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Generational approach to the social patterns of relation to work

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Generational approach to the social patterns of relation to work

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SPReW consortium

Fondation Travail-Université (FTU),
Work & technology research centre – Namur, Belgium
Rue de l'Arsenal, 5 – B-5000 Namur, phone +32-81-725122, fax +32-81-725128
Contact person: Patricia Vendramin (pvendramin@ftu-namur.org)
Coordinator

Centro de Investigaçao e de Intervençao Social (CIS), ISCTE – Lisbon, Portugal
Avenida das Forças Armadas – P-1649 Lisboa 026, phone +351-21-7903079
Scientific contact: Paula Castro (paula.castro@iscte.pt)

Fondazione Regionale Pietro Seveso (FRPS) – Milan, Italy
Viale Fulvio Testi, 42 – I-20099 Sesto San Giovanni (Mi), phone +39-02-24426251
Scientific contact: Anna Ponzellini (ponzmi@tin.it)

University of Bremen - Bremen, Germany
Institut Arbeit und Wirtschaft (IAW),
Parkhallee, 39 – D-28209 Bremen, phone +49-421-2183472
Scientific contact: Rainer Zoll (zoll@uni-bremen.de); Götz Richter (richter.goetz@baua.bund.de)

Institute for Political Science of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA PTI) – Budapest, Hungary
PF 694/115 Budapest H-1399, Orszàghàz u. 30, 1014 Budapest, Hungary, phone +36-1-2246728
Scientific contact: Julia Vajda (h13073vaj@ella.hu)

Social Development Agency (SDA),
Agency of the European Trade Union Confederation – Brussels, Belgium
Boulevard du Roi Albert II, 5 – B- 1210 Brussels, phone +32-2-2240462
Scientific contact: Claudio Stanzani (cstanzan@etuc.org)

Direction de l'Animation de la Recherche, des Etudes et des Statistiques (DARES),
Ministère de l'emploi, du travail et de la cohesion sociale – Paris, France
Quai André Citroën, 39-43 – F-75015 Paris, phone +33-1-44382254
Scientific contact: Hélène Garner (helene.garner@dares.travail.gouv.fr)

Centre d'Etude de l'Emploi – Paris, France
Le Descartes 1, 29, promenade Michel Simon, F-93166 Noisy le Grand Cedex, phone +33-1-45926888
Scientific contact: Dominique Méda (Dominique.meda@mail.enpc.fr)

Website: http://www.ftu-namur.org/sprew/

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Contents

1. OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES 7

1.1 GENERAL OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT 7
1.2 STATE OF THE ART OF SCIENTIFIC DEBATE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH 7
1.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL COHESION 8
1.4 GENERAL HYPOTHESIS AND KEY WORDS 9

2. GENERATIONS AT WORK: THE EVIDENCE OF THE RESEARCH 11

2.1 THE RESEARCH PROCESS AND THE METHODOLOGY 11
2.2 THE CHANGE OF RELATION TO WORK: HOW DOES GENERATION MATTER? 12
2.3 THREE GENERATIONS AT WORK: A BALANCE OF WEAKNESS AND STRENGTH FOR EACH GROUP 13
2.4 THE QUALITY OF INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS: NEITHER A REAL CONFLICT, NOR A TRUE SOLIDARITY 14
2.4.1 The relations between the two extreme groups 14
2.4.2 The mid-generation: the most invisible but the most problematic in the future? 15
2.5 THE CHANGE OF RELATION TO WORK IN AN INTERGENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVE 15
2.5.1 Are young people different? 15
2.5.2 A gender/generation effect: the contamination of gender models 17

3. THE INFLUENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS ON INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS AT WORK 17

3.1 A CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISON ON INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS 17
3.2 HOW MAY SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AFFECT THE RELATIONS BETWEEN GENERATIONS? 17
3.3 WHICH SOCIAL MODEL CAN BETTER PREVENT THE RISK OF INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT? 19
3.3.1 The mid-generation 19
3.3.2 The younger generation 19
3.3.3 The older generation 20

4. MAY A CONFLICT AMONG GENERATIONS OCCUR? IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES 21

4.1 FROM RESULTS TO RECOMMENDATIONS: SUGGESTIONS TO GOVERNMENTS AND SOCIAL ACTORS 21
4.2 DISTANCE FROM THE EUROPEAN POLICIES FRAMEWORK 22
4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS TO SOCIAL ACTORS 23
4.6 SUGGESTIONS TO DIFFERENT POLICY ACTORS 24

Introduction

The SPReW project focuses on the factors leading to solidarity or tensions in intergenerational relations, in the area of work. Recent researches raised the hypothesis that the younger generation has different attitudes, forms of participation, expectations and engagement in work than the older generations. The pessimistic view concludes to an increased individualism, but this assumption is not founded on robust research. The project will provide a better understanding of the evolving relation that generations have to work. Such changes have important consequences on intergenerational relations at the workplace, on solidarity between generations, and on the relevance of specific work and employment policies as well as on other public policies.

The relation to work can be analysed through different angles: value given to work, expectations associated to work, vision of the future, relation to precariousness or mobility, more generally the construction of an identity through work and the linking with other key values. A link is also established between the relation to work and other correlated issues: family formation and lifestyles, intergenerational relations in society, social inclusion or exclusion. The gender dimension and the position of migrants are constitutive and transversal aspects of all research tasks. The project also analyses age policies related to work and employment and identifies good practices. The research methodology combines qualitative, quantitative, comparative and participatory approaches.

The key objectives are to draw out social patterns of relation to work for different generations, including the gender dimension; to study articulations with other societal fields (family formation and lifestyles, intergenerational relations, social cohesion); to develop awareness of public authorities and social actors on the generational dimensions in the relation to work and employment; to draw out guidelines for youth policies and ageing policies in this area.

The authors

Vendramin Patricia (FTU), coordinator.
CEE: Bureau Marie-Christine; Davoine Lucie; Delay Béatrice; Méda Dominique; Wong Michal
CIS: Carvalho Sandra; Castro Paula; Nogal Ângela; Passos Ana; Soares Celia
FRPS: Franco Maria Teresa; Greco Sylvana; Lebano Adele; Ponzellini Anna Maria
FTU: Cultiaux John; Damhuis Lotte; Valenduc Gérard; Vendramin Patricia
IAW: Belit Saka; Grützmacher Nicole; Knop Alexander; Richter Götz; Zoll Rainer; Zoll-Grubert Elisabeth
MTA-PTI: Füleki Katalin; Polyacskó Orsolya; Vajda Júlia
SDA: Monaco Marina

1. Objectives and hypotheses

1.1 General objectives of the project

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 key objectives of the project are:

- to draw out similarities and differences of relation to work for different generations, including the gender and ethnic dimensions;
- to study articulations with other societal fields (family formation and lifestyles, intergenerational relations, social cohesion);
- to develop awareness of public authorities and social actors on the generational dimensions in the relation to work and employment;
- to draw out guidelines for youth policies and ageing policies in this area.

1.2 State of the art of scientific debate and conceptual framework of the research

The topic of generations and work is developed around some dimensions that are considered as central for understanding the relation to work and for highlighting some specificities of the orientation to work in older and younger generations. A key element is identified in the place that work occupies in people's life, at the light of the opposition between "distance" and "centrality" of work. On this point, it is important underlying what is wrong in the cliché about the young generation described as more distant from work, work being less important for them in the building of identities. It can be noted that the place that work occupies in young people live can be understood as a result of age rather than of generation. Particularly, during the entry period into adult roles, young people tend to invest at the same time in different social areas both with work (friends, partners and other activities). Nevertheless some scholars underline that a more peripheral place for work in life is shaped by some structural changes such as the education. In fact, a relativisation of work by the more qualified young people has been observed; it can be explained by the dissatisfaction regarding the disappearing of a direct link between education, work and social mobility.

The young generation is often seen as a generation "in negative," without distinctive characters and it is often defined by what it lacks more than by what qualifies it: lack of sense of belonging, of solidarity, of values and of security together with difficulty in considering themselves in any future. However, these stereotypes are not confirmed by the empirical studies. They do not help to understand that the young generation is characterised by different attitudes, values and knowledge rather than by indifference or disvalues. For example, the dimensions of autonomy and choice gain a new centrality in the young people's relation to work.

Radical changes in work started in the 80's (de-standardisation, lean production, delocalisation, outsourcing, technological innovation…). All these changes result in a rupture between new work forms and standard work characterised by standard jobs, linear careers, knowledge transmissions between senior and junior workers and by what is called the perception of a "common destiny" between old and young generations. This rupture that took place in the organisation work paved the way to a diversification in attitudes and beliefs and called for a different regulation of the intergenerational exchange.

This rupture in the work framework is what mirrors the definition of "generations at work," which constitutes the core topic of the SPReW project. To characterise a "generation" we need to identify peculiar socio-political phenomena that make a certain period distinctive. The transformation of work is an event that crosscuts the different European countries, despite their specificities.

Concerning the relations between generations and the factors of cooperation and tensions, scholars often depict the mid-generation as the more protected one and the two extreme generations as those who pay the costs of its benefits and security. In fact, a fine analysis of the phenomena demonstrates that the relations between generations are more complex and that the "balance of power" is less univocal than it might appear. The results of the SPReW empirical investigation confirm this complexity and show how different age groups appear to be "winners" or "losers" depending on the aspect we take into consideration (e.g. the olders are more exposed to knowledge obsolescence and the youngers who just entered the labour market are more exposed to economical stagnation and social insecurity and exclusion).

1.3 Implications for social cohesion

The main challenge that the transformation in work framework arises relates to social cohesion. Work appears as a key element for the inclusion/exclusion processes but it is not clear how far these processes are influenced by intergenerational dynamics. The first aspect of social cohesion that is affected by work *is the entry phase in the labour market, that is no longer a linear and completed path* but tends to be replaced by a long period of instability that makes life choices concerning housing, family and children harder. This is potentially an area of tension between generations. For example, the olders are those who could benefit of entry paths into the labour market in a period of economical richness and who can benefit now of broad social protection and stability, till they are active, and pensions when they retire. Today, at the opposite, the transition between schooling and work for young people is not simply longer but is also characterised by a "yo-yo" movement: youth people may enter the labour market in unstable jobs and may exit it to improve their level of qualification; they may leave their parents' house for a period and then go back later, in a unfinished process of entering and exiting from youth to adulthood. This questions a second aspect linked to social cohesion: the *role of institutions and welfare state that do not seem to be consistent with current developments of society*. The social security model appears to be inefficient for integrating all groups of population in employment: low-qualified workers, migrant workers, women, ageing workers (who undergo a disqualification of their competencies) and young workers who are often more overqualified. New demands for autonomy and freedom that characterised life projects of young men and women require new forms of welfare and social regulation rather than a complete deregulation. Providing answers to the new and diversified needs of workers and to the economical contingencies mean, for example: recognising non-market activities such as care and education; reshaping the retirement system and extending the active life;

harmonising life and work times; finding a better balance between security and freedom. According to some more radical views, the present times call for a redefinition of the role of work as the main source of wealth redistribution and social protection and claim the need for a minimum income independent from work.

Another dimension of social cohesion refers to the *differences and possible divide between regions and between cities and countryside.* This requires paying attention to social consequences of these differences. Data about geographical areas within a same country show that different expectations and values are associated to work according to the well-being in these areas. We have examples with the North and the South of Italy, the West and the East of Germany and the Wallonia and Flemish regions in Belgium. As for the differences between countryside and cities, the housing problem is particularly crucial, especially because it is highly correlated to access to youth independency, to professional mobility and to integration in communities.

An additional dimension concerns the effects of two opposite problems: *unemployment and overwork as source of social isolation and de-solidarisation*. Finally, the *worsening of women place on the labour market* is a well-documented issue. Women are more frequently confronted to unstable careers and drop in status taking into account their level of education. In the consortium, this is particularly true in Hungary. The position of women on the labour market is worsening since the end of the regime and for the young generation there is a reinforcement of the gender division of roles (the breadwinner vs. the housekeeper).

1.4 General hypothesis and key words

This is the general framework in which work orientations are changing. The specific questions addressed by the project are *how to characterise changing work orientations today* and *how to capture the generational dimensions of these orientations*. In particular the project was driven by some general hypothesis organised around two pillars:

1. work orientation and generation as preliminary concepts to be developed by questioning which group of people we call generation and what kinds of representation of intergenerational relations emerge as distinctive in work orientations;
2. lifestyle, family building and social cohesion as key elements to take into account both with the intergenerational dimension of work.

The key hypothesis of the project are firstly driven by the aim of *clarifying which kind of balance between the two prevailing dimensions in work orientation (*instrumental and expressive[1]) characterises the work orientation of people belonging to different generations. Is there any difference between generations referring to instrumental or expressive elements? Mor fundamentally, *is the sharp distinction between these two dimensions still appropriate to understand work orientations?*

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(1) There are two or three (depending on the authors) different dimensions in the relation to work. The first dimension is called *instrumental*; it refers to the material expectations, the idea of income, the importance of payment and the possibilities of being promoted. The second dimension is the *social* one; it refers to the importance of the human relations at work. The third dimension is called *symbolic* and has to do with the opportunities to express oneself in an activity, the interest of the work, the feeling of success, the level of autonomy and the social usefulness. Symbolic and social dimensions are sometimes considered together and called the *expressive* dimension of work.

The first set of hypothesis concerns *lifestyle and family building*, in particular:

- Changes in family and the erosion of the traditional family.
- More than two generations living under the same roof became scarce, however young people remain longer in their family.
- The participation of women to the labour market has incresaed.
- There is a risk of conflicting needs between high qualified working women and women with children.
- The pluralisation of lifestyles increases.

Concerning *generations and intergenerational relations*, a set of hypothesis is developed. They start with the decline of the classical model of father-son conflict, which characterises the contemporary more permissive society, and go to the model of knowledge transmission from “older” to “younger”:

- At the relational level, especially as far as societal values and life models are concerned, youth is often lacking of constrains that support the developpement of an identity.
- The generational dynamic can no longer be explained with the father-son conflict.
- Intergenerational conflicts are the result of diversified positions and interests in the social security system.
- An increase in intra-familial solidarity is expected.
- The often-feared “war of the generations” does not happen at the work place, nor in the family; speechlessness between generations can be observed.
- At the workplace only two generations meet and more often the mid-generation is alone. The interaction between the young and the old generation is more and more rare.
- The knowledge transfer between generations has lost its importance due to a number of reasons: the rapid changes disqualify experience; knowledge of the company environment and culture loose relevance due to permanent restructuring.
- The mid-generation is trying to isolate itself from the younger and the older generation and to take care of itself first.
- The seniority principle is regarded as an unfair preferential treatment and tends to be removed from company policies and collective regulations.

Social cohesion is understood as a the output of individual integration into societal institutions such as labour market, school, family and other social networks in the area of sports and culture, politics and organisations as parties and unions, religious communities, Referring to this, some hypothesis arer develeoped:

- Youth is the more affected by the unemployment risk.
- Young people from disadvantaged families (migrants, unemployed, poor) are pushed into permanent precariousness; these young people are engaged in poor and not very attractive activity areas.
- The mid-generation is confronted to conciliation issues.

- Social cohesion is more threaten by a growing heterogeneity rather than by open conflict: a side-by-side but speechless existence of generations and societal groups.
- At the opposite of prevailing trends, small groups of young people organise themselves in small grass-root movements along political and societal conflicts.

2. Generations at work: the evidence of the research

2.1 The research process and the methodology

The research process developed into several subsequent steps:

Analysis of the existing literature on the topics and the drawing up of a framework of hypotheses (desk research, WP1 and 2)
An integrated approach has been implemented regarding the various dimensions of the relation to work for the younger and older generations, covering analysis and hypotheses in different scientific disciplines (mainly sociology, economics, psychology, history, and statistics).

Description of changes in the relation to work, its meaning for workers belonging to different generations, the societal consequences of these changes (analysis of statistical data, qualitative research, WP3 and 4).
Existing documents, as national, European and international surveys, have been used together with a large empirical work. The qualitative investigation consists of 163 individual narratives interviews (round 25 in each country, involving three different age groups: below 30, from 30 to 50 and above 50; a mix of women and men, employed, unemployed and self-employed workers) and 18 group interviews, in six European countries. The method for analysing narrative interviews is based on a combination of collective hermeneutics and qualitative content analysis. The group interviews followed narrative interviews, the aim was to clarify particular issues and to point out areas of solidarity and tensions between generations. The analysis of empirical material took into account the four investigation fields connected to the social patterns of relation to work: work itself; intergenerational relations; family and lifestyles; social cohesion.

Highlighting the institutional factors that can lead to solidarity and social cohesion and the ones that may cause tensions among generations (cross-country comparative analysis, WP6)
The cross-national analysis explains why comparable social and psychological trends concerning the changing relation to work are likely to entail differentiated impacts, according to the respective institutional environments and what kind of institutional frameworks are more likely to enhance intergenerational cooperation. The methodological approach of comparative analysis that has been applied refers to the neo-institutionalist theory.

Providing social actors with useful ideas for managing generations at work (collection of good practices WP5, 8 and 7).
A selection of best practices targeted to youth issues, intergenerational cooperation, knowledge transfer and active ageing workforce has been realised in each country. On the basis of these examples and on the basis of the results of the empirical research, final proposals to social actors and recommendations have been drawn out, in order to ensure the European value-added of the research results.

2.2 The change of relation to work: how does generation matter?

First of all, from the empirical evidence we can try to assess the relevance of the "generation" variable for the SPReW issues. As a matter of fact, different generations face diverse historical contexts, i.e. a different mix of socio-economical opportunities and constraints and cultural frameworks. Moreover, they have to share labour market opportunities with former generations: there will necessarily be losers and winners… Anyway, how exactly the "generation" matters, in changing work orientations?

From the SPReW results, we observe that other variables (gender, education, socio-professional groups, economic development, institutional contexts) may overwhelm the effect of the "generation" variable. Particularly "gender", which has a strong influence on the place that work can have in one's life. "Age" is also an important variable; young people have a more expressive relation to work. The SPReW results are consistent with major surveys, which analyse attitudes towards work, such as the European Value Survey (EVS), the European Social survey (ESS) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP).

However, historical and cultural differences among *age groups* do exist, as the surveys show. They result from:

- the wealth development, which increases post-materialistic orientations (relevance of the content of work, polycentric attitude towards life, control of working hours, etc.);
- the important increase of tertiary education the last decades, which is linked to increased expressive orientations as well;
- the Information Society, which creates a huge digital divide between last generation and the others;
- the increasing individualisation in the building of identities, which also affects attitude towards work, in the direction of more search of autonomy, self-development self-fulfilment;
- the deregulation of labour markets, which increases job precariousness;
- the women's employment revolution, which raises the problem of work-life balance and at the same time questions gendered working models.

How far these overall phenomena contribute to create *generations*? In a strict sense, according to Mannheim, "generation units" are a production of historical events: "individuals who belong to the same generation, who share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process". They are shaped in opposition to the previous generations, they become social movements and agents of change through a process of political self-consciousness. In this sense not all the age groups are generations and not all the countries have the same generational boundaries.

In a broader sense, almost everybody agree in considering the relevance of institutional factors – like the education system, the family, the labour market regulation, the welfare state model, the type of capitalism – in drawing the boundaries among age groups or generations.

From this point of view, with some secondary diversities in the different countries, we can identify three generations of workers being currently at work: people born before the end of

fifties, people born between this date and the end of seventies and people born after this last date.

In fact, in the second half of the twentieth century, almost everywhere in Europe, an increased protection of labour and the development of welfare systems established a generation of highly protected, strong and collectively represented labour force (the so-called baby-boomers generation).

Later on, following two world petrol crises, the welfare state financial crises and the end of Keynesian policies all around Europe, at the beginning of the eighties, emerged a new generation of workers, more exposed to unemployment (the so-called X generation). In the same period, the hugely increasing participation of women to the labour market was the reason of a sharp generational transition from a "one-career generation" to the "dual-career generation", with different priorities, aims and needs.

More recently, the necessity for welfare systems to pay pension provisions to a larger population, together with the impact of globalisation on Western economies and the increasing preference for flexible labour markets, produce a generation of more precarious, less collectively represented, less socially protected workers. They are currently defined as the generation Y or the millennial generation (sometime they are called the baby-loser generation).

2.3 Three generations at work: a balance of weakness and strength for each group

Although other variables intervene in shaping the relation to work, from our interviews and focus groups generations results to be "objectively" quite differentiated.

With few differences among countries, generations are diversely positioned on the labour market:

- Young people (< 30) are more exposed to precariousness and unemployment but they benefit from a positive educational and digital differential.
- The adult generation (30 to 50) usually enjoys a stable position in the labour market but is more exposed to the difficulties related with keeping together career expectations and family care. The position of adult women is especially critical.
- The elder generation (> 50) – when it is still at work – enjoys the best wages and security and the highest representation by trade unions but they are the most exposed in case of company restructuring because of deskilling.

Moreover, different generations also show different cultures and expectations towards work.

- Young people (< 30) ask for more social protection and higher income but also for more freedom and opportunity for self-development.
- The adult generation (30 to 50) asks for social and company support for reconciling work and family but also for life-long learning measures in an ageing-worker's perspective.
- The elder generation (> 50) asks for recognition of experience but also for the an improvement of working conditions.

2.4 The quality of intergenerational relations: neither a real conflict, nor a true solidarity

The main objective of the research was to analyse the relations between these three generations, in order to highlight evidence of existing or potential social conflicts. A very rough conclusion on this point is that it does not really emerge a "perception" of conflict among generations from the opinion of most interviewees. Actually, from the interviews and focus groups, we find many arguments to sustain the contrary or, at least, to minimise the issue.

First of all, "age" looks like an "unspoken" issue: although workers were questioned several times on the topic of relation with other generations, most of the interviewees did not appear really interested in this subject. We wonder if "age" and "generation" might represent a kind of taboo (like gender).

Secondly, there is no full awareness of belonging to a generation: in the biographies, a clear perception of a social or cultural boundary among generations is seldom highlighted. This applies also to the younger generation of workers.

Thirdly, other factors, which produce other belongings, appear more relevant as determinants of group cultures at workplace: being a woman, being in a qualified profession or hierarchical grade, being an employee of a well-known organisation…

Moreover, in some countries younger people do not even share the same workplaces as the elder ones. In most large companies, due to early retirement plans, the elder generation is missing. At the same time, young people are more likely to stay in more qualified tertiary jobs. Then, especially in some professions a real face-to-face among generations does not even take place.

Anyway, the research point out, "objective" differences among generations are confirmed by the empirical evidence, as far as working conditions are concerned. Then, we should consider the possibility that more awareness of generations may initiate social conflicts in the future. From this point of view, the research interest is directed to understand which group is more likely to be conflictive in future.

2.4.1 The relations between the two extreme groups

The two extreme groups seem to face an identical problem, since both lack a fair recognition at work. From one side, young people feel undervalued as for their education. They frequently complain about low wage and precarious jobs, despite better education and higher ICT knowledge in comparison with the older. From the other ide, old people feel undervalued as for their work experience. Above all, they fear about losing their job because they are aware that companies are not going to consider any longer the result of many years of learning-by-doing as a real resource. As a matter of fact, old workers often face difficulties in finding a new job, as a consequence of the level of their wage.

The topic of "experience" has been much questioned in the project. In general terms, it appears that the value of experience has been largely retrenched over years, both as a consequence of technological change and also as a value itself (actually, the value of "innovation" scores much higher in the work culture).

Anyway, between these two extreme groups a certain amount of tension is evident. The reasons may be:

- a kind of incommunicability in the approach to work, due to a diversity in the mix of competencies and especially in the "languages" (digital vs. analogical, global vs. local…);
- the changing meaning attributed to work in different economic and social periods, where different work values are prevailing: young people often don't agree with old workers' centrality of work, while the old ones complain about apparent young people disaffection to work;
- the psychological distance between ages: young workers appear both more cynic and more passionate towards work, while old workers often solved the cognitive dissonance between attainment and expectations telling their work story as a success history.

This evidence suggests that misunderstandings are both a matter of age and of generations.

2.4.2 The mid-generation: the most invisible but the most problematic in the future?

Except for some countries, like Italy, where a relevant number of workers above 30 years still experiment precariousness, the mid-generation (30 to 50) is the most likely to enjoy security benefits, stable jobs and good wages. Nevertheless, they often feel threatened both by the increasing deregulation of the labour market (their perception of the precariousness risk is even greater than the one of younger workers who directly experiment it!) and by their lack of new skills in comparison to younger workers. From biographies and focus groups, they appear a bit envious both of their older colleagues, who still enjoy early retirement schemes and of the younger ones, more at ease in the digital and flexible society.

From the point of view of the SPReW project, the quality of their skills, their position on the labour market, their attitude towards work are important issues. In fact, they are going to be soon the ageing workforce and equitable and sustainable policies for ageing workforce have to be created referring to them.

Moreover, for the work-life balance issue, the mid-generation is the most exposed one. The mid-age group is concerned by family building, carrying of children and often also carrying of elder parents. From this perspective, adult (30-50) women appear to be the most critical inter- and intra-generational group.

2.5 The change of relation to work in an intergenerational perspective

2.5.1 Are young people different?

On the issue of differences among generations through the dichotomy "instrumental" vs. "expressive" orientation towards work, different considerations among partners emerged.

From all empirical material, it appears impossible to distinguish the generations according to a specific emphasis on instrumental and/or expressive dimension of work. At the same time, attempts to create precise classifications result poorly effective and difficult to be considered statistically representative due to the limited dimension of the sample of interviewees.

Anyway, some shared evidence emerge:

- both work orientations concern all generations, although the incidence of each dimension is different;
- diversity in young workers' orientations can be either a matter of generation or a matter of age.

In general, contrary to a widespread opinion that young people are more instrumental and less interested by work, the younger generation appears as the more concerned by the increase of expressive expectations in work and post-materialistic values.

They are described as: "terrific when working with computers, brilliant at multitasking and very good at working in teams" and also "having values". They are also the more qualified generation since history. Although they expect "too much too soon" from their job, they seem to be immune to imposed authority and they ask for mutual respect between them and their manager.

Also from the empirical analysis, the younger generation results passionated to work and it has high expectations, both materialist and post-materialist, regarding their job but at the same time it gives great importance to other things in life (polycentric conception of life). Moreover, younger people expect their work and their personal lives to work together. With the influence of technology, they perceive work and life as seamlessly entwined; they want to stay in touch with friends and families from work, work from home, have flexible hours. Then, they result less afraid about instability than the previous generations: precariousness seems to be integrated in their mind as a "normal" event.

In general, we observe that people who invested in education are more demanding and develop higher expectations of self-fulfilment towards work. These people, often young people with high degree and few family responsibility, prefer "a work they like" to "a safe job" and in they hope that in the future they will have both. According to this view, the relativisation of work is the outcome of young people greater expectations rather than of their disillusions.

What are the conclusions? Some change is occurring in the orientation to work, promoting a more expressive attitude, i.e. a greater request for self-fulfilment in work. It is not evident wheter the emerging diversity might be a "generation" effect, meaning that historical, cultural and institutional contexts make the "millennial generation" different from former ones. On the contrary, some of the changes are certainly an "age" effect: young people are always more passionate, they have higher expectations; they are more oriented to the content of work.

Anyway, neither generation nor age are the only drivers of the changes in the relation to work. Among the others drivers towards a more expressive work orientation, education and gender can be considered as the most important. Actually, both the educational level of workers (which raises attention to the content of work and self-development) and the feminisation of the labour market (women appear to be more expressive, although they are likely to change their attitude when they have a family to care) increased significantly in recent years.

2.5.2 A gender/generation effect: the contamination of gender models

Common considerations were drawn concerning the relevance of the gender variable in shaping the change between generations. One of the important evidence that has been highlighted by researchers concerns the change in the culture of the family and the increasing centrality of work-life balance issues for both male and female workers.

In a general way, the research confirms that:

– Women without children tend to have the same behaviour than men at workplace.
– Young men are (very) different from old men as for reconciling work and family life.

Could these new phenomena be considered as emerging signals of a reducing dichotomy between the male and the female models of relation to work? As a matter of fact, we could observe from one side, that many young women want to have a career; they are more competitive; they give more importance to money. From the other side, that young men – especially the qualified ones – ask for a better control on their working time and do not accept anymore to put behind their private life for work, especially when a first baby arrives.

Anyway, the "female model" is hard to die. The research points out as well that:

– women's working pattern changes after maternity, from a very expressive to a more instrumental one;
– women in the mid-generation who have a strong investment in career have more negative experiences than men as regards work-life balance;
– work-life balance is even worsening for younger generation of women when they have to face both the persisting of strong traditional values and more employment difficulty after the de-regulation of the labour market (Hungary).

3. The influence of institutional contexts on intergenerational relations at work

3.1 A cross-country comparison on institutional contexts

In order to identify what circumstances lead to deal more effectively with different, and often competing, needs of generations at work, the research includes a comparative analysis. It focuses on both similarities and distinctions in the most relevant institutions: the welfare systems, the labour market regulation, the education and training system and the industrial relations system. The purpose is to discover which features in the institutional contexts are more favourable to solidarity among generations. The final objective is to suggest well-founded recommendations to policy makers, both at local and European level, possibly taking into consideration the entire social model.

3.2 How may social institutions affect the relations between generations?

Although the influence of social institutions has probably been the more or less the same all over Europe, a cross-national comparative analysis help to understand how cultural and social

diversities are shaping the balance of power among generations in the area of work: job security, quality of working life, wage, career, etc.

This analyse allows, firstly, to highlight the conditions that can create a social conflict among generations – or just simple tensions at workplace – and, secondly, to understand which institutional environment and policies can, on the contrary, support a greater solidarity and social cohesion among different generations at work.

From this point of view, in each country, indicators and policies that can be considered as favourable to a good balance between generations and to a generational cohesion are:

- demographic trends and policies aimed at keeping *a balanced birth rate over time*, in order to maintain a good equilibrium between the state expenditure for pensions and the social security contribution coming from employed workers (while actual longer life expectancy and low birth rates are changing the old-age dependency ratio and are threatening the generational equity towards the younger generation);
- employment trends and labour market policies aimed at keeping *a stable activity rate among age cohorts***,** both through a balanced flexibility in entries and exits (to prevent the dualisation of the labour market) and incentives aimed at hindering the market tendency to to prefer mid-age more productive workers or incentives aimed at confronting company strategies of dismissal of the more expensive older workers;
- structure of the education and training system and policies aimed at a better *transition from school to the labour market* for young workers, at increasing the *employability* of all workers or at facing *skill obsolescence* of older workers (since all these factors contribute to an balanced mix of skill and competencies among workers of different ages);
- dimension and composition of welfare expenditure and policies aimed at a balanced distribution of provisions – both transfers and services – addressing the *different life cycle needs*: youth unemployment and transition to work, reconciling work and family obligations, giving help in case of dismissals and reduced income, etc.

Yet, also *cultural aspects* are likely to produce a relevant impact on the relations between generations. First of all, the *organisation of the family and its role in the economy*: households management, cohabitation, caring of family members, distribution of employment opportunities, internal redistribution of income:

- a tradition of centrality of the family in the economy, together with poor welfare provisions to young people, compel the families to extend cohabitation and financial support to their young members (by consequence, both economic autonomy, marriage and procreation time are delayed);
- a culture of centrality of the family in care-giving, together with poor public or market services for families, lead older active women to renounce to paid work for taking care of old parents and grandchildren.

Connected to this, the *different gender roles in family and in parenthood.* They have important consequences, among others, on the mid-age female participation in the labour market, on the gender and age distribution of part-time jobs, on the management of careers.

Among other social and institutional factors, *industrial relations institutions* is one important: collective bargaining coverage, union membership, trade union presence at the workplace, trade union influence on public opinion:

– high union membership among old workers is likely to condition union policies and collective bargaining towards the maintaining of older workers benefits at the workplace (secure employment, seniority rules) and of generous social protection systems, especially the state expenditures for pensions.
– union involvement in the unemployment allowance administration is likely to promote union joining also among young workers.

3.3 Which social model can better prevent the risk of intergenerational conflict?

According to this framework of analysis, we can try to assess the situation in our countries and also to give a kind of *"risk measure" for social cohesion* coming from possible future conflict among generations.

From the analysis of the different national institutional contexts, major unbalances in the power of the three generations on the labour market result:

3.3.1 The mid-generation

– In countries where a political economy oriented to liberalisation is prevailing, the *mid-generation* (and particularly men) – which is the most productive – is going to be the preferred one for employers. Referring to analysis of the variety of capitalism, US and UK – but none of our partners countries – should have a higher probability of such kind of unbalance. Anyway, the increasing reduction of State intervention in the labour market (the so-called "deregulation") may arise this risk – towards the other generations, of course – also in some of our countries, especially Italy, Portugal and perhaps Hungary. In a more creeping way, even in the others.
– However, for the above-mentioned reasons, the *mid-generation* is experiencing both a very strong "internal" competition together with an increasing weakness in comparison to young people's more intuitive relation to IT. Moreover they are the most pressured by caring tasks, addressing both children and old parents.
– As a matter of facts, the *mid-generation women with family commitments* are especially at risk in those countries where both money transfers and services to families are poor (Italy and Portugal). Whereas in other countries, like Germany and to some extent also France, where relevant transfers to families are provided but public childcare is still scarce, mid-age women are often constraint to part-time working.

3.3.2 The younger generation

Younger workers are likely to be particularly disadvantaged in those countries:

– where the state expenditures are more favourable to pensions and/or the unemployment expenditures – which can be considered as a substitute to the financial support to younger

workers – is particularly low. Among our countries, this is especially the case of Italy and of Portugal;

- where during the nineties some flexibilisation of hiring has been introduced – even an overall deregulation of labour market – , with the consequent increase of job precariousness especially among youth. This is more or less the case of all our countries, except Germany (nevertheless even in Germany young people are more affected by flexibilisation than other generations);
- where the union density is particularly higher in the elder age cohorts (which can be explain by the progressive lowering of unionisation over time), as in Germany and Italy but not in Belgium (where young people still join unions) and in France (where unions are traditionally less strong than elsewhere in Europe, so they have less incentives to protect the only group of older workers). No union data were available for Portugal and Hungary.

By contrast, *younger workers* enjoy more advantages in those countries:

- where the educational and vocational systems are better coordinated and where the transition from school to employment works well. This is the case, first of all in Germany, followed by France and Belgium. In Germany, apprenticeship plays a key role;
- where youth unemployment allowance is provided; the only country among the consortium is Belgium.

3.3.3 The older generation

The situation of *older workers* can be observed from two different points of view:

- globally, until now, they don't look particularly at risk in our countries, given the persisting early retirement provisions in most of them (Hungary, Germany, Italy, Belgium; whereas Portugal recently entered a new perspective). So far, this policy succeeded in compensating the loss of skill and related productivity of old workers. However, it is not going to be acceptable any longer, both for the Lisbon employment rate targets and for the increasing demand for work coming from old workers and retired people.
- from an individual point of view, old workers are more at risk of job losses and income reduction in the countries where the natural erosion of their skills is less balanced by continuing vocational training programmes. Among the partnership, Italy, Portugal and Hungary show the lowest share of participation of 55-64 years old workers in further education in Europe: around 4% vs. the 43% of Sweden (Eurostat, 2005).

Yet, *future old workers* – the mid-generation of nowadays – are likely to be more disadvantaged than the present old generation, because they will experience the raising of retirement age with its obligations. This will happen everywhere. Anyway, old workers are expected to be luckier in countries with a more balanced demographic trend and a higher employment rate for youth.

Analysing the problem of the balance among generations from the point of view of different theories, we could say that, while both liberal and Nordic countries have the (opposite) capabilities to find their own specific equilibrium. To reach an intergenerational equity, the neo-corporatist and Mediterranean countries have to change some of their traditional

institutional factors. The neo-corporatist ones – Germany and Belgium, and partly France – need a change in their corporatist institutions, namely trade unions, which are requested to be more protective of other groups of workers than only the old industrial workers: young people and women. As for Mediterranean countries – Italy, Portugal and to some extent also France – where a balanced social redistribution is still lacking. In these countries, we have a redistribution of social protection through the substitution of the "external" solidarity among generations with an "intra-familial" one.

4. May a future conflict among generations occur? Implications for policies

In this section we will try to draw some concluding remarks and suggestions for policies, on the basis of the analysis of the relations among generations at work.

The project results do not show the existence of a real "perception" of conflicting interests by interviewees of different generations: areas of both solidarity and tensions have been highlighted. Nevertheless, the results show "objective" differences in the quality of work for the three generations. Then, we should consider the possibility for the future that the consciousness of belonging to a less lucky generation may initiate social tensions.

Which kind of future tensions may we expect? Which specific policies can governments and social actors introduce to improve social cohesion in order to prevent such a conflict?

Taking into account the evidence from the research, institutional and company measures should be oriented at:

- re-balancing the *specific weakness* of each generation on the labour market (i.e. more social protection for young workers, more retraining for the elders, etc.), thus avoiding the risk of a future increased intergenerational unbalance;
- answering the *expectations* of each group (i.e. change in work organisation for young people, more family friendly policies at the company level for the mid-generations, humanisation of work for old workers, etc.);
- improving *understanding* between different age groups and fostering intergenerational cooperation at work (also through the articulation of career paths and the modularisation of the training systems).

4.1 From results to recommendations: suggestions to governments and social actors

From the analysis of a selection of good policy practices collected in the six countries that took part to the project, some general characteristics can be pointed out:

- Most practices focus on a specific age group.
- Few practices have an intergenerational orientation.
- Youth related issues are mostly addressed by practices promoting entrepreneurship, knowledge transfer from old to young workers (not vice-versa) and mentoring.

- Managing age diversity is an issue alive, though most practices just focus on matters of knowledge transmission (not on the idea of age diversity as a resource or on the opportunity of a reciprocal recognition by different age groups of workers).
- Active ageing problems – including changes in work organisation, ergonomics and flexible retirement – are not sufficiently addressed.
- Gender related issues – especially the mid-generation work-life balance problems – are scarcely considered.

To a certain extent, there is a gap between the practices collected and the evidence resulting from the empirical investigation (biographical interviews and group interviews). In particular, most practices identified have just a limited focus, namely they tend to address one specific generation rather than taking into account the relations between generations.

Moreover, the practices often show a one-way direction: they may aim at the fostering of the knowledge exchange between generations, but this exchange is mainly from the older age group to the younger one. This results in a disconnection between the practices and the emerging issues of the empirical research, such as the decrease in importance of "experience" and the growing importance of "innovation" and competencies of the young generation (IT literacy, language skills).

Then, no practices are oriented at answering young people expectations for a better quality of working life (new forms of work organisation and larger autonomy in working time and space) or to promote a better integration of adult workers with family commitments (more articulated career opportunities, services and benefits for parents).

In general, from a comparison between empirical results and the collected practices, it emerges an overall picture that conveys a certain dissonance between needs of different generations and actual institutional and managerial practices.

4.2 Distance from the European policies framework

General objectives of the European strategy for employment and work (Lisbon strategy, European Employment Strategy, EC Green Paper on demographic challenge, Youth pact, etc.) include: full employment and higher quality of work, centrality of workers preferences and family changes, gender as a mainstream objective, active ageing and longer permanence at work, attracting and retaining young workforce, reconciliation between work and family, solidarity between generations.

If we look at the analysed practices on the background of the European institutional framework, it is important to notice that at the European level the *topic of generations* is addressed mostly throughout the following issues:

- *Employment strategy*, namely through age management and incentives for older workers to stay longer on the labour market; integration of young people in the labour market; training for all age groups in order to increase adaptability; promoting solidarity between generations to ensure sustainable and equal social protection.
- *Demographic issues*, by focusing on support to youth, women and older employment, combining work and life cycle and by promoting a new pact between generations.

- *Equality*, in particular through a new approach to age management, mutual learning among generations at the workplace, multidimensional approach to gender as a mainstream issue also in the age perspective.
- *Education*, through the validation of formal and non-formal skills acquired in the course of a working life.

The comparison with the European policy framework underlines again some distance between the European agenda and the practices initiated by central and local governments or social partners. In particular, the distance concerns the lack of measures addressing the generational unbalance of the social protection benefits (unemployment, family supports, pensions); the lack of a life cycle approach in policies; the lack of practices addressing the ageing workforce in the perspective of longer permanence at work.

4.3 Recommendations to social actors

Consistently, it is now possible to summarise the main implications of the research outcomes from the standpoint of policy making.

We did not observe a real conflict among generations, though possible tensions can be foreseen especially for two reasons:

- the objective working conditions of the last generation, in terms of employment opportunities, social security and collective representation have greatly changed;
- particularly in manufacturing, the traditional cooperation at the workplace based on everyday practice and knowledge transmission between old workers and young workers does not work anymore, due to the sharp divide occurring between old industrial skills and new digital skills.

Moreover, the research highlights that objective critical aspects exist for each generation (or age group). In particular, also the mid-generation faces specific “generational” problems (as for their harder involvement in family commitments), while the old “lucky” ones are the most exposed to company reorganisation. As a consequence, every group has different expectations as far as the quality of working life is concerned.

Then, new challenges seem to emerge and ask for social actors intervention, in order to foster social cohesion and enhance cooperation among different age groups. Central and local institutions and governments, trade unions and companies are requested to undertake initiatives and remove constraints in the following main areas:

Flexicurity

Flexicurity, understood in a socially sustainable way, is now the main means to cope with young people precariousness in employment and social insecurity. Although they do not always ask for a stable job, they need more protection during transitions from education to employment, from one job to another, during leaves for training and skill updating. Anyway, flexicurity policies will be also useful for other generations when they have to face periods of unemployment or retraining.

Organisation of work

We could observe both a certain "ideological" opposition coming from younger generation towards the traditional hierarchy-based company organisation and also towards time and space constraints and a rather "objective" difficulty to cope with this rigidity for adult workers, especially mothers. In general, companies do not seem to be aware that a big cultural change is coming on regarding the different expectations of workers in the relation to work.

Work life balance and life cycle

The balance between work and other aspects of life is not just a female issue anymore. A good balance does not only call for a new flexible organisation of work but also for services and benefits addressing parents of young children and all workers with family care obligations. Moreover to meet workers' (especially women's) career expectations, companies should adopt different rules for career paths, leaving employees the chance to alternate hard/ less hard commitment to work in relation to their life cycle.

Lifelong training and knowledge transmission

This policy is important for all the generations. Traditional practices of knowledge transmission and valorisation of experience can be useful in some industrial or professional environments. Nevertheless, with the large diffusion of information and communication technologies, skill maintenance cannot rely anymore just on this kind of practice. Regarding the elder generation, the obsolescence of traditional skills in manufacturing and the lack of foreign languages competencies and client orientation in service sector call for specific retraining actions. Similarly, competencies of the younger generations – especially digital ones which keep changing - should periodically be updated.

4.6 Suggestions to different policy actors

Central government

Central governement should introduce appropriate social security measures, in the framework of a flexicurity policy (understood in a socially sustainable way) that could ensure:

- more security provisions for youth employment, in order to protect them against periods of unemployment and low income and to provide them health and maternity rights;
- flexible retirement measures for the elderly, in order to allow them to combine less working hours with full security during the last years of career;
- good lifelong training systems and employability to workers of every generation;
- family services and benefits (paid leaves and transfers to children or not self-sufficient family members) to help workers to meet life-cycle needs and to support more balanced demographical trends.

Local governements and local institutions

Local governements and local institutions may have a relevant role in:

- organising awareness campaigns on the topic of intergenerational cooperation;
- giving financial supports to projects of mentoring and knowledge exchanges between old workers (and entrepreneurs) and young workers (and entrepreneurs);

- creating family services at local level;
- monitoring the state of the art of existing best practices.

Social partners

Employers and trade unions at the company level may have important role in:

- changing work organisation and the performance evaluation systems, in order to increase autonomy, time management autonomy, self-development opportunities for young workers;
- introducing new tools for the harmonisation of career opportunities and family care for mid-generation, especially women;
- introducing ergonomics and humanisation of the working conditions: shorter hours, lighter workloads and improvement in the workplace environment for older workers;
- contrasting age discrimination, through measures that remove prejudices against old workers;
- introducing measures aimed at encouraging cooperation and mutual knowledge exchange between old and young workers.

Human resource managers

Specific practices to be introduced by company HR managers could be:

- age-diversity management, inspired by a managerial philosophy which considers different age-related attitudes and competencies as resources and oriented to facilitate mutual understanding among different age groups;
- practices of knowledge management, i.e. assessment, valorisation and exchange of skills and experience regarding old and young workers and knowledge transmission in both directions;
- more recognition of experience of old workers, also involving them in mentoring projects;
- designing new training systems and career paths according to heterogeneous needs in different life cycle phases;
- enhancing job satisfaction, especially addressing young people’s expectation of autonomy, mid-generation’s needs for flexible working, old generation’s needs to avoid too heavy and demanding jobs.