Age Diversity and
Intergenerational Relations at the Workplace

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Introduction

This paper is based on a European research project[1] (SPReW) that focused on the intergenerational dimensions of changes in relations to work. The aim was to point out areas of solidarity and tensions between the generations in work and to question some hypotheses concerning the young generation, notably the development of different attitudes, values, expectations and involvement in work that could have detrimental consequences for the relations between age groups. The article starts with a description of four current types of relation to work and points out their generational relevance. In a second step, the paper focuses on the mutual perceptions of three generations at the workplace (below 30 years old, between 30 and 50 years old and above 50 years old) and the correlation of such mutual perception with the different types of involvement in work. As a conclusion it raises some challenging issues for age diversity management.

1. Characterising Relations to Work

There are many hypotheses on the changing attitudes of generations and/or age groups regarding work. There is an abundant managerial literature that focus mostly on the cultural differences between generations. However a generation cannot be defined only with reference to a cultural dimension. It is a specific combination of cultural / economic / historical-political dimensions that constitute the roots of generations (Mannheim, 1990; Attias-Donfut, 1988; Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998; Gauthier, 2008). These dimensions together shape the specific orientations towards work of each generation. The definition of what is a "good job" and what is a "good life" is evolving over time; however, we cannot take for granted the fact that generation is the key variable that distinguishes individuals.

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[1] The SPReW project (Social Patterns of Relations to Work) was funded under the 6th framework programme of the European Union. It is a two years project started in June 2006. It involved researchers from six countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Portugal) and stakeholders (public authority and trade union). The overall objective of this project was to analyse the factors leading to solidarity or tensions in intergenerational relations, in the specific area of work and correlated fields. http://www.ftu-namur.org/sprew. This paper is based on Vendramin P. & Cultiaux J., "Les générations face aux mutations du travail" in "Actes du colloque international du GT1 de l'AISLF, *Jeunesses au travail: rapports intergénérationnels et dynamiques des groupes professionnels*, Brest, 29-30 mai 2008

The concept of work orientation – or relation to work, depending on the translation of the concept – refers to patterns of interpretation that are socially acquired knowledge, which results partly from people's own experiences and partly from collective experience (Schütz & Luckmann, 1973). For different areas of life, different patterns of interpretation are available. Everyday-life orientations are self-evident patterns of action, which structure life. They are usually defined by non-conscious motives. An analysis of work orientation is, in this sense, an analysis of motivations for involvement in work. Work orientations are socio-psychic patterns of the individual in his/her relation to work. Orientation here means the norms the individual has internalised during his/her life course and that s/he applies to the relevant areas of his/her regular daily life (family, leisure and work, etc.).

Research that analyses changes in relations to work looks for convergences among generations and for explicative variables for these changes, with a strong hypothesis that age plays a key role. It was the aim of the SPReW research to test such an age hypothesis. The research draws on empirical material collected in six countries in Europe[2]. This article is mainly based on the empirical material collected in Belgium – 31 narrative interviews and 3 group interviews, all with active workers and spread across five types of organisation (government, hospital, steel industry, commercial SME and IT companies). The narrative interviews set out to address the personal and the professional stories, the visions of work and the perceptions of the generations at work. The group interviews focused on the dynamics of intergenerational relationships. The material was analysed with collective hermeneutics (Molitor, 1990). This paper proposes a typology of forms of relation to work that highlights four typical forms of involvement in work, not necessarily linked to age (Cultiaux & Vendramin, 2009). This typology is validated by the results of the empirical work conducted in the five other countries covered by the research project.

The typology is not an end in itself; it is a way of reducing complexity and ordering heterogeneity (Coenen-Huther, 2003; Schnapper, 1999) and of pointing out the common characteristics between people that show convergent ways of engaging in work. Understanding changes in relations to work has not only scientific relevance; it has also pragmatic relevance as types of relation to work shape visions of work, expectations of work, visions of careers and management, relations to knowledge and learning, and specific expectations towards public policies.

The typology is built around two axes: one that differentiates the type of involvement in work, either dominated by pragmatism or by subjective / reflexive involvement. These terms refer to well-known concepts in the analysis of relations to work or the meaning of work. Research distinguishes the *instrumental*, *social* and *symbolic* dimensions of work (Paugam, 2000; Nicole-Drancourt & Roulleau Berger, 2001; Riffault & Tchernia, 2002, 2003; Zoll, 1992). Briefly, the instrumental dimension refers to the "material" expectations (level of income, security of employment), the social dimension to the importance of human relations at work and, finally, the symbolic dimension with opportunities for self-development, knowledge acquisition, interest in the work content, feeling of success, autonomy and social usefulness.

The pragmatic and reflexive involvement in work also refers to the distinction between post-materialistic and materialistic orientations (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). The vision in the pragmatic orientation is that working is necessary in order to meet personal and family needs.

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[2]   Among other things, on 163 narratives interviews distributed among three age groups (under 30 years old, 30 to 50 years old and more than 50 years old) and 18 group interviews.

Work is not "life"; it is a means. As work takes a significant place in life, then it has also to be pleasant (good atmosphere, security…). When involvement in work is rather reflexive, work plays a key role in personal identity; self-development is important as well as initiative, creativity and knowledge development. The concept of involvement or attitude used here must be understood in a broad sense. It refers not only to the representations people draw on but also to the places that people want to reach and the values they are referring to.

In pragmatic involvement as in reflexive involvement, two different attitudes are possible; they are influenced by the trajectories, the life course of individuals. This "life course" perspective is important and individuals are divided broadly into two groups: on the one hand, those who follow, as far as possible, a more or less normal pathway through life – a normative calendar (Guillaume & Lalive d'Epinay, 2005; Kholi, 1986), which has standard milestones (education, work, independent living, starting a family…) through institutionalised steps and, on the other hand, those who follow an individual trajectory, either by choice or constraint, a trajectory that is not always in line with social institutions and policies (Maier, 2008). The intersection between these two axes suggests four types of relation to work (see table).

Typology of Forms of Relation to Work

		Pragmatic Attitude	**Reflexive Attitude**	
Standardised Life Course	Employment is more important than work	I. Work is a constraint to live positively	III. Work supports self-development.	Work is more important than employment
Individualised Life Course		II. Work is a means for earning money	IV. Work is a cornerstone of the identity	

Source : Cultiaux J., Vendramin P., 2008

It quickly transpires that it is necessary to introduce an additional variable in the typology: a distinction between *work* and *employment*. Both of these constitute what we commonly name "work"; however, we forget that they refer to diverse realities. Employment is what gives access to work; it is what defines the conditions in which work will be performed while work refers to the content and organisation of activities (Piotet, 2007). Individuals give different importance to those two dimensions. In some cases, "work" will be the more important component of a "job" while in other cases "employment" will be more important. In the two attitudes of the typology (pragmatic / reflexive), either work or employment is privileged. This distinction is important because it seems that potential areas of tensions between the generations concern "employment" rather than "work". Employment is more important than work for types I and II while work is more important than employment in type III and IV. The types identified in the typology are defined as follows.

– **Work as "a Constraint to Live Positively"**
  In this first type, work is experienced as a source of income and a requirement for participating in social life. The instrumental dimension of work is important but not exclusive. Job security is also crucial; it is more important than the level of wages or career prospects. People in this group are also looking for a friendly working group, a pleasant atmosphere. This latter refers to the social dimension of work, mutual support and the ambience, but also to the usefulness of work. People in this group have active profiles; they may change jobs in order to find more secure or more enjoyable work. All

age groups are represented in this type, but there is a lower proportion of the middle-aged range. We find both men and women, with no specific gender differentiation. There are also people from all levels of qualification, but with a higher proportion of poorly qualified people. This is the type in which we have the largest group of interviewees.

– **Work as "a Means for Earning Money"**
Type II includes individuals with a mostly pragmatic approach to work. Having pleasure at work or opportunities for self-development is regarded as a "happy chance" and in any case is not a major concern. Work is a means to an end; it is not an end in itself. The social dimension of work is a relatively unimportant dimension, subjective involvement is not possible and in fact is seen as suspect. If the instrumental dimension prevails, individuals belonging to this group are not career-minded. Their ambition is limited to the wish to have sufficient income and employment security to satisfy family and individual needs. People with these profiles are rather passive as regards their working conditions. This is the smallest group compared to the other types. All age groups are represented in this type, as well as all levels of qualification. This is a "man type"; we have found mostly men having this relation to work.

– **Work as "a Support to Self-Development"**
Individuals belonging to this type III consider work as a key resource for their wellbeing and their development. Concrete work is a way to discover personal abilities and skills. The social dimension of work is also important while the instrumental dimension of work is secondary. Stability may be considered as important because it helps to consolidate the achievements of a career or to reconcile professional commitments and private life. Security is not essential and bifurcations are possible for more challenging jobs. Colleagues and hierarchy are important because they provide recognition. People with these profiles are quite proactive. Their commitment is high, in both professional and family life. This is the second largest group, although significantly less large than the first type. It is characterised by a high proportion of middle-aged people and a higher proportion of women – even if men are well represented. People in this group have mostly middle and high levels of qualification.

– **Work as "the Cornerstone of the Identity"**
In type IV, the commitment of individuals to work is highly subjective; a successful life is linked to a successful professional life. Levels of income and status are crucial in the assessment of a job; stability is secondary. A strong connection with the company, the organisation, and particularly with bosses or colleagues, can be considered as a constraint to personal prospects. The search for excellence is permanent and people belonging to this group are very proactive. There is a close association between work and life. This type is not very large, however it is larger than type II. All age groups are represented but there is a higher proportion of young workers. There is no gender difference and the average level of qualification is rather high.

An important outcome of the analysis is that there is no correlation between different forms of relation to work, and age or generation. The age groups are split between the different types. A more detailed analysis of the trajectories would highlight the dynamics inherent in these types and the intrinsic mobility of each group.

2. Mutual Perception of Generations at Work

Interviewees were also asked to describe their images of the other age groups / generations at work. How are they perceived? What characterises them? How do the different generations work together? What about solidarity or tensions between the generations in their daily work? Before going into the content of the narratives, it is interesting to note that the discourses on the generations at work are more or less prolix according to certain criteria. Thus, those who are the more verbose, positively or negatively, about other generations are: workers over 50 years, individuals who belong to type II of the typology (work as a means for earning money), men, and people with lower education levels. Workers in the middle-age group (30 to 50 years old) are the most critical when they talk about the other age groups. It is also interesting to note that the discourses usually focus on the extreme age groups (younger or older), as if the middle generation was invisible. The demarcation between age groups is far from homogeneous, as are concepts of "young" or "older" worker. Finally, the generation that is most discussed is the younger generation. Analysis of interviews revealed five recurrent topics that are developed below.

–   **Attitudes Regarding Work and Employment**
    Generally, young workers are the least talkative on this topic. Attitudes are primarily a matter of discussion among workers over 30 years old. They see the younger generation as very different from the other generations and they qualify this difference in terms of "motivation": young workers lack initiative in and enthusiasm for their work, and their interest is assumed to be mainly instrumental. This attitude is explained by cultural changes, and by changes in the psychological contract between employers and employees. Younger workers are oriented to short-term issues, to dealing with unstable jobs and to managing their own career paths. Therefore, they do not have the same loyalty towards their employers, and the older generations interpret this as a lack of motivation. However, sometimes the older generation itself is suspected of lacking in motivation (being blasé or unconcerned), while younger workers are perceived as highly-motivated and bringing new blood into organisations – this image is, however, less frequently-held. Commonplace assumptions regarding young workers entering the labour market are not new. The difference today is that companies are rediscovering the younger generation that they had previously marginalised as a silent work force kept under control by the fear of unemployment (Flamant, 2005).

–   **ICT as Figurehead of Modernisation[3]**
    When discussing the generations at work, skills and abilities with information and communication technologies (ICT) are the first topics that come up. It is interesting to note that for only two age groups is there an issue of their ability to work with ICT: workers under 30 years old and those over 50 years old. This does not appear as a concern for the middle-aged group. This can be explained by the curve of diffusion and appropriation of ICT over the last twenty years. The common assumption is that young workers are more skilled, and older workers less competent and more reticent, regarding the use of ICT. Older workers belong to the last generation that has spent a significant part of its life (professional and private) without doing so. For the older generation, ICTs are associated with all the major changes that have taken place in the world of work during the past twenty years: changes in organisational models, the growth of network

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[3]   Modernisation refers here to all changes that occurred in work during the last twenty years, not only in the area of technological development but also in work organisation, management of human resources, globalisation, enterprises restructuring, etc.

enterprises, the use of outsourcing, the development of services, the automation of informal tasks, the codification of knowledge, flexibility, and massive layoffs in many industries and in large administrations... The differences between the generations in the ability to live with ICT at work can be understood as a clash between two eras of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999) and between two working environments, which have been radically transformed.

– **The Mark of Trajectories**
Discourses about trajectories are mixed. Some things are clear: the trajectories and careers of young workers are different from those of other generations of workers. Each generation is aware of these differences; however, it is mainly older workers who raise this topic. Differences exist at all points in the trajectories of employees of different generations: in their education, entry routes into the labour market, when starting a family, in working conditions... Older workers have a twofold discourse: on the one hand, they describe life as being easier for young workers, but on the other hand, they describe the employment status of young workers as being extremely difficult compared to what older workers experienced when they entered the labour market many years ago. Insecurity, despite the completion of higher education, is seen as the main characteristic of youth trajectories. The life course or trajectory perspective is important in the analysis of intergenerational relations at work; the differences are rooted in contexts but they also leave their mark. Past history matters in an individual trajectory and past experiences have an impact on future steps, they leave marks that will not disappear spontaneously (Chauvel, 2007).

– **The Social Dimension of Work**
The quality of social relationships is an important aspect of work experience for all age groups, and age does not appear as an obstacle to good working relationships. Generally, age diversity is seen as positive for organisations. In this area, the tension between individualism and solidarity is an important issue, which is most often mentioned by older workers. The workplace is seen by them as more individualistic than in the past, while solidarity is declining for various reasons related to individuals and to society as a whole. However, these discourses are very ambiguous because, while saying this, people tell stories that demonstrate the vitality of social bonds in the workplace. Discussions about the future of social bonds in the workplace reflect a meeting of two conceptions of the enterprise held by the different generations. The majority of older workers' careers were spent in communitarian enterprises, while young workers enter the labour market with images of open organisations, an organisational model, which is promoted in the public sphere. However, discussions about individualisation do not rest exclusively on the workplace; they address society as a whole. There are many pessimistic approaches to this phenomenon, though some are more optimistic. They see the situation as one of change rather than destruction. The assumption is that social bonds, solidarity and collective belongings in the workplace are not disappearing but being transformed (Vendramin, 2004).

– **Knowledge and Ways of Working**
With respect to their portfolios of skills and their working methods, older workers are described as more structured, more logical, more organised, less hyperactive, more serene. They bring their wisdom to bear in their daily work. These attributes are seen as the product of experience. By contrast, young workers are described (by themselves as well) as excited, chatty, impulsive. Older workers are not considered as less efficient than their younger counterparts. Efficiency is seen as the product of time and experience.

Knowledge capital and knowledge transfer are key issues, with the different generations having different viewpoints on them. Some young workers say they must take the initiative and ask questions to older workers; the exchange of knowledge is not spontaneous. For others, knowledge sharing is natural and comes automatically through cooperation, when the organisation and work rhythms allow such cooperation, and when young workers are not confined to peripheral tasks. Some interviewees also note that knowledge transmission is not only a matter of age; all newcomers are in learning situations. If experience belongs to older workers, young workers seem to be more at the cutting edge of new working methods. Finally, transmission of knowledge is not seen as a unidirectional phenomenon; it also flows from younger to older workers.

3. Visions of the Generations at Work and Types of Relation to Work

There are links between the patterns of relations to work and the visions of the generations. One main question behind this cross-analysis is to understand if specific patterns of relation to work are associated with specific visions of the generations. Another key question is to identify if there are specific areas of tensions between generations according to types of relation to work.

Typology of Forms of Relation to Work and Visions of Generations
Relative Importance of different Work Components
++ Very Important; + Important; - Of Little Importance; -- Not at all Important

		Pragmatic attitude	Reflexive attitude	
Standardised life course	Employment is more important than work	I. Work is a constraint to live positively ++ Human relations ++ Attitudes + Employment security - Knowledge - Methods of work - Modernisation / ICT	III. Work supports self-development ++ Knowledge ++ Methods of work ++ Human relations - Attitudes - Employment security	Work is more important than employment
Individualised life course		II. Work is a means of earning money ++ Employment security + Modernisation / ICT	IV. Work is a cornerstone of the identity ++ Attitudes ++ Methods of work -- Employment security -- Human relations	

In the type I, discourse regarding the generations mainly focuses on human relations and attitudes, which are important points for these individuals. Security of employment can be a problematic issue. Knowledge, ways of working and the issue of work modernisation through the use of ICT are not discussed from a generational perspective.

In type II, the main topics regarding the generations concern security of employment and potential competition between the different age groups regarding their employment status. There is no competition in work, but there is competition in employment. The issue of modernisation is raised in the discourse about generations; it can create demarcations (not meaning oppositions) between age groups.

For people in type III, discourses about the generations focus more on knowledge and ways of working, and also on human relations. Attitude is not a controversial issue. Employment is not an area of tension; there is no competition between the different age groups regarding status in employment and job security.

For workers in type IV, human relations are not an issue in discourses concerning the generations, and security of employment is not an area of competition between the different age groups. Attitudes and ways of working have more importance in the visions of other generations.

4. Conclusions

Much research demonstrates a transformation in the value attached to work and in relations to work; work's domination of life gives way to a multi-dimensional approach to life in which other areas (family, leisure, social life…) have also importance. This changing role of work in broader life does not appear to be generationally-specific. While some age groups have some specific characteristics, all the generations appear to have varied types of involvement in work.

There are obvious areas of firm difference between age groups: in terms of visions of the enterprise (communitarian versus open); ways of developing social bonds; ICT skills and the communication methods shaped by these tools; informal interests. However, noting these differences is not the same as pointing out potential sources of tensions between the generations. Most of these differences do not create tensions between age groups at work. The potential areas of tension between the generations are not related to work, but rather to employment. In other words, the discourse of one generation regarding another is more contentious when employment is at stake. The age group with the more divisive discourse about the generations is the middle-age group, perhaps those who feel more threatened by competition in work. Indeed, they tend to feel threatened by the increasing deregulation of the labour market and their lack of new skills in comparison to younger workers. They also feel a bit envious both of their older colleagues, who can still enjoy early retirement, and of younger ones, who are more at ease in the digital and flexible society. Managing age diversity at work, rather than reinforcing age segregation through targeted policies and measures that reinforce stereotypes, can support knowledge transmission in both directions, mutual recognition and trust and finally social cohesion.

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