research indicates that work ethic influences motivation loss in group performance (Abele and Diehl, 2008), intrinsic motivation among students (Tang, 1989), intergroup and policy attitudes (Rosenthal *et al.*, 2011), and is associated with great personal responsibility and expected success (Christopher and Schlenker, 2005). These are a few of the diverse studies involving work ethic, but perhaps the most common evaluations of work ethic tend to be across groups.

A substantial amount of research exists that includes evaluations of work ethic across groups. For instance, early studies find relationships between work ethic and political affiliation (e.g. Beit-Hallahmi, 1979; Wagstaff, 1983). Shapira and Griffith (1990) find work values of engineers similar to those of managers, but different from those of production and clerical workers. Work ethic is also shown to vary across cultures (Woehr *et al.*, 2007) and across career stages (Pogson *et al.*, 2003). Further, researchers have investigated generational differences in work ethic (e.g. Davis *et al.*, 2006; Meriac *et al.*, 2010) resulting in conflicting findings. While researchers note differences in work ethic perceptions exist across numerous groups, Meriac *et al.* (2009) examine gender differences in work ethic perceptions and find no notable difference.

#### *Work ethic and culture*

The concept of work ethic is rooted in social and cultural elements (Beit-Hallahmi, 1979). This is evident even in Weber's (1958/1904-1905) original conceptualization of work ethic as a Protestant belief. It is also evidenced in national culture-specific conceptualizations such as the Australian Work Ethic Scale (Ho and Lloyd, 1984). Individual work ethic is indubitably influenced by socially and culturally constructed value and ideal systems. Further, as societal and cultural changes occur, work-related values are subject to change (Fernandez *et al.*, 1997).

A few researchers have investigated the relation between work ethic and culture. For example, Nevins *et al.* (2007) examined the relation between ethical values and one of Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions (i.e. long-term orientation), finding a positive relation between long-term orientation and ethical values. Woehr *et al.* (2007) examined work ethic across three national cultures (i.e. Korean, Mexican, and American), but this work was limited to establishing the measurement equivalence of the MWEP across these cultures. A study by Furnham and Rajamanickman (1992) found significant differences in work ethic between British and Indian subjects, providing evidence of differences in work ethic relative to national culture. A meta-analytic review of literature by Rosenthal *et al.* (2011) considered the relation between work ethic and prejudice (and policy attitudes) in Canada, England, New Zealand, USA, India, Jamaica, and Singapore, suggesting that work ethic's "consequences are culture and context bound" (p. 874). While some work ethic research has been conducted in a cultural context, this research tends to be limited to national culture. This research provides important insights into national culture influences upon work ethic beliefs, but other cultural influences are likely at work as well.

One potentially important cultural influence on work ethic beliefs is ethnic culture, but only a few limited studies examine differences in work ethic perceptions associated with ethnicity. An early study by Beit-Hallahmi (1979) indicates that significant

differences in work ethic exist across ethnic groups, which is supported by Bhagat (1979). However, most studies restrict the analysis of work ethic differences among ethnic groups to comparisons of works ethics between “black” and “white” groups (e.g. Aul, 1978; Buchholz, 1978; ul Hassan, 1968; Wollack *et al.*, 1971). A more recent study by Cokley *et al.* (2007) also indicates ethnic differences in work ethic, but is still limited to only “black” and “white” ethnicities. Therefore, although extant literature suggests that differences in work ethic exist across ethnic groups, the literature is limited in scope.

### *Ethnic groups*

The USA is commonly described as consisting of several ethnic groups: Caucasians represent the current ethnic majority, while African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans constitute three major ethnic minorities (Julian *et al.*, 1994). Each ethnic group is noted for generalized idiosyncratic characteristics. For example, Caucasians are broadly characterized by having an emphasis on individualism, competition, and future orientation (Cokley *et al.*, 2007) while African Americans are more aptly noted for emotional vitality, collective survival, oral traditions, and interdependence (White, 1984). Hispanics are largely characterized by high levels of interdependence, conformity, a readiness to sacrifice for the welfare of in-group members, flexible attitudes toward time, and obedience to authority figures (Marin and Marin, 1991), and Asian Americans are collectively described as exhibiting an emphasis on harmonized relationships with the precedence of group interests over individual interests (Uba, 1994).

Given the variation of broad characterizations among each group, it is not surprising that each group has historically exhibited dissimilar perceptions toward work ethic. Bhagat (1979) examines the “black-white” differences in identification with work ethic, and his research shows that – compared with Caucasian counterparts – African Americans tend to have lower propensities to associate lack of work with personal failure, higher beliefs in external locus of control, higher uncertainty toward success through work role performance, and lower belief in the relationships between hard work and self-esteem attainment. Delgado (1981) suggests that Hispanics value work and organizational goals less than their Caucasian counterparts, while simultaneously valuing collegial relationships above task considerations. For Asian Americans, work ethic correlates with collectivism rather than individualism (Oyserman and Sakamoto, 1997) suggesting more value is placed on group-level success. In all, ethnic identity and perceptions of social class are traditionally held as underlying determinants of varying perceptions of work ethic among ethnic groups (Cokley *et al.*, 2007). Understanding how work ethic perceptions manifest across ethnic cultures has the potential to yield insight into the implications of the changing nature of the USA work force. Thus, to conceptualize how work ethic perceptions are changing, we employ a transculturation perspective.

### *Transculturation*

The general manner in which cultural change is conceptualized has evolved. Scholars have described cultural change as occurring in a linear manner. This process, termed acculturation, occurs when an individual adapts to a new culture and leaves behind the original culture (LaFromboise *et al.*, 1993). Some scholars propose a “bilinear model of acculturation,” referred to as enculturation (Miller *et al.*, 2011, p. 347). From an

enculturation perspective, an individual does not necessarily leave behind the original culture when exposed to a new culture; rather, the development of both cultures evolves simultaneously. Other scholars, however, propose the transition among cultures is more dynamic.

Expanding on the acculturation and enculturation perspectives, scholars suggest that cultures not only evolve simultaneously, but the development of one culture influences development of the other. This bi-directional development of culture, termed transculturation, is the process whereby individuals consciously select useful parts of a culture and integrate the beneficial components into their own knowledge and way of thinking (Belote and Belote, 1984; Manathunga, 2011). Transculturation was originally termed by Ortiz (1947/1995) who suggests the development of cultures is a dynamic process in which adaptation, convergence, and infusement occur. In the transculturation process, individuals interact collectively thereby exchanging ideas, influencing one another, and altering cultural forms (Lull, 2000). We employ the transculturation perspective to describe how perceptions of work ethic are changing in the USA across ethnic groups through generations.

### *Hypothesis*

The dynamic nature of cultural change is prevalent in the USA given the vast diversity and rapidly changing demographic landscape. From a transculturation perspective, individuals of an ethnic background are likely to retain an identity associated with their ethnic culture, yet the ethnic culture is likely to be infused with the useful benefits extracted from other ethnic cultures within the American culture. Similarly, the American culture itself is a conglomeration of influences from various ethnic groups, and the through the transculturation process, American culture is also dynamically evolving as a result of ethnic influences.

Transculturation is strongly present in the USA. For example, with the increased rate of internet use, more students from recent generations attending college, and increased diversity in primary schools, individuals of younger generations are engaging in more transcultural communication. Because of the increased diversity to which younger generations are exposed and the ease of communication, Millennials in USA are generally more likely to exchange ideas with individuals from other cultures compared to individuals from earlier generations. Further, as individuals from various cultures are influenced by the transculturation process, the result is a dynamic evolution of cultures wherein attitudes and values tend to converge. Similar to the homeostatic processes native to biology, through the process of transculturation, cultural groups are likely to converge in similarity as the exchange of ideas, values, and attitudes occurs.

The transculturation phenomenon refers not only to a blending of cultures but also to conditions under which globalization, neocolonialism, and transnational capitalism occur (Rogers, 2006). For example, Alwin (1986) found that parental values between Catholic and Protestant groups demonstrated transcultural convergence from 1950s to the 1980s, and one identified cause for the convergence was the increasing similarity among ethnic subculture values (i.e. Polish and Italian subgroups). A study by Minter and Manning (2000) found that preferences related to environmental policies among various groups in Vermont experienced convergence when examined over time as environmental cultures dynamically evolved. Furthermore, in a study of religious groups, Hoffman and Miller (1997) noted that attitudes toward women's rights became



more similar across groups over the course of their 20-year study. Applying this perspective to the changing labor force in the USA, the interaction among cultures is likely supporting a convergence of perceptions among previously divergent groups via the transculturation process.

Given the integration of acculturated thoughts, values, and actions across ethnic groups, and given that younger generations have greater access to intercultural exchanges as a whole, we suggest that transculturation has an influence on the work ethic of younger generations. Therefore, we hypothesize that as a result of increased inter-cultural interaction and the enhanced presence of transculturally based relationships, younger generations exhibit less variation in perceptions of work ethic than older generations, resulting in a convergence in work ethic across ethnic groups within the USA:

- H1.* In the USA, younger generations exhibit less variation in work ethic perceptions when compared to older generations.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The participants for this study included graduate and undergraduate students from three large public universities. The total data set included 873 respondents, with a mean age of 29 (SD = 9.68) of which 47 percent were male. The ethnicities reported were as follows: 66 percent Caucasian, 12 percent African American, 8 percent Hispanic, 8 percent Asian American, and 6 percent identified as other ethnicities. Using data provided in a report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the composition of the USA labor force in 2011 is calculated as approximately: 67 percent Caucasian, 11 percent African American, 15 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Asian American, and 2 percent other ethnicities (Solis and Gavin, 2012). Therefore, the demographic composition obtained in the sample is representative of the USA labor force composition.

We assert that a student sample is appropriate for several reasons. First, it includes the population of interest; that is, it includes current and future members of the US workforce. Second, the ethnic composition of our sample is distributed similarly to the current US workforce, and thus, the ethnic distribution is representative. Last, a study by Van Ness *et al.* (2010) found that “the overall work ethic of students was similar to that of workforce professionals” (p. 21). In particular, these researchers found no significant differences in composite work ethic scores between student and professional respondents. For these reasons, the use of student sample is appropriate for this study.

The participants were grouped into generations based upon their date of birth. These groups included Baby Boomers born between 1946 and 1964, Generation X members born between 1965 and 1980, and Millennials born between 1981 and 1999 (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). The characteristics of these groups are presented in Table I.

### *Procedure*

We utilized an online survey to capture self-reported perceptions of work ethic. Participants were provided with a link to this survey and assured that their responses were anonymous. Participation was voluntary and course credit was awarded for participation. All participants completed the MWEP, developed by Miller *et al.* (2001). The MWEP consists of 65 self-report items that measure work ethic across seven dimensions. Miller *et al.* (2001) establish the validity and reliability of the measure and

report reliability coefficients ranging from 0.75 to 0.89 across the seven dimensions. The reliability coefficients obtained within this study range from 0.77 to 0.89 across the dimensions. The online survey also included demographic items such as age and ethnicity.

### Analyses

The means and standard deviations of the variables for each generation group are shown in Table II. In general, the data suggest that composite work ethic has declined over generations. One interesting exception to this trend is an increase in delay of gratification over generations. This pattern suggests younger generations are slightly more likely to delay gratification, or postpone rewards, than older generations. This finding is contrary to the anecdotal generalization that younger persons seek immediate gratification more than older generations.

Separate analyses of variance for each generational group were conducted. The purpose of the analyses was to evaluate differences in work ethic perceptions across ethnic groups. Therefore, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine significant differences in work ethic across ethnic groups for each generational group. It is worth noting that, in the analyses, the variation of differences was examined among the respective generational groups. A study by Meriac *et al.* (2010) finds that generational differences of work ethic may be misleading given that generational cohorts may interpret scales differently. Therefore, we focus our investigation on the variation within each respective generational group, rather than solely relying on a cross-comparison of mean values.

Tests for normality (e.g. Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Shapiro-Wilk) showed that the data was normally distributed. An exception to this was the morality/ethics dimension,

**Table I.**  
Characteristics of  
generation groups

| Characteristic            | Baby boomers | Generation X | Millennials |
|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| Participants ( <i>n</i> ) | 83           | 369          | 421         |
| Mean age                  | 52           | 32           | 22          |
| Male                      | 54%          | 49%          | 44%         |
| Caucasian                 | 74%          | 63%          | 64%         |
| African American          | 10%          | 15%          | 12%         |
| Hispanic                  | 6%           | 7%           | 10%         |
| Asian American            | 4%           | 10%          | 7%          |
| Other Ethnicity           | 6%           | 5%           | 7%          |

**Table II.**  
Means and standard  
deviations of  
dependent variables  
for generation  
groups

| Dependent variable   | Baby boomers   | Generation X   | Millennials    |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Self-reliance        | 36.57 (7.36)   | 36.05 (6.46)   | 35.83 (6.69)   |
| Morality/ethics      | 47.61 (3.17)   | 44.87 (4.44)   | 43.62 (5.13)   |
| Leisure              | 31.15 (7.13)   | 28.04 (6.46)   | 26.92 (6.60)   |
| Hard work            | 39.24 (6.02)   | 38.72 (6.11)   | 39.94 (5.84)   |
| Centrality of work   | 40.45 (4.89)   | 38.81 (5.61)   | 38.10 (5.94)   |
| Wasted time          | 39.06 (5.80)   | 38.12 (5.45)   | 37.34 (5.85)   |
| Delay gratification  | 33.81 (7.35)   | 34.82 (6.87)   | 36.22 (6.52)   |
| Work ethic composite | 267.89 (22.92) | 259.44 (24.79) | 257.96 (26.52) |

which showed non-normality across groups. As a precaution, Kruskal-Wallis H Tests were run on this dimension, but relatively similar results were obtained, thus the ANOVA appears robust against the violation of normality within this dimension. Levene's test statistics indicate that homogeneity of variances exists across groups notwithstanding the unequal ethnic group sizes within the data.

Power analysis indicated an insufficient number of Baby Boomer responses to conduct an ANOVA across all ethnic groups (Faul *et al.*, 2007). As a result, the analysis was conducted comparing the means of Caucasians and non-Caucasians for the Baby Boomer generation group. This was not necessary for the other generation groups as sufficient sample sizes existed in each ethnic group to maintain reasonable power (0.80) and detect large (0.40) effects (Cohen, 1988).

The results of the ANOVA analyses are reported in Table III as *F*-values (and significance levels). Included in the analyses are work ethic composite scores calculated in accordance with Miller *et al.* (2001). The composite score provides a holistic measure of general work ethic perceptions.

### Results

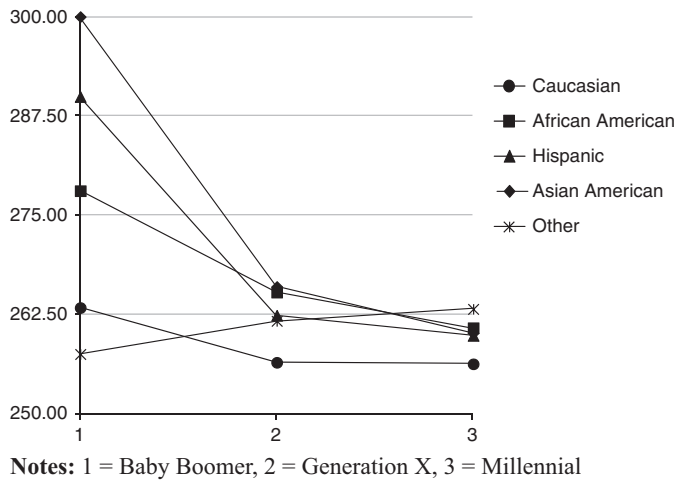
As shown in Table III, significant differences exist across ethnic groups in work ethic composite scores within the Baby Boomer (at a 0.01 significance level) and Generation X generations (at a 0.05 significance level), but no significant difference exists within the Millennial generation. The decreasing *F*-values and increasing significance levels associated with differences in work ethic composite scores suggest an overall convergence of work ethic perceptions. With respect to individual dimensions of work ethic, the Millennials show less variation in six dimensions of work ethic, in addition to composite scores, than the Baby Boomers and Generation X members. The one dimension in which significant differences (at a 0.05 significance level) exist across ethnicities within the Millennial group is Self-Reliance. This suggests that, while an overall convergence in work ethic attitudes has occurred, divergence with respect to attitudes toward achieving independence in one's work remains to some degree.

The results suggest that the transition from Baby Boomer to Generation X involved slight variation in work ethic dimensions but convergence with respect to general work ethic (i.e. work ethic composite score). The transition from Generation X to Millennial involved a convergence in both specific attitudes and general work ethic. The overall convergence in general work ethic across all generations is illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts mean work ethic composite scores for each generation (1 = Baby Boomers, 2 = GenX, and 3 = Millennials).

| Dependent variable   | Baby boomers | Generation X | Millennials |
|----------------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| Self-reliance        | 2.10 (0.15)  | 2.78 (0.03)  | 2.60 (0.04) |
| Morality/ethics      | 1.07 (0.30)  | 1.53 (0.19)  | 0.73 (0.57) |
| Leisure              | 1.69 (0.20)  | 2.52 (0.04)  | 0.94 (0.44) |
| Hard work            | 10.89 (0.00) | 2.73 (0.03)  | 1.25 (0.29) |
| Centrality of work   | 1.28 (0.26)  | 2.78 (0.03)  | 1.06 (0.38) |
| Wasted time          | 0.85 (0.36)  | 2.68 (0.03)  | 1.56 (0.18) |
| Delay gratification  | 4.70 (0.03)  | 2.71 (0.03)  | 0.30 (0.88) |
| Work ethic composite | 9.84 (0.00)  | 2.41 (0.05)  | 0.79 (0.53) |

**Table III.**  
ANOVA across  
ethnic groups within  
generation groups

**Figure 1.**  
The convergence of work ethic composite scores across generations



To evaluate specific differences in means across ethnic groups within the Millennial generational group, *t*-tests for equality of means were conducted for each pairing of ethnic groups. Specifically, tests were conducted to determine significant differences between Caucasians and African Americans, Caucasians and Hispanics, Caucasians and Asian Americans, Caucasians, and other ethnicities, African Americans and Hispanics, African Americans and Asian Americans, African Americans, and other ethnicities, Hispanics and Asian Americans, Hispanics and other ethnicities, as well as, Asian Americans and other ethnicities. The results obtained relative to composite work ethic scores are shown in Table IV as *t*-values and significance values. These results indicate that no significant differences exist in composite work ethic scores between any pairing of ethnic groups within the Millennial generational group. Furthermore, with only one exception, no significant differences were found between ethnic group pairs for any dimension of work ethic, at the 0.01 significance level. The sole exception was a significant difference ( $t = -2.709, p = 0.007$ ) between Caucasians and other ethnicities in the Self-Reliance dimension of work ethic, which is in concordance with the ANOVA results obtained. Thus, out of 70 possible combinations (seven dimensions X 10 ethnic group pairings), only a singular combination demonstrated a

**Table IV.**  
Work ethic composite score comparisons within millennial generation

| Ethnic group pairing               | <i>t</i> -value | <i>p</i> -value |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Caucasian – African American       | -1.12           | 0.27            |
| Caucasian – Hispanic               | -0.82           | 0.42            |
| Caucasian – Asian American         | -0.77           | 0.45            |
| Caucasian – other ethnicity        | -1.31           | 0.19            |
| African American – Hispanic        | 0.18            | 0.86            |
| African American – Asian American  | 0.11            | 0.91            |
| African American – other ethnicity | -0.40           | 0.69            |
| Hispanic – Asian American          | -0.05           | 0.96            |
| Hispanic – other ethnicity         | -0.51           | 0.61            |
| Asian American – other ethnicity   | -0.43           | 0.67            |

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significant mean difference. Altogether, these results provide empirical evidence of the convergence of work ethic perceptions across ethnic groups.

### Discussion

The present study contributes to the current literature by examining work ethic perceptions across ethnic groups and assessing how work ethic perceptions vary across generations. The results confirm that, by and large, no significant difference of work ethic perceptions exists among ethnic groups in the most recent generation, and the variation among perceptions of work ethic is less in more recent generations. These findings suggest that as a generational group, Millennials are similar in their perception of work ethic across ethnic groups, and work ethic perceptions among ethnic groups tend to converge across generations. Each finding has implications for the advancement of theory related to work ethic and beyond.

The data suggest that Millennials tend to have a perception of work ethic that is more similar across ethnic groups than different. According to the findings, this generation is the first (in recent times) to display a significant convergence of work ethic perceptions, which is a finding that is descriptive of the younger generation. This convergence comes into existence despite the more diversified composition of Millennials in terms of ethnic groups (Ortiz, 1947/1995). This counterintuitive finding is supported by more frequent and efficient transcultural communication (Banerjee and German, 2011) originating from increased use of internet, higher college entrance rate, increased diversity in primary schools, and similar factors. Because Millennials are communicating more frequently across ethnic groups, cultural norms, and ideas are being exchanged more readily and some ideological perceptions (e.g. work ethic) are becoming more similar rather than dissimilar as a result of the enhanced communication practices.

As the number of ethnic groups in the USA continues to increase, many would assume the differences among individuals would also continue to expand. However, we find that some ideologies are becoming more similar across ethnic groups rather than more dissimilar. We believe that even though the ethnic diversity is increasing, aspects of cognitive diversity (in terms of cultural norms and attitudes) are becoming more similar across ethnic groups. As individuals have more exposure to, and more communication with, individuals from other ethnic cultures, the transculturation process proliferates. Some have referred to this process as the “Americanization” of ethnic groups (e.g. Moffett, 1907); however, we view it not as one group imposing cultural norms and ideas on another but rather as a dynamic learning experience and exchange among all ethnic cultures. Through a continued collaboration of ethnic cultures and exchange of ideas, work ethic is one example of many perspectives likely to converge as a result of transculturation. Because of this, we look forward to future studies that extend this line of research and others that further investigate the changing nature of our domestic workforce.

This study examines the convergence of work ethic perceptions utilizing a transculturation perspective, but transculturation may also be an appropriate lens through which to view other phenomena. Perchance, a convergence exists in a broader spectrum of value systems, in which case, transculturation may help explain such phenomena. A more specific example may be a convergence in perceptions regarding social responsibility, which may at least partially be explained using a transculturation perspective. Additionally, an interesting link may exist between transculturation and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). It is certainly conceivable that the blending of

cultures that takes place during transculturation leads to social learning. For example, a shift may be occurring in the USA away from an individualistic perspective toward a more collectivist perspective given the infusion of more collectivist-oriented cultures into the traditionally individualistic American culture. If this were found to be true, transculturation, coupled with Social Learning Theory, may be an appropriate framework for explaining such a phenomenon. In any case, transculturation is a concept worthy of future study given the results of this investigation coupled with changing demographics within the USA workforce, as well as other nations.

#### *Limitations and directions for future research*

Although the current investigation provides insight into the changing nature of the labor force, the study is not without limitations. The use of a student sample may be considered a limitation; however, the sample is representative of the ethnic composition of the current US workforce. Additionally, the study by Van Ness *et al.* (2010) finds that career status has no significant effect on overall work ethic; that is, composite work ethic scores of students are similar to workforce professionals. The fundamental support for our hypothesis is based upon composite work ethic scores, and thus, we believe that any potential lack of work experience associated with student status does not diminish the findings.

In this study, individuals were categorized using ethnic group and generational classifications, which allowed for examination of perception variation among groups. Given that the data were collected at a single point in time, we are restricted from assessing longitudinal emergence of cultural change. We are careful to interpret the study given the inherent limitations of the research design. While we encourage future researchers to examine the emergence of similar phenomena over time, initial insights are garnered from the current data as a result of how work ethic perceptions vary across generational and ethnic groups. Given these findings, researchers are encouraged to investigate further categorizations that are likely to offer additional insight into the variation of work ethic perceptions. For instance, social role is another appropriate categorization given that social role provides an enhanced perception of the individual as noted in the study by Jones (2001). Following this line, future research may examine work ethic perception convergence *vis-à-vis* socioeconomic status to contribute to a deeper understanding of the determinants of work ethic differences. In a study of ethnic groups in Israel, researchers found that individuals at the time of the study identified less strongly with their own ethnic group than 30 years previously (Yaeger-Dror, 1988); thus, using additional classifications schemes may be beneficial. Although generational and ethnic groups provided useful categorizations for the context of this study, we look forward to studies incorporating other classifications that provide additional insight into the variation of work ethic perceptions.

Further, generational groups in the current study differed in sample size. Ideally, nearly equal sample sizes would have existed in all ethnic and generational sub-groups to support a more equitable comparison; however, the number of Baby Boomers was too few to conduct an ANOVA across all ethnic groups. Although the sample is largely representative of the USA workforce, the study is limited in the amount of data available from specific ethnic and generational groups. Future researchers are encouraged to continue this line of study with equal representation of all ethnic groups to gain a more comprehensive comparison of the respective phenomena.

The scale used to assess work ethic is one commonly used in such studies. Recent research, however, has suggested that other dimensions of the Protestant work ethic

scale are worth examining. Specifically, Mudrak and Mason (2010) find that asceticism merits attention as a distinct component of work ethic to examine the extent to which individuals defer to authority. Additionally, we also look forward to future research aimed at influencing work ethic. Given that no significant difference of work ethic exists across ethnic groups, detailed research into how managers are able to influence work ethic for modern generations is warranted. We acknowledge that the current study is limited by the constructs examined; however, with further investigation of the causes and effects of work ethic convergence, we will more clearly understand how the work ethic trend is affected and what other factors are being influenced. Furthermore, this will also provide a foundation for examining other phenomena which are likely to have experienced similar changes across generations and will have an influence on the workplace.

### *Managerial implications*

According to Van Ness *et al.* (2010), “understanding the values of employees is a requirement for any company that wishes to operate with vigor and vitality” (p. 11). More specifically, these researchers assert that the “key to the future success of any company is its ability to manage, train, develop, and reward (Vroom, 1960) a satisfied (Herzberg, 1968) and motivated workforce (Lawler, 1968) at all levels of its organization” (p. 11) and understanding work-related values is critical in accomplishing this. Clearly, understanding differences in work ethic perceptions is an important element of achieving success in business organizations.

Managers of millennial-generation employees are likely to not find a significant difference in work ethic across ethnic groups in that generation. However, managers should expect to find greater variation in work ethic among ethnic groups of Baby Boomers and Generation Xers. Being aware of the noted differences will allow managers to design better motivation systems and enhance job design to meet the variation in work ethic expected among the various groups. Given the potential variation in work ethic among employees, managers may consider enhancing workplace flexibility (e.g. flexible times and locations), which is shown to have positive influences for both the individual and the firm (Hill *et al.*, 2001). Regardless of the approach taken, managers will benefit from acknowledging and appropriately integrating practices supportive of the differences and similarities of employee work ethic.

### **Conclusions**

This study furthers the cross-cultural management literature with important contributions. Until now, the examination of work ethic perceptions across multiple ethnic groups has been largely absent, thus representing a gap in the cross cultural management literature. Our study empirically examines work ethic perceptions across generations and multiple ethnic groups and contributes findings to advance the literature. Further, our study advances the application of a transculturation perspective in the cross cultural management literature. Given the societal and cultural changes that are inherent in globalization and technological advances, transculturation is a useful lens through which to examine such change. While this study was limited to the USA, the transculturation perspective taken herein may be applied in numerous different national contexts, likely resulting in important insights in cultural change in various countries. This study is a first step toward a potentially robust stream of research utilizing a transculturation perspective, which could possibly prove meaningful on a global scale.

This study also furthers the work ethic literature. First, this study addresses a call from Van Ness and colleagues (2010) specifying the need for additional empirical research related to work ethic. Second, the results of our study provide evidence that work ethic manifests differently across groups. Inconsistencies from work ethic studies have plagued the literature; however, the results of our study offer a perspective that bridges the division of previously inconsistent findings. Specifically, our results indicate that work ethic manifests differently across groups, depending upon which type of group is being examined, thus suggesting that both studies that found consistent and inconsistent manifestations of work ethic are correct. Third, we contribute to the work ethic literature by demonstrating the value in multi-group studies of work ethic. Given the diversity of the labor force in the USA, as well as other nations, studies of a single group (i.e. age, generation, ethnicity, etc.) are likely limited. We examine work ethic differences across both ethnic and generational groups to conduct our analyses, and from our findings, we discover how work ethic is changing across these groups in the USA.

The key findings of this study are that overall no significant difference exists among Millennial ethnic groups in their perception of work ethic, and the variation of work ethic perceptions is less in more recent generations. In all, these findings suggest that younger generations of the American workforce are becoming more similar (across ethnic groups) in perceptions of work ethic. Despite an increase in ethnic cultural diversity in the USA, this study demonstrates that individuals are becoming more similar than they are different – at least in terms of work ethic.

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