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Intergenerational Learning in Age-Diverse Meetings:

A Social Comparison Perspective

Fabiola H. Gerpott

WHU – Otto Beisheim School of Management &

ARC Centre of Excellence in Population Ageing Research (CEPAR)

fabiola.gerpott@whu.edu

Ulrike Fasbender

Justus-Liebig-University Giessen

Ulrike.Fasbender@psychol.uni-giessen.de

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Abstract

Meetings are conducted by increasingly age-diverse participant groups as the workforces in most industrialized economies are aging due to demographic change. There are at least three reasons why meetings constitute a particularly interesting environment to study intergenerational learning processes, defined as individuals' joint construction of knowledge through an exchange of information with one or more individuals from different age groups. First, meetings allow us to observe a wide variety of interactions that may foster or inhibit intergenerational learning. Second, the interactions taking place in meetings reflect general organizational practices as well as social exchange and age norms. As such, meetings offer a view through the magnifying glass at the age-inclusive or age-discriminating organizational culture which is interwoven with the engagement of different generations in intergenerational learning processes. Third, organizational members use meetings as an arena for strategic interactions to negotiate their current and future status by positioning themselves in relation to their colleagues through social comparisons. This chapter particularly focuses on the latter topic and develops a conceptual model outlining the motivational and emotional consequences as well as antecedents that link social comparison processes in meetings to intergenerational learning outcomes of participants from different age groups.

Keywords: Aging workforce; demographic change; intergenerational learning; knowledge sharing; meeting interactions; social comparison theory

Introduction

The aging workforce and the changing nature of jobs constitute trends that have a fundamental impact on work and organizations in the 21st century (Zacher & Kooij, 2018). The number of older workers is increasing and age differences between the youngest and the oldest organizational members are becoming more pronounced due to extended working lives (Fasbender, Deller, Wang, Wiernik, 2014; Hertel, van der Heijden, de Lange, & Deller, 2013; King & Bryant, 2017). This development should be considered in combination with the fact that the nature of work as such is becoming more dynamic, interactive, and complex (Grant & Parker, 2009; Parker, 2014). In such an environment, employees of all age groups are in need to build on and acquire company-specific or expert knowledge as well as share, develop, and generate new knowledge in interactions with other employees throughout their working life (Bell & Kozlowski, 2009; Parker, 2014). Accordingly, intergenerational learning, defined as individuals' joint construction of knowledge through an exchange of information with one or more individuals from different age groups (Gerpott, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Voelpel, 2017a; Ropes, 2013), represents a relevant work experience in contemporary organizations (Rupčić, 2018).

For the purpose of this chapter, we follow previous research and define older workers as individuals aged 50 years or above (e.g., Burmeister, Fasbender, & Deller, 2018; Fasbender, Wöhrmann, Wang, & Klehe, 2019; Loretto & White, 2006). Notably, there has been a recent debate about the need to look beyond continuous age and to also include generational, tenure-related and experience-focused aspects of aging (North, 2019). In other words, there is a certain risk of "getting trapped" in stereotyped thinking about generations (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Rudolph, Rauvola, & Zacher, 2018). This chapter does not seek to solve this debate. Instead, we refer to "older workers" and "intergenerational learning" as inclusive concepts that are widely used in science and practice and refrain from being pedantic about definitional aspects.

Studies so far have predominantly relied on a stereotypical image: Older workers are seen as knowledge senders and younger workers as knowledge receivers. Recent research has criticized this so-called source-recipient model (Burmeister et al., 2018; Tempest, 2003) and suggested that both parties can be senders and receivers in the knowledge transfer process (i.e., mutual exchange model, see Harvey, 2012). For example, whereas older workers may share their expertise on company procedures or expert knowledge, younger workers can bring in knowledge on new technologies (Gerpott et al., 2017a). That is, who is the knowledge sender and who is the knowledge receiver can vary dynamically, depending on who possesses respected and prestigious expertise for a particular task or in a particular context (Anthony, 2018). In line with this bidirectional perspective, we conceptualize intergenerational learning as a deliberate process between older and younger employees that reflects a constructivist learning approach, that is, an active process of acquiring and refining expert and practical knowledge (Arib & Hess, 1986; Yeo & Gold, 2011). This implies that intergenerational learning does not happen through the passive transfer of knowledge from one person to the other, but instead requires an engaged sender and an open-minded receiver who mutually create new knowledge (Burmeister et al., 2018).

Meetings as an Environment for Intergenerational Learning

For at least three reasons meetings constitute a particularly interesting environment in which intergenerational learning may take place. These concern (1) the wide variety of interactions that may foster or inhibit intergenerational learning in age-diverse meetings, (2) the manifestation of general organizational practices as well as social exchange and age norms in meetings, and (3) the use of meetings as an arena for strategic interactions to negotiate employees' current and future status in the organization.

First, although learning is often not an explicit goal of meetings, these scheduled events offer many opportunities for individuals to acquire new knowledge and make sense of existing information (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012). As such, meetings represent

a flourishing environment for ==informal learning==. In contrast to formal intergenerational learning environments where individuals are explicitly encouraged to learn from and about each other (for an overview, see Gerpott, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Voelpel, 2017b), the interaction processes and thus the informal learning opportunities in meetings are less structured. Accordingly, meetings offer room for a wide variety of interaction processes that can either be positively or negatively influenced by the meeting attendees' individual age and the group's ==age diversity== (Gerpott & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2015). To illustrate, a field study with 313 employees nested in 54 teams found that employee age was positively linked to counteractive communication in meetings, such as complaining, seeking someone to blame, engaging in empty talk, denying responsibility, terminating the discussion early, or making clear that one has no interest in change (Schulte, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Kauffeld, 2013). On the other hand, the results also showed that the amount of counteractive communication was lower in teams with higher age diversity (Schulte et al., 2013). Further complicating the picture, studies indicate that boundary conditions play a role in determining whether age diversity has a positive or negative impact on meeting outcomes. For example, Guillén and Kunze (2019) provided evidence that meetings with participants of different ages lead to more innovative outcomes when these meetings are conducted in interdepartmental settings (i.e., meetings with participants from different departments). This is because older workers who collaborate with workers outside their focus group are challenged to stay mentally flexible and are able to capitalize on their enhanced experience-based knowledge by combing it with the specialized knowledge of colleagues from other departments. To conclude, meetings constitute a complex environment for intergenerational interactions and can therefore be seen as a ==double-edged sword== in which the learning processes between employees from different age groups can be arranged on a continuum, ranging from (1) fairly successful mutual exchange (i.e., transmitive intergenerational interactions; Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010) to (2) situations in which no learning takes place to (3) unconstructive,

negative interactions that inhibit knowledge exchange (i.e., resistive intergenerational interactions; Joshi et al., 2010).

Second, meetings are also a mirror of general social practices that reflect the organizational culture and serve to stabilize the wider social system of which they are part of (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Peck, Perri, Gulliver, & Towell, 2004). Although meeting goals may differ (e.g., making decisions, developing a strategy, updating participants about recent developments), the main purpose is usually that multiple individuals come together to discuss phenomena relevant to team or organizational functioning (Meinecke & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2015). These interactions reflect "how things are usually done" and "what is socially accepted around here" (i.e., organizational culture, see also Meinecke & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2015). Such meeting interactions reveal both ==social exchange norms== (i.e., widely shared norms of appropriate reciprocity of behaviors; Blau, 1964) and ==age norms== (i.e., widely shared judgments of the typical age of individuals holding a role or status or engaging in certain behaviors; Lawrence, 1988). For example, if it is generally accepted in an organization that younger employees should listen to and learn from their older and wiser counterparts (Tempest, 2003), this implicit age norm will be reflected in the meeting interactions in a way that younger employees are likely to be quieter than their older colleagues. In particular, younger participants may share less knowledge and ask fewer questions, which inhibits bidirectional intergenerational learning in the meeting (Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Tempest, 2003). Moreover, implicit age norms are intertwined with the age-diversity climate of an organization (i.e., employees' shared perceptions of an organization's diversity-related policies, practices, and procedures; Boehm, Kunze, & Bruch, 2014), which in turn can positively influence overall organizational performance (Boehm et al., 2014). To conclude, given the above-mentioned evidence that informal norms manifest in meetings, meetings provide an ideal research context to explore the social dynamics surrounding age diversity.

Third, meetings are part of the wider strategy process of an organization, meaning that meetings are often held to make strategic decisions. For example, meetings are important for setting agendas (Tepper, 2004) or building commitment (Terry, 1987) on a political level. Furthermore, meetings are an arena for strategic interactions. To potentially advance their careers, individuals can use meetings to gain a realistic impression of their own standing in the team and strategically position themselves within the company. As such, meetings provide ample opportunities for social comparisons, that is, the explicit self-evaluation of a person compared to others to obtain information about their own current status (i.e., static status comparison) or future status (i.e., temporal social comparisons). In the following, we rely on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Taylor & Lobel, 1989) to develop the idea that whether older and younger employees achieve high intergenerational learning outcomes in meetings (i.e., successfully learn with, from and about each other) depends on their social comparison with one another.

Static and Temporal Social Comparisons

Comparing oneself with others is a fundamental feature of human existence and is essential to construct one's own identity (Gilbert, Price, & Allan, 1995). Much research has focused on static status comparisons with, however, limited attention in the meeting and age diversity literature. Static status comparison refers to people's comparisons with others who are currently doing better (i.e., *upward social comparisons*) or worse (i.e., *downward social comparisons*)—two types of comparisons that can even be reliably differentiated on a neuronal level (Luo, Eickhoff, Hétu, & Feng, 2018).

Research on upward social comparisons has shown that individuals prefer to meet and work with others who are slightly better than themselves because they expect that this will help them to improve in the future (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). However, they only do so under certain circumstances, because upward comparisons can put a person in a vulnerable position as this may make their inferiority visible to others. Specifically, individuals tend to engage in

upwards social comparisons when they are not required to reveal their relatively lower performance to others, do not expect others to look down on them, or when they are motivated to improve themselves (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). However, meetings often constitute events in which such circumstances are not prevalent. In other words, social comparisons in meetings tend to be obvious (i.e., one team member is talking about another) and as such carry the risk of looking inferior in front of colleagues. For example, if one person talks about his/her achievements and superiority in comparison to another meeting attendee, this will likely be noticed by the other meeting participants. As a consequence, the (seemingly) inferior meeting attendee may respond in a variety of defensive ways when interacting with the other who (seemingly) outperforms him/her. The inferior meeting attendee may distance him-/herself from the other (Tesser, 1988), call the better performing colleague a "genius" (Alicke, LoSchiavo, & Zerbst, 1997), or share less helpful information with him/her (Pemberton & Sedikides, 2001). To conclude, employees possess a general tendency to compare themselves with others who are slightly better to be able to improve themselves. However, this social comparison process may only result in constructive interactions that foster learning if circumstances provide a safe environment to do so, and such circumstances are often not prevalent in meetings.

A second form of social comparison comes into place when individuals compare themselves with others who are doing worse. Early studies on these so-called downward comparisons (e.g., Hakmiller, 1966; Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983) suggested that individuals—particularly from victimized or stigmatized populations—have a tendency to engage in this behavior when threatened in their self-image. Individuals may do so to feel better about themselves (i.e., restore self-esteem, Wills, 1981) and boost their mood (i.e., self-enhancement, Gibbons & Boney McCoy, 1991). For example, while older people tend to generally describe their health as rather good, their ratings go down when they think of their past or future self (as this may remind them of a better or worse status). Yet, their ratings go

up when they assess their state of health compared to a similar target that is in relatively poorer health (Suls, Marco, & Tobin, 1991).

To illustrate the triggers of downward comparisons in a meeting context, imagine a meeting participant interacting with a colleague from a different age group. This may threaten the meeting participant's self-image because the colleague may have different views or knowledge due to different lifecycle-related perspectives or age-related experiences (Gerpott, Lehmann-Willenbrock, Wenzel, & Voelpel, 2019). Now, if the meeting participant engages in a downward comparison—e.g., comparing him-/herself to a colleague of the same age who may have even less of an understanding of the other generation's viewpoint—this can improve his/her view of himself/herself and motivate him/her to be more open for engaging in interactions with the colleague from the different age group. However, it should be noted that recent meta-analytic research could not confirm the general preference of individuals to engage in downward comparisons. Instead, individuals possess a strong preference for upward choices when there is no threat and tend to avoid downward comparisons as a dominant choice even if there is a threat (Gerber, Wheeler, & Suls, 2018).

In summary, previous research has provided interesting insights into the prevalence and potentially motivating influence of social comparisons (Gerber et al., 2018). However, our review of the literature has also shown that comparing oneself with others who are doing better can be risky for meeting interactions if attendees feel they could be put at a disadvantage (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Interestingly, previous studies have largely focused on stable social comparisons (i.e., comparisons of current status threats), and as such focused on the question "Am I currently doing better/worse than my counterpart(s)?". This perspective neglects that employees may also take into account future status threats. Only recently, scholars have begun to explore whether and how employees compare their past development against their coworkers' development and use these temporal trajectories to extrapolate their possible future status (Lam, Van der Vegt, Walter, & Huang, 2011; Reh, Tröster, & Van

Quaquebeke, 2018). As we outline next, this emerging stream of literature carries promising implications for age-diverse workplace settings.

Temporal Social Comparisons in an Age-Diverse Workforce

The neglect of a temporal account is particularly surprising when considered from a GATE perspective (North, 2019)*,* that is, against the background of the theoretical and empirical insights from the *Generation, Age, Tenure,* and *Experience* literature. Due to their tenure and experience, older employees often possess a high current status in their organization (North, 2019). In contrast, younger employees represent the next generation of workers and tend to strive for high future status. This implies that taking into account potential changes in future status is particularly relevant when looking at an increasingly age-diverse workforce. Specifically, for many decades it was expected that older employees give up or pass on their status the closer they are to retirement. Yet, the image of the older worker as "being on the descending branch" has changed considerably (Fasbender & Deller, 2017). In fact, older employees today often seek to establish a career beyond the retirement age (Fasbender et al., 2019; Wöhrmann, Fasbender, & Deller, 2017). This development gives rise to older employees' future temporal comparison processes such that younger colleagues who are currently harmless in terms of status fights may be perceived as a risk for future status as they aim to climb up the corporate career ladder. Similarly, younger employees may compare their development with the developmental trajectories of their older counterparts and realize that although their older counterparts are currently not competing for the same positions as they do, this may change in the future when the younger employees seek to take on higher-level positions. Transferred to organizational meetings, this means that older and younger employees likely compare themselves explicitly (i.e., through verbal behaviors) or implicitly (i.e., through non-verbal behaviors and thought processes) with the respective other, thus leading to a situation in which meetings transform into arenas for negotiating current and future status.

To illustrate, consider an older employee who compares him-/herself with a younger colleague and concludes that this colleague is the "rising star". This younger employee may have started at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy but has recently begun to successfully climb the corporate career leader. The older employee may notice this colleague's ascension, and, by extension, the prospect of losing relative status in the future. To prevent this anticipated development, the older employee may not engage in constructive, developmental interactions with the "rising star" in jointly attended meetings. Instead, the older employee may use these meetings as an arena to strategically position him/herself as still being competitive. In contrast, when the older employee reasons that the younger colleague is neither today nor in the future a risk to his/her own status, s/he may be motivated to share, co-create, and make sense of knowledge in meetings with this colleague.

The idea of social comparisons as a means to define oneself is also reflected in *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This theoretical perspective is often used in the age diversity literature to explain potential negative effects of age differences on relevant outcomes such as intergenerational learning (for a meta-analysis, see Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). According to social identity theory, individuals continuously (re)define their social identity by comparing themselves to others, thereby aiming to uphold a stable self-image. To confirm their self-image, individuals prefer others who are similar over others whose attributes differ from their own. Given that age is a rather salient individual characteristic that is more visible than other diversity attributes such as education or personality, it likely (but not necessarily) triggers categorization mechanisms. In organizational meetings, this means for example that attendees classify colleagues who are perceived as similar (for example due to their age, but of course many other grouping variables are also possible) as belonging to their in-group (i.e., a group with which one feels a sense of community of interests or shared key attributes). Such in-group members tend to be preferred as interaction partners because of feelings of similarity, liking, and perceived closeness (Tajfel

& Turner, 2004). In contrast, others who are perceived as dissimilar are categorized as out-group members (i.e., a group with which one feels a sense of dissimilarity and distinctiveness in terms of key attributes). These out-group members are likely to be evaluated "through the biased lens of category stereotypes" (Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002, p. 296) because they are perceived as more threatening to one's self-image and thus potentially more harmful than in-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

Relatedly, *social comparison theory* assumes that individuals strive for self-knowledge, and they do so by not only gathering objective information about themselves, but also by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). As others have phrased it, this theory is about "our quest to know ourselves, about the search for self-relevant information and how people gain self- knowledge and discover reality about themselves" (Mettee & Smith, pp. 69–70). When faced with another individual to compare to, people make a rapid judgment of similarity or dissimilarity to the comparison target. Consequently, they assimilate their self-evaluations to the target when they perceive themselves as similar, whereas they contrast their self-evaluations with the target when they perceive themselves as dissimilar (Gerber et al., 2018; Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). As such, social comparison theory, similar to social identity theory, concerns feelings of similarity and dissimilarity with others, and these perceptions are used to define one's place in the world and to construct a more realistic self-image. Social comparisons are understood as an effective adaptive mechanism that have a long history in mankind because they have been used successfully to gain a realistic evaluation of one's competitors (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007).

In combination, social identity and social comparison theory suggest that intergenerational learning can be inhibited as an outcome of meeting interactions when age differences between participants are salient and potentially threatening for employees' static and/or temporal future status comparisons. If meeting attendees conclude from social

comparison that their status is at risk (now or in the future), they engage in less knowledge-focused interactions such as sharing their knowledge, integrating knowledge, and making sense of knowledge, particularly when diagnostic (i.e., objective) criteria for success are present (Pemberton & Sedikides, 2001).

Next we integrate social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Reh et al., 2018; Taylor & Lobel, 1989) with insights from the GATE (Generation, Age, Tenure, Experience) literature to detail the mechanisms and antecedents through which learning-inhibiting meeting interactions are triggered. Specifically, we aim to shed light on (1) age-related motivational and (2) age-related emotional mechanisms that link social comparison processes with knowledge sharing interactions in meetings, which in turn determine intergenerational learning outcomes. Furthermore, we discuss (3) potential antecedents that may trigger the occurrence of social comparisons in meetings from a multi-level perspective. Figure 1 summarizes our conceptual model. The grey boxes indicate that empirical research exists that has studied the respective concepts and their relationships with other constructs from our model in the context of social comparisons or intergenerational knowledge sharing processes. The white boxes indicate a conceptual argument based on the GATE and social comparison literature.

Take in Figure 1

Social Comparisons in Meetings: Age-Specific Motivational and Emotional Mechanisms

The lifespan perspective (Baltes, 1987; Erikson, 1964) focuses on general principles of intraindividual development and their malleability. Scholars in this research tradition offer a differentiated view on age-related dynamics and suggest that certain motives and emotions become more or less important over the course of one's life (Rudolph et al., 2018). Importantly, no age period (e.g., young, middle, older age) is considered as superior to others

(Baltes, 1987). Instead, changes in motives and emotions are seen as adaptive responses (i.e., selection, optimization, and compensation) that help individuals to function well throughout their lives.

Motives: Generativity and Development Striving

Older and younger individuals tend to differ on two motivational forces, namely generativity and development striving (Kooij & Van De Voorde, 2011). Generativity striving refers to a preference for job characteristics, tasks, and situations that allow them to establish and guide the next generation (Erikson, 1964; Fasbender, Wang, Voltmer, & Deller, 2016; Kooij & Van De Voorde, 2011). Development striving describes a preference for job characteristics, tasks, and situations that relate to achievement and mastery (Kooij & De Voorde, 2011). These motives can influence how older and younger employees react upon social comparisons because they are related to different time foci.

Older employees are more likely to show higher generativity striving than younger employees. This motivational drive increases with age because older employees tend to perceive their remaining time in the organization as limited due to the upcoming retirement and because they want to "leave something behind" (Erikson, 1964; Kooij & Van De Voorde, 2011). Hence, they focus on socio-emotional meaningful experiences that can be achieved in the here and now, rather that growth and learning oriented goals that can be achieved in the future (Fasbender, Burmeister, & Wang, 2019). The generativity motive is particularly relevant for the context discussed in this chapter because it can be fulfilled for example through passing on one's knowledge to younger colleagues during meetings. In other words, generativity striving constitutes a driver for knowledge sharing (Burmeister et al., 2018). Social comparison may thus be less relevant for reducing older employees' knowledge-focused interactions as long as they possess a highly activated generativity motive that drives them to pass on their knowledge.

Younger employees tend to experience their time as expansive, which goes hand in hand with high ==development striving==. High development striving motivates individuals to acquire new skills and makes them search for situations in which they can show and advance their knowledge. In the context of intergenerational learning during meetings, younger employees can fulfill their development striving, for example, by sharing knowledge with other colleagues. Sharing knowledge creates a positive feeling of mastery as it can make them feel that they have unique knowledge that a more experienced employee does not have (Gerpott et al., 2017a). Furthermore, younger employees may be able to enhance their own knowledge by learning from the expertise of their older counterparts. In other words, development striving fosters knowledge-focused interactions. Social comparison may increase development striving, particularly in younger employees who often become motivated through a comparison with more experienced counterparts, and it is through this process that knowledge-focused interactions are fostered.

Bringing these two lines of argumentation together, we propose that one process through which social comparisons influence an employee's engagement in knowledge-focused interactions in a meeting is the degree to which an age-specific motivational mechanism (i.e., generativity and development striving) is activated. For example, if an older employee notes that the other meeting participants are harmless in terms of current or future status competitions, his/her generativity striving should have the chance to shine through. Accordingly, we presume that this employee will willingly contribute knowledge during the meeting. Similarly, if a younger employee compares him/herself with the other meeting participants and comes to the conclusion that there is no current or future status threat, his/her development motive should be triggered, and we expect this employee to intensively engage in knowledge-focused meeting interactions. In contrast, when meeting attendees come to the conclusion that their own current or future status is at risk, their generativity striving (particularly for older employees) and their development striving (particularly for younger

employees) should loose relevance as drivers of knowledge-focused interactions. Evidently, this is not to say that older workers do not hold a developmental motive or that younger employees never feel a generativity need. We only suggest that these motivational mechanisms are more closely tied to one age group than the other due to the established changes in cognitive and physical abilities over the lifespan (Kooij & De Voorde, 2011; Rudolph et al., 2018).

Emotions: Fear of Losing Status and Fear of Losing Face

Social comparisons are strongly linked to affective experiences in organizations (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007), particularly in close interactions that elicit stronger affective reactions than comparisons with distant targets (Gerber et al., 2018). To date, most social comparison scholars have taken a valence-based approach that contrasts positive emotional states with negative affective experiences. For example, scholars (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; see also Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989) showed that low self-esteem individuals in a negative affective state report improved mood after being exposed to downward comparison information. Independent of self-esteem, individuals possess a higher likelihood to experience negative affective states and tend to behave unethically when they frequently engage in social comparisons (White, Langer, Yariv & Welch, 2006).

Although these studies provide interesting insights, particularly on the negative emotional consequences of frequent social comparisons, we expect to be able to draw a more differentiated picture when focusing on specific emotions. An alternative perspective to study emotions relies on a motivational differentiation of distinct emotions that assumes that specific emotions vary in their motivational intensity (i.e., their potential to initiate action; Harmon-Jones, Gable, & Price, 2013) and are associated with unique appraisal tendencies that influence subsequent actions and cognitions in goal-directed ways (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Fear, defined as an unpleasant feeling of threat and potential harm, is one emotion that has received particular attention in knowledge management research because it is a powerful

emotion that strongly inhibits knowledge sharing (e.g., Empson, 2001; Fang, 2017; Renzl, 2008). Scholars have differentiated seven forms of fear in the workplace, namely fear of status loss, fear of face loss (failure), fear of job displacement, fear of isolation, fear of interacting with new technology, fear of the impact of new technology on society, and fear of change (Appelbaum, Bregman, & Moroz, 1998). We focus here on the first two forms of fear because they are closely linked to knowledge-focused interactions.

Specifically, we propose that which type of fear (i.e., fear of status loss vs. fear of face loss) potentially occurs after engaging in a detrimental social comparison is dependent on the meeting attendee's age. On the one hand, when older employees compare themselves to the next generation and realize their younger counterparts are seeking their positions, they may feel threatened that the younger employees are competing with them for resources and one day replace them in their jobs (Joshi et al., 2010). Hence, fear of losing status should be their prevalent emotion. On the other hand, when an employee engages in a social comparison and comes to the conclusion that his/her current or future status is threatened by a colleague, this employee can feel fear that his/her inferiority becomes visible to the others (Gerpott, Fasbender, & Burmeister, 2019). This is because knowledge sharing puts employees into a vulnerable position in which their knowledge can be criticized by others (Anthony, 2018; Fang, 2017; Gerpott et al., 2019). This risk is particularly pertinent for younger employees who are often low in the hierarchy, have limited experience and tenure, are afraid that older employees act like "know-it-alls", and are unsure whether their knowledge can actually help colleagues with more experience (Gerpott et al., 2017a). In other words, we assume that fear of losing face is the predominant emotion through which social comparison processes influence knowledge-focused interactions of younger employees.

Combining these arguments, we propose that the age-related emotional reaction (i.e., fear of status loss / face loss) constitutes one central affective process through which social comparison influences an employee's engagement in knowledge-focused meeting

interactions. This does not mean that older workers are immune to experiencing fear of losing face or that younger employees never feel they may lose status. Instead, we suggest that older and younger employees differ in their likelihood to experience either fear of status or face loss, following a social comparison.

Social Comparisons in Meetings: Antecedents (and Moderators) at Multiple Levels

Our conceptual model also includes a range of antecedents at multiple levels (i.e., behavioral, individual, team, organizational) that increase the likelihood that employees from different age groups engage in social comparisons during a meeting (see Figure 1). The description of these antecedents comes with two caveats. First, we do not consider this a comprehensive and final list of antecedents. Instead, we focus here on theoretically plausible antecedents that have received attention in the GATE (Generation, Age, Tenure, Experience) literature but so far remain unconnected to social comparison research. Second, as depicted by the direct arrow from the antecedent box to the second-last path in the model (Figure 1), we conceptualize the antecedents also as potential moderators of the link between the mediators (i.e., motives and emotions) and knowledge-focused interactions in meetings. In other words, we presume that the antecedents influence whether an employee engages in a social comparison in the first place and can potentially also amplify or attenuate the effect of a detrimental social comparison in case an employee experiences this situation.

Behavioral level: Self-promotion and agentic communication

Whether or not a meeting attendee engages in a social comparison is not independent from the meeting environment but is instead embedded in the team interaction stream in which one verbal statement influences the next, thus creating sequences of at least partly dependent behaviors (Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2018). Put simply, this means that what others say in a meeting (i.e., behavioral-level or utterance-level predictors) can directly trigger a social comparison because social comparisons often occur relatively spontaneous and effortless as unintentional reactions to the performances or behaviors of others (Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris,

1995). To illustrate, imagine a kick-off project meeting in which one meeting attendee suggests that everyone should reveal their project-related previous expertise and achievements to be able to find a solution for the current project plan. Such a statement likely triggers social comparisons. In contrast, if a meeting attendee suggests that the team should do a brainstorming session to develop a solution for the current project plan, social comparisons may be less likely. To summarize, social comparisons can be triggered by specific verbal behaviors.

Particularly, we propose that social comparisons are more likely to occur when one or several meeting members engage in verbal behaviors related to self-promotion (e.g., pointing out work experience, tenure, prestige etc.; see Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012). This is because self-promotion triggers employees to think about their own experience and relates to competitiveness, which in turn is closely linked to social comparisons (Sambolec, Kerr, & Messé, 2007). To illustrate, imagine a meeting participant that opens the meeting with the following statements "Today we are going to talk about artificial intelligence, a topic I have substantial experience with. I recently managed three successful projects on artificial intelligence that generated one million in revenue". This will likely trigger other meeting participants to think about their own achievements in this area and consequently might encourage them to follow up with statements emphasizing their own expertise. Likewise, it might also silence them.

More generally speaking, any verbal statement that signals dominance over others should increase the likelihood of social comparisons. We refer to these verbal behaviors as agentic communication. Agency describes an organism's existence as an individual, and as such stands in contrast to communion that describes an individual's participation in some larger organism of which the individual is a part (Bakan, 1966). As such, agentic communication reflects dominance and self-profitability (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). These verbal behaviors are aimed at serving the self (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007), pursuing own goals (Bakan, 1966), and striving for power and independence (Cuddy, Wilmuth, & Carney, 2012). Examples for

agentic behaviors are delegating tasks, instructing others what to do, interrupting others, or running others down (Schlamp, Gerpott, & Voelpel, 2019). These behaviors likely induce feelings of downward comparisons in the target (i.e., feeling worse than the sender), which in turn induces a motivation to rebuild one's status in the group.

Individual level: Neuroticism and Social Comparison Orientation

Scholars have repeatedly linked the tendency to engage in social comparisons to broad personality traits and have established a positive relationship with neuroticism, that is, a disposition toward being worried and nervous (Buunk, Van der Zee, & VanYperen, 2001; for an overview see Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). In other words, neuroticism describes an employee's tendency to experience psychological distress and to be overly sensitive to stimuli (Hammick & Lee, 2014). These feelings of insecurity make employees more prone to engage in social comparisons than people who score low on neuroticism, because they are highly attracted to utilizing social comparisons as a means to gain information about one's position in the social environment. For example, imagine a meeting in which the team discusses the task progress of a particular project. Because neurotic individuals are motivated to avoid the risk of appearing incompetent relative to others, they likely point out their contributions to the task in comparison to others and try to engage in communication that signals their value to the group (Bendersky & Shah, 2013). Furthermore, neurotic meeting participants may be more likely to interpret statements by others as social comparisons. For example, a neutral question such as "Do you have time to take on task A or should I give it to your colleague?" could be interpreted as an inquiry that incorporates an evaluative component (along the lines of " the person asking the question is concerned that I am overwhelmed with my work and thinks my colleague can better handle additional demands").

A more specific stream of research has argued that the tendency for social comparisons is a stable disposition in itself (e.g., Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Vogel, Rose, Okdie, Eckles, & Franz, 2015). According to this perspective, individuals differ on their so-called *social*

comparison orientation (SCO), that is, a tendency to readily compare oneself with others. Similarly to our line of argumentation for the link between neuroticism and social comparison, a high SCO likely results in more social comparison-related communication in meetings as well as a tendency to interpret other meeting participants' statements in terms of social comparisons. Previous research showed that constantly comparing oneself with others can trigger feelings of unhappiness (White et al., 2006). Negative affective states, in turn, have been shown to impair knowledge transfer (Levin, Kurtzberg, Phillips, & Lount, 2010) and increase the sensitivity for social comparisons (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997), thus inducing a self-reinforcing cycle of detrimental social comparisons. To conclude, there exists convincing evidence for some systematic interindividual variation in the tendency to engage in social comparisons which relate to a higher likelihood to engage in such behaviors and to react more negatively upon them (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Van der Zee, Buunk, & Sanderman, 1998; Van der Zee, Oldersma, Buunk, & Bos, 1998).

Team level: Age-diversity salience and leadership

First, team characteristics at the compositional level can play a role in the occurrence of social comparisons. The categorization of team members into similar versus dissimilar others— i.e., into ingroup versus outgroup members—is closely connected to social comparison processes (Hogg, 2000). Such categorization processes are particularly likely to occur when age differences are salient to meeting attendees, and salience tends to increase with higher age diversity because age differences become more easily recognizable (Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch, 2011). Importantly, this means that perceived age diversity (and not objective age diversity) is a driver of social comparisons and subsequent knowledge sharing (Gerpott et al., 2019; see also Hentschel, Shemla, Wegge, & Kearney, 2013). We therefore assume that social comparisons are likely to be more prevalent in age-heterogeneous teams than in age-homogenous teams.

Second, leaders have a tremendous influence on productive team meeting behaviors in general (Lehmann-Willenbrock, Meinecke, Rowold, & Kauffeld, 2015) and team members'

knowledge sharing activities in particular (Gerpott et al., 2019). By definition, leadership is a

social influence process. This influence of leaders is particularly important in an age-diverse

work context, as leaders shape the boundary conditions that allow meeting attendees to

capitalize on their extended knowledge base (Kearney & Gebert, 2009) instead of engaging in

detrimental social comparison processes. Leaders can, for example, serve as role-models for

team members' other-orientation (Gerpott et al., 2019), thus providing meeting attendees with

the skill and will to orient themselves toward others instead of focusing on themselves and their

relative standing in comparison with colleagues. In doing so, it is important that leaders try to

maintain the same positive level of exchange with all team members, as employees also

compare their own relationship with their leader to those of the other team members and tend to

lower their work performance and show less extra-role behaviors in case they feel at a

disadvantage (Vidyarthi, Liden, Anand, Erdogan, & Ghosh, 2010, see also Liden, Anand, &

Vidyarthi, 2016). To conclude, leaders may both directly and indirectly influence the extent to

which meeting attendees share their knowledge during meetings by making employees focuse

less on interpersonal differences and more on constructive meeting communication.

Organizational level: Formal and informal policies

Scholarly work on age diversity management has indicated that organizational context

factors can accelerate or inhibit how processes between younger and older employees unfold

(e.g., Boehm et al., 2014; Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch, 2013). We focus here on formal rules in

terms of age-inclusive human resource (HR) practices and informal characteristics relating to an

intergenerational competitiveness climate. More specifically, we propose that these

organizational level antecedents predict the occurrence of social comparisons and can weaken

or accelerate the link between the motivational (i.e., generativity and development motives) and

emotional (i.e., fear of status loss / face loss) mediators in our model as well as subsequent

meeting behaviors (see Figure 1).

On the one hand, research has shown that bundles of age-inclusive human resource practices—such as age-neutral recruiting activities or equal access to training and further education for all employees' irrespective of their age—can enhance an informal age-inclusive climate characterized by low competitiveness (Boehm et al., 2014). In such an environment, the likelihood to engage in social comparisons is reduced because individuals are constantly reminded to develop their best possible self, independently from the activities and career trajectories of others.

On the other hand, formal rules must not necessarily result in positive day-to-day practices (Riach, 2009). Instead, some organizations are prone to what Hoque and Noon (2004) label "empty shell" formal rules—that is, formal practices that are put into place to protect companies from litigation but that are not lived daily by managers and organizational members (Riach, 2009). Transferred to the meeting context, this can mean for example that despite the formal rule that all age groups possess equal rights to suggest agenda points for discussion, the informal rule is that only those with sufficient topic-related experience are allowed to do so. The formal rule has thus no real value in daily organization life. However, since agenda setting is often important for one's future status in an organization (Tepper, 2004), the interpretation of this rule tends to be of career relevance for meeting participants, particularly if the organization is characterized by the idea that one person's gain is the loss of another. The informal redefinition of the agenda setting rule thus triggers social comparison processes and younger employees are likely put at a disadvantage in shaping the meeting agenda as they often have had less opportunities to develop topic-relevant expertise. Therefore, we also consider an organization's informal intergenerational competitiveness climate as a predictor of the likelihood that an employee engages in social comparisons during meetings. A company with a low informal intergenerational competitiveness climate may trigger employees' knowledge sharing enhancing motives and reduce their fear. This is because employees do not feel threatened in their future status in such a company even if the outcome of a social comparison

process with a colleague indicates that their relative status in the future may decrease. This assessment comes about because companies with a low intergenerational competitiveness climate are loyal toward their employees and will not use the gain of one person against the other. In contrast, an organization characterized by high intergenerational competitiveness offers freedom and personal discretion at work based on performing better than others, although this is not formalized through guidelines (Fletcher & Nusbaum, 2010). Organizations with this type of management control systems trigger competitive interactions among co-workers (Luft, 2016) and thus social comparisons.

Conclusion

The intention of this chapter was to outline why meetings constitute a relevant environment to study intergenerational learning outcomes and how the addition of a social comparison lens can add to our current understanding of this research topic. We developed a conceptual model (Figure 1) depicting the motivational and emotional consequences as well as antecedents that link social comparison processes in meetings to intergenerational learning outcomes of participants from different age groups. To conclude, we propose that the study of intergenerational learning in meetings from a social comparison perspective offers numerous opportunities to develop multilevel research programs that can inform future policy initiatives to effectively manage generational differences and knowledge transfer in the workplace. We hope our conceptual model encourages scholars to empirically test our ideas in the field and laboratory and as such offers new directions that can enable the development of several lines of inquiry in this critical area of research.

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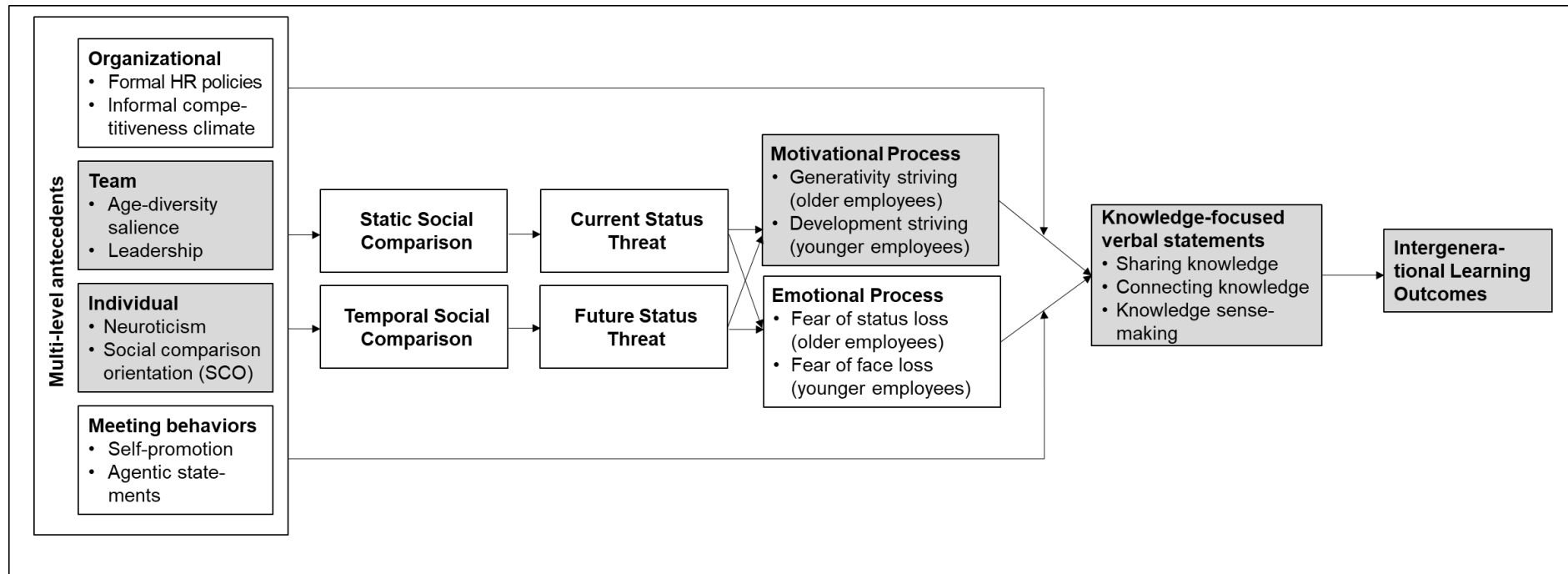
Figure 1. Conceptual model linking social comparison processes with intergenerational learning outcomes in meetings. The grey boxes indicate that empirical research exists that has studied the respective concepts and their relationships with other constructs from the model in the context of social comparisons or intergenerational knowledge sharing processes. The concepts in the white boxes lack empirical research so far and are derived from theory.