Generational Resonance in the Work Environment

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to analyse the influence of generational differences on social relations and psycho-social atmosphere in the contemporary work environment. The starting point of this analysis is the category of Echo-Boomers, which is how the generation of Millennials (also named Generation Y) is called due to certain qualities that make them similar to Baby Boomers, who were born in the twenty years after World War II. The subject of this analysis are some overlapping areas of both generations regarding value systems, attitudes, as well as cultural practices related to professional activity and balance between work and the private sphere. The purpose of this analysis is to verify the hypothesis that there is a significant similarity between both generations, a generational resonance.

Key words: generation, intergenerational transgression, Baby Boomers, Millennials, generational resonance

Introduction

Throughout history, people have searched for various criteria of social differentiation in the social space. They legitimized differences among themselves on the basis of wealth, appearance, gender, race, ethnic background, religion, education, views, knowledge, sexual preferences or zodiac signs. Although they did notice the differences in age, as it was those differences that determined the rhythm of their social life, it was not until the twentieth century that people began to ponder the

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variety of individuals regarding generational differences (cf. Lancaster, Stillman 2002: 13). The first thinker to analyse various generational identifications[1] was the French sociologist François Mentre. However, his interpretation of the category of a generation was based on the common understanding of generational waves that determine the image of a multigenerational family. In such a family the differences of social roles ascribed to children, parents and grandparents were distinguished, and also the eternal – as Mentre called it – 'fight of sons against fathers' took place (Mentré 1920, in: Savage 2008: 184). However, apart from the obvious differences of social roles, duties, and privileges that people of different ages have, in almost every epoch (although to various extents) a dominating cohort emerges. This cohort is a certain avant-garde that becomes a mouthpiece of the ambitions, hopes, and desires of individuals of more or less the same age, and nowadays even for older or younger people that find the aforementioned cohort's[2] set of beliefs appealing.

Objectively speaking, date of birth does impose a certain cultural model, a social rhythm of an individual's life that determines its behaviour and assigns its social roles, but also imposes a certain degree of conformism. Nevertheless, it is mainly culture, especially popular culture, as well as global and local events, social trends, behavioural norms and ways of perceiving the world that shape an individual's identity (cf. Twenge 2006: 2), including their generational identity. This identity is constituted of a common perception of history, a similar understanding of events and their contexts, identification with the same icons, people, places, events, and artefacts, which are given symbolic value by one generation and are likely to be meaningless for others.

Therefore Karl Manheim is right in his interpretation of a generation as a category of people born in a specific time in history or a given period of time, characterized by a common perception of the surrounding world, different from the perceptions of other age groups. It is not age, but social and psychological processes that make a group of people shares a common identity and consciousness. Individuals of similar age usually have the same generational identity, but it is not determined by the date of birth, but rather by similar experiences of History. As Manheim rightly noted,

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[1] In mid-19th century *generation* meant all people living at the same time, and in the United States of America it was used in connection with the process of immigrants' assimilation, as they were called the first or second generation. This term is linked to the Latin origin of the word *generation* as the process of becoming (cf. Savage 2008: 135).

[2] A demographic interpretation of the category of a cohort has been assumed in this article. It means people of similar age or sharing a common experience of historical events that are important for the society.

generational identity is determined by experiencing reality in a common social and political context, and being a member of a generation is a result of both age and state of mind (cf. Morgan, Kunkel 2011: 10). It is only for the simplification of the analysis of generational changes that date of birth is set as a criterion of belonging to one generation or another.

For the sake of the analysis being carried out in this article the following timeframe of subsequent generations has been assumed: Traditionalists are people born from 1918 to 1945, Baby Boomers were born between 1945 and 1964, Generation X are people born in the years 1965–1980, and the Millennials were born from 1981 to 1995.

Inversed Transgression

In the pluralistic, democratic and free-market order of the capitalistic world, a highly subjectified individual wants to have a choice in almost every matter that is important for their social existence. This concerns generational identity as well, because, in the individual's view, their date of birth should not determine whether they feel young, or wish to be perceived as older than they really are. They do not want to be explicitly assigned to a socially defined generation only on the basis of their birthday. They want to decide about their generational identity themselves, by choosing those value systems, attitudes, behaviour, and artefacts that appeal to them, and that are socially attributed to a certain generation.

Supposedly the most important factor determining a generational identity is generational contrast, namely emphasizing distinctness form other generations, or even manifesting the differences in the form of intergenerational transgressions. The sociological interpretation of the category of transgression[3] comes down to the act of overstepping the existing boundaries of social convention, transgressing standards that are in force (especially cultural standards), but often maintaining parts of whatever remains behind those boundaries. Admittedly, it may be a radical step from the point of view of the previous situation. It may be characterised by a new way of thinking and a new interpretation of social reality, it may promote a new value system, different attitudes, new cultural practices, and new visions of the future, the

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[3] A broader sociological analysis of transgression can be found in the monograph *Cross-Generational Transgressions of Late Capitalism,* which is being prepared for print at the moment.

present, and sometimes the past. It may negate existing norms, question the previous material and intellectual achievements, as well as promote its own interpretation and its own achievements. Nevertheless, it is a sociologically creative process which results in certain features, values and attitudes being reinforced and some of the ancestors' views being negated, especially if they do not fit the new political, economic and, above all, social reality. Intergenerational transgressions, with such an understanding of transgression, are targeted at other generations, especially older ones.

A particular case of intergenerational transgression can be the so-called inversed transgression, which is inspired by a certain fondness for narratives of the older generations of how it used to be in the past, how they acted and what they believed in. Those narratives are passed only as tales, usually with nostalgia making them sound way more beautiful than the reality they refer to. Inversed transgression may not be fully realized; sometimes the younger generation is not aware that it follows a way that was paved a long time age. Regardless of whether individuals are aware of going beyond the existing lines of social existence or not, in a way they move backward – although they are positive that they are driven by the imperative of progress – and such a transgression is a result of the so-called generational resonance.

Generational Resonance

Generational resonance is a process in which differences between generations (apart from those differences that are obvious and constitutive for transgression) are reinforced by values, attitudes, and behaviours that have already occurred before, usually in the generation of grandparents. In such a case generational echo gets reinforced and becomes generational resonance. As every emotional resonance, it is an individual manifesting that they identify with an attitude, behaviour or social reaction presented by another individual in a similar situation. Or that they are an emotional reflection of those attributes of their model that they find appealing. In this case the model is a representative of another generation.

Generational resonance may ultimately come down to a longing for a sense of community, which is verbalised by contemporary generations more and more often. This longing, in the face of increasing scepticism towards the logic of contemporary neoliberalism, may initiate and stimulate an inclination to modified intergenerational transgressions, such as the aforementioned inversed transgression. This form of intergenerational transgression provides us with the opportunity to

look at generational differences as a process of constant negotiating and adjusting new meanings, values, attitudes and operating principles. In the circumstances of postmodern and fluid reality, the processes of intergenerational transgressions lose their potency, which was so distinct in transgressions between Traditionalists and Baby Boomers. This is particularly visible in the haziness of sociological boundaries between youth and adulthood, which become blurry or are subjected to permanent redefinitions and renegotiations. The clearest manifestation of generational resonance in the last hundred years is how Millennials employ selected elements of the sociological portrait of Baby Boomers, which is why Millennials are sometimes called Echo-Boomers (cf.: Kroft 2004; Krebs 2002). One may state that they envied their parents, aunts and uncles their founding myth, so heavily exploited in popular culture since the 1960s. It is particularly visible in their attitude to egalitarianism; Traditionalists were sceptical towards it, as they accepted the hierarchies established before (though they were often arbitrary) that comply with the traditional way of dividing the society, although it was democratic and based on functional stratification; for Generation X it was an empty slogan that Boomers utilized to assume a dominant position in the society, an indicator of their hypocrisy. Millennials have a completely different attitude towards egalitarianism, which can be seen as proof that they really are the Boomers' echo. Perhaps they do not treat egalitarianism paradigmatically or even imperatively, but they have not the slightest doubt that economic, political and social equality of individuals is an immanent characteristic of late capitalism.

When analysing a broader socio-economic context in which the generations of late capitalism live, it is easy to see that each of them has gone through their own disruption to some extent, and that those disruptions turn out to be a formative factor. Traditionalists had as many as three disruptions: the Great Depression, World War II and the equalisation of the benefits of civilisation and economic progress. Baby Boomers experienced a cultural disruption that questioned the social world order deeply rooted in tradition. For Generation X it was an information disruption, stimulated by the explosion of information, and for Millennials it is an economic disruption, which has led the laissez-faire socio-economic order to a permanent recession, as well as to political conflicts and cultural ambiguity (Pollack 2013: 1995). The last disruption of Traditionalists, as well as the disruptions that Boomers and Generation X experienced, were clearly progressive, whereas the other two disruptions of Traditionalists and the one that deepens now and radically determines the lives of Millennials are definitely regressive. With the obvious historical relativism of the existence of the oldest and the youngest generation, similarity facilitates generational resonance, utilised in the search for a model of adaptation to new conditions that

are unfortunately marked by permanent crisis and stagnation. The resonance is visible in Millennials' attitudes to tradition, History, family and religion, which are so different from that of the two older generations. It also shows, in a modified form, in their perception of the work environment, even if it is highly postmodern and diametrically different from the social environment that Traditionalists used to function in. Another indicator of generational resonance is the longing for a sense of community that the youngest generations show. One example of this longing is the fact that Millennials and the generation younger than them prefer teamwork (cf. Tulgan 2009: 4), which was not particularly popular among Baby Boomers, and even disliked by Generation X. However, the clearest symptoms of generational resonance can be found when comparing Millennials to Baby Boomers. But are the similarities in both generations' attitudes to the work environment essential enough to justify using the term Echo-Boomers when referring to Millennials?

Generational Echoing. Baby Boomers versus Millennials in the Workplace

Baby Boomers, and especially their older cohort, were different in comparison with Traditionalists, mostly in their pursuit of not only economic satisfaction but also the sense of fulfilment achieved by doing such a work that had more meaning to them. Financial gratification or a promotion was not enough. They valued corporate privileges such as a separate office, a secretary or a private parking space. They preferred a molecular career model, which means playing an important role in the structures of great corporations with the option an organisational promotion. Their high ambitions shaped by tough competition in their childhood and youth triggered a desire to be promoted and awarded for every important, in their opinion, achievement. However, having entered advanced adulthood, they had to reformulate their expectations towards their careers and renounce the previous model. The evolution of capitalism from its industrial to post-industrial phase, the processes of globalisation followed by more competition on the job market have eliminated the guarantee of not only a satisfying career in the profession obtained by training, but also of being employed at all. Millennials, on the other hand, concentrate on having parallel careers, both in big companies and in their own, small (usually one-person) businesses, often related to the Internet and frequently in the form of start-ups that are all the rage nowadays. They expect job satisfaction as well (cf. Kopertyńska,

Kmiotek 2014: 42, 44–46; Śliwak 2016: 315), but most of all they crave self-fulfilment, permanent stimulation (Kozłowski 2012: 26), which they usually end up finding in their own businesses. Contrary to Boomers, they do not focus on work so much to be willing to sacrifice their private sphere, especially family life (cf. Kopertyńska, Kmiotek 2014: 43). They believe that the current boundary between work and private life is absurd and they expect the workplace to provide them with opportunities to carry out tasks that they used to perform – up to this time – in their leisure time.

Millennials also believe in professional success, but they perceive it differently. It is no coincidence that they are sometimes called Trophy Kids, i.e. kids who are used to being rewarded for even the smallest achievements since their early years. They expect the same treatment in their professional lives, and are disappointed when the situation turns out to be different. They expect professional success, which they are certain will come, but they encounter surprisingly bitter, negative experiences. The reality of late capitalism brings bitterness caused by the lack of a reward, but also failure, exclusion or emotional rejection. Luckily for most of Millennials, they have a very positive attitude towards reality, they are finely educated, and they have the ability to modify their expectations swiftly. In this respect, they are a reverberation of Baby Boomers, the majority of whom managed to adapt to the new conditions of work and life after the post-industrial breakthrough. Many of them had a change of career, retrained or started their own private businesses. It was especially so among Boomers from countries that returned to the capitalist economic system, where radical economic and social transformations took place.

Loyalty towards the employer presented by generations analysed in this article has a distinctively transgressive nature. The loyalty of Traditionalists was indisputable, because they regarded the institutional order they found as unquestionable. Such attitude was reaffirmed by divisional structures in which they functioned during World War II and the reconstruction period after it. Baby Boomers were generally loyal towards their employers as well (cf. Morgan, Kunkel 2011: 283). In the age of industrial capitalism their ambitions and careers were bound to one employer, although they frequently attempted to renegotiate their contracts so that they were more favourable (cf. Johnson 2010: 146–147). However, in the last decades of the twentieth century, they were greatly disappointed by the disloyalty of their employers who made mass redundancies. The bitter experiences decreased their loyalty towards any new employers. For the Boomers having been made redundant was a betrayal, an abuse of trust and disregard for their commitment to the employer. The members of Generation X observed this situation while growing up and learned to be much

less loyal towards their employers. For Millennials, such loyalty became completely insignificant (cf. Jurek 2014: 154). The older generations establish emotional bonds with the employer, and they can show trust and loyalty. This loyalty can also be expressed towards an employer from their youth or their school days, or towards entities in the business environment that their company works in. For the younger generation, on the other hand, such aspects of functioning in the work environment bear no significance at all (cf. Ryan 2007: 85). Their attitude to loyalty is translated into their expectations towards the employer or national institutions as guarantors of their decent existence after they retire. It was a belief of Traditionalists and Baby Boomers that working for one employer, combined with the functioning of government institutions and controlled institutions managing pension funds, would provide them with such income that would ensure them the consumption level they expect (cf. Sujansky, Ferri-Reed 2009: 6). Today, from the perspective of the last decades, we can state that Traditionalists succeeded in achieving such income in countries with long tradition of capitalist economy. This success reassured Baby Boomers that they would benefit from the twentieth-century conception of pension system as well. Unfortunately, the consequences of the economic crisis of 2007, demographic indexes, public debt and increasing unemployment incline towards pessimistic visions. However, this problem is perceived differently by Generation X and Millennials. They have no illusions about their future pensions, and they are entirely aware that they can only rely on their own resourcefulness and abilities to ensure themselves financial safety (cf. Ryan 2007: 81–82).

One consequence of the differences between generations analysed in this article is different attitudes to teamwork that they represent. As it was mentioned earlier, Traditionalists were the masters of working in groups, often in very large teams. Boomers also did not shun teamwork, in spite of their distinctive individualism and strong sense of independence. Having grown up in groups, played in groups, educated in large groups, they had no problem at all with working or cooperating with other people in a company or a corporation, provided that it was under supervision that they accepted. They directed their ambitions, individualism and their drive for self-fulfilment at different forms of competition, usually resulting in achieving the objectives assumed by the employer. The introversive representatives of Generation X are slightly worse at teamwork, but they still accept it if they personally benefit from it. Millennials are also willing to accept teamwork (cf. Golovinski 2011: 60–61), but only if the teams are not too large, which makes their preferences different from those of Traditionalists and Boomers. Millennials are reluctant to accept formal hierarchy (cf. Alsop 2008: 28–29); they prefer partnership in the team, which is much less

risky in small teams than it would be in larger ones (which is how older generations preferred to work). Traditionalists used to respect the professional hierarchy without protests, and this attitude was initially shared by the Boomers. However, in time they began to question those hierarchies, driven mainly by their particularism aimed at claiming managerial positions. Generation X aspired to self-management and independence, which usually led them to set up their own businesses. Millennials do not value management as well; it may even be stated that they have an aversion to it. But they do not opt for self-management either; instead they prefer management through goals, and they do not acknowledge highly formal hierarchy (cf. Lancaster, Stillman: 30–31). It is hard to find a generational resonance between Millennials and Baby Boomers in this area. However, a certain modified resonance of Traditionalists can be found in Millennials here.

Frequent changes of a workplace that were distinctive of the previous decades increased the importance of personal Curriculum Vitae. An abundant CV has become an imperative of any professional activity, especially among Millennials. For both Traditionalists and Baby Boomers, a CV was merely a register of essential information about the worker. However, changing socio-economic conditions and the evolution of the whole context of the job market forced Baby Boomers to pay more attention to the information that they put in their CV, and subsequently to learn to make a register of their educational and professional achievements. The first generation to fully appreciate the role of a CV in the realisation of the career they expected was Generation X, which mainly results from their education. They regarded their diplomas and certificates as trophies whose value increased in a society based on knowledge. Another reason was the heightened competitiveness on the job market and, in psychological terms, the awareness of having much more valuable CVs than Baby Boomers could ever boast of. Boomers, suspicious and sceptical, tried to hide inconvenient details of their biographies, in which they could have only succeeded in the pre-Internet era. Later it would only discredit the author of the incomplete or exaggerated CV, as any information is easy to verify via the Internet. The attitude of Millennials towards CVs is diametrically different (cf. Sujansky, Ferri-Reed: 7). The majority of them choose not to hide anything; on the contrary, they explain reasons behind their educational or professional failures and gaps between periods of employment with disarming sincerity. At the same time, they endeavour to create an extensive CV that includes all their achievements, as well as their hobbies, charity work, voluntary work and all skills, even if do not seem to be of any use for the position that they apply for.

Conclusion

To sum up, given the limited space for this article, it is impossible to analyse the research problem more thoroughly. However, it may be concluded that the hypothesis of a visible generational resonance between Boomers and Millennials in the work environment seems to be unsubstantiated. Comparing both generations in this respect provides many indicators that disprove this hypothesis, and the last statement hints refutation as well, nevertheless an attempt to refute it entirely is a research problem that requires a separate analysis.

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