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Understanding the stereotypes of Millennials in the workplace

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Abstract

Recent research on the generations in the workplace has acknowledged the role organizations play in creating generations and the stereotypes associated with them. However, how these stereotypes are formed has yet to be empirically explored. This paper analyzes the stereotypes associated with Millennials based on an in-depth case study of a population of drivers in a French railway company. This shows that these stereotypes mostly reflect the transformation of professional and organizational identities. The “elders” differentiate themselves from the new organizational generation to enhance the appearance of their skills, knowledge, and values, thus maintaining a balance of power that is favorable to them. Stereotypes also represent generational imprints that work as time markers in shaping the collective memory of their profession. By exploring the relationship among organizational changes, organizational generations, and generational stereotypes, this research produces a more complete understanding of the generational phenomenon in the workplace.

KEYWORDS

generation, generational identity, Millennials, organizational generation, organizational identity, stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

The place, treatment, and contributions of Millennials are a matter of considerable debate, both in the mass media (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017; Magni & Manzoni, 2020) and in the academic literature (e.g., Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Ng et al., 2012; Van Rossem, 2019). Known as Generation Me, Generation Y, Digital Natives, and Nexters (Costanza et al., 2012; Parry & Urwin, 2011; Twenge, 2010), these individuals, born between 1980 and the end of the 1990s, will make up half of the global workforce by 2050.

The aim of this paper is to better understand stereotypes of Millennials in the workplace. Studies on generational stereotypes show that Millennials are seen as having great technological ease, a culture of immediacy and playfulness, and a vision of a world without borders (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Tapscott, 2009). They are also described as being entitled, spoiled, self-centered, and narcissistic (e.g., Twenge, 2006). In the workplace, the reputation of this generation is also mixed. They are often considered to be more technologically savvy,

innovative (Van Rossem, 2019), more tolerant and inclusive, and often see a world without boundaries (Bannon et al., 2011). They are also perceived as more individualistic, more attached to material rewards and to their hobbies, less committed to their company or organization, having a weaker work ethic, and being less focused on work as the defining element of their lives (e.g., Deyoe & Fox, 2011; Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

These stereotypes can lead to various problems at work, such as intergenerational tensions (Urick et al., 2016; Weeks et al., 2017); a lack of knowledge sharing among generations (Arnold & Yue, 2012); and legality, fairness and discrimination issues (e.g. Cadiz et al., 2015; Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Raymer et al., 2017; Rudolph et al., 2021). As stereotypes have a significant influence on interactions and decision-making in an organizational context, the study of stereotypes associated with different age or generational groups is vital for management research (Finkelstein et al., 2013, 2015).

The management literature mostly adopts a sociological approach to the generations, defined as groups of “individuals who were born at a similar point in time,

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have shared similar experiences during their formative years and therefore have similar attitudes and performances” (Parry, 2014, p. 3). To attract and retain new generations who do not have the same motivations and expectations as their predecessors, organizations are called to rethink their management and human resource management practices (e.g., Carraher Wolverson et al., 2021; Cugin, 2012; Lub et al., 2016; Ng & Parry, 2016; Ng et al., 2010). Academic studies from this perspective seek to characterize the generations to better understand them and thus determine whether differing managerial practices specific to each generation are needed. They often use popular categories (e.g. Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials) drawn from practitioner literature (Lyons et al., 2015; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Van Rossem, 2019) to confirm or reject generational characteristics.

A broad body of academic research studies how each generation displays different values, attitudes, behaviors, or competencies (see, for review: Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Ng & Parry, 2016; Parry & Urwin, 2011) using opinions gathered through questionnaires. Despite the growing body of such work, such research has several theoretical and methodological limitations—a lack of longitudinal generational studies, overreliance on cross-sectional designs in which causation cannot be determined, disagreements between researchers about the years of birth that define generations, and confusion about age, period, and cohort covered (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Joshi et al., 2011; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry, 2014; Parry & Urwin, 2011; Rudolph et al., 2021). The results are often heterogeneous if not outright contradictory (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Ng & Parry, 2016; Parry, 2014; Parry & Urwin, 2011). Some have suggested that these studies disseminate and promote insufficiently grounded generational stereotypes (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015). Furthermore, while these works try to point out the real, objective generational characteristics and distinguish them from commonly held generational stereotypes, little attention is given to the latter. Only a few works specifically study generational stereotypes (e.g. Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Van Rossem, 2019).

The literature on generational stereotypes (e.g. Eschleman et al., 2017; Lester et al., 2012; Weeks et al., 2017) most often mobilizes predefined societal generational categories (Millennials, Xers, Boomers, etc.) to see the extent to which individuals pick up on these popular categories to categorize others or themselves. However, the role of the organizational context is rarely considered. Considering generational stereotypes as being only exogenous to the organization, produced by society, can miss ways to resolve intergenerational tensions in the workplace.

Recently, some alternative works have drawn attention to the role of the organization in the creation of generations in the workplace (e.g., Jeannerod-Dumouchel, 2016; Joshi et al., 2010, 2011; Lyons et al., 2019). Adopting, for the most part, an identity-based approach to generations, they emphasize the multidimensional nature of the

generations that form in the workplace due to the multiple temporalities (linked to entry into the organization, an organizational event, the industry context, etc.) that mark individuals’ experiences. From this perspective, the generational phenomenon is not only an external element that imposes itself on the organization; it is, more importantly, the consequence of experience within the organization. This approach opens up new perspectives on the study of generational stereotypes in the workplace as a means of understanding the way in which the organization marks the experience of individuals and their social identities. While this approach constitutes a promising avenue for the study of generational stereotypes in the workplace, its work remains essentially theoretical. Researchers call for contextualized, qualitative studies to empirically understand how generational identities are shaped by the organizational context (Joshi et al., 2010, 2011; Lyons et al., 2019).

To address this gap, using an organizational perspective of the generational phenomenon, this paper analyses the stereotypes associated with Millennials in light of an organizational and professional context. It seeks to answer the following question: How are generational stereotypes shaped by organizational change? It does so with an ethnographic study of subway drivers in a French railway company within a changing organizational and professional context. This ethnographic perspective is particularly adapted to “telling it like it is from the inside.” It involves the researcher participating directly in the setting to select data in a systematic manner without imposing meaning on them externally (Brewer, 2000).

By exploring the relationship among organizational changes, organizational generations, and generational stereotypes, this research generates a more complete understanding of the generational phenomenon in the workplace. Our study highlights the way in which stereotypes associated with young generations delimit organizational generations and mostly reflect the transformation of professional and organizational identities. In doing so, it gives empirical support to the identity and organizational approach to generations in the workplace (Joshi et al., 2011; Lyons et al., 2019). The results of this study provide a more detailed analysis of how organizational generations form over time. New contingency factors that produce organizational generations are also identified. Our study also extends research on generational stereotypes by adding two explanations for their emergence. First, from a power perspective (e.g., Flamant, 2007; Foster, 2013; Huyez-Levrat, 2007), older drivers use these stereotypes in a discursive strategy to promote their own skills, knowledge and values to maintain a balance of power that is favorable to them. Second, from a symbolic-memorial perspective (e.g., Attias-Donfut, 1988), these stereotypes work as time markers in shaping the collective memory of a profession within a given organization.

Analyzing generational stereotypes from an organizational perspective is useful for managers on two levels.

First, it helps them understand how people experience change in the organization and in their jobs and provides relevant information to develop appropriate training and change management programs. Second, the deconstruction of generational stereotypes from an organizational perspective is also useful in preventing intergenerational tensions. By revising their organizational socialization processes and their managerial discourse, managers can ensure that the arrival of new generations is not experienced as a threat to organizational and professional identity.

The article is organized as follows. We introduce the literature on Millennial stereotypes and their organizational interpretation. We then present our qualitative methodology and our empirical results. Finally, we discuss our results and our contributions to the literature.

TOWARD AN ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACH TO MILLENNIAL STEREOTYPES

To understand how generational stereotypes are shaped within organizations, we first review the dominant identity-based explanation of generational stereotype formation and summarize Millennial stereotypes in the workplace. Then, we introduce the concept of organizational generation to emphasize the importance of an organizational interpretation of these stereotypes in the workplace. Finally, power and symbolic/memory-based perspectives are introduced to capture the way in which social changes crystallize into stereotypes about young generations.

The identity approach of generations and Millennials stereotypes

The identity approach to generation looks at generations as social categories that people use to classify themselves and others to give meaning to their interactions (Joshi et al., 2010; Lyons et al., 2019; Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017; Urick & Hollensbe, 2014). Based on self-categorization (Ashforth et al., 2008) and social-identity theories (Tajfel, 1974), this approach sees individuals as dividing themselves into in-groups and out-groups (Turner, 1985) according to their characteristics and perceived differences (Ashforth et al., 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Generational categorization has the particularity of stemming from a unique position in a chronological sequence at the intersection of biological time and historical time (Lyons et al., 2019). Sharing a common historical position exposes individuals to common socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts at approximately the same age in their lives. This context has a lasting impact on their attitudes and behaviors, especially during their formative experiences (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Mannheim, 1952). These marks left on individuals

over time are referred to as *generational imprints* (Joshi et al., 2011). As the first generation to grow up in an entirely digitalized and connected world, Millennials carry the marks of these times; they have developed a particular relationship to technology but also a more global world vision, a culture of instantaneity and a capacity to multitask (Tapscott, 2009).

Stereotypes are positive or negative beliefs about the attributes and behaviors of members of certain groups (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996). Even though a generation can never be truly homogeneous given the internal diversity of its members (geographical location, gender, social class, etc.) (Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry, 2014), characteristics perceived as prototypical of the generation are generalized to all members in a process of depersonalization (Lyons et al., 2019, according to Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When individuals categorize themselves or others into generations, they generally refer to the popular categories of societal generations (Boomers, Xers, Millennials, etc.) (Hayes et al., 2018; Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017; Urick & Hollensbe, 2014).

Social categorization theory predicts that because individuals seek to enhance their self-esteem by achieving a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), they give more positive stereotypes to their perceived in-group and more negative stereotypes to the perceived outgroup. Indeed, the academic literature on generational stereotypes shows that each generation tends to be positive toward members of its own generation and negative toward others (Chi et al., 2013; Lester et al., 2012; Roberto & Biggan, 2014). However, in the United States, Finkelstein et al. (2013) show that older, middle-aged generations often have negative stereotypes of young people, while all generations have positive stereotypes of older workers. Other studies also show that Millennials receive the most negative stereotypes compared with Boomers and Xers (e.g., Roberto & Biggan, 2014).

While research on societal generational characteristics is prolific (see for review: Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Ng & Parry, 2016), research on Millennials is relatively scarce, confusing, and contradictory (Deal et al., 2010). Studies on generational stereotypes, in general, are even rarer. Overall, these studies show that the stereotypes associated with Millennials in an organizational context are particularly pronounced (Chi et al., 2013; Roberto & Biggan, 2014; Van Rossem, 2019) and broadly correspond to the popular characteristics conveyed by the worldwide media and academic literature (Hayes et al., 2018, Lester et al., 2012, Van Rossem, 2019). The stereotypes of Millennials identified in the academic literature include technological ease, tech-savviness, work-life balance, civic-mindedness, adaptability, multitasking, education, entitlement, laziness, self-centeredness, lack of work ethic, and poor loyalty to employers (see Table 1 for a literature review of these stereotypes). According to Deyoe and Fox (2011), many intergenerational conflicts

TABLE 1 Literature review of Millennial stereotypes.

Authors	Methodology	Millennial stereotypes
Deoye and Fox (2011)	Qualitative study in the USA (Central Texas)	Not as good a work ethic; limited people skills, or communication, due to technology; not interested in earning or putting in their time; more knowledgeable about technology; a sense of entitlement; self-centered, etc.
Finkelstein et al. (2013)	Quantitative study in the USA	Energetic and comfortable with technology; inexperienced; lazy and unmotivated.
Foster (2013)	Qualitative study in Canada	Entitled, selfish, instant gratification, spoiled, technical ease.
Hayers et al. (2018)	Qualitative and quantitative study in the USA	Values technology-driven modes of communication; irresponsible and entitled (less valuing professionalism, involvement, formal authority, face-to-face communication, and continuous learning).
Lester et al. (2012)	Quantitative study in the USA	Tech savvy; desires constant/consistent feedback and positive reinforcement; comfortable with job/company change
Lyons and Schweitzer (2017)	Qualitative study in Canada	Entitled; self-absorbed or narcissistic; lack the strong work ethic that was evident in previous generations.
Roberto and Biggan (2014)	Qualitative and quantitative study in the USA and in Europe	Tech savvy; entitled/spoiled; lazy; tech-dependent; educated; self-centered; lack focus, etc.
Urick et al. (2016)	Qualitative study in the USA	Progressive (more open-minded); unskilled communication; focusing on self as an individual.
Van Rossem (2019)	Qualitative study in Belgium	Goal oriented; the most technologically savvy; innovative but inexperienced; in need of a high level of support; those who most seek a work–life balance; not savvy about etiquette; not committed to the company.
Weeks et al. (2017)	Qualitative and Quantitative study in the USA	Better at technology and multitasking; entitled at work, and do not work as hard as those from other generations; do not “do what it takes” to get the job done at work, and “want rewards without doing the work to earn them.”
Zopiatis et al. (2012)	Quantitative study in Cyprus hospitality environment	More skeptical about recognition; more loyal to themselves than to the organization; attach less value to work benefits; less hard working; require more constant supervision and guidance; seek respect more; less reliable, etc.

are attributed to the behavior of Millennials being perceived negatively by their elders.

Thus, the identity approach to generations explains that the stereotypes associated with Millennials are rooted in their consistent patterns of characteristics and behaviors marked by the societal context in which they grew up. The representations may not correspond to all Millennials and may be manipulated for motivational purposes by other generations who devalue Millennials in favor of their own generation. These studies, while acknowledging the role of the organizational context in bringing out or in exacerbating stereotypes, do not question the role of the organization as antecedent/trigger of generational identities. Considering generational stereotypes as being only exogenous to the organization, produced by society, can miss ways to resolve intergenerational tensions in the workplace.

The role of the organization in shaping generational stereotypes

Although rare, a few researchers (Jeannerod-Dumouchel, 2016; Joshi et al., 2010, 2011; Lyons et al., 2019) pay particular attention to the role of the

organization in shaping generational identity in the workplace.

While most generation-related studies use the popular categories of Boomers, Xers, and Millennials, the theoretical work of Joshi et al. (2010, 2011) offers a multidimensional view of generation in the workplace. Following a cross-disciplinary literature review, the authors suggest considering three types of temporality within the organization that form generations with a common set of skills, knowledge, and values (generational imprints) and position them in intergenerational relationships with predecessors and successors. The first is the entrance into the organization within the same time interval, as this generally results in the same type of training, socialization and work contract experience (Joshi et al., 2010, 2011). This is the case, for example, for army cohorts. The second concerns incumbency in an organizational role/job that has been occupied by a predecessor and will be occupied by a successor, as this involves acquiring knowledge and skills specific to the role/job (Joshi et al., 2010, 2011). This is the case for top management teams. Finally, the third is the experience of significant organizational events that, by impacting individuals' work experiences, create “before” and “after” generations (e.g., downsizing). While these different generations

coexist in the organization, the organizational features and characteristics of management may support one of these generational identities with favorable intergenerational relationships (Joshi et al., 2010). Providing a qualitative empirical study of the theoretical framework used by Joshi et al. (2010, 2011), Jeannerod-Dumouchel (2016) shows that organizational socialization tactics lead to the creation of new organizational cohorts. According to her, the organizational generation concept provides an alternative interpretation of newcomer attitudes and behaviors as the outcome of a new organizational socialization process. Following this logic, the stereotypes attributed to Millennials or young people in the workplace could be partially constructed within organizations.

Lyons and Schweitzer's (2017) qualitative study of generational identity shows that people make sense of the generations as social categories by identifying with one of the common generational categories. However, they also show that popular generational labels (Boomers, Xers, and Yers) are of little importance in people's discourse in which the adjective "younger" and "older" are used to talk about generational groups. They suggest that generational identity is understood as "a phenomenon of chronological succession that relates the individual and his peers to their place in the flow of history" (p. 221). Distinguishing itself from the work of Joshi et al. (2010, 2011), they suggest that different generational identities are combined and not distinct. Continuing this work, Lyons et al. (2019) consider that generational identity in the workplace is ever changing and influenced by the interaction of a variety of nested and reciprocally related factors: societal influence; industry, professional/occupational influences; organizational influence; and workgroup influence. Their theoretical model of the dynamic ecological system of generational identity puts the individual in the center of these concentric and evolving spheres of influence. From this perspective, generations provide a natural social categorization basis for individuals when the context pushes them to identify with their peers. Individuals then interpret situations as "generational issues" and use generational stereotypes to give meaning to their social interactions.

Wade-Benzoni (2003, p. 260) defines intergenerational identification as "the perception or feeling of oneness with another generation." Thus, strong identification among generations would allow multiple generations to consider themselves as part of a single group, while weak intergenerational identification would lead them to view each other as separate groups. Based on social categorization theory, this author suggests several elements that could promote intergenerational identification: a focus on common goals, a focus on a common fate, or having a common opposition among generations. She also argues that organizational identity, as a shared identity encompassing different generations, leads to greater intergenerational identification. According to this study, it can be assumed that in an organizational context, the

stereotypes associated with Millennials can be mitigated if other generations identify with them, or reinforced if other generations identify with each other in opposition to Millennials.

Power-based perspective and symbolic-memory based perspective

Beyond identity-based approaches, other perspectives can provide a better understanding of generational stereotypes at work: the power perspective and the symbolic and memory perspective.

From the perspective of power, the generational phenomenon is essentially studied under the discursive prism. The *generations-as-discourse* concept is defined by Foster (2013) as a mental structure that provides people with, and limits them to, specific way(s) of understanding, speaking about and acting in the world around them. With this concept, the author was interested in how people talk about generations at work in Canada to understand what people think a generation is, as well as where and why it matters to them. She shows that generation-as-discourse exists because it helps make sense of different relationships to work (e.g., work to live vs. live to work) and experiences of social change (technological progress, changing gender roles, etc.). According to Foster (2013), different representations of generations and generational differences stem from "discursive strategies," which the actors who use them are generally unaware of: the different stakeholders in the discourse fight to impose a certain social order and "build meaning" through their discourse on generations. Generational stereotypes would therefore tell us more about the people who construct them than about those to whom they are directed.

Thus, when (mostly) older participants represent "the younger generation" as overly entitled, lazy and spoiled, they simultaneously constitute themselves as selfless and more attuned to the proper balance between contribution and reward. On the other hand, when (mostly) younger participants depict "the older generation" as slaves to materialistic system [...], they self-constitute as being aware of "what's truly important" and having their priorities straight. (Foster, 2013, p. 133)

In the same way, Huyez-Levrat's (2007) qualitative study of three large French companies shows that intergenerational conflicts are rooted in the struggle between individuals with heterogeneous levels of experience in the company and in the profession. People hold up differences in their way of working to legitimize their skills. Flamant (2007) also emphasizes that intergenerational conflict within organizations should be understood in

terms of the reorganization of work and a redefinition of the terms of cooperation, which create a feeling of injustice and insecurity among members of the older generation. Young and old assign a “generational” meaning to a conflict that is based on organizational issues. These authors describe how generational representations and discourses are shaped by power and legitimacy issues in the workplace. In this view, stereotypes associated with a generation are to be interpreted in light of the social changes that affect individuals: changes in their work and in their relationship to it. As a result, stereotypes about Millennials and young people become more negative the greater the interests of other generations, in particular older workers, are compromised.

From a completely different perspective, Attias-Donfut (1988) considers that naming a generation produces a historical symbol and creates a collective memory that encompasses different generations belonging to the same group. A generation is a historical symbol in the sense that it is assigned the role of witness to an era that its successors have not experienced. In contrast to history as a social science, collective memory (Halbwach, 1950) selects, reconstitutes, and deforms facts to keep only that which is alive or capable of becoming alive in the collective awareness of the group. The past is adapted to the beliefs and needs of the present. The symbolic sequencing of generations thus sets the pace of social change and builds social time. The characteristics and representations associated with generations can only be understood in relation to each other. The task of the generation is to deduce from the past what the present wants to acknowledge (Attias-Donfut, 1988, p. 182). The discourse on a generation, and therefore the generational stereotypes associated with it, forms part of a social practice that should not be confused, for example, with the memory of a generation-specific event or with the social identification with a generational category. Collective memory is, by definition, trans-generational, selective, and symbolic. By recognizing the selective and symbolic representation of generations, this work acknowledges that from a functional perspective, the representation of a generation can be stereotyped to emphasize social changes in the collective memory.

These different works suggest that, for reasons related to identity, power, and collective memory, the analysis of changes in the work environment represents an interesting framework for understanding generational stereotypes. This is the subject we wish to explore empirically by answering the following question: How are generational stereotypes shaped by organizational change?

IN-DEPTH QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF MILLENNIAL STEREOTYPES

To understand how organizational changes lead to generational stereotypes, this paper draws on an in-depth, qualitative case study set in the Régie Autonome des

Transports Parisien (RATP), a public transport company in Paris.

In this company, a very specific and widespread generational discourse runs among and toward the subway driver population. From top management to operators, it is extremely common to associate the popular Millennial stereotypes with the young generation. For the different reasons that we will expose in this section, this case is ideal for opposing an organizational reading of these stereotypes that seem *a priori* to correspond to those of the Millennials societal generation.

Organizational context

This research was initially started at the request of the Paris public transport company, the RATP, to address the growing concerns surrounding rumors about the younger generation’s different approaches to safety at work. To put the matter in context, it should be pointed out that French public sector services have experienced deep structural change in recent decades, as they have gradually been opening up to the competition in a context of increased European integration. This is especially the case for the RATP, which has undergone significant structural reforms since the early 1990s, particularly as a result of the introduction of a managerial logic (Tixier, 2002). This “modernization” process is characterized by decentralization, the introduction of management by objectives and a culture that emphasizes results, and a novel demand for profitability. All these factors point to a major upheaval in the RATP’s organizational identity, which is usually defined as members’ understanding and claims about what is central, distinctive, and continuous over time about their organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Modernization has brought new rules and management tools to a human resources approach that aims to bring as much flexibility and individualization as staff status allows. This context is likely to bring out organizational cohorts linked to successive entry into the organization and discourses on new generations who arrived after this modernization period.

The case of subway drivers

Given their central role in the company’s activities, subway drivers—nicknamed “the kings of the rails”—have amassed strong social leverage and formed a tightly knit collective based on a strong professional identity. This professional identity is entirely structured around railway safety, which they take direct ownership of and invest in unconditionally. Preserving safety is their primary objective; it is the main criterion by which peers—regardless of age or seniority—and managers assess the quality of the work accomplished and where recognition of professional value occurs.

However, this identity has been affected by the numerous transformations their occupation has experienced over the years. While the overall work logic has remained the same, the sociomaterial aspects of their work (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) have deeply changed; the technologies, procedures, and interactions that organize their professional activity have been significantly disrupted. Together with that, the demographic structure of the staff has been marked by a significant gap caused by two recruitment waves (one in the 1980s and 1990s and another in approximately 2010), which were separated by a recruitment freeze. The combination of these elements makes the RATP a particularly favorable field for narratives about the past, the present, and the future and for generational interpretations of these narratives to emerge (Thibault, 2013).

There are approximately 3000 RATP subway drivers. The minimum recruitment age is 21, and recruits undergo 2 months of internal training before being assigned to a subway line terminus. This training, taught mostly by older workers—such as classroom trainers or field-based mentors—plays an important role in the intergenerational transmission of this professional identity. They are operators and work staggered shifts. Most of their activity (driving subway trains) is solitary, but they interact with many other colleagues during their shifts in the break room, remotely via phone or when their colleagues join them on part of their journey.

The drivers are responsible for their equipment and the passengers they transport and for ensuring railway safety. Their activity is, therefore, regulated by numerous rules, which are set out in specific, detailed procedures. Deviation from these rules can result in sanctions and has consequences for a driver's career path.

Design and data collection

Case studies assume deep immersion in the kind of real context (Crowe et al., 2011) that manifests the phenomenon under study. Our qualitative case study takes an interpretative approach, according to which the world is understood as a lived experience of a conscious subject (Sandberg, 2005), “a reality interpreted by humans and subjectively meaningful to them” (Berger & Luckmann, 2018[1966], p. 70). It is particularly suitable for our study, which is designed to analyze authentic representations that individuals create from their experiences (Gioia et al., 2013).

This study also fits into an inductive approach because it aims to “construct theory” using the data collected. This approach is especially suited to our subject, which explores constructs—Millennial stereotypes—which are difficult to measure based on a deductive approach (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). The inductive approach is also recognized as effective for analyzing perceptions and how they influence the actions of

individuals in organizations, especially when these organizations face serious challenges (Eisenhardt et al., 2016).

Our research is based on an ethnographic study. Ethnography is particularly adapted to “telling it like it is from the inside” (Brewer, 2000). Data collection is flexible and unstructured to avoid prefixed arrangements that impose categories on what people say and do (ibid.). We observed people in the settings in which they work, participating in their day-to-day activities. We conducted 4 months of observations of subway drivers, all working on the same subway line, which represented approximately 160 h of fieldwork. We combined observations of the drivers within their terminus with observations while they were driving. We followed 20 drivers for their full shifts. These were day shifts (starting at 5 am), night shifts (until 2 am), or mixed shifts. We recorded notes in an observation notebook throughout our period of immersion. Observing the drivers' daily work routines gave us access to individual driver work tasks and to the time they spend with each other, including interactions with peers and superiors, as well as to the formal and informal rules that they have to comply with. The transcriptions given below were collected during these informal discussions and recorded in the observation notebook. Particular attention was given to discussions about changes in their professional environment and generational differences. The observation of people in naturally occurring settings allowed us to collect data without imposing external meaning on them (Brewer, 2000).

We also collected our data from a “purposeful sample” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We conducted 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with some of the drivers, as well as interviews with training and recruitment managers and with those higher up the hierarchical chain, to better situate the drivers in the sociomaterial environment in which they work. We did not try to identify a priori a “young” or “Millennial” category, as our interest lies in the social categorization of individuals. Table 2 summarizes the interviewee profiles.

The interviews, which lasted from one and a half to two hours, were electronically recorded and fully transcribed. The interviewer did not raise the topic of generational issues to avoid influencing the discussion. The idea was to see if interviewees would themselves use generational discourse when asked about their general working experience and, if so, to analyze how they mobilize generational categories. The drivers interviewed were first asked about their background and then invited to elaborate on their work: What does it consist of? To what extent do you like it? What are the main difficulties? Do you feel that your colleagues have changed over time? Do you think your job has changed over time? How were you trained? The question of the existence of generational perceptions in the workplace, particularly Millennials, was only directly raised if it had not been raised by the end of the interview.

TABLE 2 Profile of interviewees.

Individual	Age	Seniority	Profession	Gender
D1	25	1 year	Driver	M
D2	27	3 months	Driver	M
D3	30	6 years	Driver	F
D4	30	7 years	Driver	M
D5	31	8 years	Driver	F
D6	33	1 year	Driver	M
D7	36	4 years	Driver	M
D8	40	1 month	Driver	M
D9	43	9 years	Driver	M
D10	44	9 years	Driver	M
D11	44	10 years	Driver	F
D12	45	15 years	Driver	M
D13	46	19 years	Driver	M
D14	47	20 years	Driver	M
D15	48	19 years	Driver	F
D16	48	20 years	Driver	F
D17	51	18 years	Driver	F
D18	52	23 years	Driver	M
D19	57	33 years	Driver	M
D20	58	14 years	Driver	M
I1	50	25 years	Instructor	M
I2	55	28 years	Instructor	M
I3	38	12 years	Instructor	F
M1	37	8 years	Manager	M
M2	29	5 years	Manager	M
M3	52	28 years	Manager	M
L1	39	10 years	Leader	M
L2	48	15 years	Leader	M
L3	52	24 years	Leader	M
L4	55	27 years	Leader	M
30 interviews	25 to 58 years	1 month to 33 years seniority	20D, 3I, 3M, 4L	23 males, 7 females

Data analysis

Data analysis consisted of specifying how the young generation talked about using discourse analysis. We gained an understanding of how generational identities and stereotypes are contextual, socially created, and reinforced (Urick, 2012) by examining rhetoric differences. The generational narratives we discuss and analyze in this paper are those that were the most widely given by drivers and managers, regardless of their age or experience. Our goal is not to define generations in terms of demographic groups, age, or seniority, nor to determine whether the generational imprints mentioned are real; it is, instead, to characterize the stereotypes associated with the young generation and analyze them in light of changes to organizational and job identities.

The interview data were analyzed thematically following an inductive approach (Gioia et al., 2013). To generate theory from the data, three stages of analysis were necessary.

We first brought to light, through open coding, the primary dimensions structuring the phenomenon under study (Eisenhardt, 1989). We selected each sentence that included a discussion of generations. We focused our analysis on the terms that referred to social categories such as “us” and “them” or “the youngsters” and “the elders” to identify generational representations. We did not limit ourselves to references to youngsters; we analyzed references to elders because stereotypical references to youngsters can be implied through references to elders. By collectively analyzing similarities and differences among the many categories of stereotypes (similar to

Strauss and Corbin's, 1998, notion of axial coding), in successive cycles, we gradually reduced the number of categories. Selecting significant terms, we gave these categories phrasal descriptors. The terms used by the interviewees themselves to characterize and differentiate generations played a key role in identifying these stereotypes, as did their feelings about and judgments of the other generations. Our data also revealed a multiplicity of changes in the way that subway drivers carry out their job and interact collectively. We grouped them into categories according to the interviews. Six categories of stereotypes (in comparison with those of the elders) were identified by the three authors. Following the same logic, seven categories of organizational change were distinguished.

In the second-order analysis, we asked whether the emerging themes suggested concepts that might help us describe and explain the phenomena we were observing. Ultimately, we identified that the categories of change referred either to the growth of a new professional identity or to the growth of a new organizational identity. Similarly, two more abstract dimensions of stereotypes were identified: stereotypes relating to the skills of the youngsters on the one hand and stereotypes relating to their values and attitudes on the other.

Then, we sought to understand these stereotypes in their organizational context by moving on to an interpretation of our data. This showed that the *generational stereotypes of youngsters* are based on new *generational imprints* (a unique set of knowledge, skills, and value) left on them by changes to the organizational and professional identity that distinguish them from their predecessors. These generational imprints act as *triggers of generational stereotypes*. Stereotypes associated with the new generation are based more on generational organizational and professional influences than societal influences.

For all these coding steps, and with the aim of cross-confirmation, we systematically independently coded the data until a consensus was reached. Figure 1 below offers a schematic overview of our coding.

MILLENNIAL STEREOTYPES IN LIGHT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Our analysis clearly shows the existence of two generational categories of RATP subway drivers: negatively stereotyped “youngsters” and positively stereotyped “elders,” which includes the nonyoung. The stereotypes of youngsters held by elders fall into two major categories: One concerns their way of driving, and the other concerns their attitudes and behaviors in the organization. Some echo the stereotypes commonly associated with Millennials, while others do not. We will first

describe each of these stereotypes as they are reported by the drivers and then provide an organizational analysis of each of them. We will see that an organizational analysis can reveal the origins and meaning of these stereotypes in relation to the evolution of organizational and professional identity.

“They’re not even real drivers anymore!”: Stereotypes associated with the new way of driving

Discourse about the “youngsters”

According to the first set of narratives, the so-called youngsters live in a virtual world, in sharp contrast to the elders who have a solid footing in the real world. While the elderly recognize the youngsters’ ease with new technology, they frequently refer to them as the “Playstation generation,” “joystick generation,” or “virtual generation.” These terms are used negatively to imply that the younger operators drive their trains the same way that they play video games, in a carefree manner, with no distinction between work and play, or between the real and the virtual:

The youngsters, they’re just a reflection of the times we’re living in. They are very comfortable with the train, they play with it as if it’s their Gameboy. They still act like kids. They need mollycoddling. I once said to one of them: do you realize we actually have responsibilities? It’s a job, not a game. (D17, Interview)

Some of the youngsters do not hesitate to contest these negative stereotypes primarily reported by elders. For example, several young people say that simulator training has existed for a long time in prestigious environments (for plane pilots, for instance) and that it does not mean that their driving license is worthless or that they are bad drivers.

Another common generational narrative identified in the field, which does not correspond to any of the stereotypes associated with Millennials, refers to the inferior technical skills of the “youngsters.” Compared with older drivers, younger drivers should barely be considered drivers (which, of course, they are, albeit a diminished version in the eyes of their older colleagues). The more experienced drivers often speak admiringly of their own elders, who “knew their train by heart.” They pass on the legend of so-called “mechanic-conductors,” who were able to completely dismantle their trains and then put them back together again piece by piece—quasi-mythical figures who were not at all like the younger drivers.

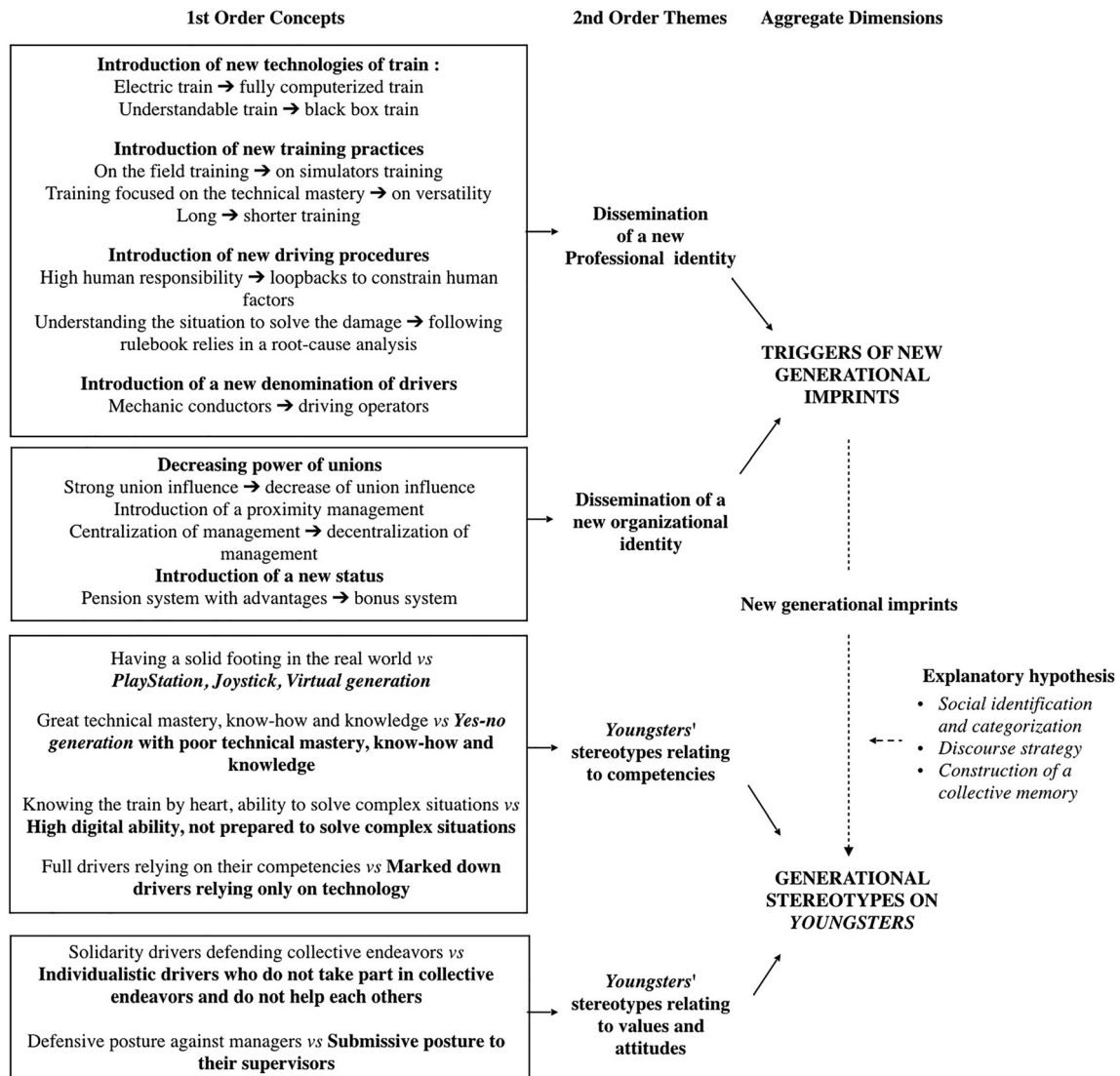


FIGURE 1 Data structure.

The elders knew the train perfectly, almost every wire. They truly learned everything about the train. Compared with those guys I'm just a clown! (D9, Interview)

Organizational analysis

All these stereotypes associated with “youngsters” should be read in the context of a series of internal technical changes that have had a significant impact on the work of drivers.

The expression “Gameboy generation,” for instance, has emerged along with similar expressions such as “joystick trains” or “game console trains” to describe the new subway trains that have been introduced in recent years. Designed during the 2000s and entirely computerized, it is said that these new trains are driven almost in the same

way that one would play with a video game console by manipulating a controller and pushing buttons:

On the new trains you can handle almost everything from the console. It is completely computerized. You have to keep up with the times; today everything is like that, based on computers. New cars are just the same. (D1, Observation)

The new generations, they're just not the same. They're fine with the new trains, they have no problem. It's the joystick generation, and they are joystick trains. All you have to do is press a button. (I2, Interview)

This ongoing replacement of the train fleet represents a major technological leap, as the drivers' transition from

driving trains designed in the 1960s, whose technology mainly relied on electronics, to fully computerized trains designed some 50 years later. It is possible to understand how this change in their work can cause most experienced drivers to feel slightly lost, as it transforms and challenges the methods and ways of working that they have acquired over sometimes decades of work.

This image of young people who see their work as a game contrasts with the image of the elders who have been somewhat left behind by these new technologies. The younger drivers, who usually feel comfortable with computer technologies, point out that their elders are less comfortable with these new trains. This uneasiness is sometimes recognized by the elders themselves:

Honestly, I have to admit that I'm not good at it. I'm not from this generation, which was born with computers, a cell phone stuck to their ear, playing Gameboy, all that... I have a computer, of course, but I only use it for basic stuff. (D17, Observation)

The term “virtual generation” also has a different meaning when associated with the RATP's recent introduction of practice simulators for training their drivers, whereas previous generations of drivers learned their practical skills entirely in the field and mainly on a specific section of the line. This change is viewed with caution, and even suspicion, by many of the elders:

The training on practice simulators, many elders criticize it. They say it's virtual. It's a Christmas cracker driver's license; it's crap training, video game training. I do not rise to it, I do not care, they can think what they want. Pilots have had simulators for years! That does not make it bad training. (D1, Observation)

Some of the elderly oppose this “virtual” simulator training to the reality of the field, where they have to deal with confrontations with passengers, “real trains”, equipment failure, production requirements, keeping to timetables, etc. They also underline that the reality of working on the subway line itself means dealing with real issues: a mistake can have very serious consequences for passenger safety. According to the experienced drivers, learning on a practice simulator does not prepare new drivers to handle issues that arise in the field, leaving them without the necessary skills at the beginning of their career:

Training has to happen in the field. Because it's the real world. It's not the same as a simulator. You're playing with people's safety, and the consequences are real too. (D10, Observation)

Thus, most of the experienced drivers perceive these technological changes as a threat because they bring changes to the way their work is defined and to everything that makes it valuable. What they value, instead, are the things they were trained in—detailed familiarity with the field and the slow acquisition, through time and experience, of the necessary know-how to deal with that field.

Finally, the discourse about the youngsters' lack of technical skills is to be understood in light of the shift in the technical requirements of the day-to-day activities of subway drivers, which has resulted in a reduction in the amount of technical work required of them. “Mechanic-drivers” gave way to “drivers”, who in turn were replaced by “driving operators”—a semantic shift indicative of the evolution of the work itself:

We used to hire drivers. Now we hire driving operators. Before, the driver was a mechanic. They had to have knowledge of the safety instructions, basic diagrams ... Today, people lack understanding of what they are handling in the process. (M3, Interview)

The transition from mechanic to driving operator was made via successive training reforms: training sessions have been shortened (from 3 to 2 months) and now take a systemic approach that focuses less on technical mastery than on versatility. The more experienced drivers who underwent the previous forms of training mostly perceive it as less complete, less substantial, generally easier and less demanding. This “inferior” training produces “inferior drivers”, who are incapable of living up to the previous standards:

The training sessions have been transformed. Fifteen or twenty years ago, they knew the train by heart. I wasn't trained like that. The new guys even less so. It's getting worse and worse, the new guys learn less and less stuff. (D9, Interview)

Another significant change to the drivers' work is the arrival of the new, entirely computerized trains. These new trains are largely “black boxes” for drivers, as they are neither taught nor required to understand how they work. This once-central aspect of a driver's activity is therefore no longer part of their job. Thus, the loss of knowledge and expertise, which is described as being characteristic of the new drivers, appears to reflect the obsolescence of this knowledge itself, which is no longer necessary for their work and has become inaccessible:

You are less of a technician. So over time, with the trains being changed, we will necessarily lose in terms of knowledge. There is a loss of knowledge, but this knowledge is no

longer necessary for the new trains. It's no longer possible to dissect the electrical system on the new trains, they're more complex. (D12, Observation)

With this decrease in the level of knowledge required comes a loss of know-how and skills. Although the advances in machine sophistication make some errors impossible, they also reduce the aspects of the job that are the driver's responsibility for maintaining railway safety. While these innovations improve safety as a whole, some drivers perceive them as questioning their qualifications and the value of their work because they reduce the skills needed to do their job. They therefore have an impact on the level of pride associated with having important work tasks and the resulting sense of responsibility:

Now they put more and more loopbacks to exclude human factors. Before, we had responsible guys. That was the great thing about the job, the knowledge that you had a job with great responsibilities and qualifications. (D13, Interview)

Young drivers who have been trained on the new trains have also lost out in terms of skills. More experienced drivers have acquired poor reflexes and rely solely on technology to maintain railway safety, whereas they know that technology can sometimes prove defective. They are then left powerless in a situation of equipment breakdown or when they have to drive older trains that are not equipped with these additional safety devices:

There's just too many fail-safes on the new trains. The youngsters have gotten too used to having this stuff that prevents them from screwing up. Some old trains have doors that can lose their closure system. When you get your license, you're taught to always do a "monocoup" [pressing a button that triggers a ringing and confirms the doors are properly closed] before leaving to ensure that your doors are fully closed. With the new trains that should never happen. In theory. And when they leave, they don't bother with the "monocoup." It's a bad reflex. These are normal operating conditions. If there's a breakdown, the doors can come unlocked. If you don't do the "monocoup" you can end up leaving with the doors unsealed. (D9, Observation)

The expression "yes/no generation" refers to changes that have recently impacted the drivers' work. These changes relate to the troubleshooting processes. While in the past, drivers had to rely on their knowledge of the

structure and workings of the train, they now have a rulebook that details all the possible situations they might have to deal with and appropriate procedures to be applied (colloquially referred to as "yes/no procedures"). The driver's rulebook relies on a root-cause analysis system: depending on the problem they identify on the train (a warning light coming on, for instance), the drivers refer to the appropriate page, where a series of closed questions leads them to the appropriate actions to be performed to solve the problem. While in the past, they had to understand the situation in order to know where the problem was coming from, which required a good understanding of the structure and workings of the trains, they say that, today, the humans driving the train have almost been turned into mere machines because they are asked not to think but to merely follow a procedure:

The rulebook, they changed it just before the new train came in. Before, it wasn't a yes/no system. It was questions. Even if you followed the procedures, at least you knew what was going on with your train. They would ask about it during the training sessions, they had to. Now they don't. It's one less opportunity to use your intelligence, to think. In addition, I need to think to feel useful! (D4, Observation)

This quote demonstrates how it can be difficult for older drivers to accept these changes because they perceive them as threats to the value and richness of their work. Indeed, these changes suppress what was once a fundamental aspect of their activity—fixing technical problems—which allowed them to prove their professional worth through the judicious use of their knowledge and skills. By removing this opportunity for creativity and pushing the level of proceduralization to its extreme, drivers have begun to feel that they are losing their humanity and slowly becoming robots:

Sometimes you just feel like a machine ... You're told to do this, and that, and this, and that ... Even when the train breaks down, you're not even asked to understand what's going on. Before, we were asked to understand, to know where the problem was ... Now they just ask: is that light on? Yes/no? You're not asked to think, you're asked to follow instructions. (D18, Interview)

When the older drivers refer to the newly recruited drivers as the "yes/no generation", they express their skepticism about their quality as drivers and depict them as being limited to blindly following the procedures without understanding anything about them. If the young people, who are trained by and for this system, are

criticized by their elders, it is because they appear to be avatars of these often ill-received changes. The contestation by the young people of their negative stereotypes is in line with the need for self-esteem of the identity perspective and with the legitimacy issue of the power perspective. The fact that most young people do not contest these stereotypes, which are nevertheless unfavorable to them, can be explained by the symbolic-memory perspective. They are aware that the time of technical and manual metro drivers is over and that technology/technical skills are replacing human skills in the new era. They recognize that they represent the metro drivers of this new era in the collective history of their organization and profession.

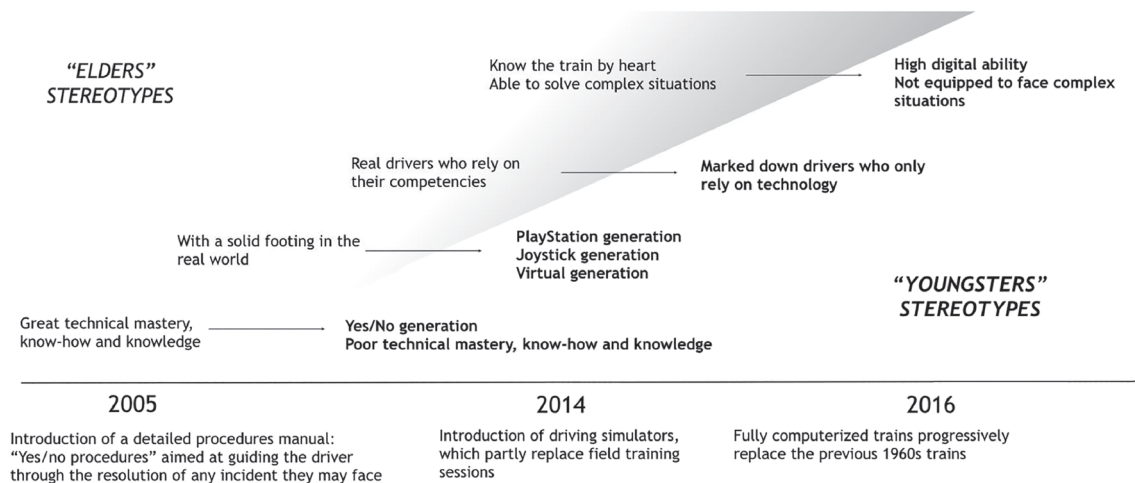
Thus, the organizational analysis allows us to understand that the stereotypes of the “youngsters” just beginning to drive trains concern their loss of certain knowledge and skills caused by a series of changes affecting the professional identity of drivers: changes in train technology, in training practices, in driving and

breakdown procedures and even in their official title. The dissemination of a new professional identity acts as a trigger for new generational imprints that shape “youngster” stereotypes. Figure 2 illustrates these results.

“Now it’s every man for himself”: Stereotypes associated with the attitudes and behaviors of young people in the organization

Discourse about the “youngsters”

Another kind of generational narrative on “youngsters” pertains to moral values. Younger drivers are often criticized for their supposedly individualistic nature, for being submissive to their supervisors and for refusing to take part in collective endeavors, unlike their elders, who are described as displaying more solidarity with their peers—a representation that is often associated with Millennials or the “Me Generation”:



Dissemination of a new professional identity of drivers: triggers of generational imprints

Changes in train technologies:

- From electromechanical to fully computerized technologies
- From understandable to ‘black box’ functioning

Changes in training practices:

- From on-the-job to simulator training
- From technical mastery to versatility focus
- From three-month to two-month period

Changes in driving and breakdown procedures:

- From high level human responsibility to technological loopback
- From technical understanding (necessary to fix breakdowns) to following a root-cause analysis rulebook

Changes in drivers’ official title:

- From ‘mechanic-conductors’ to ‘driving operators’

FIGURE 2 The introduction of new ways of driving and generational stereotypes for RATP drivers.

This idea of defending the collective, of showing some solidarity, well it has completely disappeared. People from my generation, we are still like that, we learned from our elders. There was always solidarity between colleagues, the idea that we had to make sure the rules were properly applied ... It was not one person fighting alone, while the others were watching. It was all of us in the fight together because we are all affected. That's not how it works anymore. (D15, Interview)

Day by day, the young people drift away from the prevalent informal rules between drivers that consist of "helping each other out". While this is still prevalent in the subway, according to the elders, it is being eroded because of the young people's work ethic:

Some youngsters, when you tell them that the custom here is to prep the train for the next driver, they say: prepping trains, it's not compulsory? Well, I'm not doing it. We're supposed to help each other out, among colleagues. Relieve those on long shifts, help out a guy with his maneuvers ... You try once, twice, three times. However, then they'd better not come and complain that they are not being relieved themselves! If they don't make an effort, why would other people do it for them? It's the new generation ... (D11, Observation)

Furthermore, instead of helping each other out, the young people are suspected of sucking up to their superiors, working hard to meet all their requests, even when they go beyond their job description. Indeed, they are often considered to be more inclined to do favors for their managers than for their colleagues. This is in stark contrast to the attitude of the elders, who mostly oppose all their superiors' requests that lie outside the guidelines set for their work. Those elders who take care to ensure that the boundaries of their work are respected do not understand the young people's behavior:

Some of them come and work on their day off! We fought against it, and now they're doing it! (D19, Interview)

Some of the youngsters misinterpret what they perceive as a sign of rigidity in the elders, who they describe as sticklers for their principles and who always go to work reluctantly:

Some of them, they just complain for any old reason. They just quibble over little details. You're here to do your job. Last time, I got

into a fight with a colleague. I had a short shift, it was a calm day, the manager asked if someone could do an extra ride, he asked nicely ... Me I don't mind doing it. However, the colleague was like, "No, why are you doing this, you shouldn't!" So I went like, "What's it got to do with you? I'll do what I want". Some of them, they're just so narrow-minded: who's paying you? You're pretty happy to be here, you're not here to twiddle your thumbs, if you can help out, just do it! (D7, Observation)

This quote is an example of how some of the elders try to put the younger drivers back on the "right track"—the old ways of doing things, which means behaving in a way that does not threaten the collective interests of the group. This did not produce the reaction expected from the young driver in question, as he reaffirmed his right to make his own decision, which he believed to be his own concern and no one else's.

Organizational analysis

We believe that this kind of reaction, rather than being proof of the youngsters' more individualistic nature as Millennials, is instead driven by how organizational changes have transformed the rules of the game and the balance of power between managers and metro drivers.

Indeed, the new drivers' attitudes should be interpreted in light of organizational changes, such as changes to the management style and social dialogue protocols that the RATP has undergone since the 1990s (Tixier, 2002). The decentralization of management has given operational supervisors significant decision-making power over the management of their subordinates, their working conditions, working hours and career advancement. The arrival of market competition, management by objectives, and promotion by selection have transformed the work content and daily routine of subway drivers. All these elements have directly contributed to the increased power of their immediate supervisors, who are in direct contact with the drivers and therefore encourage newer drivers to adopt a more conciliatory attitude. It is those immediate supervisors who have the power to decide on the sanction the drivers receive when they make a mistake, to give them the work schedule they want and support or hold back their career development, and so forth. In short, the supervisor has a significant impact on their everyday working life as well as their future:

You know, even with the hierarchy, things were very different before. Before you could fall out with a manager ... it had no consequences, you got into a fight, and you could

just speak out and say what was wrong. Now management has changed. Today, we feel like we just have the right to keep quiet. Before, the unions had a lot of influence here and would oppose management anytime. (D16, Observation)

Some of the changes have contributed to individualizing drivers' interests and, in particular, separating the interests of the young people and the elders. Some elders, for instance, mention the differences in status that make it difficult to mobilize the young people to defend the profession's interests because they do not benefit from the same advantages. The most significant difference is the pension system, where older drivers benefit from the one-fifth system (meaning they earn 1 year of pension every 5 years), whereas younger drivers, those who joined the company after 2008, do not:

The only way we can put pressure is to go on a strike. In addition, if they want to remove the one-fifth for the elders, the youngsters won't follow. They did it on purpose. They understood that if we are less united, we have less weight. Those who're joining the company now, they're not on the one-fifth system. We're not fighting for the same causes, this is why there's no mutual aid anymore. (D3, Interview)

The difference in status between the elders and the youngsters helps prevent the emergence of a strong collective that can defend itself. In this context, the proliferation of bonuses is highlighted as a major source of the individualization of interests. A bonus system, which offers extra pay to those who behave according to managers' expectations, has been developed over the years. For instance, it allows them to encourage drivers to increase their driving time or to work on their day off:

Financial participation, incentive awards ... All that makes you think. They say, look, if we don't meet our company objectives, there will be no profits, and therefore no bonus distribution. All this did not exist when I joined the company. A lot of bonuses are based on the number of days at work, so you think twice when there's a strike. (D15, Interview)

The combination of these elements leads to a fundamental transformation of the relationship between drivers and their managers and the balance of power between them, a transformation verging on a paradigm shift. They are experiencing a shift from a model of standardized rules that apply to everyone to an interpersonal interactions-based model. Here, again, organizational

analysis allows us to understand that the stereotypes associated with the attitude of the "youngsters" within the organization are caused by new organizational rules that have altered the identity of the organization: decrease in the power of the union, decentralization of management and change in the career management rules. By criticizing the attitudes of the young, the old seek to legitimize their union struggle, the preservation of their status made possible by collective solidarity. By deploring the attitude of the young people, they regret this new organizational era that is taking shape where union power and collective solidarity are weakened. The young people, for their part, do not seem to be aware that their behavior is rewriting the collective memory of the profession. They are essentially seeking to defend their self-esteem from an identity point of view and to legitimize their behavior in relation to the interests that separate them from the old ones. Figure 3 provides a representation of the changing organizational identity and how it acts as a trigger for generational imprints and stereotypes.

DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to understand how generational stereotypes in the workplace reflect organizational changes. Our results show that these stereotypes are the expression of a new generation within the organization that has resulted from the introduction of several changes in organizational and professional identities. By exploring the relationship among organizational changes, organizational generations and generational stereotypes, our research generates a more complete understanding of the generational phenomenon in the workplace.

Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the literature on generations and generational stereotypes in a twofold manner. First, our analysis has produced a number of insights that could advance the current understanding of how organizational changes produce organizational generations. Second, our findings shed light on the link between changes in the organizational context and generational stereotypes.

Understanding how changes in the organizational context produce organizational generations

Our study questions the relevance of using societal generational categories (babyboomers, gen-Xers, Millennials, etc.) to understand the generational phenomenon and stereotypes at work. Our results show that it is not the

professional and organizational reforms that have impacted their activities. However, they are also “organizational cohorts” that joined a mechanistic organization at different periods, as well as “occupational generations,” trained and working as subway drivers. For RATP subway drivers, the confusion between the age of individuals and their seniority in both the occupation and the organization (which are strongly aligned) has reinforced the generational categorization into two distinct groups.

Moreover, our findings broaden the understanding of the organizational contingency factors that produce organizational generations. Converging with prior research (e.g., Jeannerod-Dumouchel, 2016; Joshi et al., 2010, 2011), our results underline the key role played by organizational socialization, and professional training in particular, in producing organizational cohorts. However, our research suggests that other factors, such as work transformation and organizational rule changes, also play an important role. Beyond professional training, technological and procedural changes, as well as changes to an official job title all contribute to significantly altering how the job itself is viewed. Redefining an occupation brings new values, attitudes, behaviors, knowledge and skills, which contribute to the creation of generational representations. In addition, other structural organizational changes—new social regulation rules (decrease in the power of unions), decentralized management, new career development conditions—help to shape generational differences. More broadly, anything that is likely to alter organizational identity—members’ understanding and claims about what is central, distinctive, and continuous over time about their organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006)—can create organizational generations.

Contrary to Joshi et al. (2010, 2011) and consistent with Lyons and Schweitzer (2017) and Lyons et al. (2019), our results show that the generations in organizations stem from the alignment or combination of both intraorganizational and extraorganizational levels of influence. The organizational and professional changes observed cannot be disconnected from more general developments in the French and European railway industry, new institutional regulations that govern the entire sector and technological developments across society as a whole. As Lyons and Schweitzer (2017) and Lyons et al. (2019) emphasize, in people’s cognitive representation, these multiple, intertwined influences take the form of generations as a “here and now phenomenon” (p. 221), “a phenomenon of chronological succession that relates the individual and his peers to their place in the flow of history” (p. 220). This logic of succession makes it possible to skip precise categories, since as suggested by Biggs and Lowenstein (2011), people appear to understand generation as an undifferentiated amalgam of age and history simply and vaguely defined under the terms “youngsters” in opposition to “elders.”

Exploring the link between changes in the organizational and professional contexts and generational stereotypes

Our results corroborate arguments that the analysis of change in organizational and professional contexts allows a better understanding of generational stereotypes at work. At first glance, the labels used to designate the young people partly correspond to Millennial stereotypes identified in the literature: they are seen as individualistic, with limited skills, and with high digital ability, which corroborates the work of Deyoe and Fox (2011) and Foster (2013). However, the organizational interpretation of these stereotypes provides a better understanding of these stereotypes in three aspects. In some cases, the organizational context further clarifies the stereotypes of societal generations. For example, the labels of “Gameboy generation” or “virtual generation” associated with the RATP’s “youngsters” seem to be in line with the stereotypes associated with Millennials such as “tech savvy” (Lester et al., 2012; Roberto & Biggan, 2014; Van Rossem, 2019), but they can only be fully understood in light of train automation and the introduction of simulator training. In other cases, the organizational context helps explain stereotypes contrary to those of the societal generation. While Millennials are seen as granting more importance than their elders to the work-life balance, the “youngsters” of the RATP are, on the contrary, accused of being “submissive to their supervisor”; this is, however, understandable given the evolution of the managerial policy and the individualization of remuneration. Finally, organizational analysis may be the only way to provide an explanation for stereotypes that do not exist more broadly for societal generations. This is the example of the “Yes/no generation” label, which refers directly to the new incident procedures for subway drivers.

Our study of stereotypes in an organizational context can help explore the identity reasons that lead individuals to harbor stereotypes that are often negative toward younger generations at work. In line with the identity approach to generations (Joshi et al., 2010; Wade-Benzoni, 2003) and social-identity theory (Van Rossem, 2019), our study suggests that the negative stereotypes attributed to young people allow the older members of an organization to enhance their own identities, thereby fulfilling their need for self-esteem. For example, by designating young people as the “Gameboy generation” or “yes/no generation,” older drivers invalidate the young and criticize their lack of seriousness at work, emphasizing, in contrast, their own solid technical skills and their strong professionalism.

We also found evidence that the negative and critical tone of these stereotypes informs us about the power relationships between two organizational generations: the elders’ undermined legitimacy translates into anxiety and a feeling of injustice that they harbor against the young

people. Interpreting generational stereotypes at work through the lens of power issues is novel in that this literature has not been mobilized to understand generational stereotypes and organizational generations' relationships. As suggested by Foster (2013), representations of generations and generational differences can stem from an often unconscious "discursive strategy" of actors who fight to impose a certain social order and "build meaning" through their discourse on generations. Youngster stereotypes are used as a discursive strategy by older drivers to maintain a balance of power that is favorable to them. The negative discourse associated with the young generation expresses elders' opposition to new organizational and managerial rules (Flamant, 2007; Huyez-Levrat, 2007) that have altered the hierarchy of competencies. Contrary to the authors mentioned above, these power issues are indeed intergenerational issues, not in the societal sense but on the scale of organizational and professional generations. In this way, the "elders" legitimize a view of the world that favors their journey and the achievements of their generation at the expense of the new and that lets them symbolically fight against technical and organizational changes that question their know-how and their professional achievements.

Our findings also emphasize the way in which generational stereotypes shared by several generations can be the expression of a collective organizational and professional memory. Although Attias-Donfut (1988) has already evoked this notion of collective memory shared by several generations, it has not been linked to that of stereotypes in an organizational context. The stereotypes attributed to young people and elders thus recount the historical narrative of subway drivers, whose professional identity has undergone major upheaval. Certain young people accept their negative stereotypes because they agree with the dominant views of the history of the profession, its past grandeur, and the way in which current changes diminish its value. Youngsters take on the role of representing this new era, while elders play the role of witnesses to the end of an era. Thus, when they criticize the new generation, the older generation truly deplors the changes that have taken place in their own profession. They long for a return to the golden age that they experienced, are frustrated at not being able to completely pass on their knowledge and feel fear and disappointment at seeing their profession disappear.

Managerial contributions

The abundance of practice-oriented papers on how to manage Millennials in the workplace shows that this is "a pressing concern for many organizations" (Magni & Manzoni, 2020: p. 910). Our research has four strong implications for practice.

Our results underline the role of organizations in the emergence of work-related generations, namely, through

the technical and managerial reforms they introduce. Generational diversity is, therefore, not a strictly external phenomenon that management must deal with; it is also a phenomenon in which the organization plays an active role. Offering new paths to integration and social recognition (Osty et al., 2007) and helping workers adapt to major changes in working conditions are therefore fundamental for management to maintain intergenerational cohesion. Additionally, work-related generational categories are the expression of how organizational changes affect individual experiences. Understanding the origins of these categories can serve as a barometer for the generational gaps and potential tensions that they may create. One way to avoid tensions between organizational generations would be to encourage a perception or feeling of oneness with other generations (Wade-Benzoni, 2003). According to Wade-Benzoni (2003), this can be done by making the target future group as specific as possible, such as thinking in terms of future generations of actors in a specific industry, organization, or department. Focusing on common goals or focusing on a common fate can also help. Finally, fostering organizational identification would help unite distinct generations under a common identity that encompasses them.

Clark et al. (2010) also showed that the creation of a transitional identity, which retains elements of the current identity and includes elements of the modified identity, helps employees develop a new organizational identity that is conducive to change. This interim sense shared by members about what their organizations are becoming helps reduce rival representations of the organization and the intergenerational tensions that derive from them.

It also seems essential for management to act on the collective memory of the subway driver profession by finding ways to add value to the new professional identity that is taking shape, not just in terms of discourse but also in terms of enhanced tasks (for example, giving more leeway to drivers concerning passenger information if this is useful to them).

Wherever possible, ensuring the same benefits and length of training for successive generations is conducive to fostering intergenerational cohesion. If the training and benefits conditions cannot be maintained, the managerial line should ensure that these changes make sense for the former employees and address the concerns they raise.

Limits and future research perspectives

This case study was a revealing story that allowed an in-depth analysis and understanding of generational stereotypes in an organizational and professional context. The organizational-contingent perspective we adopted provides a useful basis for understanding other contexts. Future research could assess the arguments developed

here using samples in different organizational contexts. It would be interesting to carry out similar studies in firms dealing with downsizing, in less hierarchical contexts and in organizations that have only undergone incremental changes. It would also be interesting to choose an organization or profession that is more valued than in the past to see whether the representations associated with the younger organizational generation are positive in that case.

It is also important to keep in mind that this case study constitutes a snapshot of organizational generational stereotypes at a particular point in time. While job/organizational evolutions have led to changes in the representations, attitudes, behaviors and competencies of some of the employees in our study, this cross-sectional methodology does not capture the generational dynamic over time. This could only be achieved by a broader longitudinal study.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to the alternative literature on generations (identity, power, symbolic-memorial perspectives) and makes new contributions to the management of generational diversity in the workplace. This case study on generational stereotypes associated with the so-called Millennials at work shows that the characteristics associated with this generation can only be fully understood in the context of a changing organizational context. The old and the young, who entered the organization and the profession at different times and in different contexts, form distinct organizational and professional generations. The stereotypes attributed to the “youngsters” mostly reflect their generational imprint resulting from the introduction of new organizational rules and the transformation of a profession. Moreover, the critical and disparaging register of these stereotypes is explained by a discourse strategy of the “elders” who differentiate themselves from the “youngsters” to bolster their skills, knowledge, and values and thus maintain a balance of power that is favorable to them. In addition, stereotypes play a role in creating the collective memory of a professional identity, in which the experience of all generations is combined. This explains why the younger generation accepts some of the negative stereotypes attributed to them by their elders. By adopting an organizational approach to generations, this paper advances the current understanding of how organizational changes produce organizational generations. It also provides a more detailed understanding of the relationship among organizational changes, organizational generations, and generational stereotypes.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have contributed equally.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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