

Generational approach to the social patterns of relation to work

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Context of the research

SPReW is a research project funded under the 6th framework programme of the European Union, within priority 7 (Citizens and governance in the knowledge-based society). It is a two years project started the 1st of June 2006.

The overall objective of this project is to examine the factors leading to solidarity or tensions in intergenerational relations, in the specific area of work and correlated fields. It intends to provide a better and updated understanding of the relation that diverse generations have with work, and to analyse the policy challenges and implications of these changes.

The project involves researchers from six countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Portugal) and stakeholders (French Ministry of Labour; Social Development Agency of the European Trade Union Confederation).



Final conference and dialogue workshop

Generations at work: areas of solidarity and tensions

Brussels, 15 May 2008

Languages: French/English

Programme available soon on <http://www.ftu-namur.org/sprew>

Third deliverable: qualitative approach

The third deliverable of the SPReW project (D3) gathers the qualitative analyses conducted in the six countries (round 25 narrative interviews + 3 groups discussions in each country). The report identifies common trends in the changing patterns of relation to work. It also highlights transversal issues about generational issues.

Four main patterns of relation to work

Different social contexts have shaped generations of workers and their social environment, in particular their families. They had to face specific tensions and to solve specific problems and finally they developed new types of attitudes towards work. The diversification of life courses is an outcome of the diversity of responses that individual and familial strategies provided. Such diversification shapes the definition of professional courses (objective impact) and the way they are experienced (subjective impact).

Crossing two key variables — the attitude towards work (pragmatic or reflexive) and the nature of the life course (standardised or individualised life courses)— appears as a fruitful perspective to understand individuals' involvement in work and intergenerational relations. A

distinction between the relation to work and the relation to employment appears also as a key variable to understand intergenerational relations at work.

On the first hand, interviewees refer essentially to two cultural models corresponding to two typical attitudes regarding work.

- The first attitude (called *pragmatic*) corresponds to the idea that work is necessary to encounter some material and social obligations: family needs, consumption, organic solidarity, etc. Work is not life: it is just a means. As it is a constraint, and because it takes a significant place in life, work must also be pleasant (this means working in a good atmosphere, feeling useful, having an interesting occupation...). Individuals referring to this attitude have interiorised a quite traditional conception of work, rooted in the Welfare State and in a stimulating progression and security of career. Rationality of controls and evaluations assure social equity; career is a stable, steady and predictable progression for an individual is in the same organisation; progression means recognition of work and experience; etc.
- The second (called *reflexive*) corresponds to the idea that work plays an essential role in the identity and in self-development. Individuals expressing this attitude have interiorised a second type of participation that promotes self-fulfilment, initiative, creativity, reactivity and flexibility. At the contrary, bureaucracy is seen as alienating individuals. Individuals are engaged in a search for meaning and the workplace is seen as a key place for this goal. This second kind of participation to work appears lately in the 1990's (linked to the emergence of the Reflexive State).

The kind of response that an individual provides to the solicitations of the cultural models is also rooted in his life course.

- If he wants to conform to the norms provided by a cultural model and if he has resources to do it, he engages himself in a *standardised life course*: institutions give social roles and positions; age is important; the position in the life course is a structuring all dimensions of life, etc.
- If he does not conform to the cultural model, he engages himself in an *individualised life course*. A distance to norms characterises those life courses. Distance can mean incapacity to find resources or, at the opposite, a will for independence, the desire to build their own life project. Individuals negotiate their role, their position and their identity, which can be more precarious. Because institutions do not provide enough categories to organise the life components, dimensions of the existence are sometimes more confused, their articulation is more singular and they require more creativity or determination from individuals.

Those two criteria define four main types of relation to work:

- Individuals having a standardised life course and a pragmatic attitude regarding work tend to consider *work as constraint to experiment positively*. They consider security of employment, usefulness and social relation as essential.
- Individuals having a standardised life course and a reflexive attitude regarding work consider *work as an opportunity for self-development*. A job must be fulfilling and allowing good social relations. Security of employment is not essential.
- Individuals having an individualised life course and a pragmatic attitude regarding work tend to consider *work as a means to earn money*. They have no passion for their work, no expressive needs. Their job must provide them enough money and stability for their private projects. In that sense they are quite trustful to their employers until they provide a secure and not too requesting work framework.

- At least, individuals having an individualised life course and a reflexive attitude regarding work tend to consider *work as the cornerstone of their identity*. Success in work means success in life. Their relation to work is characterised by an intensive professional investment: they need challenges, autonomy... However, security of employment and social relations at work are not significant for them. At the contrary, they are very flexible and autonomous.

Some transversal findings

When comparing national analyses, some transversal findings and topics were highlighted; they raise challenges for companies and public policies.

➤ *Firstly, there is no evidence of a link between relation to work and generations*

The pragmatic or reflexive attitude regarding work does not specifically refer to age groups.

From the individual's point of view, there is no strong awareness to belong to a generation. The sense of generational differences differs from one individual to another and the categorisation featured in the academic literature is not experienced in itself by generations at work: who is young, middle-aged or old is not constant.

Most of the time, *age in itself is an issue that has even not been raised in the interviews*. A very common appreciation could be summarised through some quotations: "This is not age that matters, this is work." "Age is a wrong variable, there is always something else." "Differences of age... I have no problem with that."

Those observations are important to point out, notably for young workers, because they are often considered as a whole group sharing the same attitude regarding work.

➤ *Secondly, all national observations tend to confirm that there are no indicators of an explicit conflict between generations.*

This is even the case in contexts where asymmetry between young and old generations is emphasized. It doesn't mean, however, that there are no differences and no potential areas of tensions between generations. For example, there is a common agreement regarding *capabilities of young and old workers in the field of ICT*. Young workers see themselves, and they are described by older workers, as more competent in ICT, while older workers see themselves, and they are described by young workers, as less competent and quite reluctant to ICT. ICT are for the older generation the symbol of all major changes that occurred in work the last twenty years: changes in organisational models with the emergence of the network enterprise, outsourcing, development of services, automation of informational tasks, codification of tasks, polyvalence, flexibility... In Hungary, the change of regime has also shaped significant differences between younger and older workers who have been socialised in the communist regime.

Potential areas of tensions between generations were however observed. They mainly concern the relation to employment (i.e. the position in the labour market, status, contract, career prospects; it is also embedded in trajectories), rather than the relation to work (referring to the content of work, the management of social relations, the knowledge approach, the ways of working, etc.). This is particularly observable among individuals having a pragmatic relation to work.

➤ *A third key issue concerns the importance of trajectories in the shaping of the relation to work.*

Past history matters more than age. Former experiences have an impact on further steps. The trajectories of young workers entering into an enterprise have an impact on their relation to work, their specific expectations regarding the enterprise and the management.

In the same way, if transition or precariousness is too long, it is difficult to reinvent a trajectory after 30, and even before.

Moreover, changes are evident: life and work trajectories of older workers are quite different from those of young workers today. However, mainly the older workers group draw out the differences in trajectories according to age groups. They have ambivalent statements: on the one hand, life is described as easier for young workers but on the other hand, they describe their employment status (not their work in itself) as extremely problematical and unfair as regards to what they have known when they entered the labour market more than 30 years ago.

➤ *A fourth statement concerns the different interpretations that young and old workers give to some life events, particularly concerning insecurity and precariousness.*

If the young workers – particularly the low qualified – are described as the main victims of changes in work (they have to start a family, to pay a mortgage for their house, etc), the older workers mainly use the word “precariousness”. At the contrary, when they tell their situation, the young workers tend to relativise the issue. They often consider their different experiences as trials that legitimate their current occupation. They have a negative appraisal of such transitory period when they fear to be trapped in it. For those who are more qualified it is also part of a “battle for talents”.

➤ *A fifth key issue concerns the increasing demand for a new balance between work and life.*

Tensions between work, self-development and private life are more important for active women (and this is a potential area for discrimination) but the topic is important for both men and women, especially within the young generation. In certain circumstances, companies could interpret all the efforts that individuals, and particularly women and young workers, are doing to arrive at some equilibrium between a private life and a professional life, as a lack of motivation. However, this concern will be more acute for those who have a reflexive relation to work than those who have a pragmatic relation to work, in particular if we consider the growing importance of “post-materialism” among the younger workers.

➤ *A sixth statement concerns the potential of the consolidation of the workplace as an area for cooperation and transmission between generations.*

The context of massive early retirement, combined with the recruitment difficulties in certain sectors, means that companies will have to tackle the risk of losing competences. If the issue has a place in managerial discourses, it is not yet translated in concrete programmes.

The complete report and updated information are available on the SPREW website.

Other research tasks in progress

- Empirical data collection includes a *selection of relevant good policy practices* in the field of employment policies and intergenerational management. This selection and the transversal analyse will be achieved in February. Up to now, the selection of the practices highlights the relative scarcity of projects directly targeted on intergenerational issues or intergenerational processes.

Age groups are most often tackled separately. For youth, the main explanation refers to integration and socialisation issues. For older workers, policies focus on ageing at work and early retirement. Significantly, the middle age workers are generally not considered as a relevant group for such initiatives.

- The SPREW project also includes a *quantitative approach*. The collection of relevant common data in each country, the inventory of existing relevant surveys at regional, national and international levels and the assessment of such inventory will be achieved in February. This will lead to the elaboration of an appropriate set of questions or indicators that could be proposed for inclusion in existing survey schemes at the international level.

Further information

Deliverable on good policy practices	February 2008
Deliverable with quantitative approach	February 2008
Conclusions and recommendations	April 2008
European dialogue workshop	May 2008
Final synthesis report	June 2008
Press release	June 2008

Updated information about the project is available at the following web address:

<http://www.ftu-namur.org/SPREW>

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